

Old and Middle English

Old English Period

- cca 5th - 11th century
- the British Isles inhabited by the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (main groups)
- Christianization: St Patrick (Ireland), St Columba (Scotland), St Augustine of Canterbury (England)
- Old English texts: poems (epic, religious, lyrical); chronicles; legal texts; translations of parts of the Bible; proverbs, maxims, charms, rhymed riddles

Beowulf (8th century)

- long heroic poem
- two half-lines, each with two stresses, separated by caesura
- alliteration
- kenning
- mixture of pagan and Christian themes

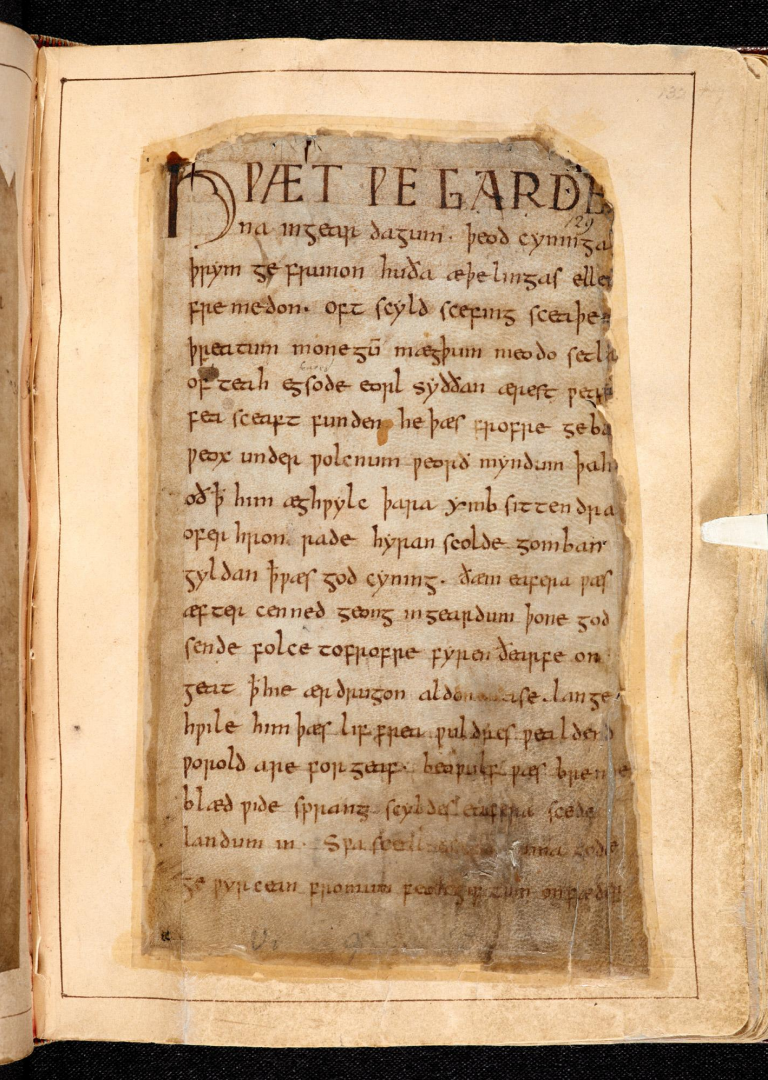


image: British Library, bl.uk

Beowulf

closing lines

cwaédon þæt hé waére wyruldcyning

manna mildust ond monðwaérust

léodum líðost ond lofgeornost

They said that of all the kings upon the earth
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

(translation Seamus Heaney)

examples of other texts from the Old English period

- lyrical poems and elegies: *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wife's Lament*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*
- maxims, proverbs, riddles, spells ("Against a Dwarf")
- religious poems: *Caedmon's Hymn*, *The Dream of the Rood*
- prose: Bede the Venerable: *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (in Latin); Aelfric's sermons; Bishop Wulfstan: Wulf's sermon to the English (*Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*)

Caedmon's Hymn

Nu sculon herigean / heofonrices Weard

[Now must we praise / heaven-kingdom's Guardian,]

Meotodes meahte / and his modgeþanc

[the Measurer's might / and his mind-plans,]

weorc Wuldor-Fæder / swa he wundra gehwæs

[the work of the Glory-Father, / when he of wonders of every one,]

ece Drihten / or onstealde

[eternal Lord, / the beginning established.]

He ærest sceop / ielda bearnum

[He first created / for men's sons]

heofon to hrofe / halig Scyppend

[heaven as a roof, / holy Creator;]

ðā middangeard / moncynnes Weard
[then middle-earth / mankind's Guardian,]

ece Drihten / æfter teode
[eternal Lord / afterwards made --]

firum foldan / Frea ælmihtig.
[for men earth, / Master almighty.]

Caedmon's Hymn

Now we ought to praise the Guardian of the heavenly kingdom,
The might of the Creator and his conception,
The work of the glorious Father, as he of each of the wonders,
Eternal Lord, established the beginning.
He first created for the sons of men
Heaven as a roof, holy Creator;
Then the middle-earth, the Guardian of mankind,
The eternal Lord, afterwards made
The earth for men, the Lord almighty.

