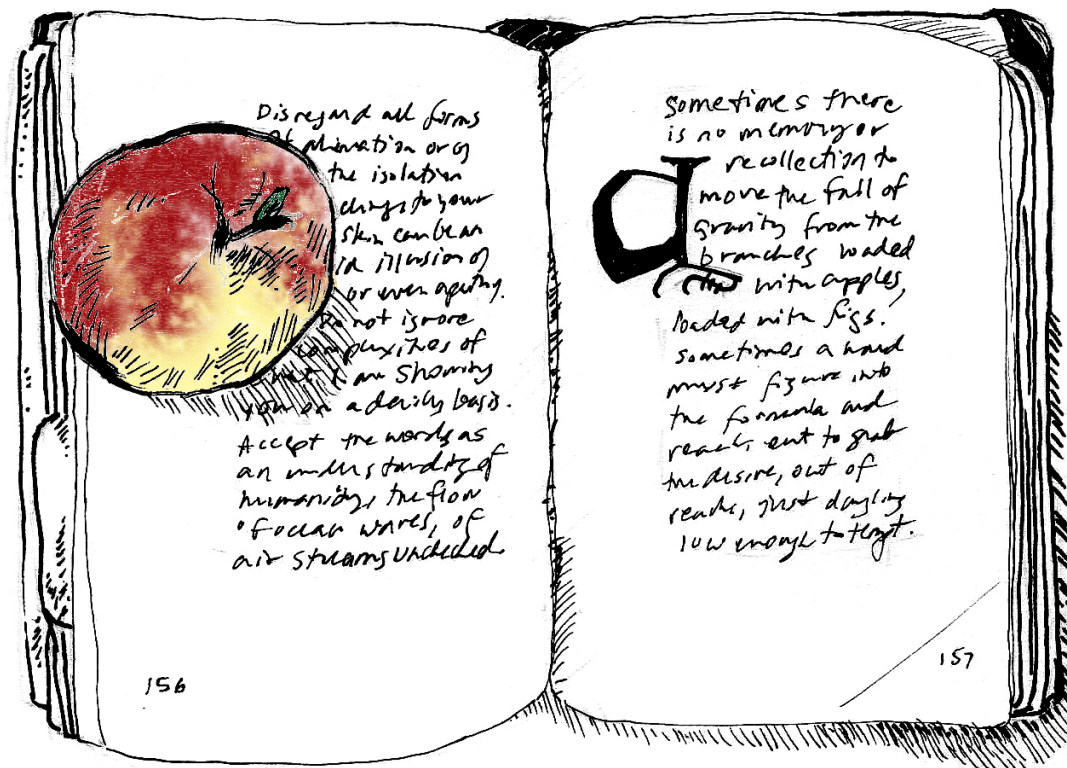


# Anglo-Saxon Prose and Short Poetry

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# *The Venerable Bede*

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**Bede (673-735) is known as the earliest prose writer and first historian for the island of England.**

His writings help established a sense of nationalism for a developing country and offer a strong recognition for the variety of people who made up the collection of merging cultures under a united church.

- his life revolved around the Benedictine monastery
- the recording of Beowulf was possibly during the time of Bede's life
- both writers lived in a section of the country called Northumbria, at a time when it was a medieval kingdom in the Northwest territory, before becoming a part of the larger central Anglo-Saxon kingdom
- his full manuscript *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (*Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*) was completed in 731, a few years before his death in 735
- the book outlines how Christianity developed across the pagan landscape; fully composed in Latin

# *The Venerable Bede and Cædmon*

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**The poem “Caedmon’s Hymn” exists in many different versions.**

Bede recorded the only Latin version of the work, paraphrasing the poem

**from an oral source**; approximately 19 Old English printed versions exist—  
all based off the Latin text by Bede, all slightly different versions of each other.

- the original poem would have been composed by Cædmon around 658 to 680 in the later half of the seventh century— the dates are uncertain due to the lack of data; Cædmon’s birth and death dates were never recorded
- Bede recorded the lyrics roughly a generation later, during the eighth century
- the one reference is the only surviving resource of the poet’s full material; it is assumed he composed other verses based on biblical texts, but these were not written down because they were intended to be memorized and performed in the traditional scop fashion or as a monk’s chanting chorus

# *The Venerable Bede and Cædmon*

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**Bede's recording of the hymn/poem is considered significant for a number of reasons.**

As a historian this act is important because Bede chose a contemporary, creative work to represent in his collection of historical information.

