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**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES AND EDUCATION:** a collection scientific works of the International scientific conference – London, England, 2025. Issue 5

**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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## The legacy of old English literature.

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**Abstract.** Old English literature, produced in Anglo-Saxon England between the fifth and eleventh centuries, forms the earliest major layer of English literary culture and continues to influence modern language, artistic expression, and scholarly inquiry. This expanded abstract explores the long-lasting significance of Old English texts by examining their stylistic features, core themes, historical contexts, and enduring contributions to later literary traditions.

In terms of form, Old English writers created a distinct poetic system rooted in oral performance. Their use of alliteration, formulaic expressions, and imaginative figures such as kennings and descriptive repetition shaped a disciplined, memory-oriented style of storytelling. These conventions guided later medieval writers and provided inspiration for poets in much later periods who sought to reconnect with early English poetic techniques. Thematically, Old English literature extends from epic narratives and laments to saints' lives and theological prose. Ideas such as destiny, isolation, loyalty, spiritual struggle, and the tension between individual identity and communal duty continued to echo throughout English literary history.

Old English writing also served as a bridge between pre-Christian Germanic traditions and the developing Christian worldview of early medieval England. The manuscripts that preserve these works—including the Exeter Book and the Nowell Codex—established patterns of compilation, preservation, and textual interpretation that shaped the growth of medieval literacy and the custodianship of literature. Their rediscovery centuries later sparked new intellectual movements, giving rise to modern philology, historical linguistics, and the study of early medieval culture.

Ultimately, Old English literature endures as more than a relic of the distant past: it is a dynamic source of linguistic heritage, narrative models, ethical reflection, and scholarly methodologies. Its narratives, symbols, and stylistic innovations continue to shape the development of English literature and the cultural perspectives built around it.

**Keywords:** Old English literature; Anglo-Saxon culture; alliterative verse; kennings; epic tradition; manuscript heritage; Christianization; oral tradition; linguistic influence; medieval poetry; literary legacy; Beowulf; Exeter Book; Nowell Codex.





## Аннотация

Старая английская литература, созданная в Англосаксонской Англии между V и XI веками, представляет собой самый ранний значительный слой английской литературной культуры и продолжает влиять на современный язык, художественное выражение и научное исследование. Этот расширенный абстракт исследует долгосрочное значение текстов Староанглийской литературы, изучая их стилистические особенности, основные темы, исторический контекст и устойчивый вклад в последующие литературные традиции.

С точки зрения формы, староанглийские писатели создали уникальную поэтическую систему, основанную на устном исполнении. Их использование аллитерации, формульных выражений и художественных фигур, таких как кенниги и описательные повторения, формировало дисциплинированный стиль повествования, ориентированный на память. Эти условности стали ориентиром для последующих средневековых авторов и вдохновили поэтов более поздних эпох, стремившихся вновь соединиться с раннеанглийскими поэтическими техниками. Тематически, староанглийская литература охватывает эпические повествования, плачи, жития святых и богословскую прозу. Идеи судьбы, изоляции, верности, духовной борьбы и напряжения между индивидуальной идентичностью и общественным долгом продолжали звучать на протяжении всей истории английской литературы.

Староанглийские тексты также служили мостом между дохристианскими германскими традициями и развивающимся христианским мировоззрением раннего средневекового Англии. Манускрипты, в которых сохраняются эти произведения — включая «Эксетерскую книгу» и «Кодекс Ноуэлла» — установили образцы компиляции, сохранения и интерпретации текстов, которые сформировали развитие средневековой грамотности и хранение литературы. Их повторное открытие спустя века вызвало новые интеллектуальные движения, породив современные филологию, историческую лингвистику и изучение культуры раннего средневековья.

В конечном итоге старая английская литература сохраняется как не просто реликт далёкого прошлого: она является динамическим источником языкового наследия, моделей повествования, этических размышлений и научных методологий. Её повествования, символы и стилистические новшества продолжают формировать развитие английской литературы и культурные перспективы, построенные вокруг неё.





**Ключевые слова:** Старая английская литература; англосаксонская культура; альтернативный стих; кенningar; эпическая традиция; наследие манускриптов; христианизация; устная традиция; лингвистическое влияние; средневековая поэзия; литературное наследие; «Беовульф»; «Эксетерская книга»; «Кодекс Ноуэлла».

