The long stretch of European history from the fall of Rome in 476 to the first appearing of the Renaissance in Italy about 1300 is known as the Middle Ages or medieval period. In England it lasted more than a thousand years. It began with the invasion of England by Germanic tribes around 450. It ended with the accession of the first Tudor monarch, Henry VII, in 1485.

The medieval period is also popularly known as the Dark Ages. The name *Dark Ages* may suggest a spiritually benighted medieval Europe under the shadow of Roman Catholicism. However, the name was invented not by Protestants but by eighteenth-century rationalists, who were hostile to all religious faith. Historians such as Edward Gibbon regarded the barbarian invasions and the spread of Catholic belief as a dark interlude between the enlightened eras of classical Rome and the Renaissance. The term *Middle Ages* itself implies a barren interval between two great eras of achievement.

This view, we know, is mistaken. The Middle Ages was neither dark in secular learning nor entirely so in spiritual understanding. Greek was by no means unknown, and classical learning was preserved, though often in garbled form, in the monasteries. Pockets of true Christian belief existed both without and within the Roman church. These centuries may be considered dark only in a relative sense.

A contrary tendency in recent times has been to romanticize the Middle Ages. Some modern culture critics, as well as poets, novelists since Sir Walter Scott, and filmmakers, have regarded medieval man as man at his best and society since that time as largely in decline. During the high Middle Ages, before the growth of large towns and the invention of the printing press, persons on all social levels are said to have experienced life to the fullest. Human existence was uncomplicated, natural, joyous, focused on basic needs. People lived close to the earth, at peace with themselves and their physical surroundings. Overall, the church exercised its benign, harmonizing control.

This primitivist view is even further from the truth than the rationalist. What we know of peasant life indicates the opposite. Life was toilsome, tedious, and insecure. Death stalked the worker daily in the form of war, famine, or disease. Life expectancy was short: a man was old by the age of forty. Folk rituals and superstitions that seem quaint today were rooted in fears of the supernatural. Fairies and elves
were not petty pranksters but formidable threats to health and safety. These dangers, along with exploitation by greedy nobles and clergy, caused personal anxiety and social unrest. Along with continual feuding between nobles and clans, divisions continually arose within the church itself. Papal control was challenged by obstinate rulers. Church doctrine and ritual met resistance from peasant folkways. Medieval life was not the carefree, harmonious existence some have supposed.

Finally, the Middle Ages differed from country to country and from century to century. Some generalizations are, of course, possible; but we should understand that this period was not a static era but a time of constant, dynamic change. The hand of God was at work in political events, in social and economic conditions, and in the minds of the people. No age is more fascinating to the student of our cultural past.
The Middle Ages

1 The Old English Period 450-1100

- 432 Coming of St. Patrick to Ireland
- 449 First appearance of Germanic tribes (Jutes in Kent)
- c. 480 c. 543 St. Benedict, founder of Western monasteries
- 597 Arrival of Roman Catholic mission
- 664 Synod of Whitby
- 674 Founding of
- 681 Founding of Jarrow
- Scandinavian harassment

450

Ecclesiastical History of the English People

673

735

731

700

400 500 600 700

C. 700 Beowulf
450-1100

The English Middle Ages spanned two quite different cultural eras. These are known, conveniently, as the Old and Middle English periods. The names Old and Middle refer to the forms of English in use during those times. Old English was the language brought by the Anglo-Saxon conquerors in 450; Middle English, the language spoken by their descendants after 1100 and for the next three centuries. England’s security was threatened largely from the outside during the Old English period, mainly from the inside during the Middle English period. Both periods contributed importantly to the formation of the English national character.

INVASIONS

More than nine hundred years have passed since England was successfully invaded. The Spanish failed in 1588, the French in 1803-5, the Germans in 1940. None reckoned on the pluck of the English or the fickleness of the English coastal weather. A storm helped Sir Francis Drake destroy the Spanish fleet. A dense fog enabled the English—in naval vessels, pleasure craft, and rowboats—to retreat from Dunkirk and renew their struggle against the Axis powers. We, of course, recognize in these events the protecting hand of God over a nation that once feared Him. We may need reminding that this protection had a beginning just as it may very well have an end. Until the close of the Old English period medieval England was rarely free from the threat or the actuality of invasion. In fact, a series of invasions spanning eleven hundred years set the major features of what might be called the personality of England.

