

English 229: History of the English Language

Study Guide for Quiz I

Test Date: in class on Wednesday, Feb 25

Reading.

Be prepared to write a discussion of the main themes covered in the readings listed below. As a guide for the themes to study, review the list of topics in the conclusion of the chapter in Changing English (p. 73). Also, to review, summarize for yourself the Reading at the end of Chapter 2 in Changing English.

“The Prehistory of English” (chapter)	In photocopied course packet
Chapter 2 “The Origins of English” pp. 39-63 and Reading A at the end of the chapter.	In <i>Changing English</i>

Historical events and periods.

Be prepared to explain the importance of these events or periods in relation to the history of English as a language and to locate them on a historical timeline.

- The Roman occupation of Britain
- The dissolution of the Western Roman Empire
- The Anglo-Saxon settlement/invasions of Britain
- The Christianization of Britain
- The Viking invasions and the Danelaw
- The Norman invasion and occupation

Key terms, texts, and concepts.

Be prepared to identify and/or define and/or discuss the following issues, terms or things

Historical linguistics	Inflection	Anglo Saxon poetry
Questions of evidence in language history	Case (Nominative, Accusative, Genitive, Dative)	Battle of Brunanburh
Linguistic reconstruction	Syntax	Aelfric’s Cosmology
Diachronic study of language	Analytic language	The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles
Synchronic study of language	Synthetic language	Bede’s <i>Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i>
Cognate words	Borrowing	Cædmon’s Hymn
Indo European family of languages	Alliteration	
Language Contact		
Language variation		
Sir William Jones		

Chronology:

- Old English (also referred to as Anglo-Saxon): from the earliest Germanic-language speaking settlers in Britain to 1100, just after the Norman Conquest;
- Middle English: 1100-1500;
- Early Modern English: 1500-1700;
- Modern English: 1700 to the present

The Roman occupation of Britain (AD43–410).

When the Romans first invaded Britain in the first century BC it was inhabited by various Celtic-speaking peoples for whom inclusion in the Roman Empire was to provide relative stability and economic growth for more than three centuries. During this time (AD43–410), Latin was the official language—the language of government and commerce—but Celtic undoubtedly remained the vernacular. Native Britons will have continued to speak Celtic at home but the increasing number of mixed marriages will have added to the number of families speaking Latin.

The dissolution of the Western Roman Empire AD410

In AD410, when the emperor sent word to the British towns that they should take measures for 'their own defense', it seems that the Roman garrisons had already departed.

The original inhabitants of the Britain, the Ancient Britons, were then absorbed into a Celto-Roman society. With the eventual departure of the Roman legions - to deal with problems closer to Rome itself - this Celtic-speaking society was left to fend for itself.

As this Celto-Roman society did not give birth to the English language the linguistic impact of the almost four-hundred-year presence of the Roman legions (43 AD to AD 410) is very limited on modern English. Nevertheless a smattering of words has been handed down almost all of which are related to the names of Roman settlements. These include towns and cities now ending in -chester or -caster (from the Latin word for camp, "castra"), or "straet" street and "win" for wine.

The Anglo-Saxon settlement/invasions of Britain AD 450

The bilingual Romano-British communities which remained came increasingly under attack from across the North Sea. The newcomers, who began by raiding and who later settled in southern and eastern Britain, spoke a variety of Germanic dialects.

Almost directly following the departure of the Romans, and perhaps as early as AD 450, Germanic tribes including Anglo-Saxons, Angles and Jutes began their invasion of the country and the true seeds of English were sown. They divided the territory into some 12 kingdoms and spent much of their time fighting amongst themselves.

The existing Romano-Celtic tribes were pushed to the north and west of the country where the Celtic languages were preserved and nurtured in areas such as Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, and Brittany in France. These languages eventually evolved into Welsh, Cornish, Scots Gaelic and Breton, while the dominant language in England became what is now called Anglo-Saxon or Old English.

On the continent (before c.450) Before the Anglo-Saxons migrated to Britain the Germanic tribes were already in contact with Latin, as they had long lived on the borders of the Roman Empire. Indeed, many individuals (e.g. mercenaries and slaves) actually lived within its borders. Several hundred Latin words were borrowed at this time and many of them were brought to Britain by the Anglo-Saxons.

After arriving in Britain (after c.450) When the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain they found a population familiar with Latin and Roman culture. Some English words of Latin origin date from this time.

