

History of English Literature

From Anglo-Saxon Period to Twentieth Century

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*P*REFACE

This book is a systematic, comprehensive and analytical history of English Literature. It is an attempt to trace in detail the history from the days of Beowulf in the Anglo-Saxon Period to the present day when literature is produced to explore, highlight, illuminate and explicate social realities, national issues and global problems. Literature mirrors the society and documents social life. It traces cultural and linguistic development as well. It is used to propagate and propagandise ideas and to preach messages of humanistic philosophy and also used as a means to vindicate justice in society.

The book as it is on English literature, deals authentically with social, cultural, literary and linguistic realities in the ages of literature of England and explores and records them systematically. In it I have discussed with adequate evidences from literary works, the growth and development of English literature till the end of the twentieth century and my discussion on each age of literature is enriched with social and political evidences from the pages of history of Great Britain. The social and political history that precedes my discussion on each age is carefully designed for Indian students and foreign readers so as to enable them to penetrate deep into English literature.

The book aims at facilitating the comprehensive understanding of English literature for graduate and postgraduate students. It is also designed for NET and SLET aspirants. Social, political, economic and cultural backgrounds of each age of English literature, which have been elaborately dealt with in this volume will definitely facilitate their preparation for those tests. A separate chapter on the meanings and definitions of literary terms appended to the end — it will ease their understanding of literature and the developments of English literature at different ages.

Ample light has been shed on the writers, their development as writers and their works. Major literary works have been analysed and discussed, and this will serve the purposes of students in all their academic careers. My aim in writing the book is to instil into the reader's mind deep interest in reading English literature. What is special about the book is the language being easy and simple, lucid and dignified.

I owe my indebtedness to a good many numbers of scholars, critics and writers for materials used in this book. I have consulted a number of books to enrich and enlarge my discussion which this book contains. Prof. M N Sinha is my writing inspiration and guiding force. I am thankful to Ajit Misra, Chanchal, Malda, who composed the script and to Romio Dey who designed the book and made ready for its publication. My gratefulness goes direct to Mr. Sandip Nayak, who has showed his keen interest in bringing this book out. I shall deem it highly prized if it serves the students' as well as the readers' purposes.

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Dr Kalyan Pandey

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD & LITERATURE 17-59

1.0. Introduction, 1.1 The Society And Religion of the Anglo-Saxon, 1.2. Anglo-Saxon Pagan Poetry, 1.3 Beowulf as an Epic, 1.4 Beowulf as a picture of Early Teutonic Life, 1.5 Anglo-Saxon Heroic Poetry, 1.6 Anglo-Saxon Elegiac Poetry, 1.7 Anglo-Saxon Christian or Religious Poetry 1.8 Fusion of Christian and Pagan Elements in Anglo-Saxon Poetry, 1.9 Nature in Anglo-Saxon Poetry, 1.10 Features of Anglo-Saxon Literature, 1.11 Anglo-Saxon Prose, 1.12 Alfred's contributions to English Prose, 1.13 Contributions of Aelfric and Wulfstan to Prose, 1.14 Major works of the Period : (i) Widsith, (ii) The Wanderer, (iii) The Seafarer, (iv) The Ruined Burg or The Ruin, (v) The Wife's Complaint, (vi) The Husband's Message, (vii) The Deor's Lament, (viii) The Battle at Finnsburh, (ix) Waldere (Waldhere), (x) The Battle of Brunanburh, (xi) The Battle of Maldon, (xii) The Dream of the Rood, (xiii) The Phoenix, (xiv) The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

CHAPTER II THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD(1106-1350) 60-86

2.0. The Historical Background of this age of Literature, 2.1 The Normans, 2.2 The Norman Conquest and its Effects, 2.3 The Literature of the Church, 2.4 Literature of the Court, 2.5 Medieval or Metrical Romances, 2.6 Arthurian Romances, 2.7 Folk Literature : The Ballad, 2.8 The Rise of the Allegory, 2.9 Middle English Lyrics, 2.10 Some important Literary Works : (i) History of the Kings of Britain, (ii) The Moral Ode, (iii) Ormulum, (iv) Ancren Riwe, (v) Handlyng Synne, (vi) Curson-Mundi, (vii) The Owl and the Nightingale, (viii) King Horn, (ix) Havelok.