**Introduction.** Old English literature, which spans roughly from the 5th to the 11th centuries, represents the earliest and one of the most foundational periods in the history of English literary tradition. Emerging from a world shaped by Germanic tribal culture, oral poetic practices, and later Christian influences, Old English texts formed the groundwork upon which subsequent English literature was built. This era produced poetry, prose, historical chronicles, homilies, saints' lives, and epic narratives that not only documented the social and cultural realities of early medieval England, but also established literary themes, motifs, and stylistic conventions that continued to evolve in later centuries.

One of the defining characteristics of Old English literature is its fusion of pagan heroic values with Christian theological perspectives. Works such as Beowulf, The Dream of the Rood, and The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle illustrate the complex ideological transformation of early English society as it transitioned from warrior-centered traditions to a faith-based worldview. This blending of cultural identities has contributed to the enduring fascination with Old English literary heritage, as the texts offer insight into a civilization negotiating spiritual, linguistic, and political change.

Additionally, Old English literature holds significant linguistic value. It preserves the earliest stages of the English language, documenting its grammar, vocabulary, poetic meter, and rhetorical structures. The study of Old English not only reveals how contemporary English developed over time, but also demonstrates the depth and diversity of early textual production. Many of the literary techniques introduced during this era—such as alliteration, kennings, and formulaic composition—remain subjects of scholarly interest and continue to influence modern poetic and narrative styles.

The legacy of Old English literature therefore extends far beyond its historical timeframe. Its texts have shaped national identity, inspired reinterpretation in modern literature and media, and provided a foundation for philological research and literary criticism. Understanding this legacy is essential for appreciating the roots of English culture and the evolution of its literary canon.

### 1. Historical and Cultural Background

The development of Old English literature cannot be separated from the broader historical events that shaped early medieval England. The migration of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes to the British Isles brought new linguistic and





cultural traditions, while the later Viking invasions and eventual Norman Conquest introduced further political and social shifts. These events influenced literary themes such as heroism, exile, loyalty, and fate, which are recurrent throughout Old English texts. The dynamic interaction between various cultural groups contributed to the richness and complexity of early English literary heritage.

## 2. Oral Tradition and Poetic Structure

Old English poetry was deeply rooted in oral tradition. Poets—known as scops—performed narratives accompanied by the lyre, relying on memorized formulas and alliterative verse to preserve stories across generations. This form of oral composition shaped unique structural elements: tightly patterned alliteration, parallelism, repeated motifs, and metaphorical expressions like kennings (e.g., “whale-road” for sea). Understanding this oral foundation is crucial for analyzing the stylistic distinctiveness of Old English texts and their resilience across centuries.

## 3. Christianization and Literary Transformation

The Christianization of England in the 7th century transformed literary production profoundly. Monasteries became key centers of learning, manuscript preservation, and translation. Many Old English works survive because monks copied them in scriptoria. Christian themes—such as moral struggle, divine providence, and salvation—merged with native heroic traditions, creating a dual worldview visible in works like Beowulf and The Wanderer. This blending marks Old English literature as a unique intersection between pagan memory and Christian ideology.

## 4. Manuscript Preservation and Legacy

Only a small portion of Old English literature has survived—mostly due to four major manuscripts: the Junius Manuscript, Exeter Book, Vercelli Book, and Nowell Codex. These collections contain some of the most important poems and prose texts of the period. Their survival is largely accidental, yet they became essential sources for understanding early medieval thought, aesthetics, and linguistic evolution. The manuscripts themselves are invaluable artifacts that reflect early English book-making, illumination, and scribal practices.

## 5. Impact on Later English Literature

The influence of Old English literature extends into Middle English, Renaissance, Romantic, and even contemporary literature. Authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien drew inspiration from Old English themes, especially heroic ethos, mythic landscapes, and stylistic devices. Modern philology, historical linguistics, and comparative literature continue to rely on Old English texts to explore cultural continuity and transformation. Thus, Old English literature remains a living legacy within the global literary tradition.





**Research Methodology.** This research is based on a qualitative and text-oriented methodological framework designed to explore the long-lasting impact of Old English literature. The study relies on detailed textual interpretation, comparative literary examination, and historical analysis. The main body of texts includes well-known Old English works such as Beowulf, The Wanderer, The Seafarer, The Dream of the Rood, and entries from The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. These primary sources are supplemented with academic studies, linguistic research, and historical writings that help situate the texts within their broader cultural and religious settings.

