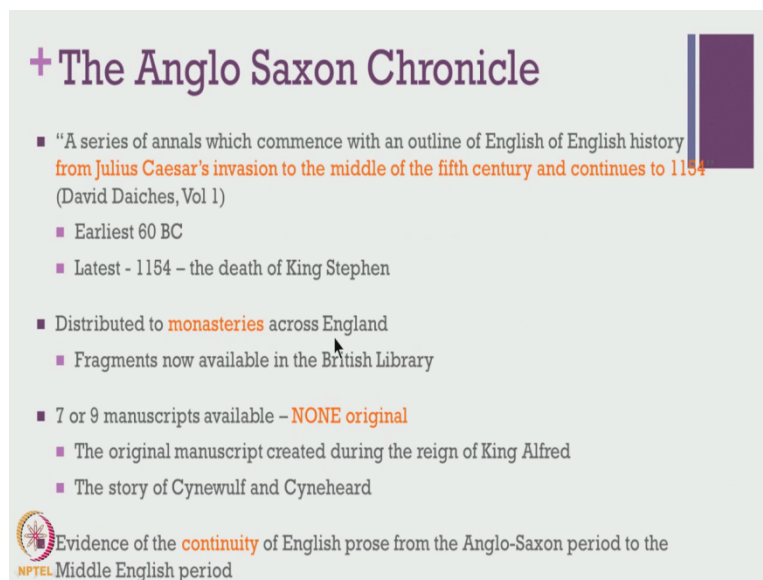


History of English Language and Literature
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Lecture No 1C
Middle English Period-England before Chaucer

Hello everyone, welcome to today's session of the course The History of English language and Literature. In continuation with the previous lecture, we begin looking at the Middle English period and we begin with lecture with this understanding that the Middle English period cannot be constructed in a single seamless continuer. It needs to be divided at least into two parts; the time before Chaucer and the period after Chaucer. If you have noticed in the title itself today's lecture is has got a subtitle "England before Chaucer".


So we begin with this inherent understanding that Chaucer is perhaps the most determinant figure in classifying Middle English into two and also perhaps the most important literary figure and cultural figure in the whole of a Middle English period. However, in today's lecture we look at the period before Chaucer trying to locate the Middle English period in a more holistic sense looking at the other literary influences which began to shape Middle English language and Middle English literature even before the arrival of Chaucer.

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+ The Anglo Saxon Chronicle

- "A series of annals which commence with an outline of English of English history from Julius Caesar's invasion to the middle of the fifth century and continues to 1154 (David Daiches, Vol 1)"
 - Earliest 60 BC
 - Latest - 1154 - the death of King Stephen
- Distributed to monasteries across England
 - Fragments now available in the British Library
- 7 or 9 manuscripts available - NONE original
 - The original manuscript created during the reign of King Alfred
 - The story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard

 Evidence of the continuity of English prose from the Anglo-Saxon period to the Middle English period

So which is this period that we classify as Middle English? The exact dates are difficult to be stated because there is no exact date or a year in which Anglo-Saxon period or the old English period came to an end and the Middle English period began. But however for political convenience it is easier to note down 1066 or the year of Norman Conquest as the

beginning of and the opening moment of Middle English period because politically that was the time when the Anglo-Saxon dominance came to an end and the Normans took over England.

And around the same time significant changes came to be imparted into English language, so in that sense 1066 is one convenient date which can mark the inaugural moment of Middle English period. And also around 1100 it is generally considered that English began to assume an identity of its own, it began to lose its Germanic old English Germanic inflections and the current form in which we know English began to emerge and evolve from the 1100 onwards. So the language that we see during a Middle English period it is not old English, it is not the modern contemporary English either, it is a form of a blend of old English and Norman English, in that sense some historians even called the language of this period as an in between language.

But English during this time becomes more comprehensible and the literatures are and the literature of this period is easier to identify with than with that of the old English text. And roughly as we noted earlier, the Middle English is from the 12th to the 15th century. In today's session we will be looking only at the period till the beginning of Chaucer. At this point it is also important to be stated that some historians consider Chaucer as a real starting point of English literature.

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+ Milestones

- 1066 - Norman Conquest
- 1215 - Magna Carta
- Around 1250 - French begins to lose its prominence
- 1337-1453 - The Hundred Years War
- 1362 - The Statute of Pleading
 - "henceforth all proceedings in the law courts should be in English instead of French"
- The Black Death
- The emergence of the Middle Class

Holy Crusades

England outgrows the hostility between the native population and the invaders

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So in some sense that the works that we talk about in today's lecture, they are not of supreme importance in terms of literary analysis and literary criticism, but they only have a historical