CHAPTER III	THE AGE OF CHAUCER (1350-1400)	87-116
	3.0. Social and Political Background, 3.1 Authors of the Age : (i) John Wycliffe, (ii) John Hower, (iii) William Langland, (iv) Sir John Mandeville, (v) John Barbour, 3.2 Alliterative Poems : (i) Pearl, (ii) Sir Gawain and Greene Knight, 3.3 Geoffrey Chaucer, 3.4 Chaucer—the Forerunner of the Renaissance, 3.5 Chaucer's Poetic Achievement, 3.6 Three Periods of Chaucer's Poetry, 3.7 Troilus and Criseyde, 3.8 The Parlement of Fowls, 3.9 The House of Fame, 3.10 The Legend of Good Women, 3.11 The English Period, 3.12 The Canterbury Tales, 3.13 Chaucer as a poet.	
CHAPTER IV	THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES (1400-1500)	117-133
	4.0. Social Background, 4.1 Literary Features of the Age, 4.2 The English Chaucerians: (i) John Lydgate, (ii) Thomas Hoccleve, (iii) Stephen Hawes, (iv) Alexander Barolay, (v) John Skelton, 4.3 The Scottish Chaucerian, 4.4 Prose Literature of the Fifteenth Century.	
CHAPTER V	GROWTH OF ENGLISH DRAMA	134-141
	5.0. Growth of English Drama, 5.1 The Mystery and Miracle Plays, 5.2 The Morality Plays, 5.3 The Interlude, 5.4 Some Important Works : (i) Everyman, (ii) The Castle of Perseverance, (iii) Mankind.	
CHAPTER VI	THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE	142-157
	6.0. The English Renaissance, 6.1 The Impact of Renaissance on English Literature, 6.2 English Humanists, 6.3 Utopia, 6.4 Brilliance of Erasmus, 6.5 Classical Influence on English Literature, 6.6 Some Major Works: (i) Ralph Roister Doister, (ii) Grammar Gurton's Needle, (iii) Gorboduc	
CHAPTER VII	THE ENGLISH AGE	158-270
	7.0. The English Age, 7.1 Elizabethan Poetry, 7.2 Henry Howard, 7.3 Sir Philip Sidney, 7.4 Edmund Spenser, 7.5 Henry Constable, 7.6 Daniel, 7.7 William Shakespeare, 7.8 Michael Drayton, 7.9 Christopher Marlowe, 7.10 Some Important Works: (i) Tottel's Miscellany, (ii) Astrophel and Stella, (iii) Amoretti, (iv) The Faerie Queene, (v) The Shepherd's Calender, (vi) The Mirror for Magistrate, (vii) Shakespeare's Sonnets, 7.11 Edmund Spenser, 7.12 Elizabethan Songs and Lyrics, 7.13 Elizabethan	

Narrative and Epical Poetry, 7.14 Satire and Erotic And Pious Poetry of the Age, 7.15 Prose Literature in the Age, 7.16 Elizabethan Essays, 7.17 The Works of Bacon, 7.18 Bacon's Contributions, 7.19 Growth and Development of English Novel, 7.20 The Elizabethan Drama, 7.21 University Wits / Pre-Shakespearean Dramatists, 7.22 Marlowe's important Dramatic Works, 7.23 Influence of Seneca of Elizabethan Tragedy, 7.24 William Shakespeare, 7.25 Shakespeare's indebtedness to his Predecessors, 7.26. Shakespeare's Stage and Audience, 7.27 Shakespeare as a Dramatist, 7.28 Shakespeare's English, 7.29 Shakespearean Comedy, 7.30 Shakespearean Tragedy, 7.31 Shakespeare's Treatment of History, 7.32 Dramatic Works of Shakespeare

