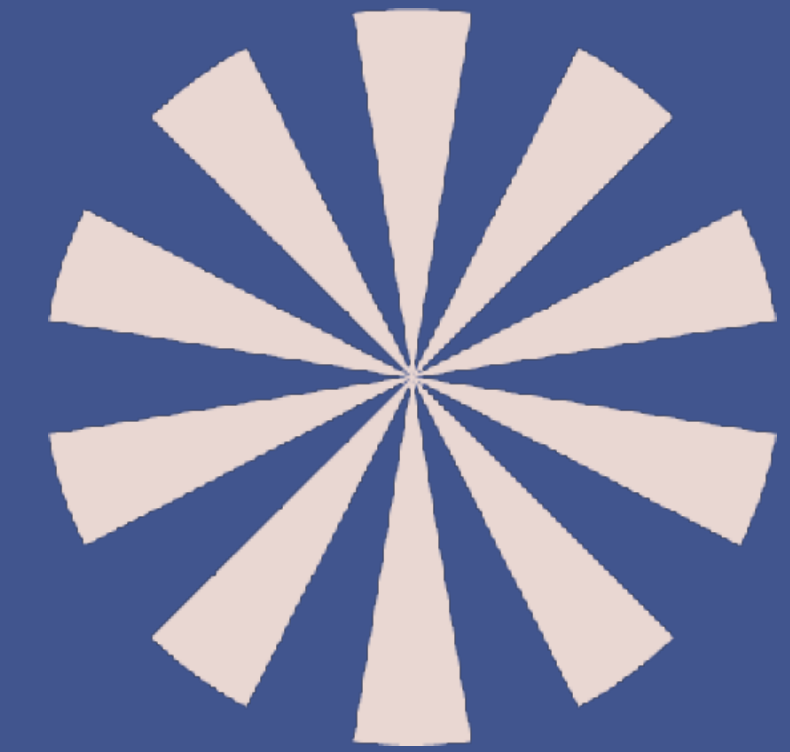

Old English Literature



DR. KALYANI VALLATH

25 YEARS OF
EXCELLENCE



VTES IS NOW
Vallath

Old English Period

The Celts (Britons)



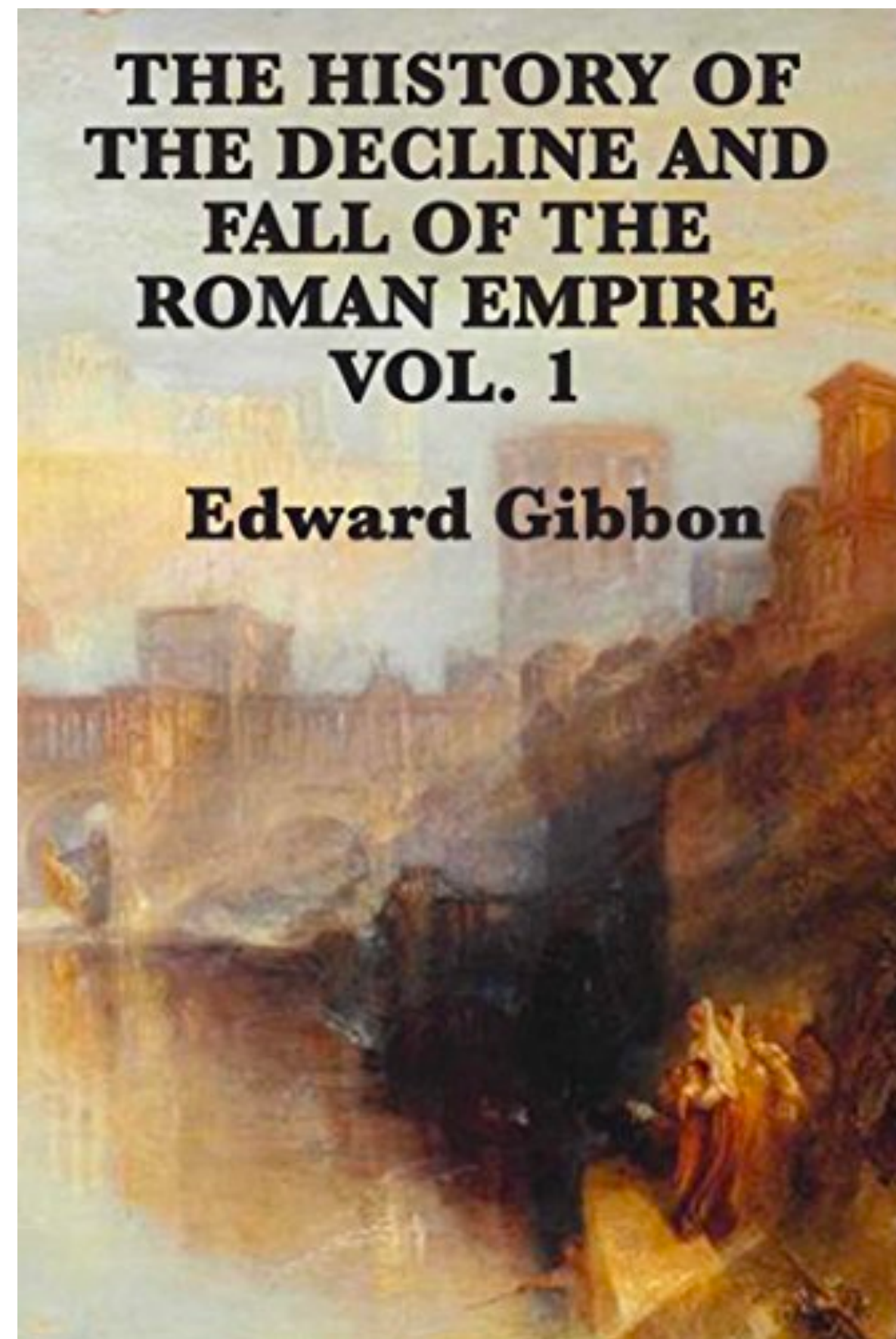
- Original inhabitants of Britain from Iron Age
- Iron Age roughly from 800 BC to 100 AD, when Romanization was complete
- Spoke Celtic languages, called “Britain” or Brythonic
- Society had class structure (Druids were the priestly learned class, like Brahmins)
- Many striking connections have been found between the cultures of ancient Vedic India and the Celtic people, pointing to the fact that these seemingly different cultures split from each other.
- Celtic languages and cultures survive today in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Brittany (Breton, Cornish, Scottish, Gaelic, Irish, Welsh)

