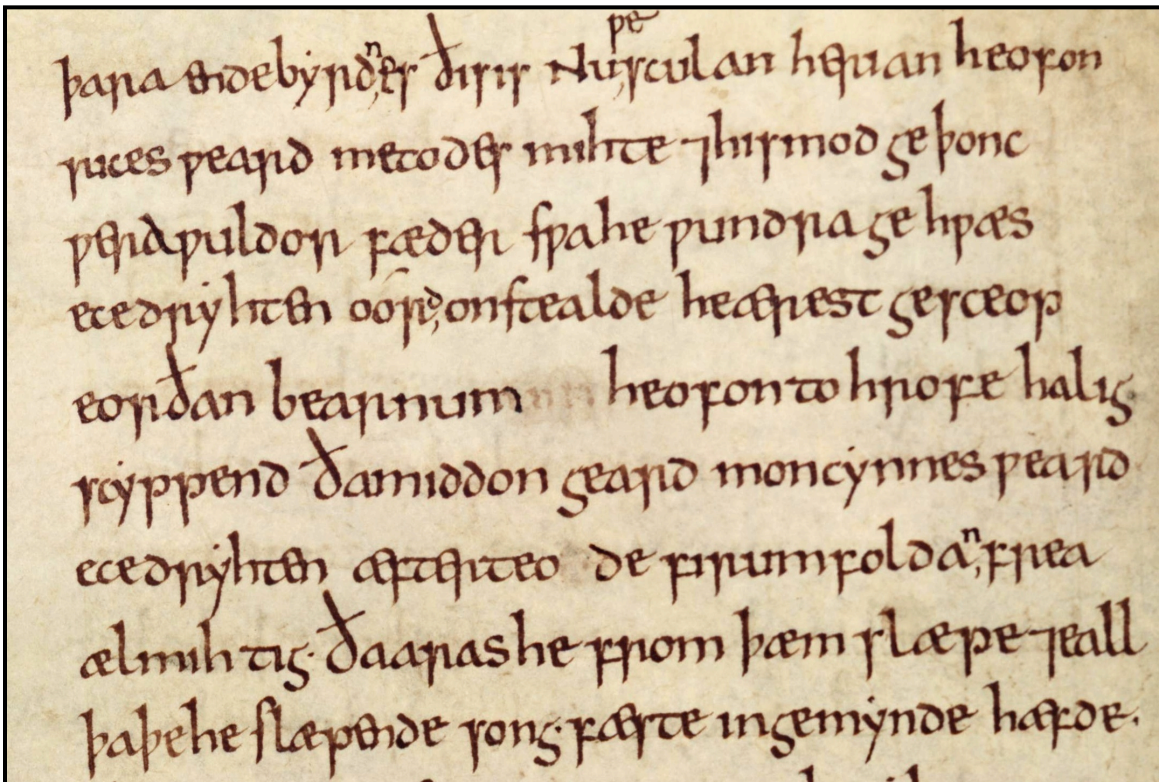


Caedmon's Hymn (c. 670)

Caedmon's Hymn (composed around AD 670) is the earliest extant poem, secular or religious, we possess in English. The story of this cowherd turned poet is told by the Venerable Bede (672/73–735) in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, (AD 632), which remains an important witness to the events of the Anglo-Saxon period. In style, the *Hymn* conforms to the oral tradition of Old English poetic composition, which requires that each “half-line” (e.g. *Nu sculon herigean*) alliterates with the other (i.e. *heofonrices weard*). In modern editions, the division between half-lines is indicated by several spaces, though medieval scribes, due to the cost and effort involved in preparing parchment (made of animal skin), tended to write out poetry as if it were prose (as in the ms. facsimile below). This saved space and ‘money.’ You’ll also notice that capitalization was kept to a minimum, as with ‘heofon’ in the first line below (last word). Otherwise, apart from its literary character, *Caedmon's Hymn* is remarkable for the number of manuscript copies that survive—no less than twenty-one. This number may not seem like a lot, but when you consider that most poems (including *Beowulf*) survive in only one manuscript, the number is great, indeed. But why so many? Because the poem is recorded in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, which circulated widely throughout and after the Anglo-Saxon period.



ms. Corpus Christi College 279b (early 11th century), fol. 112v.

