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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 discusses the synthesis of religious and heroic imagery in Old English literature through a comparative analysis of Beowulf and the writings of the Venerable Bede. Both works reflect the intersection between the pagan heroic tradition and emerging Christian values in Anglo-Saxon England. While Beowulf integrates divine imagery within a heroic framework depicting light, battle, and sacrifice as symbols of spiritual struggle Bede's historical narratives transform heroism into faith-based virtue, emphasizing divine providence and moral courage. Through their distinctive genres, both authors illustrate how Anglo-Saxon culture redefined heroism as an act of divine service rather than personal glory. The study concludes that religious and heroic symbolism in these texts not only shaped the moral ideals of early English society but also laid the foundation for the fusion of faith and valor in medieval literature.

Key words: Old English literature; Beowulf; Bede; heroism; Christianity; religious imagery; Anglo-Saxon culture.

INTRODUCTION

Old English literature stands at the crossroads of two worlds: the heroic pagan past of the Anglo-Saxons and the Christian faith that reshaped their cultural and moral values. The tension and harmony between these traditions are best observed in two major works the epic poem Beowulf and the writings of the Venerable Bede. Both authors, though different in purpose and genre, use religious and heroic imagery to express ideals of faith, courage, and moral duty. This paper explores how Beowulf and Bede integrate these two traditions to create a distinctly Anglo-Saxon vision of heroism and spirituality.

LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

Old English literature represents the cultural meeting point of pagan tradition and Christian belief, producing works that balance physical heroism with moral and spiritual ideals. Among the most important texts reflecting this synthesis are the epic poem Beowulf and The Ecclesiastical History of the English People by the Venerable Bede. Both use imagery of battle, light, and faith to define what it means to be heroic in a changing moral world. In





Beowulf, the protagonist personifies the traditional Germanic warrior virtues of bravery, honor, and loyalty, yet his story is framed by a Christian worldview. Beowulf's victories are often attributed to God's will, and the imagery of light versus darkness reveals divine presence in the struggle between good and evil. His death is portrayed not only as heroic but as a moral sacrifice, demonstrating the Christian idea that true greatness is found in humility and service to God.

Bede's writings, meanwhile, focus on the heroism of faith. In *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede presents missionaries and Christian kings as spiritual warriors. Figures such as St. Augustine, St. Cuthbert, and King Edwin achieve greatness not through battle, but through faith, humility, and the power of divine truth. Imagery such as spiritual light, conversion as victory, and baptism as rebirth symbolizes the triumph of Christianity over paganism. This study employs a comparative literary methodology, combining textual analysis, thematic interpretation, and historical contextualization. Key imagery and motifs from both texts such as light, darkness, fate, and divine justice are examined to reveal how each author redefined heroism. The research also considers the historical background of Anglo-Saxon England, when Christian ideology was gradually reshaping traditional heroic values.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results indicate that Beowulf and Bede together form a literary bridge between two moral worlds the pagan heroic age and the Christian spiritual era. Both writers reinterpret heroism to align with changing cultural and religious values. In Beowulf, the hero's courage and loyalty, while rooted in pagan ideals, are sanctified through Christian interpretation. Beowulf acknowledges that his power comes from God, and his death becomes a symbol of sacrifice rather than mere glory. The poem thus teaches that heroism is valuable only when guided by divine will. Bede, in contrast, presents a world where physical heroism has been replaced entirely by spiritual devotion. His heroes are moral exemplars whose strength lies in their faith and righteousness. Through stories of conversion and divine intervention, Bede redefines heroism as a commitment to God's truth. The imagery of light conquering darkness parallels the Christianization of the English people. Together, these works show how early English writers transformed the meaning of heroism. Beowulf represents the last echo of the warrior ethos, while Bede establishes the new ideal of the saintly hero. Their shared use of religious and heroic imagery symbolizes the unification of body and soul, strength and faith, action and belief.

CONCLUSION

The study of Beowulf and Bede reveals how Old English literature served as a bridge between pagan heroism and Christian theology. Both authors used





imagery of light, battle, and divine power to represent a transformation of values: from earthly glory to heavenly reward. Beowulf's struggles against monsters symbolize humanity's fight against sin, while Bede's depiction of kings and saints shows how true heroism lies in obedience to God. Together, they shaped an enduring literary tradition where courage is sanctified by faith and faith is strengthened by courage. Thus, religious and heroic imagery in Old English literature reflects not only a cultural synthesis but also a profound spiritual vision one that defines the soul of early English identity.

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