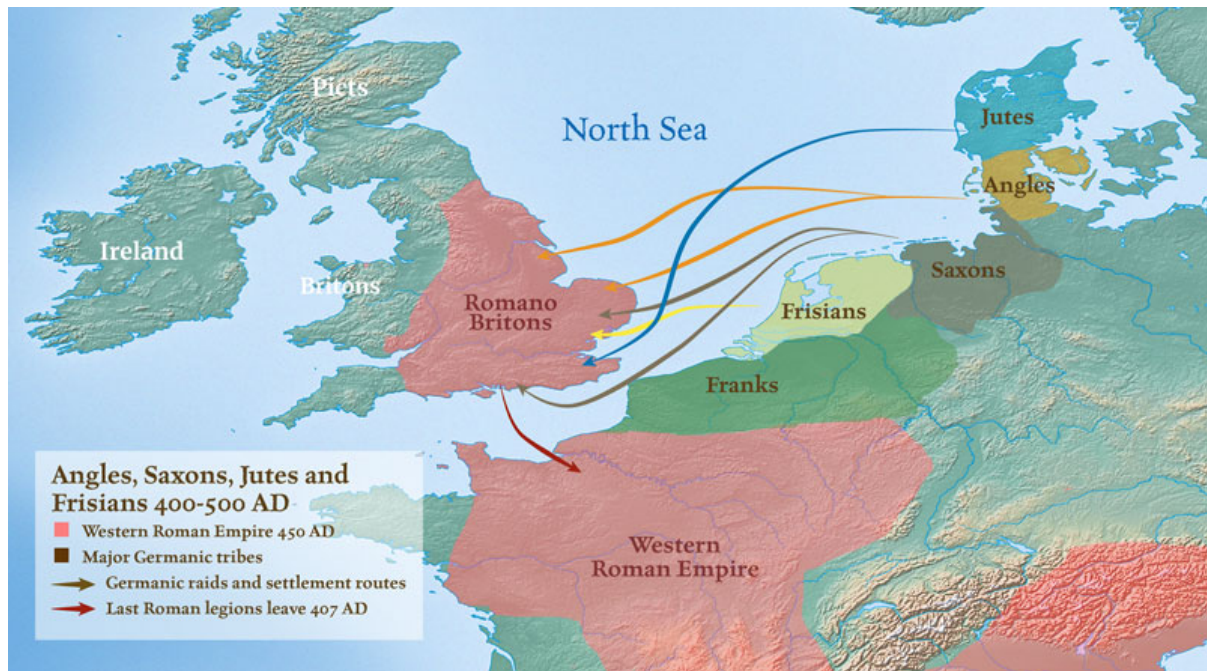


1. The Anglo-Saxon or Old English Period (450-1066 AD)

Angles and Saxons were the ancestors of the English race. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the early 5th Century, three Germanic tribes—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—saw an opportunity to fill in the power gap and started migrating to Britain. The Anglo-Saxons were fearless, adventurous, and brave people. By 670 A.D. they had occupied the major part of the country, and the land of Anglos or Angloland—present day England—became their permanent abode.



Infographic Map created by [Louis Henwood](#) for The History of English Podcast.

The language brought by these Anglo-Saxon settlers together with some Latin and Celtic words became Old English. Anglo-Saxon literature was the earliest phase of English literature. It contains writings of puzzles and riddles **Anonymous**, [The Exeter Book riddles](#), [‘The Wanderer’](#).

This period consists of literature written in Old English in Anglo-Saxon England from the 5th Century AD to the Norman Conquest of 1066. The Old English spoken by Anglo-Saxon people looks incomprehensible to today’s English-speakers..

1.1 Anglo-Saxon Poetry

The Anglo-Saxons were fond of singing about battles, gods and their ancestral heroes. It is, however, these songs of religion, wars, and agriculture that marked the beginning of English poetry in ancient England.

(i) **Anonymous**, [Beowulf](#)

The Anglo-Saxon poetry was mostly sung instead of written. That’s why there are very few remnants left of it. Among them, the most famous one is *Beowulf*, a rich literary narrative. It is the first English epic poem. *Beowulf* narrates a tale of the adventures of Beowulf, a brave Swedish hero. It is set in Denmark,— when read in the original Anglo-Saxon – seems almost more German than ‘English’. This poem, in fact, abounds in all sorts of references and allusions to great events and the fortunes of kings and nations.

(ii) Anonymous, [‘The Wife’s Lament’](#).

