The Anglo-Saxons: 449–1066
Introduction to the Literary Period
The Anglo-Saxons: 449–1066

300s B.C.
Celts in Britain

55 B.C.–A.D. 409
Roman Occupation

A.D. 449
Anglo-Saxon Invasion

A.D. 400–699
Spread of Christianity

A.D. 878
King Alfred against the Danes

A.D. 1066
Norman Invasion

A.D. 1200
The Celts in Britain

Before and during the 4th century B.C.

• Britain home to several Celtic tribes

• Britain named for one Celtic tribe—the Brythons

• King Arthur – famous Celtic King (516?)

• Celtic religion a form of *animism* (belief that Gods/spirits controlled all aspects of life and could take the form of trees, rivers, fire, thunder, etc)
The Roman Occupation

**55 B.C.**
Julius Caesar invades Britain

**A.D. 43**
Celts defeated by Claudius
- Romans build walls, villas, baths, roads

**A.D. 409**
Romans evacuate their troops
- Britain left vulnerable to attack
- Central government breaks down
The Anglo-Saxon Invasion

A.D. 449 The Anglo-Saxons push the Celts into the far west of the country.
The Anglo-Saxon Invasion

Anglo-Saxon Society

- Warrior-based society, led by strong warrior chief
- “Warfare was the order of the day” (between clans, tribes, and outside invaders)
- Anglo-Saxon life was dominated by the need to protect the clan and home from enemies.
- Fame and success were achieved through loyalty to a leader, and success was measured by gifts received from leaders.
The Anglo-Saxon Invasion

- Women had many rights in Anglo-Saxon society. Women inherited and held property (even when married) and were offered substantial gifts of money and land from prospective husbands.
- English emerged as a written language.
The Anglo-Saxon religion

- offered no hope of an afterlife...only fame offered immortality and provided a defense against death.
- valued concept of the “Heroic Ideal”...earthly virtues of bravery, loyalty, generosity, and friendship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Norse god</th>
<th>Anglo-Saxon god</th>
<th>Day of week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Odin</td>
<td>Woden</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thor</td>
<td>Thunor</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The Anglo-Saxon Invasion

The Anglo-Saxon bards

- called “scops”
- skilled storytellers and honored members of society.
- sang of heroic deeds
- regarded as equals to warriors

Why were the scops important?

- Anglo-Saxons did not believe in an afterlife
- warriors gained immortality through songs preserved in the collective memory.
King Alfred the Great against the Danes

8th–9th centuries

Vikings, called Danes, invade Britain

871 Alfred of Wessex becomes king of England.

878 King Alfred unifies the Anglo-Saxons against the Danes. England becomes a nation.

* Alfred was also known for reviving an interest in learning and the English language.
The Spread of Christianity

**Around A.D. 400**
- Christian monks settle in Britain
- Christianity and Anglo-Saxon culture co-exist

**By A.D. 699**
- British pagan religions replaced by Christianity
The Norman Invasion

1066

- William of Normandy crosses the English Channel
- William defeats Harold and Anglo-Saxon army
- French replaces English as the language of the ruling class

The Norman Invasion, Bayeux Tapestry
Literature of the Period

• Leading Genres: Poetry and Riddles
  o Epics (narrative/story-like)
  o Elegiac mood (somber, sorrowful tone)
  o Strong rhythm and no rhyme
  o Lyrical (focuses more on emotion)
Terms

- **Animism** – Celtic belief that Gods/spirits controlled all aspects of life and could take the form of trees, rivers, fire, thunder, etc.
- **Fatalism** – Anglo-Saxon belief that the course of one’s life was pre-determined by fate.
- **Bards** – skilled storytellers and honored members of society. The Anglo-Saxons called them “scops” and they were not regarded as inferior to warriors…actually, the Anglo-Saxons viewed creating poetry as important as fighting, hunting, farming, and loving (because of religion).
- **Vernacular** – language of the people > Old English.
- **Alliteration** – repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words (ex: the wind whips through the woods).
- **Caesura** – rhythmical pause separating a line of verse into halves.
- **Kennings** – descriptive compound words that evoke vivid images (“sea-stallions” and “whale-road”).
- **Epic** – a long, narrative poem that relates the great deeds of a larger than life hero who embodies (is made up of and reflects) the values of a particular society.
An Introduction to Beowulf
Beowulf

- 1st great work of English national literature
- Composed between 700-750, but depicts earlier time period...early 6th century.
- An example of “heroic literature” and, as such, is composed of many traditional motifs and recurring elements.
- Beowulf’s name means “Bear”...??
- The epic is a mythical and literary record of the formative stages of English civilization.
Beowulf

- Story handed down *orally* for generations, naturally with changes and embellishments.
- 3,200 lines long
- Poet unknown...scholars think it was originally told by someone of pagan religion but recorded by a monk due to Christian elements present in the story.
So, why is *Beowulf* an important work of literature?

1. It is an expression of Anglo-Saxon values and attitudes:
   - Warfare was the order of the day
   - Fatalism
   - Courage, loyalty and honor
   - The battle of Good versus Evil
   - Boasting
   - Storytelling (bards/scops held key to immortality)
So, why is Beowulf an important work of literature?

2. It is an archetypal example of an epic:
   - Long
   - Narrative
   - Adventures of a central hero with supernatural powers
   - Worldwide or cosmic setting
   - Major battle scenes
   - Discussion of hero’s weaponry
   - Participation by God (or Gods) in action
So, why is Beowulf an important work of literature?

3. It is an example of Old English poetry:
   - 4-beat rhythm
   - No rhyme
   - Alliteration
   - Kennings
   - Caesuras
• Journal Entry!
  – On the last page of your notes, pick one of the journal topics and respond to it in the space provided.
  – I will collect your notes after the test on Beowulf and the Anglo Saxon time period, so make sure you do not lose the packet!