The Christianization of Britain 597 BC

Christian missionaries, led by St Augustine in 597, introduced a large Latin vocabulary into English. This was mainly to do with the church and religion but also included animals and some domestic words related to food.

Thus we have abbot, angel, cucumber, elephant, hymn, laurel, lentils, lobster, mass, noon, nun, oyster, pear, priest, school, temple, tiger, and verse. In all, around 450 new words were added to the language at that time.

In 597 Pope Gregory sent a mission headed by St Augustine to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to Christianity. This goal was achieved during the following century and many Latin words were adopted at this time, some relating to the church or to the acquisition of Latin literacy and some to more domestic concerns.

The major event of this early period was the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity during the seventh century. Christianity brought with it renewed contact with Latin and the introduction of literacy using the Roman alphabet. Manuscripts began to be written in England, at first only in Latin but later in Old English, and from about 700 increasing numbers of Old English texts survive.

The Viking invasions and the Danelaw 780s

A more profound linguistic change occurred as a result of invasions and settlement by Vikings (Norwegians and Danes), whose Old Scandinavian language (known also as Old Norse) was closely related to Old English. The invasions started in 747 and continued intermittently until the early eleventh century. In 878, King Alfred of Wessex defeated the Danes, and confined their settlements to an area known as the Danelaw. This led to the dominance of Wessex and the West Saxon dialect in the late Anglo-Saxon period, as Alfred's sons and grandsons retook the Danelaw and established a unified English kingdom. However, renewed invasions in the 990s led to the exile of King Aethelred in 1014, and for the following twenty-five years the whole of England was ruled by Danish kings.

Scandinavian influence on the vocabulary of English Examples include:

- *place names ending in -by ('farm' or 'town'): Derby, Grimsby, Rugby*
- *surnames ending in -son: Wilson, Robinson, Harrison*
- *words with the hard -sk sound: skirt, sky, whisk pronouns: they, their, them (Old English used hie, hiera, him)*
- *many commonly used words: both, same, to, sister, get, give, take.*
- *Sometimes both the English and the Scandinavian words survive (the English word is given first): hide/skin, sick/ill, rear/raise.*

The second big linguistic invasion came about as a culmination of the innumerable Viking raids which began in AD 787 and continued until the beginning of the eleventh century. There are more than 1,500 place names of Scandinavian origin in England – of which some 600, such as *Rugby* and *Derby*, end in *-by*, which is Danish for *farm* or *village*. Furthermore, some of the most commonly used words in modern English – *cake, call, fellow, get, give, guess, hit, kid, knife, leg, lift, same, smile, take, them, they, want, weak* – come from this period, directly introduced from Old Norse, as do many of the words using the "sk" sound – *skin, skirt, sky, skull, skill*, etc. The suffix *-son* for family names was also introduced at this time.

Northern monasteries had been repositories of learning and language but unfortunately the monasteries and their libraries suffered the brunt of the Viking raids, and the 3,000-odd written documents that have survived their wrath only total around 3 million words.

The cumulative invasions left the Norsemen occupying the north of the country and the Anglo-Saxons in the south - both of them speaking a Germanic tongue. However, while there were substantial similarities in vocabulary between the two languages the grammar was more dissimilar. Over time the languages merged, a greater variety of vocabulary entered the language and the grammar of both was simplified as the large number of inflections, which both languages initially possessed, began to be reduced.

The Norman invasion and occupation 1066 (1100-1500)

The third linguistic invasion was the result of a single military incursion, that of Duke William of Normandy. He came to claim the crown which he maintained that he had been promised some fifteen years earlier and defeated the newly-crowned Anglo-Saxon king Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

Following the Conqueror's victory the country was divided into English-speaking peasants and French-speaking Norman rulers. These new rulers imposed their language of rule, of power, and of authority and introduced some ten thousand words over the next three hundred years. From *army, soldier, guard* and *battle* to *crown* and *court*; from *duke* and *baron* to *peasant* and *servant*; from *authority* to *obedience*; from *sir* to *serf*; from *crime* to *fine* to *judge* to *jury*. From *spy* to *fool*.

But not everything these invaders introduced was the language of dominance. They also introduced words related to the arts: *art, music, chess, poet, rhyme, dance, joy*; to fashion and clothing: *dress, boots, robe, fur, garment, veil, wardrobe*. Everywhere they extended the language of the ruling classes, introducing names such as *Geoffrey, John, Richard, Robert, Roger, Stephen* and, significantly, *William*, all of which we would now consider as typically English names.

