# Ancient English prose

The earliest English prose work is the ***law code*** of ***King Aethelberht I of Kent***. It was written in the very end of 6th century. The 7th and 8th century prose was practical in its character so a lot of laws and wills date back to this period.

The history of literature of this period is closely connected with ***Bede*** (673-735). This famous monk was probably the greatest teacher and the best-known man of letters and scholar in all contemporary Europe. He is to have translated the ***Gospel of St.John*** into Saxon, but the translation is lost. He wrote in Latin on a vast range of subjects from natural science to grammar and history. His most important work is the ***Ecclesiastical History*** of the English People, which is really a history of England from Julius Caesar’s invasion to 731. According to it we find out that Bede could relate things simply and well. But during much of this period conditions were unfavorable to writing and literacy in England declined sharply between 800 and the reign of King Alfred and then again after about 990.

The deeds and thoughts of ***Alfred*** (849-901), king of the West Saxons, remain a strong moral influence on the world. Posterity rightly gave him the surname of “the Great”, as he is one of the comparatively few great men of all time. He led a vigorous program to translate into English “certain books that are necessary for all men to know”. His ill health and the wars with the Danes did not keep him from trying to educate his people or from earning the title, “father of English prose”. Although most of his works are translations from the Latin, yet he has left the stamp of his originality. For example he re-casted a Latin work on history and geography written in the 5th century by ***Orosius***. Alfred the Great omitted some parts, changed others, added some interviews so this book is known as Alfred’s Orosius now.

Alfred also translated ***Pastoral Rule*** in order to show the clergy how to teach and care for their flocks. Alfred was fond of people and tried to examine their souls on his works. For example, he wrote: “Let us love the man but hate his sins“. His revision of the legal code, known as Alfred’s ***Laws***, shows his moral aim. Alfred also produced a work on moral philosophy, by altering and amending the ***De Consolatione Philosophie*** of Boethius. In simplicity and moral power, some of Alfred’s original matter in this volume was not surpassed by any English writer for several hundred years.

Alfred's interest in the history of his people is evidenced, in the stimulus he apparently gave to the recording of it in systematic fashion. ***The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*** was probably originated in Alfred’s reign. This is the first history of any branch of the Teutonic people in their own tongue. From annals already existing and known Latin sources, a compiler put together (about 891) an account of previous English history from the age of Julius Caesar. Outstanding events falling in Alfred's reign were told "with breadth and detail. This original version of the so-called Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was sent to a number of centres of learning and there carried forward as official supplements were circulated for addition to it. Local materials were also used. The oldest surviving version, closest to Alfred's original project, is the Parker manuscript (thus named because it was once in the possession of Archbishop Parker). The Chronicle has come down to us in several different texts. According as it was compiled or copied at different monasteries. The entries, relating to earlier events were copied from Bede’s Ecclesiastical History and from other Latin authorities. The Chronicle contains chiefly those events which each year impressed the clerical compilers as the most important in the history of the nation. This work is a fountainhead to which writers of the history of those times must turn. Sometimes the narrative is extremely vivid. For example the excellence of the portraiture of William the Conqueror is evident.

The Benedictine reform of the mid-10th century brought about a period of lively literary activity***. Aethelwold***, bishop of Winchester and one of the leaders of the reform, translated the ***rule of St.Benedict***. But the greatest and most prolific writer of this period was his pupil ***Aelfric***. This abbot followed Alfred’s example in writing native English prose. His chief works are his ***Homilies***, a series of sermons, and ***The Lives of Saints***. Although much of his writing is a compilation or a translation from the Latin Fathers, it is often remarkably vigorous in expression. To modern readers the most interesting of Aelfric’s writings is his ***Colloquium***, designed to teach Latin in the monastery of Winchester. The pupils were required to learn the Latin transformation of his dialogues in the Anglo-Saxon vernacular. Some of this dialogues are today valuable illustrations of the social and industrial life of the time.

***Wolfsan*** (died 1023) was a contemporary and friend of Aelfric. Among (the homilies ascribed to him, the most famous and most eloquent is an address to the people of England on the evils and calamities of his times. Wolfsan of course regarded these quite simply as punishments (for moral transgressions. Wulfstan's intense feeling and his mastery of oratorical style raise his ***Sermon to the English*** above the more conventional ones of the time warning about an imminent end of the world.

So by the end of ancient period English had been established as a literary language with a polish and versatility unequalled among European vernaculars.