

Dear Students,

A very warm welcome to this lecture series on English Poetry Up to the Eighteenth Century. In this paper we would be taking up the major canonical poets of English Literature, ranging from Chaucer, upon whom Dryden conferred the title of “The Father of English Poetry”, through Spenser, Dryden, Marvell, Milton, Pope, Dryden right up to Thomas Gray and William Collins, who are hailed as the precursors to Romantic poetry. I am hopeful that you will definitely find this lecture series useful and you will surely be benefitted by it.

This lecture will be covering the Anglo Saxon period of English history.

# History of Britain Prior to the Arrival of the Anglo-Saxons

## THE CELTIC PERIOD 750 BCE TO 12 BC

- Britain was originally inhabited by the **Celtic Britons**. It is believed that the Celts arrived in England around **500 BCE** from southern Europe. Spoke Celtic and are considered to be the original inhabitants of Britain
- Celtic tribes: **Brythons/Brithons** (who inhabit the present day Britain) and the **Gales/ Gauls** (inhabit the present day Ireland and parts of Scotland) spoke Celtic languages such as Cornish, Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic
- The Celts lived in closely tied clans and were mostly **hunters** and **farmers**. This was an **Iron Age period**.

# THE CELTIC PERIOD 750 BCE TO 12 BC (Contd.)

- **The Druids**: The Celts were led by the Druids, who were members of the **high-ranking professional** class in the ancient Celtic culture. They were an authority on disciplines such as law, polity, medicines, history and helped in resolving people's issues
- The Druids are chiefly remembered as **priests** who administered sacred rituals
- The Druids **preserved** the **myths, legends, history, polity and law** orally as written script had not developed during the Celtic period.

# THE ROMANS (55 BCE – 407 CE)

- The Romans accepted Christianity and introduced it to **Britannia**. They referred to the island Britannia
- Role of Christianity in civilizing the people: softened the ferocity of a warring people, improved the conduct of the faithful
- **Roman Contribution:** Mainly through **architecture, infrastructure and the art of warfare**  
**Hadrian's wall**, built by the emperor Hadrian was an important defensive fortification on the northern limits of the Roman Empire.  
The Romans gave the island the name Britannia
- **Downfall of the Roman Empire:** The Roman rule ended in England as Rome was under attack from the **Northern Germanic barbarian invaders** called the Vandals; the Roman troops were called home to defend their homeland in 407 CE.

# The Anglo Saxon Conquest

- **Who were the Anglo-Saxons?**

- They were tribesmen; mainly deep-sea fishermen, farmers,

They drove the Celts to the periphery. Celts took Christianity with them when they were driven out by the Anglo Saxons

- **The Anglo-Saxon life (Social Structure)**

- King chosen by a Witan or council of elders. Each community had four distinct classes.

**Earl:** hereditary class of waring warlords who owed their position to the king.

**Second rank: (a)Freemen:** they were allowed to own land and engage in commerce

**(b)Thanes,** early barons came under this class

**Lower ranks:** churls or serfs, bonded servants who worked the land in return for military protection.

**Lowest rank:** thralls or slaves who were usually military prisoners

# Anglo Saxon Kingdoms

- Ireland,
- Scotland
- Northumbria
- Danelaw
- Wales
- Mercia
- Wessex

# THE VIKINGS 407 CE to 499 CE

- The next major wave of invasion in Britannia was by the **Vikings** from the Northern European mainland (Scandinavia)
- The Vikings were more of **raiders** who went about attacking **monasteries and villages** as monasteries besides being seats of learning were storehouses of historical artefacts and opulence.
- The Viking invaders continued their raiding spree even during the Anglo Saxon period. The famous Anglo Saxon king Alfred the Great resisted their invasion considerably. The Vikings eventually left Britannia in 954, after their last king, Eric Haraldsson (Bloodaxe) was killed. Eventually the Vikings were driven out by the Britons.

## THE ANGLO-SAXONS (Some Trivia) (449-1066 CE)

Who were they? The term Anglo Saxon refer four Germanic tribes which came to the British Isles from the modern day Denmark and Northern Germany: **The Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes and the Frisians**. The Angles and the Saxons were the most powerful Germanic tribes to conquer Britannia and contributed most to the development of Angleland or the Engaland and the present day England. Hence, the period is called the Anglo-Saxon period.

**Areas occupied by the Anglo Saxons:** Angles claimed areas in the East; Saxons settled in the South; Jutes: small portions in the South and the Frisians any patch of land they could find and dispersed throughout the country.

**Its significance today:** The modern day English has its roots in Old English which was spoken by the Anglo Saxons. English is therefore a Germanic language.