Romans in Britain



- The Roman conquest of Britain was a gradual process.
- Julius Caesar's expeditions to Britain— 55 and 54 BC
- Britain had diplomatic and trade links with Rome since then
- Romans under Emperor Claudius invaded Britain in AD 43; invasion ended in the AD 80s
- Britain became "Britannia", a province of the Roman Empire
- Roman Empire became very powerful in the subsequent centuries

Romans in Britain



- Empire divided into Western Roman Empire and Eastern Roman Empire
- Economic decline and barbarian invasions in Western Roman Empire at the end of 4th century AD
- Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire
 - Book by Edward Gibbon published in 6 volumes in 1776-89
 - Covers the history of the Roman Empire, Europe and the Catholic Church
 - Discusses the decline of the Western Roman Empire (in 4th century AD) and Eastern Roman Empire (in 1453, Fall of Constantinople)
- End of Roman rule in about 410 AD
- Christian historian Augustine of Hippo says Rome brought the downfall upon itself by its own corruption

Anglo-Saxons



- We get this story from
 - Gildas's *On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain* (Latin, 6th c.)
 - Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Race* (Latin, 8th c.)
- After the Romans left Britain, Picts, Scots and Irish invaded the island
- The Celtic war-lord Vortigern invited the Germanic mercenary tribes, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, to assist in fighting the warring tribes; their leaders were Hengist and Horsa
- Anglo-Saxons settled in the south and east of Britain in the 5th century AD
- The Anglo-Saxon period is called Old English period

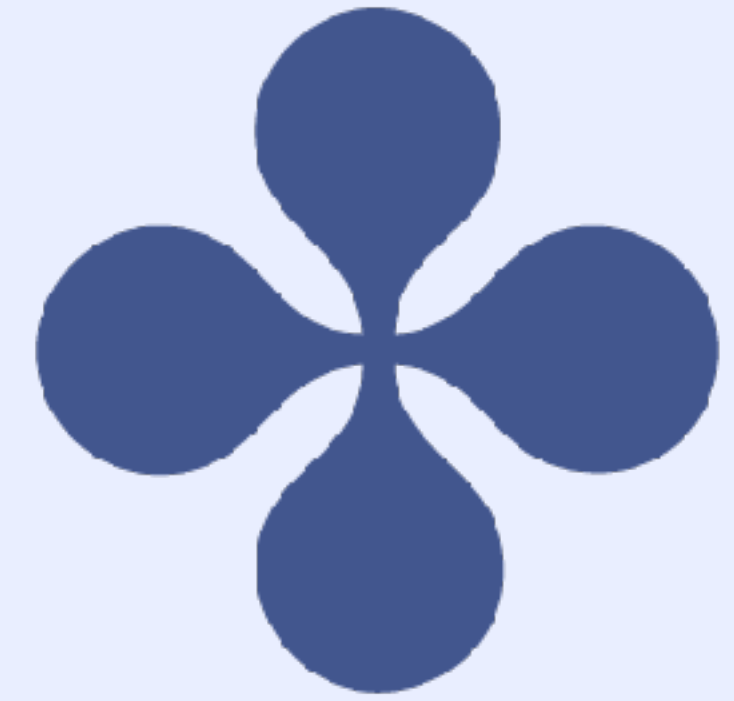
King Arthur



- Believed to have lived in the 5th or early 6th century
- Celtic king, probably of Roman descent
- Fought against the Saxon invasions of Britain
- Religious aspect: Arthur is a Christian king who fought 12 battles against the pagan Saxons

Arthurian Legends

- In the Middle Ages, Arthur became an international figure; Arthurian legends appeared in English and French
- Important elements of these legends:
 - Knights of Arthur's Round table
 - His sword Excalibur, horse Llamrei
 - His castle and court at Camelot
 - Arthur's wife Guinevere and her lover Launcelot
 - Perceval and the quest for the Holy Grail
 - The love of Tristan and Iseult
 - Arthur's final battle against Mordred at Camlann
 - His final rest in Avalon



Anglo-Saxons



- Heptarchy 600-800 AD
 - Seven kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons
 - The idea that there was a Heptarchy in the Anglo-Saxon period was first proposed in the 12th century AD by the historian Henry of Huntingdon
 - Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Sussex, Wessex, Kent
- In 8th and 9th centuries AD, persistent Danish (Vikings from Scandinavia) attacks on Anglo-Saxon kingdoms
- Society: kinship groups led by strong warrior chief
- English emerged as a written language
- Their pagan religions offered no hope of an afterlife
- People valued earthly virtues of bravery, loyalty, generosity, and friendship
- Bards (scops) strummed the harp and sang of heroic deeds of warriors who thus gained immortality

The Spread of Christianity

- Christian monks first reached Britain during the Roman period.
- **Around AD 400**
 - Christian monks settle in Britain
 - Christianity and Anglo-Saxon culture co-exist
 - By the year 550, the native Britons had been converted to Christianity and the religion became firmly established within their culture.
 - St. Augustine of Canterbury's Gregorian mission in AD 597; converted King Aethelbert of Kent & his wife
- **By A.D. 699**
 - British pagan religions replaced by Christianity
 - 7th century AD is also the time of Prophet Muhammad.