(translation Elaine Treharne)

Charm against a Dwarf

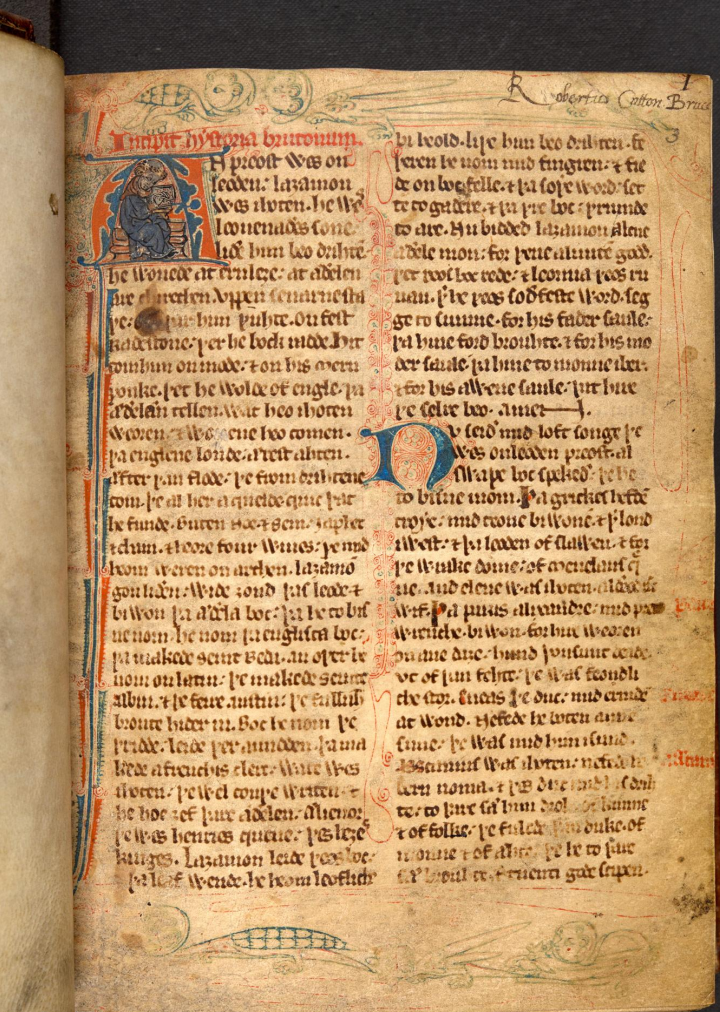
Against a dwarf one shall take seven little offerings, such as one has worshipped with, and write these names on each of the offerings: Maximianus, Malchus, Iohannes, Martimianus, Dionisius, Constantinus, Serafion. Then afterwards one shall sing the charm that I say hereafter, first in the left ear, then in the right ear, and then above the top of the man's head. And then a maiden must go and hang it around his neck, and do so for three days; he will soon be well.

Here he came in walking, in spider form.
He had his harness in his hand, he said that you were his steed,
he put his traces on your neck. Then they began to travel from the
ground;
so soon they came from the ground, then their limbs began to cool.
Then came in walking the beast's sister;
she put an end to this then and swore oaths
that this would never harm the sick one,
nor that one who might find this charm or knows how to recite it.
Amen. So be it.

(Translation David E. Gay)

Middle English Period

- cca 11th - 15th century
- influence of Anglo-Norman and the French tradition, chivalric (courtly) tradition



Layamon: *Brut* (around 1200)

- reworking of the French *Roman de Brut*
- rhymed chronicle
- character of King Arthur
- written in English as an expression of patriotism
- halfway between Old English poetic style and French chivalric tradition
- introduces rhyme

image: British Library, bl.uk

examples of other texts from the Middle English period

- Thomas Malory: *Morte d'Arthur* (mid-15th century) - prose retelling of the King Arthur legends
- fabliaux and ballads
- folk songs: *The Cuckoo Song*
- love poetry: *Alysoun*
- religious allegory: *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (mid-14th century)
- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (mid-14th century)

The Cuckoo Song

Sumer is icumen in,
Loude sing cuckou!
Groweth seed and bloweth meed,
And springth the wode now.
Sing cuckou!
Ewe bleteth after lamb,
Loweth after calve cow,
Bulloc sterteth, bucke verteth,
Merye sing cuckou!
Cuckou, cuckou,
Wel singest thou cuckou:
Ne swik thou never now!



Geoffrey Chaucer

The Canterbury Tales

- begun probably 1386
- characters: the Knight, the Squire, the Prioress, the Monk, the Friar, the Merchant, the Clerk, the Carpenter, the Wife of Bath, the Miller, the Pardoner, and others
- heroic couplet: rhymed iambic pentameter

Chaucer in a 15th c. MS of *The Canterbury Tales*
image: britannica.com

Canterbury Tales

General Prologue, opening lines

When the sweet showers of April have pierced
The drought of March, and pierced it to the root,
And every vein is bathed in that moisture
Whose quickening force will engender the flower
And when the west wind too with its sweet breath
Has given life in every wood and field
To tender shoots, and when the stripling sun
Has run his half-course in Aries, the Ram,
And when small birds are making melodies,
That sleep all night long with open eyes,
(Nature so prompts them, and encourages);

Then people long to go on pilgrimages,
And palmers to take ship to foreign shores,
And distant shrines, famous in different lands;
And most especially, from all the shires
Of England, to Canterbury they come,
The holy blessed martyr there to seek,
Who gave his help when they were sick.

(translation David Wright)

Canterbury Tales

General Prologue, opening lines in Chaucer's English

Whan that April with his showres soote
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veine in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flowr;
Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye
That sleepen al the night with open yë—
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages—

Thanne logen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Canterbury they wende,
The holy blisful martyr for to seeke
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seke.