# Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Background

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## History

Old English, the modern term for the common language of the Anglo-Saxons, was used from the early 6th century (when the invading Germanic tribes had pretty well settled in Britain) to around the middle of the 12th century (about the point when it was mutated by time and Norman French into the Middle English of Chaucer).

There can be little argument that the Saxons and other Germanic peoples developed their style of poetry long before they preserved their verses in written form. Among the oldest surviving Old English poems, *Widsith* was written in the 7th century, yet contains elements (in the form of names and famous deeds) drawing from three hundred years earlier. Similarly, the most famous of all Anglo Saxon poems, *Beowulf*, is known from a c. 11th century copy of a c. 8th century poem which references people and events from around the 6th century.

There are many references to the *scops* (pronounced "shawps") – crafters of song, poem and story. The *scop* was highly esteemed in the noble's court, for not only could he entertain, teach, and provide news, but he could burnish a noble's reputation (or tarnish that of his rival) with a song. We can only speculate how these verses were presented, but based on archeological and written evidence, a type of lyre was used as accompaniment – possibly strummed during the caesura[1]. The poems may even have been sung. As scriptoria and literacy increased in England, writings of all kinds, including verse, were copied down. But though all indications suggest the Anglo-Saxons were prolific creators of poetry, very little has survived the centuries. Many manuscripts were scraped clean for reuse of the parchment, while others fell victim to fire, rot, or the even the need for scrap materials.

There are approximately 30,000 lines of Old English poetry existing today. By comparison, William Shakespeare left us more lines than that in his plays alone. From this paltry amount we are left to deduce the form and function of Saxon poetry. Yet the fact that the earliest poems (for example, the 7th century *Caedmon's Hymn*) through the latest (such as the 10th century *Battle of Maldon*) all share the same alliterative form and style elements suggests the poetic structure was fixed by the *scops* quite early on.

## Verse-Worthy Topics

The Anglo Saxons composed poetry that fit one of several general themes (some examples can be found on the last page of this handout):

***Heroic Stories/Elegies***: *Beowulf* is best known, but others, such as the fragments of *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Fight at Finnsburg*, also mix history with heroic ideals. A few, such as *The Battle of Brunanburh*, are documented in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle.

[1] Pronounced si-'zhur-uh. The pause between half-lines; see the handout "General Characteristics of Anglo-Saxon Poetry"

***Wisdom and Philosophy***: These poems are more philosophical and contemplative, often brooding on the cruelty of fate and the whims of fortune. *The Ruin*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Wife's Lament* are examples of these.

***Christian Themes***: Much of the surviving Saxon poetry is in the form of Biblical paraphrases, the lives of saints, or original works such as *Dream of the Rood* (although it has been suggested that the latter was adapted from an earlier poem about Odin). In fact, some poems, though originally composed before the Saxons were Christianized, were clearly written with a Christian audience in mind.

***Miscellaneous***: A number of short poems can be found in the surviving manuscripts, such as mnemonic or memory aids, short verses, and riddles.

## Two Notes on Translations

**The poetry of a culture** is shaped by the language of that culture. In this case, the consistent front-stress of words in Old English lends itself to the rhythm and alliterative structure. When translating a poem to another language; something is always lost, whether rhythm, style, or even meaning. Here is an example, taken from *Beowulf* (lines 26-34)

**In the original Saxon verse**

Him ðá Scyld gewát      tó gescæphwíle
felahrór féran      on fréan waére·
hí hyne þá ætbaéron      tó brimes faroðe
swaése gesíþas      swá hé selfa bæd
þenden wordum wéold      wine Scyldinga
léof landfruma      lange áhte·
þaér æt hýðe stód      hringedstefna
ísig ond útfús      æþelinges fær·
álédon þá      léofne þéoden

**A translation by Howell D. Chickering** (One of the more faithful versions)

Scyld then departed      at the appointed time,
still very strong,      into the keeping of the Lord.
His own dear comrades      carried his body
to the sea's current,      as he himself had ordered,
the nation's dear leader      had ruled a long time.
There at the harbor      stood the ring-carved prow,
the noble's vessel,      icy, sea-ready.
They laid down the king      in the center of the ship,

**A recent translation by Benjamin Slade,** (who claims to take the "middle ground between intelligibility and literal translation")

Then Scyld departed at the destined time,
still in his full-strength, to fare in the protection of Frea;
he they carried to the sea's surf,
his dear comrades, as he himself had bid,
when he yet wielded words, that friend of the Scyldings,
beloved ruler of the land, had ruled for a long time;
there at the harbour stood with a ringed-prow,
icy and keen to sail, a hero's vessel;
they then laid down the beloved prince,

**Translation by Seamus Heaney** (who goes for the spirit rather than the direct translation)

Shield was still thriving when his time came
and he crossed over into the Lord's keeping.
His warrior band did what he bade them
when he laid down the law among the Danes:
they shouldered him out to the sea's flood,
the chief they revered who had long ruled them.
A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbour,
ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.
They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,

**A prose translation by David Wright** (who, obviously, dispenses with poetic form altogether)

Scyld's hour came when he was in the prime of his strength. After a long reign the king departed into the care of his God. His dearest retainers carried the beloved Danish leader to the sea's edge, as he had commanded while he could yet speak. Rime-encrusted and ready to sail, a royal vessel with curved prow lay in harbour. They set down their dear king amidships. . .