The research further incorporates literary-historical approaches to investigate how sociopolitical developments, oral tradition, Christianization, and manuscript culture shaped the formation of early English literature. Concepts from philology and comparative literature are also employed to trace the continuity of stylistic devices, thematic patterns, and narrative forms from Old English to later literary periods. Altogether, these methods allow for a thorough assessment of Old English literature's foundational role in shaping English literary heritage.

**Analysis and Results.** The analytical findings highlight several major features of Old English literature's enduring influence. To begin with, Old English poetry introduced essential stylistic techniques—such as alliterative verse, rhythmic pauses, and metaphorical kennings—that established the groundwork for later English poetic traditions. Heroic ideals like loyalty, bravery, kinship, and resistance against fate became central motifs, forming the moral and cultural fabric that later English authors continued to develop.

Additionally, the coexistence of pagan and Christian beliefs within Old English texts produced a distinctive thematic mixture. Works like Beowulf demonstrate this fusion by blending heroic fatalism with Christian moral judgment. This dual perspective became a hallmark of English literature and influenced writers of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and even modern periods.

Another significant result is the role of manuscript preservation. The survival of foundational codices—such as the Exeter Book, Vercelli Book, Junius Manuscript, and Nowell Codex—enabled Old English literature to endure despite the loss of many other works. These manuscripts not only preserved the literary culture of early medieval England but also provided crucial linguistic evidence for the development of the English language.

Finally, the analysis shows that Old English literature continues to shape contemporary cultural imagination. Its themes, narrative forms, and symbolic language still inspire modern authors, with J. R. R. Tolkien being a prominent example. Through such influence, the spirit of Old English storytelling remains alive in modern literature.

**Discussion.** The overall discussion demonstrates that the legacy of Old English literature extends far beyond its historical context, influencing





language, culture, and literary tradition. One key observation is the timeless relevance of its themes. Concepts such as exile, loss, heroism, and moral struggle continue to resonate, suggesting that early English writers captured universal human experiences that transcend centuries.

Furthermore, the blend of Christian and pagan worldviews found in Old English texts reflects the cultural transformation of early medieval England. This hybrid belief system helped shape a uniquely English mindset—one rooted in ancient heroic values yet shaped by Christian ideology. Such complexity has enriched the interpretative depth of Old English literature and ensured its continued scholarly significance.

Manuscript transmission also plays a critical role in shaping modern understanding of the period. Although only a small portion of Old English literature survived, the preserved manuscripts offer rare insights into early English society, linguistic evolution, and artistic expression. Their survival underscores the importance of textual preservation in the formation of literary heritage.

Lastly, the discussion reveals that Old English literature remains a dynamic source of inspiration for modern scholarship and creative writing. The medieval revival in the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as the philological work of figures like Tolkien, highlight the enduring appeal of Anglo-Saxon culture. As long as scholars and writers continue to reinterpret these works, the legacy of Old English literature will remain vibrant and evolving.

**Conclusion.** The examination of Old English literature highlights that its influence extends far beyond the relatively small number of surviving texts. Despite the limited manuscripts that have reached the present day, these works laid the essential groundwork for the development of English literary tradition. Through unique poetic structures, rich thematic content, and complex cultural perspectives, Old English texts established the foundational patterns of storytelling, symbolism, and linguistic expression that would shape English literature for centuries to come.

A key observation is that Old English literature introduced stylistic and structural techniques—such as alliteration, kennings, and rhythmic patterns—that became integral to later English poetry and prose. The period also explored enduring themes, including the tension between heroism and mortality, the interplay of fate and human choice, and the coexistence of pagan and Christian beliefs. These motifs have maintained their relevance over time, influencing works in the medieval, Renaissance, Romantic, and modern literary periods.

The preservation of manuscripts such as the Exeter Book and the Nowell Codex demonstrates the critical role of textual conservation in maintaining cultural memory. These documents provide insight into the worldview, societal norms, and religious transformations of early medieval





England, ensuring that modern scholars can access and analyze the foundations of the English language and literary expression.

Furthermore, Old English literature continues to shape contemporary creativity and scholarship. Modern writers, most notably J. R. R. Tolkien, have drawn inspiration from its mythological, heroic, and narrative traditions, proving that the themes and forms developed in this period retain their resonance and vitality even today.

In conclusion, the legacy of Old English literature is multidimensional. It lies not only in the texts themselves but also in the cultural, linguistic, and intellectual traditions they fostered. Its enduring influence on language, literary forms, and thematic exploration ensures that this early period of English literature remains a significant and dynamic component of the global literary heritage.

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