Anglo-Saxon Period Culture & Literature

449-1066 A.D.

Melissa Dyer - English IV Lecture Notes

Immigrant Song

by Led Zeppelin

Ah, ah.
We come from the land of the ice and snow,
From the midnight sun where the hot springs flow.
Hammer of the gods, will drive our ships to new land.
To fight the hordes, and sing and cry.
Valhalla I am coming.

Always sweep with, with threshing oar.
Our only goal will be the western shore.

Ah, ah.
We come from the land of the ice and snow,
From the midnight sun where the hot springs flow.
How soft your fields so green. Can whisper tales of gore.
Of how we calmed the tides of war. We are your over Lords.

Always sweep with threshing oar, Our only goal will be the western shore.

So now you'd better stop, and rebuild all your ruins.
For peace and trust can win the day, despite of all your losing.

Ooh. Ooh. Ooh. Ooh. Ooh
Ooh. Ah.
Ooh. Ooh. Ooh. Ooh. Ooh.
Ooh. Ooh. Ooh. Ooh.

*what does this classic rock song have to do with the Anglo-Saxons?

Anglo-Saxon Culture

- based on a *Germanic warrior society* centered around warfare & battle--fighting for property/power

- **Brief life span:** 35-40 years; life was often brutal, violent, & short

- Women mattered very little, but surprisingly had more rights than later British women

- ***Wyrd*:** "Fate"; believed to be the controlling force of the world

Anglo-Saxon Culture
Nations/Tribes

- Groups related by <u>kinship</u>, exchange of oaths, & ruled by <u>Chieftains,</u> Kings, or Lords

- Lord had band of warriors whom he pays to fight for him by providing them shelter & treasure

- Royal Generosity of "spoils of war" thus an important aspect of heroic behavior

- Warriors, in return, pledge their service and protection to the Lord

Anglo-Saxon Culture
Heroic (Warrior) Code

- **Valued**: physical strength, bravery, honor, generosity, kinship (friendship), and loyalty to chieftain

- ***Blood Vengeance*:** sacred duty of soldiers to avenge the death of their leader

- ***Wergild***: "manprice"; if a lord/kinsmen was slain, a man had special duty of either killing the slayer or exacting from him the payment of ***wergild…*** The money itself had less significance as wealth than as proof that the vengeance could never be happy, having found no practical way of satisfying their grief
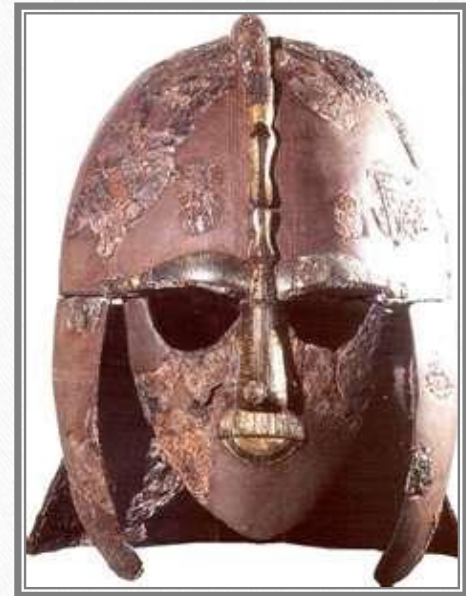
Anglo-Saxon Literature
(began as spoken verse)

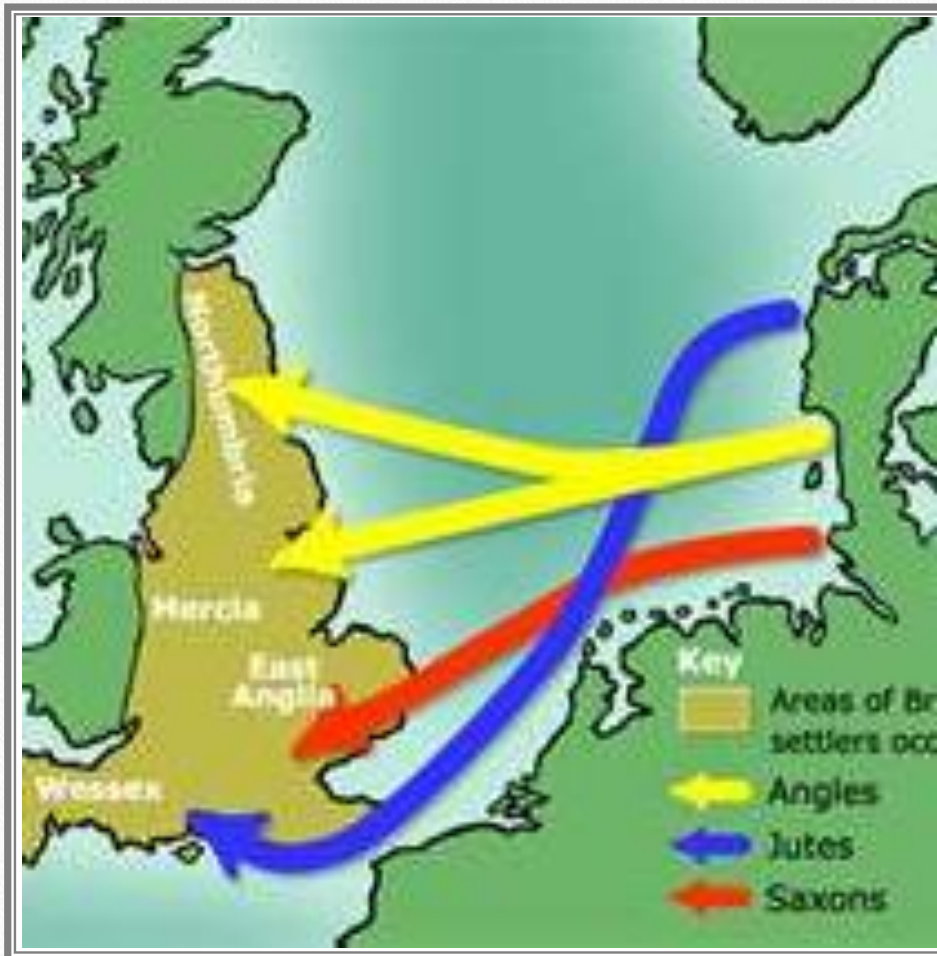- **Public function:** to entertain warrior kings & attendant thanes in mead halls