Political

These inroads of men and ideas may be distinguished as political and religious invasions. The first of the political invasions was the least consequential. Roman legions occupied England for more than four centuries but left little of permanent importance. The Roman invasion began fitfully with Julius Caesar’s reconnaissance raids in 55 and 54 B.C. It was not until a hundred years later that an army under Claudius overcame all Celtic resistance and made England, in fact as well as name, the Roman province of Britannia.

The effects of the Roman occupation were mainly physical. The direction of the invasion, from the southwest, favored London as the administrative center and depot. From London, supply roads fanned out to garrisons in all parts of the realm. These garrisons were called castrae (plural of L. castra, camp). Their sites are identifiable today from the names of cities ending in -cester, -chester, and -caster (e.g., Gloucester, Winchester, and Lancaster). Some sections of the connecting highways are still visible, and many of the ancient routes survive as major thoroughfares in the road system of present-day Britain. Also visible are ruins of Roman villas (country estates) and public baths. Especially impressive are the remains of Hadrian’s Wall, built to hold back the marauding Picts, inhabitants of what is now Scotland. Met by the Solway Firth from the west and the River Tyne from the east, Hadrian’s Wall crossed England at its narrowest point between the Irish and the North seas.
The island inhabitants subdued by Claudius were descendants of the Celts who had overspread Europe in pre-Roman times. They, or their predecessors, left burial mounds and circles of huge stones, the most famous of which is Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plain. Without a central government they could not turn back the well-organized advance of Rome. In the course of time they turned to their conquerors for help against other invaders, pouring out of the north. In 410 they were left to defend themselves when the Roman legions were called home to protect what was left of the crumbling empire.

From the fifth to the eleventh centuries, England was continually harassed and eventually conquered by Germanic tribes from homelands around the Baltic Sea. In 449, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the Jutes began to occupy Kent. Then came the Angles and Saxons, who occupied the middle and southern regions respectively. The Angles gave their name to the conquered land, *Englaland*, and to its people, the *Englisc* (Old English *sc* is pronounced like *sh*). These new conquerors are known collectively today as Anglo-Saxons and their dialects as Old English. They were not just military adventurers but immigrants who had come to settle. The Celts, overmatched, were forced to vacate central Britain. Some fled to Scotland, some to Ireland, some to a region in France known as Brittany. The others were pushed back into the southwestern corners of the island, present-day Wales and Cornwall.

The Anglo-Saxon conquest was not without resistance. There were some temporary setbacks and reversals. But the victory, once accomplished, was permanent. It left the island divided into the familiar three parts: England, Scotland, and Wales (Cornwall was known anciently as West Wales).

Four centuries after their arrival, the Anglo-Saxons succeeded in uniting their seven kingdoms under a single ruler. This unification was threatened and ultimately destroyed by still another group of invaders, the fearsome Vikings. By the time of Alfred the Great (871-99), Danish raiding parties had ravaged the eastern coast as far inland as a day’s journey on horseback. Even worse, a large army of Danes was residing year round in the Midlands and in much of Alfred’s southern kingdom of Wessex. In the northwest, as well as in Ireland, the Norwegians were encroaching in similar fashion. With brilliant military tactics and enormous fortitude, Alfred stopped the advance of the Danes, forcing them to sue for peace. The Treaty of Wedmore (878)
Germanic Invaders

along with a later agreement confined the Danes to the northeastern half of England, a region known as the Danelaw, and compelled their leaders to accept baptism.

After Alfred’s death, his children and grandchildren reconquered the Danelaw, ruling from the Firth of Forth to the English Channel. Their achievement was short-lived, however. The Danes, ever watchful, took advantage of weak leadership, dissension, and treachery among the Saxon ruling class and brought not only the Danelaw once again but also all of England under their domination. In 1016 England became part of the Scandinavian empire of the Danish king Canute (1016-35).

Though the Danish presence was more or less constant in northern England for over two hundred years and though all England was under Danish rule from 1016 to 1042, the Danish influence was not so great as one might think. The Danes adapted themselves easily to the English and mingled freely with them, for they had similar northern European roots and spoke a similar language. Their kings upheld English laws and customs. It was not until another invasion of Northmen, who had settled in
France, that English society was radically changed. From the Norman (i.e., Northman) Conquest of 1066, England received a new nobility and a strongly centralized feudal administration. Thereafter political change would come gradually and from within.