Alfred & the Vikings



King Alfred
Statue in Winchester

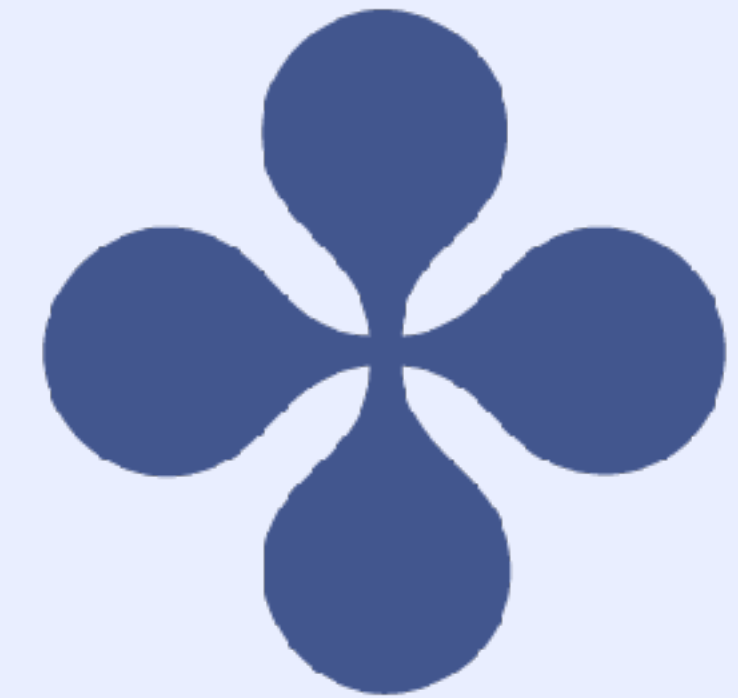
- King Alfred of Wessex (849-899)
 - King of Wessex from 871 until his death in 899
- Fought the Vikings (Danes)
- Viking Age in Britain (800-1066)
 - Great but sporadic violence by Viking raiders
 - Danish Rule in many parts of Britain
 - Danelaw
 - Common law developed during Alfred's time
 - Basis of all law in the UK

Norman Conquest 1066



- The last Anglo-Saxon king Edward the Confessor promised William, Duke of Normandy, the English throne
- Edward went back on the promise and designated Harold his successor
- William of Normandy defeated Harold and Anglo-Saxon army
- French replaced English as the language of the ruling class

Arthurian Literature: 12th century



- Flowering of “historical” literature on Arthur
- Gesta regum anglorum (William of Malmesbury)
- Historia regum Britanniae (Geoffrey of Monmouth)
 - Gives accounts of other early kings also, starting from Brutus
 - Focus is on Arthur himself, not his world of romance
- Five Arthurian romances by Chrétien de Troyes
 - Part of “Matter of Britain”
 - Inaugurated Arthurian romance tradition
 - Depicts Arthurian world as a lost golden age
 - Focus is on chivalry, quest, and exploits of the knights

Arthurian Literature: 12th century

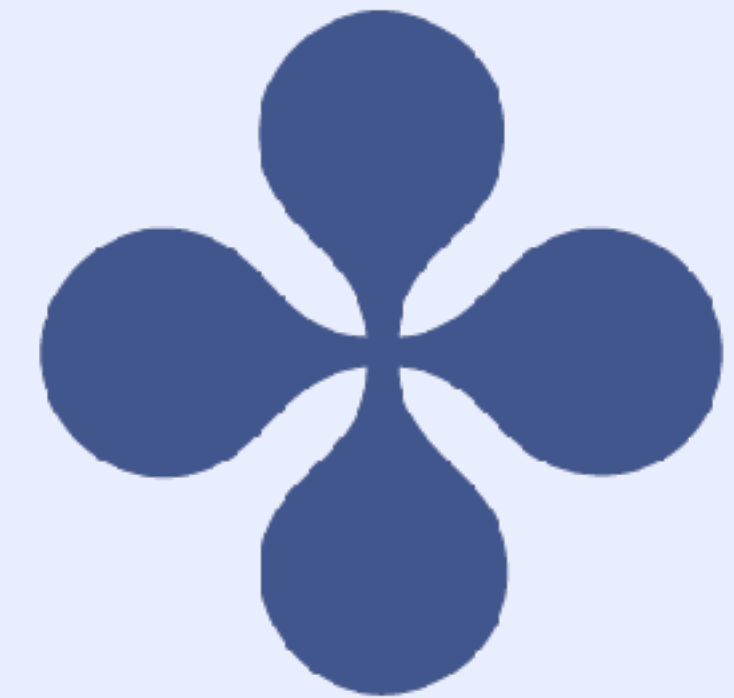


A manuscript miniature from *Roman de Brut* [from a 14th century manuscript]

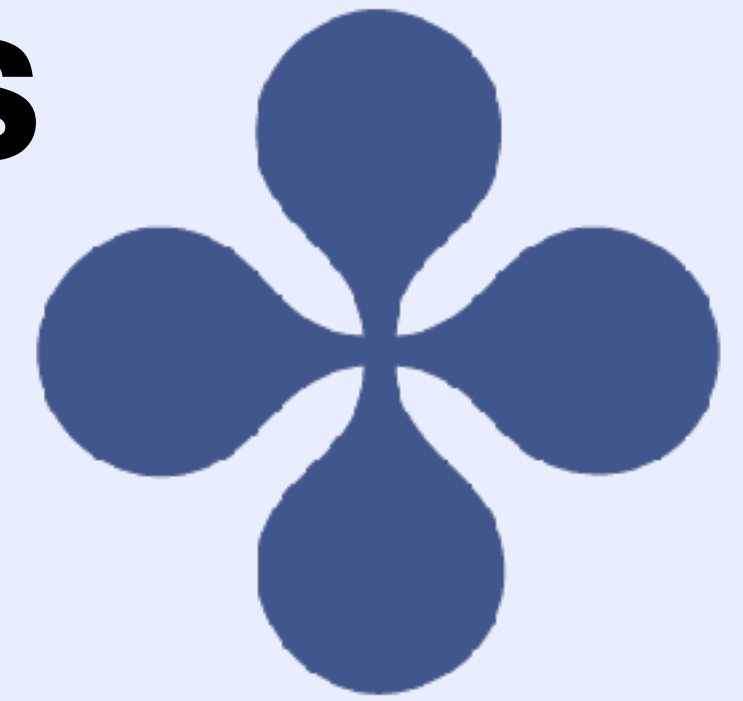
- Roman de Brut (by Wace, written in Norman language)
- Expands Geoffrey's account
- Inspired Layamon's Brut
- Focus is on the king and his battles, and his knight Gawain

