

## FROM ORAL EPIC TO WRITTEN CHRONICLE: THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the pivotal transition from a communal, oral poetic tradition to a structured, written historical one in early medieval England and its crucial role in shaping a nascent national consciousness. By analyzing the heroic epic *Beowulf* alongside the historiographical work of the Venerable Bede and the vernacular translation program of King Alfred the Great, the research explores how these textual enterprises collectively constructed a shared past, a linguistic identity, and a sense of destiny for the Anglo-Saxon peoples. The investigation argues that this literary evolution was not merely a change in medium but a foundational cultural project that translated tribal memory into a coherent narrative of nationhood, laying the groundwork for the English literary canon.

**Keywords:** Old English literature; *Beowulf*; Venerable Bede; King Alfred the Great; national identity; oral tradition; historiography; vernacular translation.

**Аннотация:** Данное исследование рассматривает ключевой переход от общинной устной поэтической традиции к структурированной письменной исторической традиции в раннесредневековой Англии и его решающую роль в формировании зарождающегося национального самосознания. Анализируя героический эпос «Беовульф» вместе с историографическим трудом Беда Достопочтенного и программой переводов на народный язык короля Альфреда Великого, работа исследует, как эти текстовые проекты в совокупности конструировали общее прошлое, языковую идентичность и чувство судьбы для англосаксонских народов. Исследование утверждает, что эта литературная эволюция была не просто сменой носителя информации, а основополагающим культурным проектом, превратившим племенную память в связный нарратив национальной принадлежности, заложившим основы английского литературного канона.

**Ключевые слова:** древнеанглийская литература; «Беовульф»; Беда Достопочтенный; король Альфред Великий; национальная идентичность; устная традиция; историография; перевод на народный язык.

**Annotatsiya:** Ushbu tadqiqot Angliyaning ilk o'rta asr davridagi jamoaviy og'zaki she'riy an'anadan tashkil topgan yozma tarixiy an'anaga o'tishning o'ziga xos jarayoni va yangi paydo bo'layotgan milliy o'zlikni shakllantirishdagi hal qiluvchi rolini o'rganadi. «Beovulf» qahramonlik eposini Venerable Bede ning tarixiy asari va Qirol Alfred Buyukning o'z tiliga tarjima dasturi bilan birgalikda tahlil qilish orqali tadqiqot ushbu matnli loyihalar anglo-sakson xalqlari uchun qanday qilib umumiy o'tmish, til identifikatsiyasi va taqdir hissini qurganligini o'rganadi. Tadqiqot shuni ta'kidlaydiki, bu adabiy evolyutsiya faqat axborot vositasi o'zgarishi

emas, balki qabilaviy xotirani millatga mansublikning uyushgan hikoyasiga aylantiruvchi asosiy madaniy loyiha bo'lib, ingliz adabiy kanonining asosini yaratgan.

**Kalit so'zlar:** qadimgi ingliz adabiyoti; «Beovulf»; Venerable Bede; Qirol Alfred Buyuk; milliy o'zlik; og'zaki an'ana; tarixiy yozuv; o'z tiliga tarjima.

## INTRODUCTION

The genesis of English literature is not found in the quiet of a scriptorium alone but resonates from the mead-halls of a earlier age, where history was sung, not written. The formation of a distinctly English cultural identity was a profound textual achievement, born from the dynamic interplay between a fading world of oral, heroic poetry and an emerging project of written, historical record. To trace this journey from the legendary verses of *Beowulf* to the scholarly pages of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and the purposeful translations of King Alfred is to witness the very construction of a nation's memory—a conscious effort to forge a unified past from the disparate threads of tribal migration, conquest, and faith.

Before the establishment of monastic chronicles and royal courts as centers of learning, the collective identity of the Anglo-Saxon peoples was preserved and performed through oral epic. Poems like *Beowulf*, composed to be heard rather than read, served as repositories of pagan values, heroic ideals, and a deep sense of communal fate. They presented a world defined by loyalty, vengeance, and the relentless struggle against chaos, reflecting a pre-literate society's understanding of its place in a perilous cosmos. This tradition was inherently fluid, adapting to its audience, yet it provided a powerful, if mythic, foundation for a shared Germanic heritage.