**Religious**

Occurring simultaneously with the political invasions were the religious, resulting in the so-called Christianization of England. Primitive Christianity came to England in the first century. We need not take seriously the legend that Joseph of Arimathea evangelized the Celts, bringing the Holy Grail (the cup of the Last Supper) to Glastonbury. Roman legions brought the new faith to England, and it soon spread among the Celts. Unfortunately, the Celtic church during the Roman occupation followed the rest of Christendom into Catholic ritualism and superstition. With the Anglo-Saxon conquest, Scandinavian paganism replaced Celtic Catholicism in England.

Ireland, untouched by the Roman occupation, was another matter. In 432 a British Celt named Patrick began evangelizing Ireland for Rome. He founded a national church that took its basic doctrine from Rome but remained independent, resisting later developments in Roman belief and practice. Irish Catholicism differed from Roman mainly in denying papal authority and permitting the clergy to marry. The centers of Irish ecclesiastical control were not churches governed by bishops but monasteries ruled by abbots. These monasteries became renowned centers of learning and bases of missionary efforts to convert the Germanic tribes newly arrived in England.

The influence of these abbots was challenged in 597 by the arrival of a mission of some forty monks from Pope Gregory. Its leader, Augustine, soon converted King Ethelbert of Kent and became the first archbishop of Canterbury. (This Augustine is not to be confused with the famous fifth-century bishop-theologian of North Africa.) Roman and Irish Catholicism competed in England until 664, when, at the Synod of Whitby, the English clergy decided in favor of Rome. Soon, important monasteries were planted in the north, Wearmouth in 674 and Jarrow in 681; and a national episcopal system was installed. Thereafter, English Catholicism was under papal rule.
CONSEQUENCES

Apart from the Roman occupation, which affected mainly the landscape, these political and religious invasions permanently shaped the character and culture of England. Roman Catholicism drove out Irish Catholicism as thoroughly as the Anglo-Saxons expelled the Celts from central England. Each produced a new beginning. What came later was mostly synthesis: of Anglo-Saxon culture with Scandinavian and of Roman Catholicism with both. The results of the last Germanic invasion, the Norman, appear most obviously in the Middle English period and will be discussed at length in the next section.

Political

During the Old English period, the Germanic invaders amalgamated into a new people and established political ties with continental Europe. Both Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians were seeking not just booty but a new home. They soon developed loyalties to their new communities. In time, these communities combined into a single political system, and England became a nation. During this process, there was emerging in England’s rulers a national point of view and in England’s peoples a national, rather than tribal, sense of identity. Paradoxically, with the emergence of a national self-concept came a greater awareness of other national cultures, as England became part of the Scandinavian empire of Cnut and then of the Norman territories of William the Conqueror. As England became more conscious of itself, it became more conscious of continental Europe.

Religious

The coming of Roman Catholicism began a dominion over English life and thought that would last almost a millennium. When the Roman missionaries arrived in 597, there remained few vestiges of the earlier primitive Christian faith, only Germanic paganism with pockets of Irish Catholicism. The new religious faith, though as spiritually barren as what it replaced, gave England a national government of sorts long before political unity became possible. This ecclesiastical rule is reflected today in the organization of the Anglican church, with its archbishops of Canterbury and York and lower-level clergy.

In the tenth century, when the nation became politically unified, the ecclesiastical and civil governments became mutually supporting institutions, and England was assimilated into the European community of nations influenced by Rome. Religiously as well as politically, national selfhood was accompanied by national ties with continental Europe. These ties were increasingly with the lower continental nations, especially Italy and France. What Romanism began, William of Normandy was to finish: the cultural realignment of England from the Germanic north to the Mediterranean south.

Cultural

From these invasions emerged a distinctive language and literature. Old English is, of course, now unintelligible to the ordinary reader of English, but modern
English descends directly from it. The dissimilarity is not a difference between separate languages but a kind of generation gap between parent—or, more accurately, grandparent—and child. The child obviously has come of age, for English today is the most widely spoken language in the world. It has also excelled as an artistic medium. English literature has achieved a distinction unsurpassed by that of any nation of modern or ancient times.