- the poem likewise represents the time period just after pagan-dominated rule in England
- also, this piece displays the actual transition of literature from the traditional, **oral-based** practice to a **printed** record
- European society was shifting from cultural learning through memory to communication through recorded texts as a standard practice
- rhetorical concepts of communicating historical events were changing on a larger scale
- it is rare to have a name attributed to any Old English poem

# *Cultural Learning*

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## **The monks transcribing the material were trained men.**

There is much discussion over how much these people were educated.

- the creation of a handmade book requires more than one individual
- the scribes and translators would have had some intense learning in the cultures and writing of Ancient Greek and Rome.
- often material in Latin would be translated into Old English for the average ruler and his/her court; a Latin-based education was not as common as the English Renaissance period
- in this regard, the transition in the educational process can be seen in its early stages of development, a model which will be used in later centuries

# *Bede's "Cædmon's Hymn"*

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**Bede sometimes models his writings on hagiographic prose—**

that is, he emulates existing texts recording the lives of saints and martyrs.

- This topic became a genre on to itself during the Eighth Century: recording the miracles and religious teachings of people deemed holy by the church.
- These writings in turn sometimes became in a sense propaganda in order to promote the church. Sometimes local folk-heros and pagan house gods were reinvented or inserted into divine stories of a saint or martyr to help confirm religious philosophies and to enlist new members.
- Bede will focus his themes closely to the perceived Christian doctrine.
- Notice how Bede concentrates information on Christian traditions of Last Rites and the Eucharist within his narrative on the poet.

# *Bede's "Cædmon's Hymn"*

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**Cædmon is shown receiving a divine epiphany through a dream.**

Notice also a divine being specifically talks to Cædmon in the dream, offering him the gift of poetry.

- This is similar to other Old Testament tales in:

Genesis:

- > Jacob dreams of angels moving up and down a golden ladder; the voice of God addresses him, providing a goal
- > Joseph and his various dream interpretations in Genesis

The Book of Daniel

Book of Revelation

- Due to the nature of the gift, Cædmon therefor creates a song of the Creation itself, explaining the Grand Purpose

# *Bede's "Cædmon's Hymn"*

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**Notice the full theme of Bede's prose piece.**

For the most part he shows how someone lowly or someone of working class can have their true potential recognized and their reputation exalted.

- Many myths and biblical stories follow the same pattern; in some regards the characterization of Cædmon which Bede presents displays the poet as a Christ-like figure, a symbol of humility and devotion:
- he is “born” in a stable
- he is tested by a group of higher authority
- his work becomes recognized by all
- his work centers on a religious, philosophical theme



# *Bede's "Cædmon's Hymn"*

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**Also of interest the construction of the death scene.**

Compare this concept against the close of Beowulf. Bede needs to establish basic differential qualities in order to prove his point of how Christian concepts are a value over the warrior-based pagan ideologies.

- one obvious, immediate difference is the fact Cædmon is shown in a calm, non-violent situation: he dies peacefully in his sleep
- Cædmon is shown as an example of one who led a proper life as a Christian
- initially Beowulf is shown sacrificing himself for the greater good

# *Bede's "Cædmon's Hymn"*

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**However, notice how similar the scenes actually are:**

- both Cædmon and Beowulf were men who followed an established code
- both men initially start out their stories unrecognized; they prove their worth with their deeds and talents
- both are shown in the winter of their years after a successful life
- both are made aware that their death is imminent; they accept the notion of their fate
  - > with Beowulf, once he sees the tarnished treasure, he gives a acknowledged prayer to the Christian God accepting the fact he has achieved a sign of his worth for his work; he dies with Wiglaf
  - > with Cædmon after he receives the Eucharist, he dies with Christ

# Cædmon

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**Although titled as a hymn, the work by Cædmon is considered a poem.**

This is due to its formal structure following Anglo-Saxon verse (including the epic Beowulf) which typically utilizes:

- **alliteration:** repetition of key sounds at the beginnings of words in one line
- **cæsura:** a visual space in a line of poetry to represent a slight pause
- **hemistich:** a half-line of verse; what results when a cæsura is placed within a line; for spatial reasons, a double-line can be used as well to represent the division:

Now we ought to praise || the maker of the heavenly kingdom  
the power of the Creator, || and his intention

# Cædmon

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Typically, each line contains four stresses per line, separated by a caesura.

Of course, for the contemporary reader, when poetry is composed in Modern English, this pattern is easier to see. However, below are the opening lines from the second stanza of “Cædom’s Hymn”:

He aerest sceop      aelda bearnum  
Heofon to hrofe      Halig Scyppend

**HE AER**est sceop      **AEL**da **BE**arnum  
(*He first made || for the children of men*)

**HEO**fon to **HRO**fe      **HAL**ig **SCYP**pend  
(*Heaven as a roof || Holy Creator*)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www8.georgetown.edu/departments/medieval/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/a32.2.html>