**Anglo-Saxon Poetry** (or **Old English Poetry**) encompasses verse written during the 600-year Anglo-Saxon period of British history, from the mid-fifth century to the Norman Conquest of 1066. Almost all of the literature of this period was orally transmitted, and almost all poems were intended for oral performance. As a result of this, Anglo-Saxon poetry tends to be highly rhythmical, much like other forms of verse that emerged from oral traditions. However, Anglo-Saxon poetry does not create rhythm through the techniques of meter and rhyme, derived from Latin poetry, that are utilized by most other Western European languages. Instead, Anglo-Saxon poetry creates rhythm through a unique system of alliteration. Syllables are not counted as they are in traditional European meters, but instead the length of the line is determined by a pattern of stressed syllables that begin with the same consonant cluster. The result of this style of poetry is a harsher, more guttural sound and a rhythm that sounds more like a chant than a traditional song.

Although most Anglo-Saxon poetry was never written down and as such is lost to us, it was clearly a thriving literary language, and there are extant works in a wide variety of genres including epic poetry, Bible translations, historical chronicles, riddles, and short lyrics. Some of the most important works from this period include the epic [*Beowulf*](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Beowulf), [Caedmon](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Caedmon)'s hymn, [Bede](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Bede)'s *Death Song*, and the wisdom poetry found in the Exeter Book such as *The Seafarer*, and *The Wanderer*.

A large number of manuscripts remain from the 600 year Anglo-Saxon period, although most were written during the last 300 years (ninth–eleventh century), in both Latin and the vernacular. Old English is among the oldest vernacular languages to be written down. Old English began, in written form, as a practical necessity in the aftermath of the Danish invasions—church officials were concerned that because of the drop in Latin [literacy](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Literacy) no one could read their work. Likewise [King Alfred the Great](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Alfred_the_Great) (849–899), noted that while very few could read Latin, many could still read Old English. He thus proposed that students be educated in Old English, and those who excelled would go on to learn Latin. In this way many of the texts that have survived are typical teaching and student-oriented texts.

In total there are about 400 surviving manuscripts containing Old English text, 189 of them considered major. Not all of these texts can be fairly called literature, but those that can present a sizable body of work, listed here in descending order of quantity: sermons and saints' lives (the most numerous), biblical translations; translated Latin works of the early Church Fathers; Anglo-Saxon chronicles and narrative history works; laws, wills and other legal works; practical works on grammar, medicine, geography; and lastly, poetry.

**Old English poetry** is of two types, the pre-Christian and the Christian. It has survived for the most part in four manuscripts. The first manuscript is called the *Junius manuscript* (also known as the *Caedmon manuscript*), which is an illustrated poetic anthology. The second manuscript is called the *Exeter Book*, also an anthology, located in the Exeter Cathedral since it was donated there in the eleventh century. The third manuscript is called the *Vercelli Book*, a mix of poetry and prose; how it came to be in Vercelli, Italy, no one knows, and is a matter of debate. The fourth manuscript is called the *Nowell Codex*, also a mixture of poetry and prose.

Old English poetry had no known rules or system left to us by the Anglo-Saxons, everything we know about it is based on modern analysis. The first widely accepted theory was by Eduard Sievers (1885) in which he distinguished five distinct alliterative patterns. The theory of John C. Pope (1942) inferred that the alliterative patterns of Anglo-Saxon poetry correspond to melodies, and his method adds musical notation to Anglo-Saxon texts and has gained some acceptance. Nonetheless, every few years a new theory of Anglo-Saxon versification arises and the topic continues to be hotly debated.

The most popular and well-known understanding of Old English poetry continues to be Sievers' alliterative verse. The system is based upon accent, alliteration, the quantity of vowels, and patterns of syllabic accentuation. It consists of five permutations on a base verse scheme; any one of the five types can be used in any verse. The system was inherited from and exists in one form or another in all of the older Germanic languages. Two poetic figures commonly found in Old English poetry are the *kenning*, an often formulaic phrase that describes one thing in terms of another (e.g. in *Beowulf*, the sea is called the "whale road") and *litotes*, a dramatic understatement employed by the author for ironic effect.

Old English poetry was an oral craft, and our understanding of it in written form is incomplete; for example, we know that the poet (referred to as the *Scop*) could be accompanied by a harp, and there may be other aural traditions of which we are not aware.