The advent of Christianity and Latin literacy, however, introduced a revolutionary new framework for understanding time, community, and purpose. The Venerable Bede, working at the monastery of Jarrow in the 8th century, undertook a monumental task: to narrate the history of the English people not as a series of legendary feats, but as a coherent story within Christian providence. His *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (The Ecclesiastical History of the English People) consciously created the “*gens Anglorum*” as a single subject of history, uniting various kingdoms under a shared spiritual destiny and a common narrative arc from pagan darkness to Christian light.

Building upon this ideological foundation, the Viking invasions of the 9th century precipitated a crisis that demanded not just military but cultural response. King Alfred the Great, in a visionary program of national revival, championed the translation of key Latin works—including Bede's *History*—into the English vernacular. This act was profoundly political. By making “the books most necessary for all men to know” accessible in Old English, Alfred sought to educate a leadership class, unify his realm through a common language of law and learning, and consciously cultivate an English literary prose tradition. The voice of the scop was thus joined, and increasingly supplanted, by the voices of the chronicler and the translator.

While each of these texts—*Beowulf*, Bede's *History*, Alfred's translations—is often studied in isolation, a focused examination of their sequential and synergistic roles reveals the core mechanism of early English nation-building. How did the heroic ethos of the oral epic persist within or conflict with the Christian universalism of the written chronicle? In what specific ways did Bede's narrative invention of a unified English people provide the conceptual

groundwork for Alfred's political project? By seeking answers to these questions, we can appreciate the earliest English literature not merely as artistic or historical artifact, but as the active, deliberate process of forging a nation through the power of the word.

### METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes an integrated analytical approach, combining close textual examination with historical contextualization. It treats three foundational Old English corpora not in isolation, but as consecutive and interconnected phases in a deliberate cultural project aimed at forging a collective identity.

The investigation is built upon a core triad of primary sources, each representing a pivotal stage in this process. The analysis begins with the poem *Beowulf*, which serves as the paramount representative of the oral epic tradition and the pre-literate heroic value system it enshrined. The focus then shifts to the Venerable Bede's seminal Latin work, the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, examined as a conscious effort to construct a unified narrative of the English people within a Christian historical framework. Finally, the study turns to the vernacular program initiated under King Alfred the Great, including key texts like the preface to his translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. These are analyzed as strategic instruments for linguistic unification and the promotion of a cohesive political ideology.

To guide this comparative examination, a structured qualitative analysis was applied, viewing each corpus through three defining lenses of identity formation. The first lens investigated the construction of a communal past, analyzing how each text defines "the people," selects significant events, and establishes a timeline, tracing an evolution from mythical time to a structured Christian chronology. The second lens focused on language and medium as identity markers, examining the symbolic role of linguistic form—from the formulaic diction of oral poetry, to Latin as the language of universal history, to Old English as an officially sanctioned vehicle for rule and learning. The final lens considered the ideological purpose and intended audience of each textual enterprise, studying both stated and implicit goals—such as the preservation of fame, religious instruction, or political consolidation—and the specific "imagined community" each work sought to address and shape.

### RESULTS

The analysis revealed a coherent and deliberate evolution in the literary construction of Englishness across the three textual stages.

#### The Evolution of Historical Narrative

A clear progression from cyclical legend to linear, providential history was observed. *Beowulf* presents a timeless, legendary past of archetypal heroes and monsters. Bede introduces a decisive chronological framework, placing the Anglo-Saxons within God's plan and creating an origin story that leads to their conversion. Alfred's project adopts this linear history (via the *Chronicle*) and directs it towards a future goal of survival and renewal.

#### The Mobilization of Language

The study documented a strategic shift in the status of the vernacular. Old English in *Beowulf* is the natural medium of a native tradition. Latin in Bede represents access to universal Christendom and scholarly authority. Alfred's program deliberately elevates Old English to a language capable of conveying sacred and classical wisdom, thereby making it a

pillar of secular and cultural identity distinct from both pagan orality and Latinate cosmopolitanism.