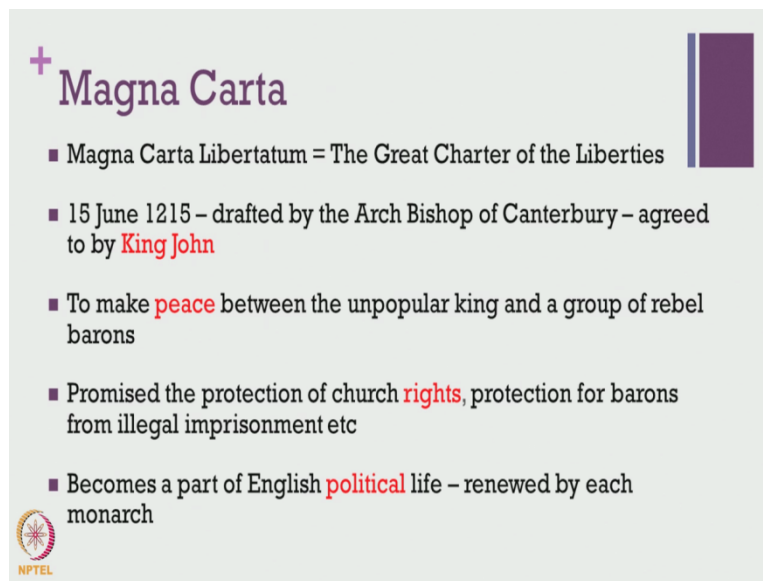
kind of interest in situating the events that led to the emergence of Chaucer as the most important literary figure. With this understanding we move on to look at the major milestones of the Middle English period. 1066 is obviously the year of the Norman Conquest and by 1215 we have a very politically defining moment which produced the Magna Carta about which we will be hearing a little more about shortly.

And around 1250 it is said that the French begins to lose its prominence to various other socio-political events some of which we will be taking a look at in the later sessions. And it is also characterized by the 100 years war which lasted 1337 to 1453, the details of which we shall be taking a look at when we talk about Chaucer's England. And 1362 marks a very important year in terms of the prominence that English language acquires, it is the year of Statute of Pleading, which ordered that henceforth all proceedings in the law courts should be in English instead of French. This is also characterized by Black Death, the bubonic plague which affected not just Britain but also many parts of Europe.

And this is also significantly the era which saw the emergence of the Middle classes a very prominent figure. And it is important to note that Europe was also undergoing radical changes during the Middle English period and this was the time of the Holy Crusades as well, but we do find that England had participated only minimally in the Holy Crusades. But it is however, the literature of longing the literature of love and about the beloved who is left behind who is yawning for the soldier who is out at the war front, all of these themes get built into the literature of the times because of the influence of the whole Holy Crusades as well.


It was also politically and religiously quite significant, but however since the discussions on the Holy Crusades are beyond the scope of our course, we shall just leave it at that. And also to be highlighted is the point that around this period England also outgrows the hostility between the native population and the invaders who were Norman French. And in 1066 when the Norman French invaded Anglo-Saxon, there was a growing hostility for quite a long time, but by the end of the Middle English period we find that it is no longer about the foreign influences, it is no longer about fighting among themselves, but it is more about consolidating themselves as a nation and as a single linguistic unit.

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+ Magna Carta

- Magna Carta Libertatum = The Great Charter of the Liberties
- 15 June 1215 – drafted by the Arch Bishop of Canterbury – agreed to by **King John**
- To make **peace** between the unpopular king and a group of rebel barons
- Promised the protection of church **rights**, protection for barons from illegal imprisonment etc
- Becomes a part of English **political** life – renewed by each monarch

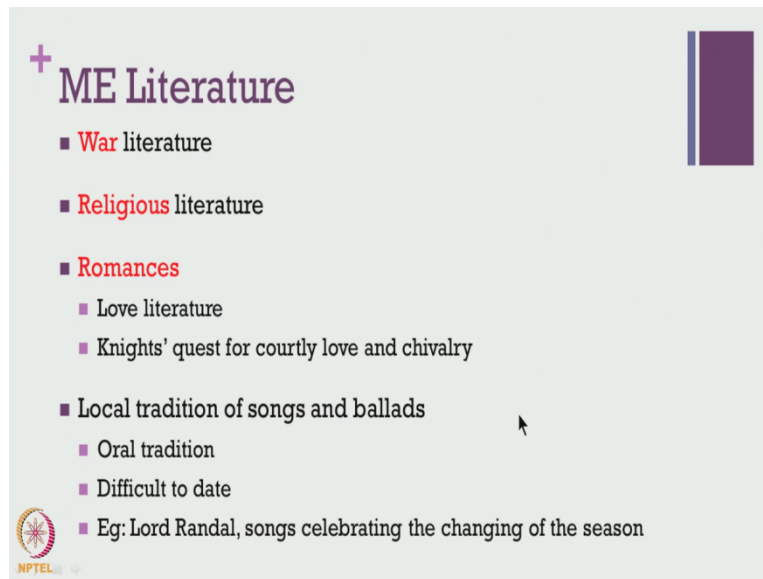
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And let us take a quick look at what this even Magna Carta is, this is important because this was very politically significant event that began to mark the ways in which England began to shape itself as a nation and also even at a later point of time when England was talking about rights and various ways in which it could negotiate between the rulers and the ruled Magna Carta was a very determining factor. So this was the great charter of the liberties as many of us know about. And this was signed on 15 June 1215, it was drafted by the Arch Bishop of Canterbury and was agreed to by King John was the ruler of England then.