Later Arthurian Literature

- French Vulgate Cycle of Arthurian romances (13th c.)
 - Arthur's world as epitome of chivalry
- The Alliterative Morte Arthure (c. 1400)
- Le Morte D'Arthur (Thomas Malory, 1469-70)
 - Based on French prose romances
 - Caxton printed this work

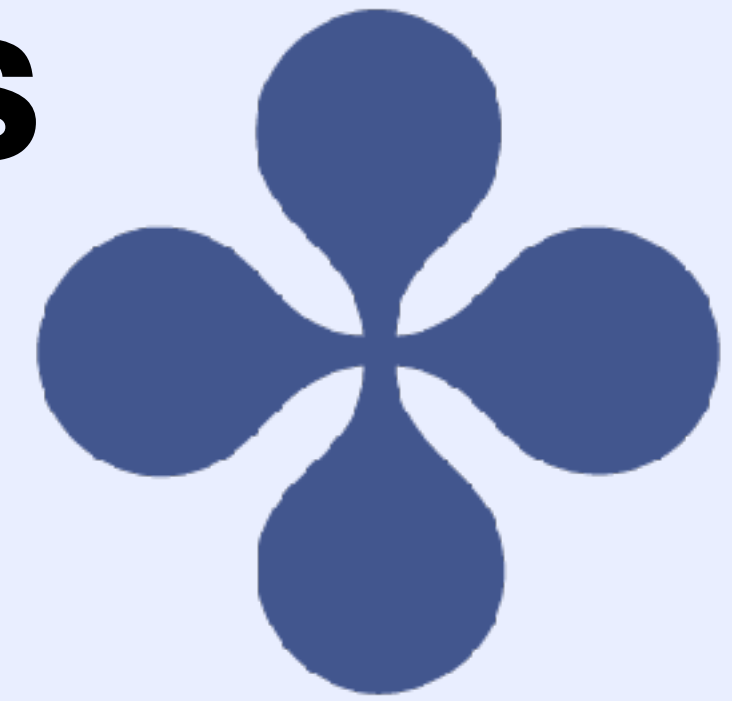


Other Writers of Arthurian Legends



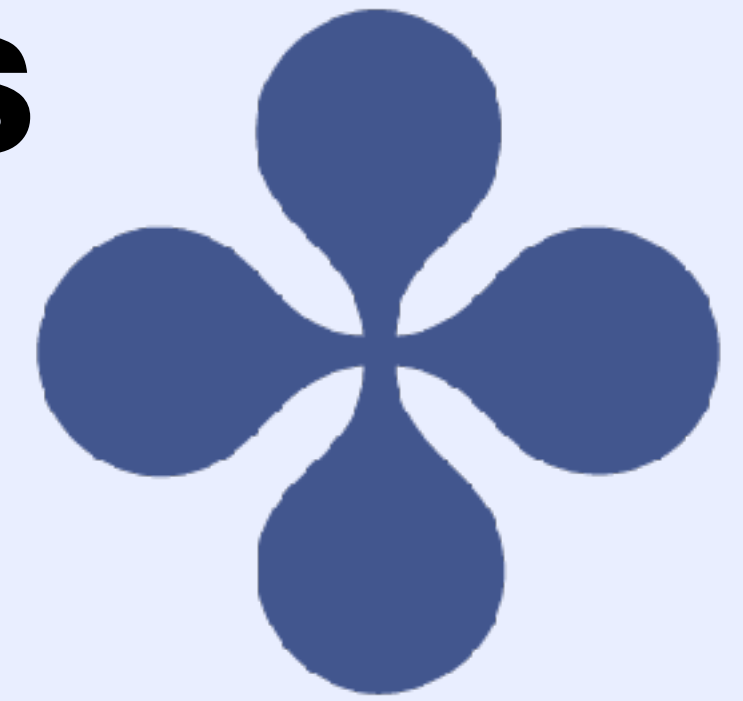
- John Leland
- Michael Drayton
- Edmund Spenser (The Faerie Queene)
- George Gascoigne (The Masque at Kenilworth)
- John Dryden (with Henry Purcell, opera King Arthur, or The British Worthy)
- Walter Scott (Marmion, The Bridal of Triermain)

Other Writers of Arthurian Legends



- Victorian Revivers of Arthurian legends
 - Lady Charlotte Guest
 - Alfred Tennyson (Idylls of the King: 12 poems which include “The Lady of Shalott”, “Morte d’Arthur”, “Sir Galahad”)
 - William Morris (Defence of Guenevere)
 - Swinburne (“The Day before the Trial”, “Lancelot”, Tristram of Lyonesse)
 - Matthew Arnold (Tristram and Iseult)
 - Aubrey Beardsley (Art Nouveau painter who illustrated Malory’s Morte D’Arthur)