- **Scops:** *Anglo-Saxon* poets, storytellers, trained singers

  - *much honored* keepers of the history & mythology of their countrymen

  - accompanied the recitation with a small harp or **lyre**

  - often had to compose & recite a poem "on the spot"

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Anglo-Saxon Literature:
Heroic Poetry

- **Heroic Poetry:** recounts achievements of warriors

- **Themes**: the glory of God and his champions

- **Beowulf**: the national epic of England

  - **1st** work known to have been composed in the English language (*not in Latin!*)

Anglo-Saxon Literature:
Elegiac Poetry

- **Elegiac Poetry:** laments someone's death **OR** the loss of the past

- **Themes**: the pain & sorrow of this world

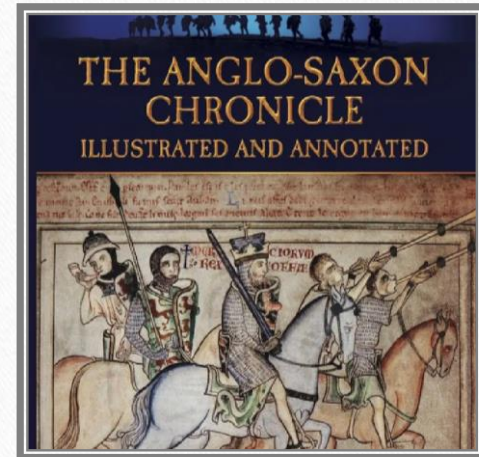 - "The Wanderer"

  - "The Seafarer"

  - "The Wife's Lament"

Anglo-Saxon Literature:
Prose

- **The History of the English Church and People** by the Venerable Bede (673-735) (*in Latin*)

- **The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles** instigated by **Alfred the Great** (in **Old English**)

Anglo-Saxon Poetry Techniques

- The characteristic style of **Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry** consists of a set of **conventions** (*standards*) which controlled length & arrangement of lines:

- A line of poetic verse called a ***stiche*** with **4 stressed syllables**

- A ***caesura,*** dividing the line into 2 half-lines or ***hemi-stiche,*** which *gave the poet a pause for breath at midpoint in each line*

- Each half-line has **2 stressed syllables** & a varying number of unstressed syllables

- No **end rhyme**

- A variety of **end-stopped lines** and **run-on lines** (*enjambment*)

- Grim **understatements**

Anglo-Saxon Poetry Techniques

also included were:

- **Alliteration,** the repetition of initial consonants, occurs on stressed syllables

  [*with old woes new wail my dear time's waste*]

- **Kennings** (condensed metaphors) two-word descriptive comparisons (such as "whale-road" or "sail-road" for the sea, "bone chamber" for the body, or "candle of heaven" for the sun) were **symbolic**

- **Assonance:** the repetition of *similar vowel* sounds followed by different consonant sounds in words that are close together

  [*lake & fate; an abbot on an ambling pad*]

- **Consonance:** the repetition of final consonant sounds after *different vowel sounds*

  [*east & west; struts & frets; add & read*]

Styles of Anglo-Saxon Poetry

- Can you recognize the characteristic style of Anglo-Saxon poetry? Do not be misled by one element that you know to be true of Anglo-Saxon poetry; consider the **mood** and **total effect** of the following passages and decide:

  Is it Anglo-Saxon poetry or NOT?

"
Louder, louder, chant the lay,
Waken lords and ladies gay.
Tell them youth and mirth and glee
Run a course as well as we.
"

ANGLO-SAXON Poetry OR NOT?

NOT

"

With my grip will I grapple the gruesome fiend,
Foe against foe, to fight for our life.

"

ANGLO-SAXON Poetry OR NOT?

YES

"

Straight I seized the slippery monster,
Slapped him smartly on the snout.

"

ANGLO-SAXON Poetry OR NOT?

NOT

"

I war with the wind, with the waves I wrestle,
I must battle with both when the bottom I seek.

"

ANGLO-SAXON Poetry OR NOT?

YES

"

Many a mead-bench mounted with gold
Was wrung where they wrestled in wrath together.
"

ANGLO-SAXON Poetry OR NOT?

YES

"

And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill;
But O for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!

"

ANGLO-SAXON Poetry OR NOT?

NOT