**Language and learning** In the parts of England settled by the Anglo-Saxon invaders, the Gaelic language of the Celts was replaced not by separate languages but by varieties of the same language. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes spoke dialects of the West Germanic branch of a family of languages known as Indo-European, so named because of their wide distribution from India to Europe. At the time of the invasion, many of the Germanic dialects were close enough to be mutually understood. Even the North Germanic (Old Norse) dialects of the Scandinavian invaders four centuries later were probably intelligible to their English opponents. But geographical separation produces linguistic separation, and the language of England inevitably would go its own way.

Going its own way did not, however, mean isolation from other languages. It is true that English took little from the conquered Celts—mostly place names such as Kent, York, Dover, London, and Thames. But English, a great borrowing language, incorporated large amounts of vocabulary from the languages of England’s later invaders: from church Latin, from Scandinavian, and from French. The Latin acquisitions during the Old English period were mainly ecclesiastical words such as apostle, altar, bishop, priest, monk, disciple, and shrine. Though sizable, they were only a prelude to the great influx of classical Latin vocabulary during the Renaissance that would make Latin the largest foreign element in the English word stock.

Less extensive in word number than the Latin but higher in word frequency are the Scandinavian borrowings. The Viking influence shows strongly in names from central and northern England where its presence was most felt. It appears in place names ending in -by, “village”; -beck, “brook”; -dale, “valley”; -fell, “hill”; -garth, “yard”; -gill, “ravine”; -thorpe, “hamlet”; and -thwaite, “clearing.” From these regions come English surnames ending with -son or -sen. But the main Scandinavian impact is in ordinary speech: in words such as sky, skin, anger, low, wrong, husband, gate, die, take, and want. Most notable is the grammatical influence: the Scandinavian pronouns they, them, and their replaced their Old English equivalents in the English system.

The French contribution to English vocabulary belongs to the Middle English period. But it is convenient to treat it here as an effect of the invasion that ended the Old English period. The effect was momentous. For almost three hundred years after the Norman invasion, French displaced English as the language of the ruling class and of the nation’s business. Consequently, from French came words associated with political rule, aristocratic living, and the professions. These loan words pertain to such areas as government (crown, reign, prince, parliament), military life (war, peace, battle, armor, officer, soldier, siege), art (art, beauty, color, design, ornament, paint), dress (dress, apparel, costume, and most names of particular garments), cuisine (boil, fry, stew, roast, toast, sauce, pastry, soup, sausage), law (justice,
judge, jury, court, accuser, attorney), and the church (religion, prayer, service, sermon, saint, saviour, chapel). A native Saxon in Sir Walter Scott’s novel Ivanhoe complains that animals killed for food appear with English names during their lifetime (ox, cow, calf, sheep, swine, deer) but with French names on the table (beef, veal, mutton, pork, venison).

Part of the linguistic aftermath of the Norman invasion was the acceleration of certain internal changes in the language that had been underway for some time. During the Old English period, the major regional dialects—Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish—were slowly reducing their grammatical inflections (variations in word form to express tense, case, person, number, etc.). From causes not fully understood, during the three centuries or so after the Normans arrived, the language moved quickly from a form not greatly different from the original tribal dialects to that of Middle English, not greatly different from the English of today. This tendency to develop from a synthetic to an analytic language—that is, from one in which grammatical relationships are shown by inflections to one in which they are indicated by word order and function words such as prepositions and helping verbs—is a feature of Indo-European languages. What especially distinguishes English is the speed and thoroughness of the change.

The introduction of Latin by the Roman missionaries gave English not only some additional vocabulary but also a new alphabet. By means of the twenty-six letter Latin alphabet, Old English became, for the first time on any significant scale, a written as well as spoken language. Although the Anglo-Saxons, like other Germanic peoples, had a means of recording language through runes (sticklike figures used in divination), the skill was confined to a few initiates. Evidently very little was written in English before the coming of Augustine and his fellow monks.

With Latin, England acquired also another language. It became the language not only of the church but also of diplomacy and scholarship. Virtually all important writing during the Middle Ages was done in Latin. A command of Latin opened the door not only to the mysteries of the Catholic religion but also to the classical thought preserved by the monasteries. The acquisition of Latin brought England within the cultural mainstream of Europe. By the end of the eighth century, English scholarship was highly regarded in Europe.