**Another thing to note** is that this convention of writing two half lines to a line on the page is modern; generally, the poems were written to the end of a page. In other words, what we see in poetry books as:

*bærst bordes lærig, and seo byrne sang*
*gryreleoða sum. þa æt guðe sloh*
*Offa þone sælidan, þæt he on eorðan feoll,*
*and ðær Gaddes mæg grund gesohte.*

Was more likely to be found in a medieval parchment this way: *bærst bordes lærig and seo byrne sang gryreleoða sum. þa æt guðe sloh Offa þone sælidan, þæt he on eorðan feoll, and ðær Gaddes mæg grund gesohte.*

However, the modern style makes clearer to the modern student the rhythms and word patterns that the Saxons took for granted (just as we unconsciously pick up on iambic pentameter and rhyme schemes).

## Examples

*Note: these translations are often not in proper form.*

**From *Widsith***
So I have always found throughout my travels
that the lord who is dearest to all his subjects
is the one God grants a kingdom of men
to have and to hold while he lives on earth.'
Wandering like this, driven by chance,
minstrels travel through many lands;
they state their needs, say words of thanks,
always, south or north, they find some man
well-versed in songs, generous in gifts,
who wishes to raise his renown with his men,
to do great things, until everything passes,
light and life together; he who wins fame
has lasting glory under the heavens.

**From *The Battle of Maldon***
Then Bryhtwold spoke, shook ash-spear,
Raised shield-board. In bravest words
This hoar companion handed on the charge:
'Courage shall grow keener, clearer the will,
fiercer the heart, as our force faileth.
Here our lord lies leveled in the dust,
the man all marred: he shall mourn to the end
who thinks to wend off from this war-play now.
though I am white with winters I will not away,
for I think to lodge me alongside my dear one,
lay me down by my lord's right hand' . . .

**From *The Ruin***
The city buildings fell apart, the works
Of giants crumble. Tumbled are the towers
Ruined the roofs, and broken the barred gate,
Frost in the plaster, all the ceilings gape,
Torn and collapsed and eaten up by age.
And grit holds in its grip, the hard embrace
Of earth, the dead-departed master-builders,
Until a hundred generations now
Of people have passed by. Often this wall
Stained red and grey with lichen has stood by
Surviving storms while kingdoms rose and fell.
And now the high curved wall itself has fallen
. . .

**From *Dream of the Rood***
Now I command you, loved man of mine,
that you this seeing tell unto men;
discover with words that it is glory's beam
which Almighty God suffered upon
for all mankind's manifold sins
and for the ancient ill-deeds of Adam.
Death he tasted there, yet God rose again
by his great might, a help unto men.
He then rose to heaven. Again sets out hither
into this Middle-Earth, seeking mankind
on Doomsday, the Lord himself,
Almighty God, and with him his angels,
when he will deem--he holds power of doom--
everyone here as he will have earned
for himself earlier in this brief life.

***Exeter Riddle Number Five***
I am solitary, scored by knives
Bitten by swords, sated of battle
Weary of blades. War I see often
Terrible conflict. No comfort I seek
With thoughts of safety in the thick of war
Before I die amidst daring men
But I am hurt by hammer-leavings
The bitter and hardy handiwork of smiths
Nip me in castles; I need yet await
Grimmer ordeals. I could never
In any dwelling discover a healer
Whose art in herbs could heal my wounds
But my blade-gashes grow yet bigger
By deadly blows by day and night.

(Answer: *Shield*)

# For Further Reading:

## *Books*


Alexander, A., (1991, 3rd edition). *The Earliest English Poems*. London: Penguin Books. (A basic collection of Old English poems in translation).

Chickering, H.D. (1989, 2nd edition). *Beowulf* (Dual language edition). New York: Anchor Books. (A good translation and also has an excellent introduction chapter on the basics of Anglo-Saxon poetic styles, themes, and construction. Also has a good pronunciation guide).

Heaney, S. (2000). *Beowulf* (Dual language edition). New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux. (The tone and flavor is quite different than Chickering, but also enjoyable. This edition also has a good introduction and textual notes).

Pollington, S. (1996). *An Introduction to Old English Language and Literature*. Norfolk, England: Anglo-Saxon Books. (A short overview of the topic; highly general, but a good beginning).


## *Web sources*


*The Complete Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. Available at: http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/ascp/ (All currently known Anglo-Saxon poetry is available, in Old English, at this one site).

*Early Period Poetry.* Bunches of links on early period northern European poetry – Saxon, Nordic/Icelandic, Irish, Welsh. Available at:
http://www.eclecticco.net/early_period_poetry.htm

*Old English Poetry*. Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_English_poetry
A nicely-done encyclopedic background overview of the subject.

*Building Blocks of Old English Poetry.* Available at: http://www.sp.uconn.edu/~mwh95001/oepoetry.htm

*Beginner's Guide to Prosody: Anglo-Saxon Accentual Meter.* Available at:
http://tinablue.homestead.com/Prosody4anglosaxonmeter.html

*Introduction to Old English*. Available at: http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/research/rawl/IOE/index.html
Features chapters dealing with poetic style and meter.

*Beowulf on Steorarume* . Available at: http://www.heorot.dk/
Much information related to the epic poem, including several translations.

*Battle of Maldon*. Sound file samples from *Battle of Maldon,* in Old English, available at:
http://www.engl.virginia.edu/OE/Guide.Readings/Maldon.html

*Lexicon of Kennings.* Available at: http://www.hi.is/~eybjorn/ugm/kennings/kennings.html

*Vocabulary of Alliteration*. Very useful resource, available at: http://in.home.xs4all.nl/Poet/VocAll.htm