They also invaded the home, changing the eating and cooking habits of the native inhabitants. Thus, *plate, table* and *chair*. *Fry, roast* and *toast*. *Pork, beef, veal, sole, herbs* and *fruit*. Although William I had originally, at the outset of his reign, promulgated writs in English, Latin would be the language of the Church and all official documents while French the language used at court throughout this period. It would be more than three hundred years before English would again come to the fore. It is, however, on record that although William made an attempt to learn English towards the end of his life, he gave it up as being too difficult.^[4]

But Old English had survived in the general population and certainly continued to be the language of town and country life. Consequently, after the Black Death wiped out between a third and a half of the English population between 1348 and 1375, the 13-year-old King Richard II was obliged to do an unusual thing - address those defeated in the 1381 Peasants' Revolt in halting English. It was the first time a monarch had used the language since the Conquest, 315 years earlier. As far as we know, none of the preceding monarchs had been able to speak English. And it would not be until 1399, when Henry, Duke of Lancaster deposed Richard to become Henry IV, that a monarch claimed the crown, not in Latin, the language of state business, nor in French, the language of the ruling classes, but in English, Middle English, the language of Chaucer. Albeit with around 30 per cent of its then 50,000-word lexicon being French in origin.

~KEY TERMS AND IDEAS~

<p>Historical linguistics Questions of evidence in language history Linguistic reconstruction Diachronic study of language Synchronic study of language Cognate words Indo European family of languages Language Contact Language variation Sir William Jones</p>	<p>Inflection Case (Nominative, Accusative, Genitive, Dative) Syntax Analytic language Synthetic language Borrowing Alliteration</p>	<p>Anglo Saxon poetry Battle of Brunanburh Aelfric's Cosmology The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles Bede's <i>Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i> Caedmon's Hymn</p>
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Historical linguistics

It is the study of language change. It has five main concerns:

1. to study changes in particular languages
2. to discover the pre-history of languages, and group them into language families (comparative linguistics)
3. to develop theories about how and why language changes
4. to describe the history of speech communities
5. to study the history of words, i.e. etymology.

Diachronic study of language & Synchronic study of language

Diachronic / Synchronic. (Gk, *chronos*, time; *dia-*, through, across; *syn-*, with, together).

A diachronic study or analysis concerns itself with the evolution and change over time of that which is studied; it is roughly equivalent to historical. Thus diachronic linguistics is also known as historical linguistics.

A synchronic study or analysis, in contrast, limits its concern to a particular moment of time. Thus synchronic linguistics takes a language as a working system at a particular point in time without concern for how it has developed to its present state. The extent to which synchronic study really does as it were take a frozen slice of history for study is itself not absolute: to talk of a system necessarily implies movement and interaction, and movement and interaction take place in time.

Questions of evidence in language history

An important issue in any historical description concerns the evidence that is available to the historian and how that evidence is interpreted. Telling any history is like telling a story which both describes events and gives them a particular interpretation. When studying written sources it is important to ask certain questions. Who is telling this story? Whose perspective does it represent? The traditional view of the early history of English was based on evidence drawn wholly from such sources and the growing evidence from archaeology has been interpreted to fit that view. However, some archaeologists are now offering a different interpretation and genetic studies are making another sort of evidence available.

The history of any language includes both a linguistic history (the nature of the grammar and vocabulary at different points in time) and an account of who spoke the language, where and when. The former kind of history is often called the internal history, and the latter the external history. Just as there are two dimensions to the history of a language, so there are two kinds of evidence. Broadly speaking, we can distinguish between linguistic evidence (often called internal evidence) and non-linguistic historical, archaeological or scientific information (often called external evidence). Internal

evidence comes mainly from texts and documents which provide examples of the language at known points in time. External evidence typically comes from archaeological sites or contemporary written histories. Writing the history of any language involves problems concerning the availability of evidence, the relationship between external and internal evidence, and the interpretation of whatever evidence exists.

- Availability: there is very little internal evidence before the early eighth century.
- Relationship between the two types of evidence: sometimes the external and internal evidence seem contradictory.
- Interpretation: the evidence that exists can be interpreted in different ways.

Linguistic reconstruction and Indo European family of languages

Educated guesses or calculations about earlier unattested or unrecorded forms of language based on observed sound correspondences, enabled linguists to posit the proto language, (Indo-European), as the original or unitary language for a group of languages that now range geographically from India and Iran to the east to Britain and North-America in the west.

