

Migrations

that shaped Old English literature

It is the middle of the 5th century AD. The Migration Period is at its peak – barbarian tribes are moving towards southern and western Europe. Groups of Germanic peoples inhabiting what is now Denmark, northern Germany, and eastern Netherlands – the Jutes, Angles and Saxons – cross the North Sea and invade the British Isles, pushing the Celtic Britons to Cornwall and Wales. Contrary to their barbarian origins, the invaders brought with them sophisticated material culture, beliefs (similar to Nordic ones) and orature – spoken literature, which would later become the basis of Old English (pre-Norman) literature.



Fragment of the Bayeux Tapestry depicting the death of the English king Harold II at the Battle of Hastings (1066), won by the armies of the Duchy of Normandy led by William the Conqueror. The Norman conquest of England ended the Old English period in history and literature | Photo: public domain (Wikipedia Commons)

Old English texts were created after the period of Christianisation, during the so-called Heptarchy (seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms), i.e. from the end of the 7th century. The heyday of Old English literature came in the 10th and 11th centuries. 'The Old English literature is quite unique because nowhere else in Europe have so many and such diverse works been written in the vernacular, i.e. in the everyday language used in day-to-day communication, and therefore understandable to every member of the Anglo-Saxon community. In this respect, it can only be rivalled by Nordic literature written between the 12th and 14th centuries', notes Rafał Boryślawski, PhD, DLitt, Associate Professor, who researches Old English literature at the Institute of Literary Studies at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Silesia in Katowice.

Ironically, such wealth of Old English texts (which, incidentally, is grammatically and lexically very different from modern English) would not exist if it hadn't been for the Viking invasions. In the year 793, described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as a year of famine, epidemics, and the appearance of 'fiery dragons', ships carrying Scandinavian warriors reached the British coast for the first time, arriving at the holy island of Lindisfarne. While there, the Vikings plundered and destroyed the local Benedictine monastery. Their raids continued throughout most of the 9th century, and in 865, the so-called Great Heathen Army (Old English: *mycel hæþen here*) landed in the British Isles, and kept ravaging the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms for the next 13 years. The Viking conquest was only brought to an end by the victory of Alfred the Great, King of Wessex, at the Battle of Edington.

It was Alfred (c. 849–899), reigning since 871, who decided that the only chance to save the Western European cultural heritage was to familiarise all his subjects with this tradition, including those from the lower social classes. Latin was not particularly suitable for this purpose (most of its speakers had fallen victim to the Scandinavian aggressors), so the everyday language remained the only viable option. This marked the beginning of a great translation campaign, which included *Confessions* by Augustine of Hippo and *On the Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius. Original works in Old English were also being produced on a large scale, including religious texts (sermons, lives of saints), philosophical and existential works, love poetry, wisdom literature, and heroic poems, the most famous of which is *Beowulf*, an extremely important source of inspiration for J.R.R. Tolkien. Dating back to the times before the Germanic settlement in Great Britain, the story of the hero fighting the monster Grendel, his terrifying mother and a dragon can be traced to a manuscript from the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries. It is a prime example of the migration of literature along with people – in this case, the Germanic ancestors of the English nation.

'Usually, students first learn about *Beowulf*, but personally, I would rather recommend elegiac and existential poems, especially *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, as an introduction to Old English literature', says Prof. Boryślawski. 'I myself was once completely captivated by these works, which compare the human fate marked by suffering, sadness, loneliness and the ultimate loss of everything to a journey across the sea that nevertheless offers hope. This element is depicted very vividly; while reading, you can al-



Page from the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, an illuminated manuscript from the early 8th century. The book stands out thanks to its rich ornamentation, which intertwines Irish, Germanic, Celtic, Pictish, Latin, Arabic, and Byzantine motifs. The *Lindisfarne Gospels* is a perfect example of the cultural sophistication of Northumbria in the early Middle Ages
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most feel the cold, dampness, and saltiness of the sea water'.

For the literary scholar from the University of Silesia, very important are also the poems that are riddles – often with two (or more) completely different solutions – and wisdom literature bordering on philosophy and theology of life. Recently, Prof. Boryślawski has been analysing Old English texts for the motif of fear and proposing new interpretations of works contained, among others, in the *Exeter Book*.

'It is precisely the elegiac and existential poems, riddles and wisdom literature, characterised by a certain enigmatic nature, that I consider to be the three main paths to the extraordinary aesthetics, mentality, and sensitivity of the people of that time. The Middle Ages were not dark ages! And if a contemporary reader would like to seek inspiration in this literature that goes back as far as 14 centuries, I would point out that Old English works seek to inspire us to marvel at the world and recognise it as an eternal mystery. We want to know the essence of God's plan, but as humans we are ultimately limited in this capacity. However, the awareness of these limitations is in itself a success!', concludes Prof. Boryślawski.