Old English became middle English somewhere around 1100 AD and Middle English became Modern English around 1500 AD.

Shakespeare wrote his plays in Modern English; Beowulf was written in Old English

The Anglo-Saxons pushed the natives to the periphery to regions such as Cornwall, Wales, Ireland and Scotland which helped to preserve the Celtic languages of Cornish, Welsh and Irish and Scottish Gaelic

# THE ANGLO-SAXONS: SOME FACTS

- **Hierarchical structure:**
  - King: The benefactor of his subjects
  - Thanes( king's warriors)
  - Subjects
- **The Anglo-Saxon Religion:** followed Paganism. They had different gods for different things and regions
- They had a strong belief in fate what they called **WYRD**
- **Prominent Gods:** Tui: the god of war and sky, woden: the chief of the gods, fria: woden's wife and the goddess of the home; Later on the names of the days of the week were derived from the names of these Anglo Saxon gods.
- In 597, the Roman cleric St. Augustine arrived in England. He was able to convert King Etherbert of Kent and this led to his whole kingdom being converted. The church promoted peace and helped unite the English people and also helped bring education and a written literature. Monks often worked as scribes, recording and duplicating written work by hand.
- **Important buildings:**
  - The Mead Hall:** a large wooden structure where the king lived, held his court and parties too and it was the major social centre of the Anglo-Saxon culture

# The Role of Church and Some Important Literary Personalities

- The Church promoted peace and helped unite the English people.
- It also brought education and a written literature.
- The monks often worked as scribes, recording and duplicating written work by hand.

# Some Important Literary Personalities (contd.)

- **Caedmon:** A shepherd, the earliest known English poet, wrote “Caedmon’s Hymn”
- **Venerable Bede (673-735)** “The Father of English History” wrote *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* which narrates the account of the early Anglo Saxon times
- **Cynewulf:** Wrote “The Ascension”, “The Legend of Saint Julian” “Elene” “Fate of the Apostles”
- **Alcuin of York:** Poet, clergyman wrote *Life of St. Willibrord*

# Characteristics of Anglo Saxon Poetry

- **Alliteration:** The repetition of same letter or same sound at the beginning of words for poetic effect  
Eg: Sally sells sea-shells by the sea shore
- **Caesura:** Pause in a line
- **Kenning:** It is a stylistic device used in Anglo Saxon poetry which is defined as a two-word phrase that describes words through metaphors and which also acts as a kind of riddle as it describes someone or something in confusing detail. For example in kenning “whale road” represents the sea, “breast-hoard” represents heart.
- **Orality:** Most of the Anglo-Saxon poetry was circulated through word of mouth by scopes were professional minstrels.

# Important Anglo Saxon Works

- The Anglo Saxon Poetry is mainly divided into three categories:  
(a) Pagan Poetry (b) Elegiac Poetry (c) Christian Poetry

## (a) Pagan Poetry:

- **Beowulf:** The earliest known English epic which recounts the story of the legendary pagan hero Beowulf. It is of Scandinavian

**The legend of Beowulf:** The heroic Beowulf travels to the land of the Danes to help the Danish king Hrothgar fight the monster Grendel, Grendel's mother and a terrifying dragon. His story was passed down orally among the Germanic tribes and in England by the Anglo Saxons and written down somewhere around the 8<sup>th</sup> Century

Beowulf's story has both a Christian and a Pagan flavor as it was recorded by a Christian Anglo Saxon around the 7<sup>th</sup> or the 8<sup>th</sup> Century

**Other Important Pagan Poetry:** *The Flight of Finnsburh, Waldere, Widsith and Deor*

## Elegiac or Wisdom Poetry

- *The Ruin*
- *The Wanderer*
- *The Sea Faerer*
- *Lays of Boethius*

# CHRISTIAN POETRY

- (a) Lives of Saints
- (b) The Anglo Saxon Chronicle: *The Battle of brunanburh*
- (b) *The Battle of Maldon*

# Characteristics of Anglo-Saxon Poetry

- **Alliteration:** The repetition of consonant sounds eg: Sally sells sea-shells by the sea shore, blue baby bubbles which is used at the beginning of words for poetic effect
- **Caesura:** Pause in a line
- **Kennings:** Metaphorical phrases. This is where they had their “stock epithet” a work of phrase characterizing a person or thing. Kennings showed relationships amongst people. Eg: xyz may be called ABC’s daughter or Brook of the rolled up sleeves, The lord of the slammed dunk: Michael Jordan

# CONCLUSION

- This wraps up our study of the Anglo-saxon poetry.
- Tune in next time when we unravel some more interesting things about the next period that follows in the history of England, ie the Noman period.