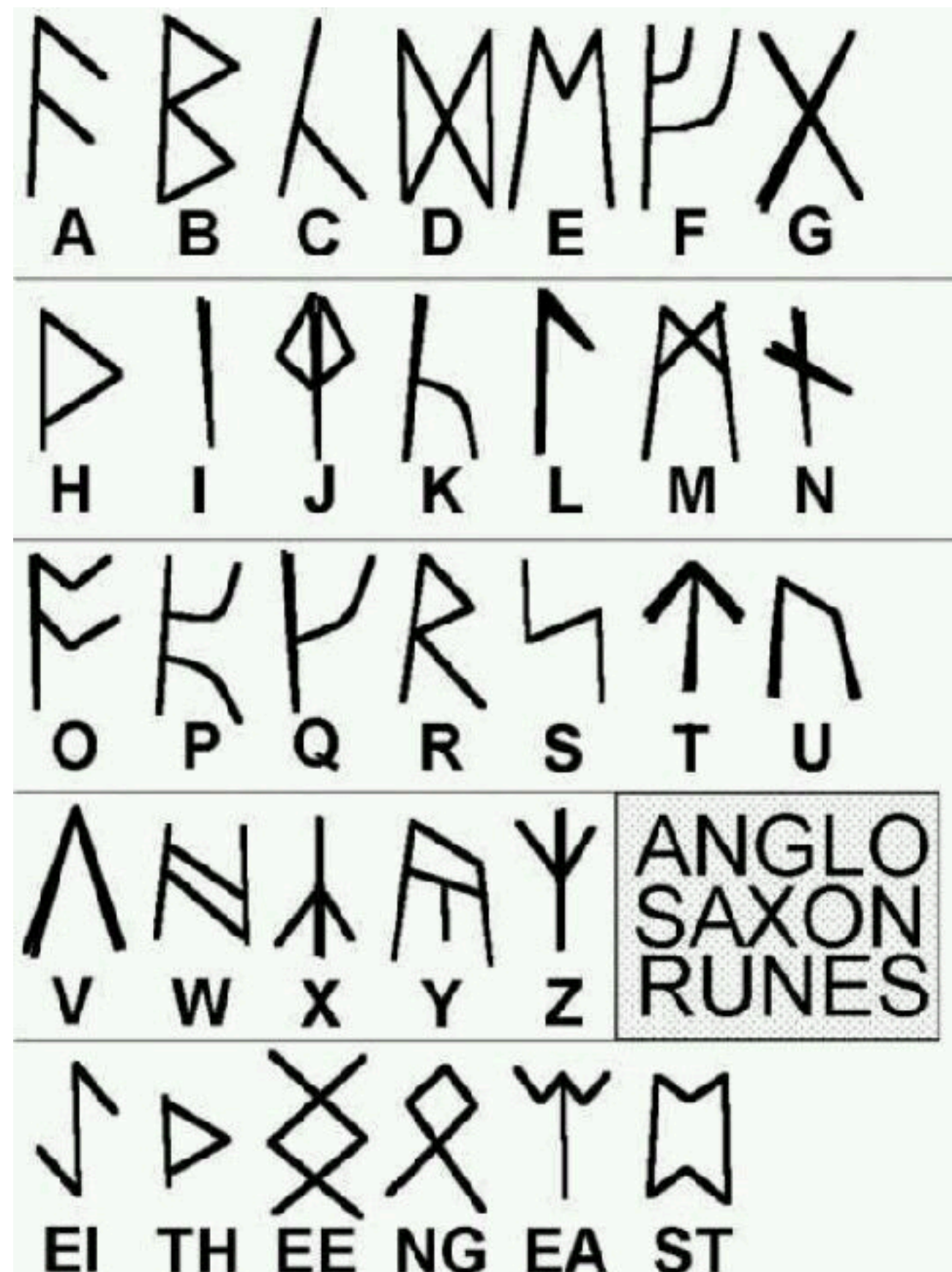
20th c. Writers of Arthurian Legends



- TS Eliot (The Waste Land)
- Charles Williams (two cycles of Arthurian poetry)
- CS Lewis (science fiction that draws on Grail mythology)
- David Lodge (Small World—draws on Arthurian motifs)
- Arthurian motifs abound in contemporary children's fiction

Old English Language & Literature

Old English Language



- English developed from the dialects (closely related but not uniform) of the Germanic tribes, Angles, Saxons and Jutes
- English belongs to the Germanic family, a sub-group of the Indo-European family
- Old English has four major dialects:
 - Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon and Kentish
 - Northumbrian & Mercian were found in the region north of the Thames, and are collectively called Anglian
 - Kentish was the dialect of the Jutes in the southeast
 - In the late OE period, West Saxon dialect (of Wessex) became the most important, and the standard for written prose
- Nearly all the surviving Old English texts are in West Saxon

Characteristics of Old English

- Pronunciation and Spelling
 - Pronunciation, especially of long vowels, was different
 - Had letters and consonant clusters we no longer employ
- Vocabulary
 - Purely Germanic words
 - Absence of French and Latin derivatives
- Grammar
 - Old English is a synthetic inflectional language
 - Words themselves change to indicate person, number, tense, etc
 - Modern English is an analytical language
 - More than changes within the word, changes of word order and use of prepositions and auxiliary verbs are employed



Old English Literature: An Overview



- Period from the 7th century to the Battle of Hastings (Norman Conquest) of 1066
- Poetry chanted by a scop (bard) to the accompaniment of a harp
- The period was characterized by the imposing scholarship of the Christian monasteries
- Major genres
 - Epic poetry, Hagiography, Sermons, Bible translations, Chronicles
- Greatest work: Beowulf
- Major authors: Caedmon, Cynewulf, Venerable Bede

Old English Manuscripts

- Four major Manuscript collections
 - Junius Manuscript
 - Exeter Book
 - Vericelli Book
 - Nowell Codex (or Beowulf Manuscript)

