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eoconf.com - from 2024



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES AND EDUCATION: a collection scientific works of the International scientific conference – London, England, 2025. Issue 3

Languages of publication: Uzbek, English, Russian, German, Italian, Spanish

The collection consists of scientific research of scientists, graduate students and students who took part in the International Scientific online conference «**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES AND EDUCATION**». Which took place in London , 2025.

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RELIGIOUS AND HEROIC IMAGERY IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE: A STUDY OF „BEOWULF” AND BEDE’S WRITINGS

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Abstract. This article expresses the intertwining of religious and heroic imagery in Old English literature, focusing on Beowulf and the writings of the Venerable Bede. The article aims to demonstrate how early English authors merged Christian ideals with traditional Germanic heroic values to construct a distinctive literary identity. In Beowulf, the poem’s imagery reflects a tension between pagan heroism and emerging Christian morality, where symbols of courage, loyalty, and fate coexist with divine providence and salvation. Similarly, in Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People, religious imagery serves to sanctify the heroism of missionaries and kings who spread Christianity across Anglo-Saxon England. It shows that both works employ religious symbolism to elevate heroic action, portraying spiritual virtue as the highest form of heroism. Ultimately, the synthesis of religious and heroic elements in these texts illustrates the cultural transformation of early medieval England from warrior ethos to Christian worldview.

Keywords: Old English literature, Beowulf, Bede, religious imagery, heroism, Christianization, Anglo-Saxon culture.

INTRODUCTION

Old English literature reflects the complex intersection of pagan heroism and emerging Christian thought during the early medieval period. Among its most significant works, Beowulf and Bede’s writings reveal how spiritual belief and heroic ideals coexisted in shaping the moral and cultural identity of Anglo-Saxon England. Beowulf presents a world rooted in warrior values yet influenced by Christian interpretations of fate, virtue, and salvation. In contrast, Bede’s historical

narratives emphasize divine purpose and moral heroism as instruments of faith and nation-building. By examining the religious and heroic imagery in these texts, this study seeks to uncover how early English writers transformed the heroic ethos into a vehicle for expressing Christian virtue and cultural renewal.

LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

Old English literature, written between the 7th and 11th centuries, represents the earliest stage of English literary history and reflects the





cultural transformation of Anglo-Saxon society. It combines elements of pagan oral traditions with emerging Christian beliefs introduced after the conversion of England. Among the most significant examples of this period are the epic poem Beowulf and Bede's historical and religious prose works. Beowulf, composed around the 8th century, is an epic poem that celebrates heroism, loyalty, and the struggle between good and evil. The beautiful Anglo-Saxon poem "Beowulf" may be called the foundation-stone of all British poetry. It tells of times long before the Angles and Saxons came to Britain. There is no mention of England in it. The poem was composed around 700 by an unknown author. This was about seventy years after the death of Mohammed and in the same age as the beginning of the great Tang Dynasty in China. Three hundred years later, about the year 1000, the manuscript, which still survives, was written down by an unknown scribe. The poem presents the legendary history of the Anglo-Saxons, and its author might have been descended from the original tribes of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who invaded Britain from the European continent in the fifth century. Those people spoke Germanic language in which the poem is written. "Beowulf" is 3182 lines long, approximately 80 or 90 pages in book length. The narrative itself falls into two halves: the first part takes place in Denmark where, coming to the aid of King Hrothgar, Beowulf fights the monster Grendel and Grendel's mother. The second part is set in Southern Sweden where, after the death of King Hygelac and his son, Heardred, Beowulf has ruled in peace and prosperity for 50 years before being called upon to combat a dragon that is terrorizing the country after having its treasure hoard looted. "Beowulf" blends a fairy-tale narrative with considerable historical material. (Sweedish and Danish kings really ruled in the VI century).

The manuscript of "Beowulf" is in the British Museum, in London. It is impossible for a non-specialist to read it in the original, so it was translated into modern English language in the 20th century. In the analysis of Beowulf, scholars such as J.R.R. Tolkien (1936) have emphasized the poem's integration of pagan heroic ideals with Christian morality, arguing that its monsters and battles serve both as entertainment and as moral allegories.

Bede's masterpiece, completed in 731, when he was 51 years old, is his "The Ecclesiastical History of the English Race", which describes the growth of the Christian church in England from the attack of Julius Caesar in 55 B.C. to Bede's own days. Although Bede was Anglo-Saxon, he wrote the work in Latin, the language he spoke and wrote. Late in the ninth century, scholars at the court of King Alfred translated it into Anglo-Saxon. "The Ecclesiastical History of the English Race" seemed to them one of the central works of their culture, worthy of reproduction into a language more people could read. Venerable Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People belongs to the genre of historical prose. Bede's Ecclesiastical History has been analyzed by historians





such as Michael Lapidge (2006) and Barbara Yorke (1990), who stress that Bede presents Christian faith as both a moral and political force. Yorke notes that Bede's work transforms the notion of heroism, linking moral courage with religious leadership and societal unity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Beowulf and Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People shows that both works are considered part of Old English literature for several important reasons.

Firstly, both texts reflect the linguistic and cultural context of Anglo-Saxon England. Beowulf was composed in Old English, the earliest form of the English language, while Bede wrote in Latin, the scholarly language of the time, yet his subject matter English people, kings, and missionaries firmly belongs to the Anglo-Saxon world. Their content, themes, and moral ideas collectively represent the intellectual and cultural heritage of early England.

Secondly, both works demonstrate the synthesis of pagan and Christian elements that defines Old English literature. In Beowulf, traditional Germanic heroism is intertwined with Christian moral interpretation. The hero's courage and loyalty are portrayed as virtues guided by divine providence. Bede's writings, meanwhile, document the Christianization of England and portray spiritual devotion as the highest form of heroism. As Michael Lapidge (2006) notes, Bede's narrative transforms physical bravery into moral and spiritual strength, marking a cultural shift from warrior ideals to religious virtue.

Thirdly, both Beowulf and Bede's works contribute to the formation of a unified English identity. Beowulf preserves the oral heroic tradition that connects people through shared legend and language, while Bede's Ecclesiastical History provides a written historical foundation that defines England as a Christian nation. According to Barbara Yorke (1990), Bede's historical vision was not only religious but also national, presenting the English people as a unified community under one faith.

Therefore, these two works are central to Old English literature because they collectively illustrate the linguistic, cultural, and ideological transformation of Anglo-Saxon England from a tribal warrior society to a literate Christian nation. Their enduring influence makes them key sources for understanding the moral and spiritual development of early English civilization.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Beowulf and Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People are among the most important works of Old English literature. Both are included in this period's literary tradition because they reflect the language, culture, and worldview of their time. Through Beowulf, we can see





the ideas of heroism, loyalty, and courage that were central to Anglo-Saxon society, while Bede's writings focus on faith, spirituality, and moral values.

Although the two works differ in style and purpose, they are connected by their shared concern with human virtues, ethical principles, and the spiritual transformation of society. For this reason, they form the foundation of Old English literature and help us better understand the early cultural and moral development of the English people.

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