CHAPTER VIII THE JACOBAN AGE

271-338

8.0. Historical and Social background, 8.1 The Decadence of Drama in the Jacobean Age, 8.2 Benjamin Jonson, 8.3 Ben Jonson as a dramatist, 8.4 Ben Jonson's Works, 8.5 George Chapman, 8.6 Thomas Dekker, 8.7 Thomas Middleton, 8.8 Thomas Heywood, 8.9 John Marston, 8.10 Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, 8.11 Philip Massinger, 8.12 Cyril Toureur, 8.13 John Webster, 8.14 Webster and Shakespeare, 8.15 John Ford, 8.16 James Shirley, 8.17 New Trends in Poetry, 8.18 The Caroline Poetry / The Metaphysical School of Poetry, 8.19 John Donne, 8.20 George Herbert, 8.21 Herbert as a Religious poet, 8.22 Andrew Marvell, 8.23 Marvell as a poet, 8.24 Henry Vaughan, 8.25 Richard Crashaw, 8.26 Thomas Traherne, 8.27 Abraham Cowley, 8.28 The Cavalier Poets, 8.29 The Caroline Prose / Jacobean Prose, 8.30 Milton as a prose Writer, 8.31 The Bible and its influence on English Prose, 8.32 Character Writers of the Seventeenth Century.

CHAPTER IX THE AGE OF MILTON

339-363

9.0 The Age of Milton, 9.1 Life and Works of Milton, 9.2 Major Works of Milton : (i) Native Ode, (ii) L'Allegro, (iii) Comus (iv) Lycidas (v) Paradise Regained, (vi) Samson Agonistes, 9.3 Milton's Puritanism, 9.4 The Renaissance and the Reformation in Milton's Poetry.

CHAPTER X THE RESTORATION AGE

OR THE AGE OF DRYDEN (1660-1700)

364-395

10.0 Historical Background, 10.1 Restoration Poetry, 10.2 Restoration Prose, 10.3 Restoration Theatre, 10.4 The Comedy of Manners, 10.5 The Writers of the Comedy of Manners : (i) Sir George Etherege, (ii) William Wycherley, (iii) Sir John Van brugh, (iv) George Farquhar, (v) Thomas Shadwell, (vi) William Congreve, 10.6 Important Works of Congreve : (i) The Old Bachelor, (ii) The Double Dealer, (iii) Love for Love, (iv) The Way of the world, 10.7 Heroic Drama or Restoration Tragedy, 10.8 John Dryden, 10.9 Thomas Otway, 10.10 Nithaniel Lee, 10.11 John Dryden, 10.12 Dryden's Important Works : (i) Absalom and Achitophel, (ii) Mac Flecknoe, (iii) Essay on Dramatic Poetry

CHAPTER XI THE AGE OF POPE

396-439

11.0 Social and Political Background, 11.1 The Age of Prose and Reason, 11.2 The Classical Age or The Augustan Age, 11.3 Augustan Prose, 11.4 Prose Writers: (i) Daniel Defoe, (ii) Jonathan Swift, (iii) Joseph Addison, (iv) Richard Steele, 11.5 Popularity and Importance of The Periodical Essay, 11.6 Minor Prose Writers.

CHAPTER XII THE AGE OF JOHNSON

440-558

12.0 Social Background, 12.1 Samuel Johnson, 12.2 Johnson's Contribution, 12.3 Johnson's style, 12.4 Decline of Drama in The 18th Century, 12.5 Oliver Goldsmith, 12.6 The Rebirth of English Novel, 12.7 Life in English Novels in The Eighteenth Century, 12.8 Novelists of the Age, 12.9 Novels of Richardson, 12.10 Richardson as a novelist, 12.11 Henry Fielding, 12.12 Henry Fielding as a novelist, 12.13 Richardson and Fielding, 12.14 Fielding's Contributions, 12.15 Tobias Smollett, 12.16 Smollett as a novelist, 12.17 Smollett's Contributions, 12.18 Laurence Sterne, 12.19 Sterne as a novelist, 12.20 The Sentimental Comedy, 12.21 Oliver Goldsmith, 12.22 Richard Brinsley Butler Sheriden, 12.23 Goldsmith as a dramatist 12.24 Sheriden as a dramatist 12.25 Important works, 12.26 English Novel after Sterne. 12.27 Women