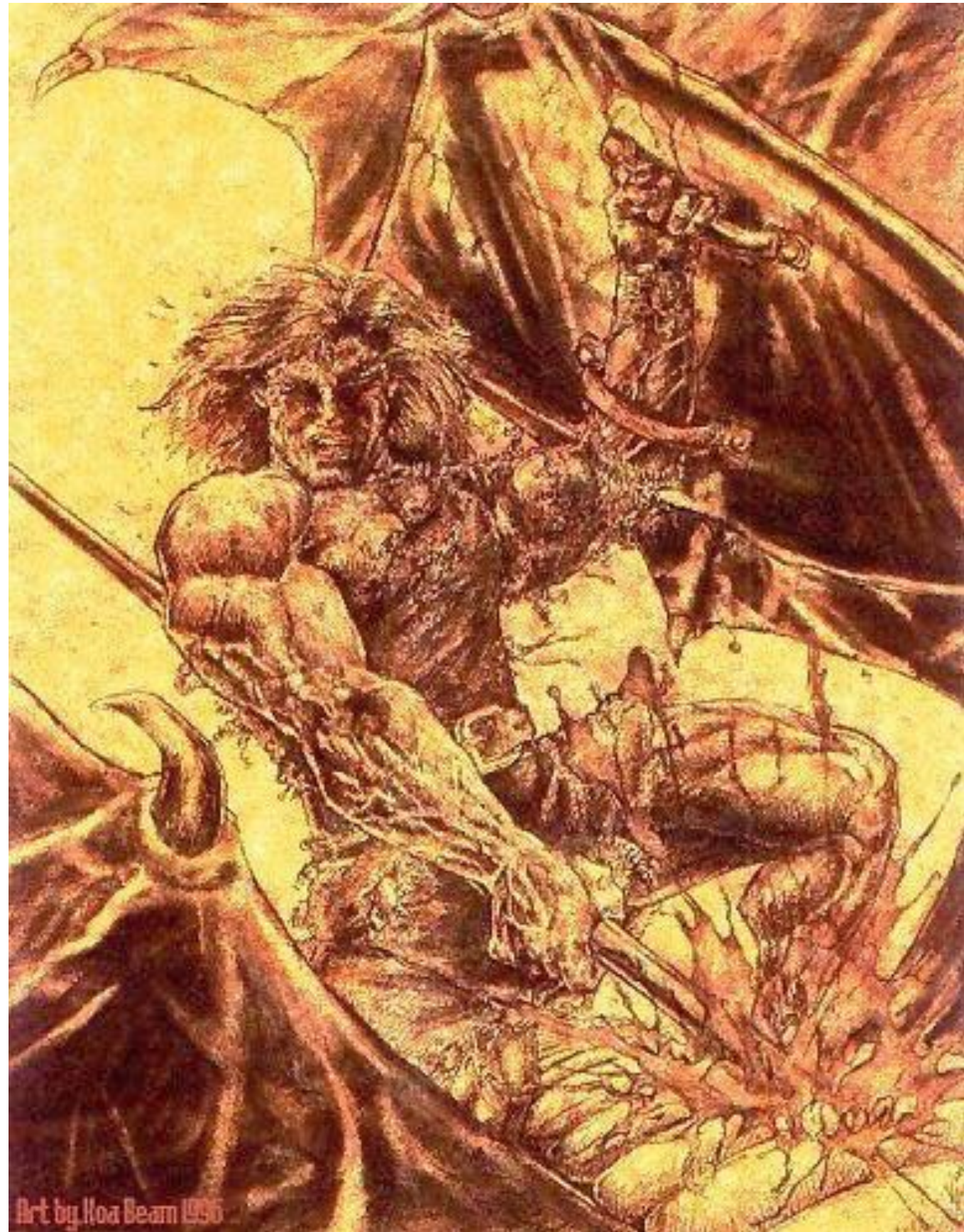


Old English Poetry



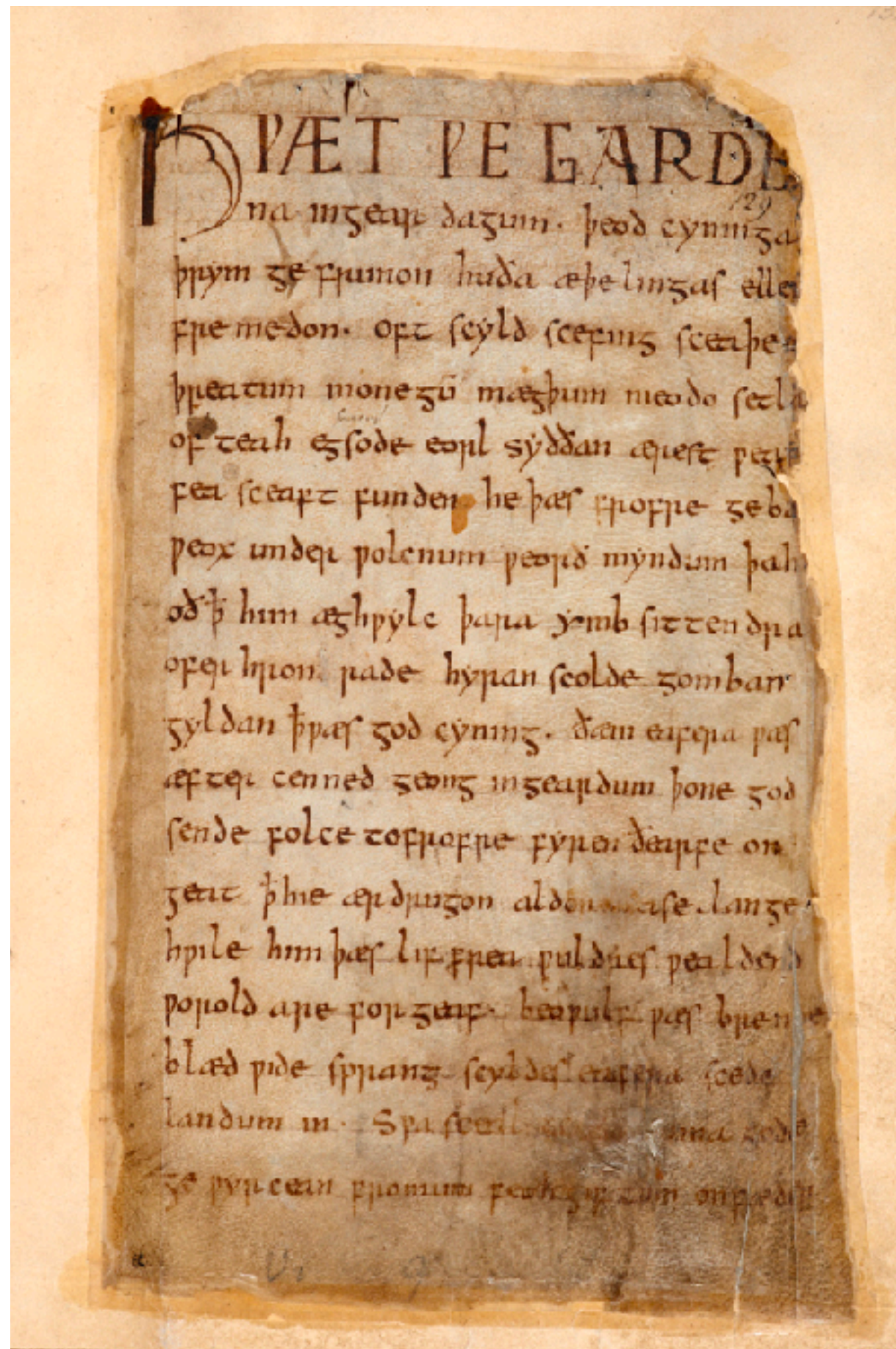
- General Features
 - Bold and strong
 - Mournful and elegiac
 - Sings of sorrows and the ultimate futility of human life
 - Two types: (i) Heroic Germanic and (ii) Christian
 - Portrays the helplessness of man before the power of fate
 - Alliteration and kenning (elaborate descriptive phrases)
 - Internal rhyme
 - Poems are mostly anonymous