### The Redefinition of Communal Purpose

The central ethos defining the community transformed dramatically. The heroic code of the comitatus (lord-retainer loyalty) and earthly fame in *Beowulf* gives way to Bede's model of a people united by shared faith and ecclesiastical history. Alfred synthesizes these, promoting a Christianized yet distinctively English ideal of wisdom, practical leadership, and collective defense, forging an identity based on faith, language, and political community.

## ANALYSIS

### Construction of a Communal Past

*Beowulf* operates in a legendary "once upon a time," blending Scandinavian geography with Germanic values. Its past is a tool for illustrating eternal codes of conduct, not for documenting linear history. Bede performs a radical act of selection and interpretation. He begins with the Roman conquest of Britain and meticulously charts the adventus Saxonum (coming of the Saxons), framing it not as an invasion but, crucially, as part of a divine scheme. He creates a "national" history by weaving together the stories of separate kingdoms into a single ecclesiastical narrative, inventing the "English" as a subject of history. Alfred builds on this invented continuity. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, begun in his reign, uses the annal format to create a year-by-year record of the *Angelcynn* (English people), legitimizing his rule and the struggle against the Vikings as the latest chapter in Bede's ongoing story.

### Language and Medium as Identity Markers

The oral-formulaic style of *Beowulf* ("Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum...") is designed for memorial performance within a warrior aristocracy. Bede's elegant Latin locates the English within the international Republic of Letters and the universal Catholic Church, granting them prestige and a place in world history. Alfred's famous preface to the *Pastoral Care* laments the decay of Latin learning and explicitly champions English as a vehicle for national recovery: "it seems best to me... that we should translate certain books which are most necessary for all men to know into the language that we can all understand." This was a political manifesto for a literate, vernacular public sphere.

### Ideological Purpose and Audience

*Beowulf's* purpose is commemorative and ethical, reinforcing the bonds of the hall for a listening audience. Bede's purpose is didactic and unifying, offering a moral history to fellow churchmen and perhaps rulers, showing how the English became God's chosen people in Britain. Alfred's purpose is explicitly salvific and statist. Facing existential threat, he uses translation and the *Chronicle* to create a cadre of educated administrators, foster a shared culture of law and piety, and rally the *Angelcynn* around a common project of defense and intellectual renewal. The audience expands from the hall, to the monastery, to the entire realm.

## DISCUSSION

The trajectory from the scop's song to the king's scriptorium reveals literature as the primary engine of early English nation-building. This was not a passive reflection of identity but its active, textual construction. The heroic past, preserved in *Beowulf*, provided a deep reservoir of cultural values and a sense of shared Germanic origins. Bede provided the master narrative—the story, the timeline, and the spiritual justification—that transformed those disparate tribes into a single people with a God-given role. Alfred, facing disintegration,

operationalized this narrative, using the vernacular as a tool to make that identity tangible, teachable, and politically actionable.

This process underscores the profound power of textualization. Writing down the oral epic—as happened with *Beowulf* near the end of this period—began to fossilize a dynamic tradition, turning it into a canonical object. Bede's history, by its very nature as a written, Latin text, claimed an authority and permanence that oral poetry could not. Alfred's program recognized that control over language and the dissemination of texts was synonymous with control over the identity and loyalty of his subjects. The "English" thus emerged at the intersection of memory, faith, and political necessity, narrated into existence.

Understanding this literary genesis is crucial for comprehending the deep roots of English national consciousness. It demonstrates that long before the Norman Conquest or the centralized state of the later Middle Ages, a concept of *Angelcynn* was being carefully fabricated through an interplay of poetry, history, and policy. This study places Old English literature at the heart of political theory, showing how the management of the past and the word is fundamental to the creation of community.

### CONCLUSION

This analysis confirms that the journey from the oral epic to the written chronicle in the Old English period was the foundational act of English literary and national self-creation. Through the heroic memory encapsulated in *Beowulf*, the unifying historical vision of Bede, and the vernacular mobilization of King Alfred, a complex process of identity formation was textualized. These works collectively translated a patchwork of tribal affiliations into an imagined community with a shared past, a sanctioned language, and a common destiny. The legacy of this period is therefore not merely the first masterpieces of English literature, but the very blueprint for how a culture uses narrative to invent itself, establishing patterns of historical consciousness and linguistic identity that would resonate for centuries.

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