Literal, Inter-Linear Translation of *Caedmon's Hymn*

Nu sculon herigean	heofonrices weard,	
<i>Now should we praise</i>	<i>the guardian of the kingdom of heaven,</i>	
meotodes meahte	and his modgeþanc,	
<i>the might of the measurer</i>	<i>and his mind-plans,</i>	
weorc wuldorfæder,	swa he wundra gehwæs,	
<i>the work of the glory-father</i>	<i>how he, for each wonder,</i>	
ece drihten,	or onstealde.	
<i>the eternal lord,</i>	<i>established a beginning.</i>	
He ærest sceop	eorðan bearnum	5
<i>he first created</i>	<i>for the sons of men</i>	
heofon to hrofe,	halig scyppend;	
<i>heaven as a roof,</i>	<i>holy creator;</i>	
þa middangeard	moncynnes weard,	
<i>then middle-earth</i>	<i>mankind's guardian</i>	
ece drihten,	æfter teode	
<i>the eternal lord</i>	<i>afterwards made</i>	
firim foldan,	frea ælmihtig.	
<i>for the men of the earth</i>	<i>lord almighty</i>	

**Appendix I: The Story of Caedmon in Book Four (Ch. 29)
of
*Bede's Ecclesiastical History*¹**

There was in this abbess's monastery [i.e. Hild's monastery at Whitby/Streanaeshalch] a certain brother, particularly remarkable for the grace of God, who was wont to make pious and religious verses, so that whatever was interpreted to him out of Scripture, he soon afterward put the same into poetical expressions of much sweetness and humility, in English, which was his native language. By his verses the minds of many were often excited to despise the world, and to aspire to heaven. Others after him attempted, in the English nation, to compose religious poems, but none could ever compare with him, for he did not learn the art of poetry from men, but from God; for which reason he never could compose any trivial or vain poem, but only those which relate to religion suited his religious tongue; for having lived in a secular habit till he was well advanced in years, he had never learned anything of versifying; for which reason being sometimes at entertainments, when it was agreed for the sake of mirth that all present should sing in their turns, when he saw the instrument come towards him, he rose up from table and returned home.

¹ Translation taken from <http://www.csun.edu/~sk36711/WWW/Common%20Files/bede.htm>

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Having done so at a certain time, and gone out of the house where the entertainment was, to the stable, where he had to take care of the horses that night, he there composed himself to rest at the proper time; a person appeared to him in his sleep, and saluting him by his name, said, "Caedmon, sing some song to me." He answered, "I cannot sing; for that was the reason why I left the entertainment, and retired to this place because I could not sing." The other who talked to him, replied, "However, you shall sing." "What shall I sing?" rejoined he. "Sing the beginning of created beings," said the other. Hereupon he presently began to sing verses to the praise of God, which he had never heard, the purport whereof was thus:

We are now to praise the Maker of the heavenly kingdom, the power of the Creator and his counsel, the deeds of the Father of glory. How He, being the eternal God, became the author of all miracles, who first, as almighty preserver of the human race, created heaven for the sons of men as the roof of the house, and next the earth.

This is the sense, but not the words in order as he sang them in his sleep; for verses, though never so well composed, cannot be literally translated out of one language into another, without losing much of their beauty and loftiness. Awaking from his sleep, he remembered all that he had sung in his dream, and soon added much more to the same effect in verse worthy of the Deity.

In the morning he came to the steward, his superior, and having acquainted him with the gift he had received, was conducted to the abbess, by whom he was ordered, in the presence of many learned men, to tell his dream, and repeat the verses, that they might all give their judgment what it was, and whence his verse proceeded. They all concluded, that heavenly grace had been conferred on him by our Lord. They expounded to him a passage in holy writ, either historical, or doctrinal, ordering him, if he could, to put the same into verse. Having undertaken it, he went away, and returning the next morning, gave it to them composed in most excellent verse; whereupon the abbess, embracing the grace of God in the man, instructed him to quit the secular habit, and take upon him the monastic life; which being accordingly done, she associated him to the rest of the brethren in her monastery, and ordered that he should be taught the whole series of sacred history. Thus Caedmon, keeping in mind all he heard, and as it were chewing the cud, converted the same into most harmonious verse; and sweetly repeating the same, made his masters in their turn his hearers. He sang the creation of the world, the origin of man, and all the history of Genesis: and made many verses on the departure of the children of Israel out of Egypt, and their entering into the land of promise, with many other histories from holy writ; the incarnation, passion, resurrection of our Lord, and his ascension into heaven; the coming of the Holy Ghost, and the preaching of the apostles; also the terror of future judgment, the horror of the pains of hell, and the delights of heaven; besides many more about the Divine benefits and judgments, by which he endeavoured to turn away all men from the love of vice, and to excite in them the love of, and application to, good actions; for he was a very religious man, humbly submissive to regular discipline, but full of zeal against those who behaved themselves otherwise; for which reason he ended his life happily.