Beowulf



- England's oldest extant national epic
- Written probably in the 7th century AD
- Survives in a 10th century manuscript called Cotton Vitellius A.xv (or Nowell Codex)
 - The manuscript was badly damaged in a fire in 1731
- Contains 3,182 lines
- Scandinavian story of the Geatish hero Beowulf

The Plot of Beowulf



- First Part
 - The Geatish warrior Beowulf kills Grendel, a monster who attacks Heorot, the hall of the Danish king Hrothgar
 - Grendel's mother, who seeks revenge, is also killed
- Second Part
 - Set 50 years later
 - Beowulf is now King of the Geats
 - Beowulf kills a dragon who attacks his people, and is himself mortally wounded
 - Ends with Beowulf's sorrowful burial

Grendal



- King Hrothgar of Denmark, descendant of great king Shield Sheafson
- Builds a great mead-hall Heorot where warriors drink, receive gifts and listen to bards
- But the noise angers Grendel, a swamp monster
 - He terrorises Danes every night
- Beowulf, a young warrior from Geatland, arrives to rid Danes of Grendel
 - Years ago, Hrothgar had settled Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow's blood feud with Wulfings

The Fight



- Hrothgar holds a feast in Beowulf's honour
- Unferth, an envious Dane, taunts Beowulf
- Beowulf recounts some past accomplishments
 - Soldiers get boosted by these stories
 - Merriment continues into the night
- Grendel arrives at night
- Beowulf fights him unarmed; proves stronger
- Grendel tries to escape; Beowulf tears an arm off the monster; hangs it high up in the hall as trophy
- Grendel slinks back to the swamp to die

Mother's Fury



- Celebrations galore include songs praising Beowulf
- Grendel's mother, a swamp-hag, gets to Heorot seeking revenge
 - She kills Aeschere, one of Hrothgar's trusted advisors
- Beowulf is provoked into action
 - He dives to her underwater lair; Hrunting, the sword gifted by Unferth, fails to bruise her
 - Finds an ancient sword in the lair, forged for giants; kills her with that
- Finds Grendel's corpse and bring its head for Hrothgar
 - Blade of the sword melts to the hilt from Grendel's blood
 - Hrothgar honours Beowulf with gifts that include the sword Naegling, his heirloom—used to fight the dragon
 - Hrothgar gives a sermon to be wary of pride & rewards his men

Homebound



- Beowulf returns to Geatland
- Meets King Hygelac, his uncle and Queen Hygd, recounts his adventures
 - Beowulf hands over his gifts to Hygelac
 - Hygelac also rewards him for his heroics
- Eventually, Hygelac is killed fighting Shyolfings
- After Hygelac's son Heardred dies, Beowulf becomes king
- Rules wisely for 50 years, brings prosperity

Loyalty and Trust



- Hrothgar's Queen, Wealhtheow, compared to mythical wicked queen Modthryth
- She fears Beowulf might usurp the throne from Hrothgar's sons, Hredric and Hrodmond
- But, Hrodulf, their cousin, snatches the throne
- The ever-so-loyal Beowulf offers to protect and train the young prince to regain charge of the throne

Second Part



- In Geatland, a slave steals from a dragon guarding its mound of treasure; triggers fiery destruction
- Old Beowulf fights the dragon with Naegling, but the sword breaks, senses his death but still persists
- Wiglaf (“remnant of valour”) aids him in the fight, even when others flee
- Beowulf is bitten in the neck and poisoned by dragon fire
- Finally Wiglaf slays the dragon
- As per his wish, Beowulf is burned in a huge pyre and buried in a mound of treasure overlooking the sea

The Ending

- Beowulf's end is heroic
 - Nevertheless even a truly great warrior-king, like Beowulf, can do nothing to protect his people in the end.
 - In fact, the Geats are left especially vulnerable because their king killed so many enemies, who might now seek revenge.
- The lament of the Geatish woman
 - Shows community feeling and the creation of collective history
 - Elements of pagan, oral culture

Features of Beowulf

- Sustained grandeur
- Brilliant style
- Baroque diction
- Set the standards for heroism
- Offers lessons in moderation and humility
- Warns about the transitory nature of worldly glories
- Fascinating representation of court culture
- Use of communal memory and shared tribal history
- Digressions, moving back and forth in time
- Pagan philosophical poem rather than a Christian work
- However, Biblical narrative is woven into the poem through references to Cain