Novelists, 12.28 The Novel of Terror or Gothic Novel, 12.29 Eighteenth Century Prose Literature, 12.30 Adam Smith, 12.31 Edmund Burke, 12.32 Edmund Burke as a Political Thinker, 12.33 Burke's Style, 12.34 The Precursors of Romantic Revival, 12.35 Literary Trends of the Age, 12.36 Features of Pre-Romantic Poetry, 12.37 The Pre-Romantic Poets / Transitional Poems, 12.38 Thomas Grey, 12.39 Thomas Grey as a poet, 12.40 William Collins, 12.41 Collins and Grey, 12.42 William Cowper, 12.43 Robert Burns, 12.44 William Blake, 12.45 Blake's Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, 12.46 Minor Transitional Poets, 12.47 The Rise of Medievalism Poets: (i) James Macpherson, (ii) Thomas Chatterton, (iii) Thomas Percy, 12.48 Nature in the Eighteenth Century Poetry, 12.49 Some important works: (i) The Season, (ii) The Castle of Indolence, (iii) Macpherson's Ossian, (iv) The Castle of Otranto

CHAPTER XIII THE ROMANTIC AGE

559-705

13.0 Social, Political and Literary Background, 13.1 Intellectual Background, 13.2 The Literary Features, 13.3 The Influence of the French Revolution on English Literature, 13.4 The Romantic Movement as Addition of Strangeness to Beauty. 13.5 Features of the Romantic Poetry, 13.6 Return to Nature in Romantic Poetry, 13.7 Romanticism as Passion for Medievalism, 13.8 Romanticism, 13.9 The Romantic Poets: William Wordsworth, 13.10 William Wordsworth as a poet of Nature, 13.11 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 13.12 Coleridge as a poet, 13.13 Coleridge as a critic, 13.14 Coleridge as a poet of the Supernatural, 13.15 Wordsworth and Coleridge as poets of Romanticism, 13.16 Percy Bysshe Shelley, 13.17 P.B. Shelley as a poet, 13.18 Shelley as a Lyric Poet, 13.19 Lord Byron, 13.20 Byron as a poet, as a satirist, 13.21 John Keats, 13.22 Development of Keats' Poetry, 13.23 The Odes, 13.24 Keats' Sonnets, 13.25 Features of Keats' Poetry, 13.26 Keats As a Romantic Poet, 13.27 Nature in English Romantic Poetry, 13.28 Robert Southey, 13.29 Walter Scott as a poet, 13.30 Minor poets,

CHAPTER I
ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD & LITERATURE

AN INTRODUCTION : The Anglo-Saxons were a Germanic people who lived in England during post-Roman times. In the fifth and sixth centuries, the Angles and the Saxons from the area now known as Schleswig-Holstein, together with the Jutes, invaded and conquered Britain. The name England (Anglo-land) came from the Angles. England—which is the centre of English language and literature—belonged to the Celtic natives who had, though there is no such historical record, settled there during the gradual spread of Aryan Civilization in the West. The Angles brought the story of *Beowulf* with them to England in the sixth century, and there, somewhat about A.D. 700, the poem was made. This was about seventy years after the death of Mohamed and in the same age as the beginning of the great Tang Dynasty in China.

The land was invaded and finally conquered by Rome in 43 A.D. The Romans ruled the land long and the natives of the land were deeply influenced by their culture. "The departure of the Romans in 410 left the British population open to the inroads of the invaders from the north." The Angles, Saxons and Jutes came to settle in England in the later part of the fifth century and, eventually, gave the country its name and its language.

The Angles, Saxons and Jutes belonged to the Teutonic tribes. They invaded and conquered Britain. The Angles settled along the Eastern Coast; the Saxons occupied the Southern Coast; while the Jutes—who were comparatively unimportant—settled in Kent. The Angles gave their name to the country which came to be called Anglo-land or England, while the people came to be called Anglo-Saxons or, simply, Saxons. These Anglo-Saxon tribes drove the Celtic Britons Westwards into Wales or enslaved them. Their descendants live to this day in Wales, Scotland and Ireland. These tribes were heathen Germans and extremely fierce and savage in conduct. They were by nature warriors and their livelihood mainly depended on plunder. Their permanent settlement in England changed their mode of living. Gradually they became social; their fierceness and savagery were gradually replaced by human feelings, love and sympathy. Thus they became settled inhabitants, with certain specific peaceful vocations, and cultivated the ideal of a corporate living.