At just 53 lines, this is one of the shortest works of Anglo-Saxon literature included in this list. It’s a cry of despair and grief, told from the perspective of a wife whose husband has been exiled. The poem also features the rather useful Anglo-Saxon word *uhtceare*, which has been translated as ‘lying awake in the morning worrying’.

(iii) Anonymous, [‘The Seafarer’](#).

This 124-line poem is often considered an elegy, since it appears to be spoken by an old sailor looking back on his life and preparing for death. He discusses the solitariness of a life on the waves, the cold, the danger, and the hardships. As such, the poem captures the bewitching fascination the sea holds for us, but also its darker, more unpredictable side. Various views are held of the poem as a moral poem about how to face up to your own fate, a wholly religious poem, and as a great secular poem, ‘The Seafarer’ is a fine and accessible example of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

(iv) Anonymous, [‘The Dream of the Rood’](#).

Another early work of Anglo-Saxon literature, ‘The Dream of the Rood’ is an early work of English Christian verse and an example of the dream poem, ‘Rood’ means ‘cross’ or ‘crucifix’. ‘The Dream of the Rood’ is an English poem that made its way abroad, and is perhaps, therefore, the first successful English literary export.

(v) ‘Cædmon’s Hymn, ‘Bede’s Death Song’

Who was the first English writer? Cædmon was the first English writer. He wrote his poetry in the Old English language. His only surviving work is ‘Cædmon’s Hymn.’ Perhaps the oldest poem written in English, *Caedmon’s Hymn* was composed in the 7th century by a goatherd and takes the form of a short hymn in praise of God.

Bede also wrote this very short poem on his deathbed – at least, reportedly. Whether he was actually the author of ‘Bede’s Death Song’ is difficult to say for certain, but this five-line lyric, about facing death and looking back on a life well lived, is a marvellous short example of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

(vi) Cynewulf’s *Juliana, The Fates of the Apostles, Crist, and Elene*

Cynewulf’s famous religious poems were *Juliana, The Fates of the Apostles, Crist, and Elene*. Among them, ‘*Crist*’ is the most popular one telling the event that occurred in the life of Jesus Christ.

Key Characteristics of Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Heroic poetry elements, Christian ideals, Synecdoche, Metonymy. and Irony. After embracing Christianity, the Anglo-Saxon poets began to write religious poetry. Therefore, the major portion of Anglo-Saxon poetry encompasses religion. The most famous religious poets of the Anglo-Saxon period were Caedmon and Cynewulf.

1.2. The Anglo-Saxon Prose

The Anglo-Saxons replaced Latin prose with English which observed all the rules of ordinary speech in its construction. The famous Anglo-Saxon king, Alfred the Great, translated most of the famous Latin Chronicles in English. However, the second famous prose writer of the Anglo-Saxon period was, no doubt, Aelfric. He was actually a priest. Among his famous writings were *Lives of the Saints*, *Homilies*, and *Grammar*. Moreover, compared to other contemporary prose writers of the period, Aelfric's prose was easy and alliterative.

(i) **Anonymous, [The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle](#).**

One of the most important manuscripts in English history, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was created in the late 9th century during the time of Alfred the Great, almost certainly at his command (the manuscript is thought to have been written in Wessex, where Alfred ruled). The famous Anglo-Saxon king, Alfred the Great, translated most of the famous Latin Chronicles in English. Actually, the *Chronicle* survives in several different manuscripts, a result of its having been distributed to various monasteries and then added to. Among other things, the *Chronicle* contains accounts of the two battles of 1066, Stamford Bridge and Hastings.

(ii) **Aelfric, *Lives of the Saints, Homilies, and Grammar***

He was actually a priest. Among his famous writings were *Lives of the Saints*, *Homilies*, and *Grammar*. Moreover, compared to other contemporary prose writers of the period, Aelfric's prose was easy and alliterative.

What was the first work in English literature? Beowulf was the earliest most popular epic poem of English literature.

1.3. The Decline of Anglo-Saxons

The Anglo-Saxon period flourished until the Norman Conquest of 1066. After the defeat of Harold, the last of Saxon kings, by William who was the Conqueror of Normandy, France, the Anglo-Saxon period finally came to an end. In history, their ruling period extends roughly from 450 A.D. to 1066 A.D.

There is no doubt that the Anglo-Saxons lived a life rich in courage, splendor, savagery, and sentiment. Their literature, thus, remarkably contains all these traits. It reflects all the main principles of their life, for instance, the love of personal freedom, religion, appreciation for womanhood, responsiveness to nature, and the struggle for glory.