Within another hundred years, however, Viking marauders had so ravaged English monasteries that Alfred had to import scholars to teach Latin to his noblemen and administrative assistants. He began a program of translating Latin works into English—that is, into his native West Saxon dialect. He also had his translators copy works in other English dialects into West Saxon. Alfred’s concern for an educated leadership, along with the loss of manuscripts in the Viking raids in the north and northeast, is responsible for the fact that most Old English literature has come down to us in the dialect of West Saxon.

**Literature** The poetry preserved by Alfred’s copyists (English prose before Alfred was virtually nonexistent) reflects its tribal origins. It is oral, using the devices of repetition that characterize poetry written for, or even during, public recitation. What might be rejected as triteness and redundancy by a modern ear are its very soul: stock epithets, synonymous expressions, and other parallelism of thought.
Little they deemed, those dauntless warriors,
As they leaped to the fray, those lusty fighters,
Laying on boldly to left and to right,
Eager to slay, that no sword upon earth,
No keenest weapon, could wound that monster.

In this translated passage from *Beowulf*, the poet employs repetition to expand and elevate an important moment in his narrative. Rather than rhyme or modern meter, the poem uses four heavily stressed syllables per line (two per half line), of which at least two (one in each half line) always alliterate. Accordingly, in the first line of the passage above, “deemed” and “dauntless” alliterate, yoking the half lines. Obviously this poetry is artistically controlled expression. The pace is slowed not only by stylized repetition but also by long speeches and formal description. Evidently early Germanic audiences were interested not so much in what happened in the story as in the way in which the story was told.

Such poetry was at one time the work of professional minstrels called *scops*, composing and reciting for tribal gatherings. But what has been preserved, while written in a similar style, was evidently composed for a civilized audience. The anonymous authors of Old English poems were most likely monks well versed in their native Germanic lore using tribal legend and codes of conduct to convey moral and religious ideas. The result of this mixed tribal-monastic origin is a curious blend of pagan and Christian elements. Pagan Wyrd, or Fate, vies with Christian Providence as the determiner of human affairs. Biblical heroes and Catholic saints appear as tribal chiefs and champions. Amidst these contradictions—not unusual where Catholicism has assimilated a native culture—Old English poetry has enormous vitality and a special charm.

On the whole, Old English poetry is somber, for life was hard and risky. For generations English society endured on the edge of collapse. The poetry was not devoid of humor. This is evident in the frequency of *irony*, both of statement and of situation, as well as in the fondness for riddles. But most is written in what has been called “the stiff-upper-lip tradition.” Little may be expected in this life or the next by those lacking the courage and strength to endure. This stoical view of life has persisted in English literature.

The most noble of Germanic tribal traditions was the code of *comitatus*: an unquestioning loyalty of warrior to chief and of chief to warrior that required the members of a warrior band to protect one another until death. This bond, according to a distinguished historian, laid “the moral foundation of the social code of England for ages to come.” It underlay the oath of fealty to a ruler and a ruler’s corresponding obligations to his subjects. This bond of loyalty will be of special interest to us as we examine this warmly human and richly artistic body of writing. We will also notice the heroic ideals of courage and wisdom, so necessary to the survival of a struggling tribal people, as qualities needed by God’s people today.
Bede 673-733

One of the most important works translated from Latin by Alfred’s scribes was *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Its author, Bede, was called the Venerable because of his reputation for piety and scholarship. Well versed in Greek and possibly Hebrew, as well as in Latin and his native Old English, Bede was the outstanding European scholar of his age. A Benedictine monk, he spent most of his life in the monasteries of Jarrow and Wearmouth, writing works on grammar, rhetoric, astronomy, homiletics, history, theology, and other learned subjects. His *Ecclesiastical History* (731) is our major source of information about the Anglo-Saxons before the writings of Alfred’s time.

The purpose of the *History* was to chart the spread of Christianity throughout England from Roman times to the present. The Christianity was, of course, Catholicism. The doctrine of salvation by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9) was largely lost to the Middle Ages, both then and later. The crucifixion was at the center of Catholic belief, and faith was necessary. But faith had to be supported by works; grace was conferred by the sacraments; and forgiveness of sin came through penance, a process involving a punishment set by the priest. Worship centered in the Mass, a supposedly miraculous re-enactment of the crucifixion through the blessing of the bread and the wine.