Christian motives



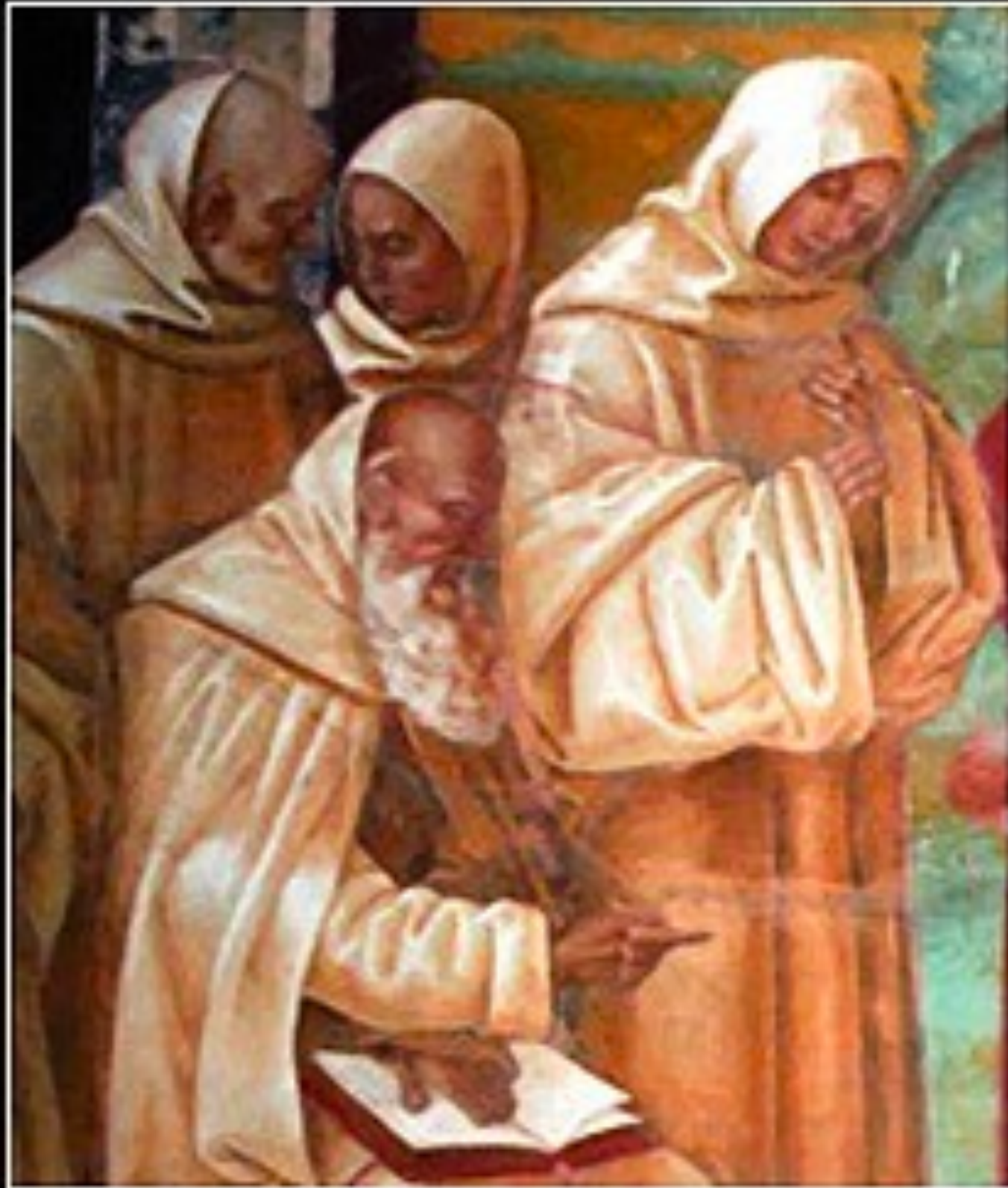
- Supposedly added after the composition
- Grendel traces lineage back to Cain
- Hrothgar's instructions to Beowulf are typically Christian touching upon humility, sacrifice, faith; to share not covet as in Ten Commandments
- Beowulf warned of undue heroic pride and arrogance
- The great, ancient sword found in Grendel's mother's lair is seen as God's grace to help Beowulf rid the world of the menace

Caedmon



- 7th century Northumbrian poet; “Father of Old English poetry”
- Was a brother at the monastery of Whitby
- Details of his life are known from Venerable Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English Race (year 731)
 - Was an illiterate cow-herd
 - A miracle happened in his life: At a feast that Cædmon attended, everyone was asked to sing a song on a harp. Cædmon left the hall, ashamed that he could not contribute a song. Later a man appeared to him in a dream and said, “Sing to me the beginning of all things.” Cædmon was then able to sing verses and words that he had not heard of before.
- According to Bede, Caedmon founded the school of Christian poetry called “Caedmonian School”

Cynewulf



- Lived in the 9th century
- Nothing known for certain about his life
- Was probably very religious
- Believed to have lived to an old age, which he felt to be a burden
- At some point of his life, seems to have enjoyed the favour of princes
- Was certainly a Latin scholar
- In his poetry, the personal note is emphasized, and even lyrical

Cynewulf

- With him, Anglo-Saxon religious poetry moved beyond Biblical themes into the didactic, the devotional and the mystical
- Poems
 - The Fates of the Apostles
 - Juliana
 - Elene
 - Christ II (or The Ascension)
- School of Cynewulf
 - The Dream of the Rood
 - Andreas
 - The Phoenix
 - Judith

Elegies



- Exeter contains a collection of seven Old English elegies
- Themes of loss and consolation
- The seven elegies are
 - Deor
 - Wulf and Eadwacer
 - The Wife's Lament
 - The Husband's Message
 - The Ruin
 - The Wanderer
 - The Seafarer

Old English Prose

- Sermons and translations from Latin
- Two types
 - Christian
 - Alfred the Great
 - Aelfric
 - Wulfstan
 - Secular
 - Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
 - Aelfric
 - Works on medicine, law, mathematics, rhetoric, geography, astronomy, etc
 - Riddles



Venerable Bede



- Lived in the 7th-8th century
- 40 books to his credit, dealing with theology and history
- Varied themes, including commentaries on the Bible, observations of nature, music and poetry
- Ecclesiastical History of the English Race (731)
 - Originally in Latin: *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*
 - Written in 5 books
 - Authentic historical document

King Alfred the Great (c. 848-899)



- King of Wessex from 871 until his death in 899
- Successfully resisted Danish attacks
- Translated theological and philosophical prose from Latin
 - Pastoral Rule (or Pastoral Care) by Pope Gregory
 - History of the World by Orosius
 - Ecclesiastical History of the English Race by Venerable Bede
 - Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius (written in prison while awaiting execution)
- Initiated work on the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
 - Collection of annals; a major historical document
 - Compiled in AD 890; continued till 12th century

Aelfric of Eynsham



- Late 10th century clergyman and prose stylist
- Well-known for his sermons, homilies, saints' lives
 - Catholic Homilies
 - Lives of the Saints
- Used plain English, and sustained the interest of readers / listeners
- Aimed to bring Christians to a better understanding of their faith
- Wrote textbooks to teach Latin
- Wrote letters to teach Christians their duties
- Made translations from the Old and New Testaments
- His works were
 - Copied throughout the Middle Ages
 - The first old English books to be printed

Other Writers / Works

- Wulfstan
 - Contemporary of Aelfric
 - Wrote sermons, of which Sermon of the Wulf is important
 - Blames the sins of the English for the Viking invasion
- Martyology
 - Prose work about saints and martyrs
 - Believed to have been by a Mercian author
- Prose on astronomy, geography, medicine, law, etc has survived