Indo European family of languages from which we derive English, German, French, Greek, Latin etc

Cognate words

Though similarity in the actual shape or form of the words forms the basis of such comparison closer scrutiny reveals that the similarity is in fact based on systematic and regular sound correspondences between component segments in semantically related words, which we refer to as cognates.

Language Contact

Contact between people who speak different languages results in contact between their languages: people must communicate and might learn each other's mother tongue. More often it is the language of the culturally more advanced of the two people that becomes the focus for the speakers of the other language.

Language Variation

Between the speakers of any language there is variation in the way that they use their language. This variation is demonstrated by linguistic differences in terms of sound (phonetics) and structure (grammar). There might be only slight variations between forms of a language – such as minor pronunciations of words or a slight changes of grammatical structure that do not inhibit intergroup communication. Sometimes there are differences between the speech of men and women, different social classes, and differences between age groups. People will identify some of these features as marking the "best" or most "beautiful" form of the language, other features will be considered nonstandard or undesirable. Some of these differences may impede intelligibility and intergroup communication.

Sir William Jones

In 1786 Sir William Jones showed that Sanskrit was related to Latin and Greek.

Jones argued that Sanskrit was “more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity ... than could have possibly been produced by accident”. He suggested that these languages had ‘sprung from a common source’ and that Celtic and even Germanic might possibly belong in this group.

Analytic language & Synthetic language

An analytic language is any language where syntax and meaning are shaped more by use of particles and word order rather than by inflection. The opposite of an analytic language is a synthetic language.

Analytic languages often express abstract concepts using independent words, while synthetic languages tend to use adpositions, affixes and internal modifications of roots for the same purpose.

Analytic languages have stricter and more elaborate syntactic rules. Since words are not marked by morphology showing their role in the sentence, word order tends to carry a lot of importance; for example, Chinese and English make use of word order to show subject–object relationship. Chinese also uses word order to show definiteness (where English uses the and a), topic–comment relationships, the role of adverbs (whether they are descriptive or contrastive), and so on. Analytic languages tend to rely heavily on context and pragmatic considerations for the interpretation of sentences, since they do not specify as much as synthetic languages in terms of agreement and cross-reference between different parts of the sentence.

A synthetic language, in linguistic typology, is a language with a high morpheme-per-word ratio. This linguistic classification is largely independent of morpheme-usage classifications (such as fusional, agglutinative, etc.), although there is a common tendency for agglutinative languages to exhibit synthetic properties. Synthetic languages are numerous and well-attested, the most commonly cited being Indo-European languages such as Greek, Latin, German, Italian, Russian, Polish and Czech.

There are two kinds of languages: synthetic and analytic ones. Synthetic languages, such as Czech or German, use a lot of inflection (many different forms of one word in different situations: e.g. in Czech the noun PES has these forms psa, psovi, pse, psem, whereas English only has DOG. Similarly, the Czech verb Jít also has forms like jdu, jdeš, jde, jdeme, jdete, jdou, jdi etc., whereas English only has GO or GOES.) In synthetic languages, word order is not very important, since the different forms of words carry the meaning.

English is an analytic language. There is only very little inflection and word order is very important for understanding the meaning.

All languages, however, tend to move slowly from synthetic, to analytic. English started as a synthetic language with a lot of inflection. Slowly, it dropped the inflection and started using word order as a means of distinguishing the meaning. The Czech language is still in the beginning of this process with its seven cases and many different verb forms. Spanish is now somewhere in between, having different verb forms but the same noun forms, and English has gone far from the synthetic into the analytic.

Borrowing

Borrowing is a process in which one language "borrows" words from other languages. The reason can be the fact that there isn't a word for the particular thing in the language. In some cases, a new word from another language replaced or supplemented an already existing word.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

After his defeat of the Vikings, King Alfred commissioned the translation into English of many Latin texts, including Bede's Ecclesiastical History. The reason he gave was a drastic decline in the knowledge of Latin and the wholesale destruction of Latin manuscripts by the invaders. It is also likely that Alfred commissioned the writing of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which provides an account of Anglo-Saxon history from a Wessex point of view.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is the earliest known history of England written in the English language. It was probably first compiled at the behest of King Alfred (848/9 to 899), and distributed to monasteries throughout the land for copying in around 892, after which each copy was kept up to date by a member of the monastic community. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is the oldest history of any

European country in a vernacular language. It begins with the birth of Christ and, in most versions, the entries cease soon after the Norman Conquest in 1066.