The Mass is an un-Biblical, idolatrous repetition of an event—the main event of history—which was accomplished “once” forever (Heb. 9:27-28; 10:11-12). In this re-sacrificing of Christ by the priest, the bread and wine are said to become the actual body and blood of the Redeemer. However, according to Scripture, Christ in that very body, “after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God,” where He remains until His kingdom is complete (Heb. 10:12-13). His work as Intercessor makes unnecessary and fraudulent the ministry of any human priest.

Still, enough of the magnificence of divine redemption—the idea of the suffering and dying God—must have appeared within the Catholic distortion of the gospel to make Romanism seem far superior to pagan Germanic superstition. Bede’s account of the conversion of the Northumbrian king Edwin shows a recognition of this superiority on the part of his counselors. Of special interest to us is its depiction of the gloom of the heathen mind.

Further on in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede tells the story of Caedmon, a shy, illiterate cowherd of Whitby, who was inspired by divine vision to versify sacred history. Bede includes a short hymn consisting mostly of a series of phrases referring to the Creator. This series of phrases exemplifies two features of Old English poetry: variation and the periphrastic epithet. The first, variation, is the repetition of an idea in different words with the same grammatical form. When variation is done well, its effect is one not of redundancy but of cumulative characterization. The repeated idea flashes its facets as a diamond being held to the light and turned so as to show its full beauty.
The **periphrastic epithet** is the expression of an idea in a roundabout, more elegant way. A specific form of this device (not illustrated in the hymn) is the **kenning**, a metaphoric compound of two words, such as *whalepath* for sea. The kenning is a poetic application of a very old tendency in English: the expression of new ideas by word compounding (e.g., *gospel* from *god*, “good,” + *spell*, “tale”; *heartsick* from *heart*, “heart,” + *sec*., “sick”; *handbook* from *hand*, “hand,” + *boc*, “book”). The periphrastic expanding and crystallizing of meaning give Old English verse vitality even in translation.

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**The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**

**[The Conversion of Edwin]**

When he heard this, the king answered that it was his will as well as his duty to accept the Faith that Paulinus taught, but said that he must still discuss the matter with his principal advisers and friends, so that, if they were in agreement with him, they might all be cleansed together in Christ the Fount of Life. Paulinus agreed, and the king kept his promise. He summoned a council of the wise men, and asked each in turn his opinion of this strange doctrine and this new way of worshipping the godhead that was being proclaimed to them.

Coifi, the Chief Priest, replied without hesitation: “Your Majesty, let us give careful consideration to this new teaching: for I frankly admit that, in my experience, the religion that we have hitherto professed seems valueless and powerless. None of your subjects has been more devoted to the service of our gods than myself; yet there are many to whom you show greater favour, who receive greater honours, and who are more successful in all their undertakings. Now, if the gods had any power, they would surely have favoured myself, who have been more zealous in their service. Therefore, if on examination you perceive that these new teachings are better and more effectual, let us not hesitate to accept them.”

Another of the king’s chief men signified his agreement with this prudent argument, and went on to say: “Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter’s day with your thanes* and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it.” The other elders and counsellors of the king, under God’s guidance, gave similar advice.
[Caedmon's Hymn]
Now we must praise the Ruler of Heaven,
The might of the Lord and His purpose of mind,
The work of the Glorious Father; for He,
God Eternal, established each wonder,
He, Holy Creator, first fashioned the heavens
As a roof for the children of earth.
And then our guardian, the Everlasting Lord,
Adorned this middle-earth for men. 
Praise the Almighty King of Heaven.

For Thought and Discussion
1. What argument does Coifi, the chief priest, give Edwin to help convince him to accept the new teachings? How do you know that his motivation is self-centered? What two adjectives does he use to describe heathenism?
2. What motivation does the second member of the witan, or ruling council of wise men, set forth as a reason for considering Christianity? In what way does Christianity offer the specific answers he seeks?
3. What imaginative comparison does the second counselor use, and what specific images make the comparison especially poignant?
4. What are the seven periphrastic epithets referring to God in Caedmon's hymn? Of these epithets, which two are most closely synonymous, and where do they appear? What attitude does the poet express by the use of these epithets?
5. How does Caedmon's hymn illustrate both unity and progression?