The English language developed from the West Germanic dialects spoken by the Angles, Saxons and other Teutonic tribes. The word English reflects the fact that Anglo-Saxon literature first flourished in the north

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and was written in the Anglican dialects spoken in Northumbria and Mercia. Later, under king Alfred, the West Saxon region became the cultural centre. The earlier Anglian literature was copied in the West Saxon dialect, now commonly called Old English, or Anglo-Saxon English. The changes that have made modern English look like a different language from Old English are the results of certain natural tendencies in language development, such as progressive simplification of the grammar, as well as the events in history. The Norman Conquest (1066) and the growth of London as a cultural centre had done much to the growth and development of the English language. Besides, the influences of the languages like Greek and Latin have greatly enriched the language.

The seeds of English literature were sown in the soil of England. Literature which the Anglo-Saxons wrote is known as Anglo-Saxon literature. Poetry dominated Anglo-Saxon literature. The Anglo-Saxons were no longer nomadic and were enjoying some sort of peace and prosperity. They had time to spare for literature. They had devoted time and mind to writing literature. They followed social life and observed social and cultural customs. The social, cultural and religious life of the Anglo-Saxons is clearly reflected in the poetry they wrote.

Anglo-Saxon poetry is broadly divided into two classes — *Pagan* and *Christian*. The Anglo-Saxons were primarily Pagan or non-Christian. They worshipped Pagan gods and goddesses. So poetry which was composed by the Pagan Anglo-Saxons is called *Anglo-Saxon Pagan* or *non-Christian poetry*. Gradually, Christianity conquered England and the Anglo-Saxons embraced Christianity as their religion. They were deeply inspired by the Bible, and the poetry the Anglo-Saxons wrote in Christian England is known as *Anglo-Saxon Christian poetry* or *Anglo-Saxon religious poetry*. The theme of such poetry is based on as derived from the Bible. Literature under the influence of Christianity reflects the life of the Anglo-Saxons guided by "five great principles — their love of personal freedom, their responsiveness to nature, their religion, their reverence for womanhood, and their struggle for glory as a ruling motive in every noble life. (W. J. Long).

The earliest phase of the English language (450-1066 B.C.) is recorded in the history of English literature and of the English language as *Old English*. In the earliest part of the period, many English poems were composed. These poems reflected the life of the pagan Germanic tribes on the Continent and in Britain. Those that have survived included the epic *Beowulf* and such lyrics as *The Seafarer*, *Widsith* and *Deor's Lament*. *Beowulf* is the first long poem in English. Though the Angles brought the story to England, it is not even about the Angles, but about the Scandinavians. The German tribes, though they warred with each other—and with anyone else within reach—had a 'free trade' in stories. Their poets, at least, believed in 'Germania', the single German people. So it is that the first English poem is a Scandinavian story, brought over by Angles, and made into a poem of England.

The earlier Anglian literature was copied in the West Saxon dialect, now commonly called Old English, or Anglo-Saxon English

Beowulf is a long narrative poem, characterised by the beauty and grandeur of an epic. It celebrates in glowing words the heroism and self-sacrifice of Beowulf, a young hero. The story of this poem is of a monster named Grendel who is disturbing Hrothgar, king of the Danes, in Heorot, his great hall. Beowulf arrived there with a group of warriors to the rescue. He defeats and kills the terrible monster, Grendel's mother, a sea monster, who seeks vengeance for the death of her son, and invites her end of life in the hand of Beowulf. Beowulf is highly praised by the Danes and greatly rewarded by them. He goes back to his native land. In the second part of the poem Beowulf is a king, and, as an old man, he has to defend his country from a fiery dragon. He slays the dragon who had ravaged his land, but in the fight he himself is mortally wounded. The poem closes with an account of his funeral rites.