The Battle of Brunanburh

The Battle of Brunanburh, the poetic annals for 937 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Brunanburh celebrates the victory of the Anglo-Saxons, led by West Saxon king Athelstan and his brother Edmund, over a Norse-Scots coalition, led by Dublin Viking Anlaf and Scottish king Constantine II. It was Aethelstan, grandson of Alfred, who won the battle of Brunanburh, signaling the end of Viking raids for more than a century and also the beginning of Wessex domination over all of Britain.

The poem is both self-consciously artistic, with strict meter and high poetic diction, and politically aware. It is self-conscious poetry that seeks to legitimize the focus of its praise, the reigning aristocracy, and to instill national pride in its audience. The poem commemorates the martial prowess of a well-governed people and demonstrates its artistic skill as well.

Case (Nominative, Accusative, Genitive, Dative)

The indirect object case, for instance, is known as the 'dative', and the possessive as the 'genitive'. When a noun is being used as the grammatical subject of a sentence it is in the 'nominative' case; when it is the direct object it is in the accusative case.

- Nominative -- subject of sentence, person doing the action.
- Accusative - object, the thing/person at the receiving end.
- Dative -- indirect object -- the thing/person to or for something is done.
- Genitive -- possessive. With the words "the book of the boy" "the book" would be nominative and "of the boy" genitive.

The concept of case began with Latin, which has lots of 'em. In English, we use nominative, objective and possessive.

The nominative is what you think of as the subject of a sentence or clause. "I" is nominative. You can use this pronoun in the nominative case in lots of ways- "I ate the apple" or "I didn't eat the orange."

Possessive is easy, too. "That's **my** car" or "The fault is mine" are examples of the possessive adjective and pronoun.

Objective lumps together the dative and accusative. There is a well-known transformation in English that identifies these two cases. I might tell you: "Give him the ball." Or, if we're talking about the ball, "Give it to him." In these two example, "him" is dative and "the ball" or "it" is accusative. You can tell for yourself by asking the question, "What's receiving the action of the verb? What gets given? The **ball** gets given, so it's accusative. If you can answer "to" or "for" then it's dative.

- Nominative indicates the subject of a sentence. (The boy loves the book).
- Genitive Indicates possession. (The boy loves the girl's book).
- Dative Indicates indirect object. (The boy gave the book to the girl).
- Accusative Indicates direct object. (The boy loves the book)

Inflections

One reason why word order was freer in Anglo-Saxon times was that relationships between words could also be signaled by the actual 'shape' taken by individual words. If you look at line 26 of Figure 2.7, for instance, you'll see that one of the words we can recognize, word ('word'), has two shapes: word and wordum. The -um ending means the same as the modern preposition to, and also tells us that the form is plural. So in studying Old English it's very important to learn what endings can be added to a particular word, and what meanings are attached to them.

Latin does not depend on word order for basic meaning, but on inflections (changes in the endings of words) to indicate the function of words within a sentence.

Anglo Saxon poetry

The Anglo-Saxons were prominent in the early Middle Ages, which stretches from the 1st Century up to the Renaissance, which began around the 14th Century. The Anglo-Saxons invaded what is current day England around the year 450 and were the dominant group until the Norman invasion in 1066. The group consisted of three Germanic tribes: the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes. Throughout the following decades, the Anglo-Saxon people pushed the native Britons to the present day area of Wales. Over the next few centuries, the Anglo-Saxons remained dominant. However, there were many changes in society, which inherently affected the literature of the era. For example, the Anglo-Saxon people spoke in what is now called Old English, which is a combination of the native Briton's language and the Germanic tribal tongue they brought with them. Also, the Briton people were Christians converted by the Roman Empire. At the start of the Anglo-Saxon invasion, Christianity was suppressed, but over the following years, the Germanic tribes were converted to Christianity. Thus, Christian ideals become popular in Anglo-Saxon literature.

The Anglo-Saxon society continued to grow over the following centuries, absorbing other cultures and rebuffing other Germanic invaders. Overall, the rich history of the people is reflected in the rich literature of that era.

Characteristics and Examples of Anglo-Saxon Poetry

The Anglo-Saxon invaders brought with them a tradition of oral poetry. Christianity, apart from providing new literary topics, also brought the written word to the Anglo-Saxons. For the most part, in that era only churchmen were literate and spent much time copying manuscripts. Thus, we see plenty of religious topics in the written works of that era.

Let's look at some of the more prominent traits of Old English Poetry. One important trait comes from the original Germanic tribes, who valued **heroic poetry**. Heroic poetry is poetry honoring brave feats and following specific codes of conduct. This type of poetry also emphasized strong kinship, meaning a generosity to not just blood relatives, but to all people in the tribe. The king must follow a code of **royal generosity**, meaning rewarding his faithful followers liberally. In addition, the king's subjects must follow a code of **blood vengeance**. They must fight for their king to the death, avenge him if he is slain (or any kinsman for that matter) and suffer endless shame if they fail to do so.

One Old English poem, Beowulf, displays many great examples of heroic poetry traits. Beowulf is the story of a warrior who saves his people from evil monsters, which obviously emphasizes courageous deeds. Kinship can also be seen in the relationship between Beowulf and King Hrothgar. Beowulf must kill three monsters to get revenge for the men they have killed. Also, there is kinship between Beowulf and his soldiers, who mourn his death and praise him for his bravery.

The second important trait of Anglo-Saxon literature is the focus on **Christian ideals**. In adapting to Christianity, the Anglo-Saxons also adapted their literary heroes to the new religion. Images of the cross become popular in poems, as well as the idea of Heaven and Hell. Forgiveness is another Christian virtue that was developed in Anglo-Saxon poetry. The heroes retained their desire for war and glory, but they also considered fighting for Christian principles.

Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People

The Ecclesiastical History of England examines the religious and political history of the Anglo-Saxons from the fifth century to 731 AD. St. Bede's historical survey opens with a broad outline of Roman Britain's geography and history. St. Bede pays special attention to the disagreement between Roman and Celtic Christians, the dates and locations of significant events in the Christian calendar, and political upheaval during the 600's. St. Bede collected information from a variety of monasteries, early Church

and government writings, and the oral histories of Rome and Britain. This book is useful to people looking for a brief survey of religious and political figures and events in Anglo-Saxon history. Readers should recognize that St. Bede's religious and political biases are subtly reflected in his historiography, diminishing its objectivity. Nonetheless, his Ecclesiastical History of England is one of the most important texts of the Anglo-Saxon history. The book's historical import is evidenced by the fact that nearly 200 hand written copies were produced in the Middle Ages.

The so-called Venerable Bede (c. 673-735) embeds this Anglo-Saxon hymn and the legend of its creation within his Latin text, *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, a book that describes the spread of Christianity in England. The hymn itself was composed in the mid- or late-7th century and so is the earliest surviving Old English poem.

Bede, also referred to as Saint Bede or the Venerable Bede, was an English monk at the Northumbrian monastery of Saint Peter at Monkwearmouth and of its companion monastery, Saint Paul's, in modern Jarrow, both in the Kingdom of Northumbria. Bede's monastery had access to a superb library which included works by Eusebius and Orosius among many others.

Cædmon's Hymn

Bede records that Caedmon was an illiterate farmer working for a monastery who at first avoided singing. "Therefore, at feasts, when it was decided to have a good time by taking turns singing, whenever he would see the harp getting close to his place, he got up in the middle of the meal and went home" (25). Modern commentators presume that Caedmon actually "concealed his skill from his fellow workmen and from the monks because he was ashamed of knowing 'vain and idle' songs" (24). The generic scene described does sound like a mead-hall revel. According to the legend, Caedmon had a mystical experience in his cattle shed in which he was given a calling to sing: first, about Creation. The hymn well represents Old English poetry, with its lines of four stresses and a medial caesura, with its two or three alliterations per line, with the stacking up of epithets (God is guardian, measurer, lord, creator, master). As always in Anglo-Saxon culture, the Old Testament God works better than the New. And the reference to "heaven as a roof" may evoke the security of identity with an implicit comparison to the enclosure of the mead-hall. Praising God's creative ability even seems to function somewhat as a boast.

Nu sculon herigeaƿ heofonrices Weard,
Meotodes meahte ond his modgeþanc,
weorc Wuldorfæder; swa he wundra gehwæs
ece Drihten, or onstealde.
He ærest sceop eorðan bearnum
heofon to hrofe, halig Scyppend:
þa middangeard moncynnes Weard,
ece Drihten, æfter teode
firum foldan, Frea ælmihtig.

Praise now to the keeper of the kingdom of
heaven,
the power of the Creator, the profound mind
of the glorious Father, who fashioned the
beginning
of every wonder, the eternal Lord.
For the children of men he made first
heaven as a roof, the holy Creator.
Then the Lord of mankind, the everlasting
Shepherd,
ordained in the midst as a dwelling place,
Almighty Lord, the earth for men.