The Anglo-Saxons embraced Christianity and they became Christians. They became inspired by Christian religious messages and principles. They composed poems suffused with Christian theme and sentiments. Early Christian literature included Caedmon's *The Genesis, Exodus, Daniel* and the allegorical *Phoenix* (a translation from Latin). Cynewulf is another Christian poet of the age. A number of poems have been associated with his name. Cynewulf is distinguished from Caedmon. His works are not paraphrases in verse. He wrote some original poems. *Juliann, Elene, Christ* and *The Fates of the Apostles* bear the signature of Cynewulf. *The Dream of the Rood* is "the finest of all old English religious poems in its intensity of feeling, brilliance of conception and certainty of execution. It is the work of a real artist and poet" (Albert). It is by far the most imaginative of the old English poem. The Cross appears to the poet in a dream and narrates the unwilling part it played in the Crucifixion. The whole story leads to the dreadful day of Jesus' crucifixion. The poem is enriched with devotional Christianity and rich poetic artistry. It is a true Christian poem, suffused with religious sentiment. It synthesises Christianity and poetry.

Literature first flourished in Northumbria but, in the reign of Alfred the Great (871-901), West Saxon became the literary dialect. The earliest definite figure is Aldhelm (709), Bishop of Sherborne, who wrote praises of Virginity in an ornate Latin. The greatest figure is the Venerable Bede (673-735), who spent nearly the whole of his life of intense study in the monastery at Jarrow. Foremost among his works is his greatest *Ecclesiastical History of the English Race*. He made his monastery at Jarrow a great centre of civilization in that troubled century when the Christian civilization of Europe was threatened with destruction. Bede wrote in Latin and the excellence of his work gave him in his own lifetime a European reputation, which lasted long after his death.

In the century after Bede, the Danish invasion broke up a nascent civilization in England. One after another the great abbey houses were destroyed. Then Alfred, a young man of twenty-two, became king of England. He changed the fortune of England and wonderfully improved the social and political situations of England. He is remembered as one

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of the outstanding figures the history of England. He was a brave soldier, an efficient strategist, a distinguished scholar, an admirable educator, and also far-sighted administrator. He won the confidence of people. He was not only the military saviour of his people but also had a great zest for knowledge and deep interest in the distribution of knowledge. Under him, much Latin literature was translated into English prose, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was revised and expanded. He became the guiding spirit of the translation of Latin works into English. As a manual for the instruction of the clergy he prepared a translation of the *Pastoral Rule of Gregory the Great*. He also had translated *the History of the World of Orosius*. "These works are his contribution to our literature. Sometimes he translated word for word, at others more freshly, but those passages which have greatest value are both for an understanding of the character of the king and also for their literary way of explanation or expansion" (Albert). His prose style is highly Latinized one. He lent English prose strength and dignity by introducing a large Latin element into old English prose style by translating Latin books.

THE SOCIETY AND RELIGION OF THE ANGLO-SAXONS : The Anglo-Saxons were great rovers and a courageous race. They were fierce in battle with the sea as well as with other tribes, but they also delighted in singing and merry making. They were fond of war and they loved the sea. They were a singing folk. Every chieftain had his bard or scop who sang in the evening the war deeds of the day or the sagas of the past. Often the chieftain, like Hrothgar in *Beowulf*, was himself a singer. Lays were sung in the chambers of the women. The warrior went into the fight chanting as he smote with the sword. The scop or the singer, and the gleemen or the poet, were attached to the court and their songs were inspired by many a theme such as their love of personal freedom, their response to nature, their religion, their reverence for womanhood, and their struggle for glory as a ruling motive in every noble life. The social life of the Anglo-Saxons was varied, and they were engaged in multifarious activities in the society.

Their society was broadly divided into two classes — the warrior class who formed the ruling class; and the tillers of the soil, who were more or less slaves. The king was their chosen leader. He was advised by a council of elders or *witans* and the council was called *Witanagant*, which is looked upon by some as the origin of parliament. The king and his vassals or feudal tenants formed the aristocracy who enjoyed all privileges. The tillers were tied to the land and the women to their homes. The virtues inculcated in such a society were manliness and heroism on the part of the nobles; industry and toil for the tillers; and meekness and submission for women. These virtues which governed the social life of the Anglo-Saxons were extolled in literature as long as this feudal basis of society remained more or less unchanged.

The Anglo-Saxons were Pagan before being Christian. Like the Scandinavians they worshipped Pagan gods. They imagined natural forces as gods and goddesses and worshipped them. Their chief gods

Anglo-Saxons were fond of war and they loved the sea. They were a singing folk