And this was in fact as a result of a growing rebellion from the barons and this was assigned to make peace between highly and popular King John and group of rebel barons. So in that sense, it is one of the earliest political negotiations that had taken place and this also had lot of implications for the commoners because it promises the protection of the church rights, it also involved the protection of barons from illegal imprisonment so on and so forth. So it also ensured that the king could not act according to his wills and fantasies, but he also had to put in place certain principles and certain and ensure that certain rights are available to the subjects to the other rulers so on and so forth.

And Magna Carta is supremely important and we choose to discuss this in this lecture because it became a part of English political life. And we begin to see that the literature of the times also reflected this kind of new freedom and the new secular ambience, which was getting generated in England and Magna Carta was incidentally renewed by each monarch one after the other, so in that sense it assumes supreme political and civil importance.

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Now coming back to our main topic on Middle English literature, Middle English literature was a little more varied compared to the Old English literature, we noted that Old English literature was mostly about war and about religion and about the trials of daily life but with the Middle English period we move little ahead it is certainly war literature occupies major certainly war literature continues to occupy a major part of literary writings, there is also religious literature in place. But in addition to this we find a new kind of literature emerging which could be classified as romances we need to understand romance in a rather broad sense since it is not just about love literature, it is also about a Knight and their quest for courtly love and the values of chivalry that they stood for.

So in that sense, romance literature was mostly about the lives of knights and kind of adventures that they embarked upon, so it was not the romance has not yet got reduced into love life between just two ordinary people, so alongside we also find this local tradition of songs and ballads emerging. We do not have much evidence about the kind of songs and ballads that existed during that time but mostly it was also transmitted through this oral tradition. And it is also difficult to date these ballads due to the same reasons, some are even of the opinion that these ballads were prominent even during the Old English period and they were just transmitted through this oral means from one generation to the other.

And some of the important and the notable ballads which were orally transmitted even after the Middle English period were the songs which later came to be known as the song of Lord Randal and some of the songs that celebrated the changing of the season. So in this lecture, we shall not be discussing much about this the oral tradition or the tradition of songs and

ballads we shall be focusing mostly on war literature, religious literature and the romances which prevailed during that time primarily because they were written down and they were not just based on the oral tradition.

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- Most works were 'anonymous'
- Books - very expensive
 - Manuscripts, copies
- Most writers lived in London
- London - gains predominance
 - (Norman capital)
- Oxford and Cambridge
 - cultural and linguistic affirmation
 - 1167, 1209

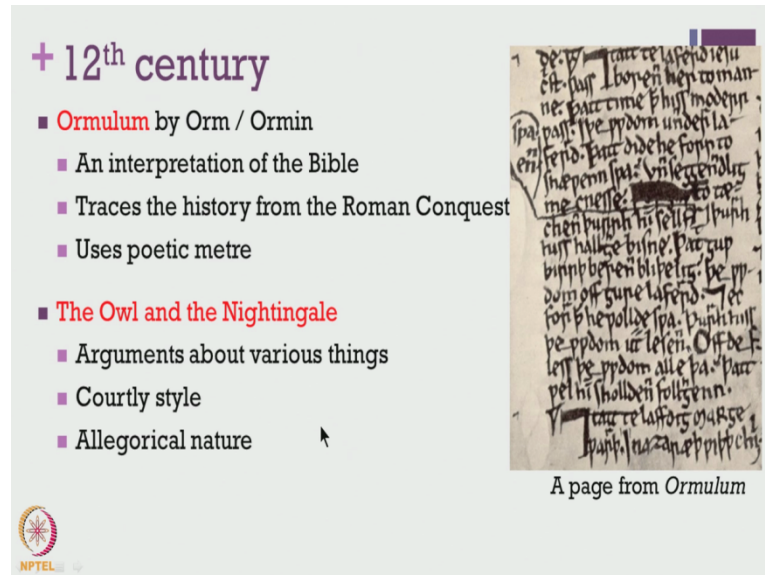
And another significant factor is that most of the works were anonymous, it is not yet become quite common for them to sign the works with their own names, so in that sense no one took any kind of the ownership to the works and all literary works were considered as almost as public property. And books were very expensive during that time printing had not yet come into place and it was mostly copied manuscripts were available that was a very expensive affair and not many could afford it. And London also emerges as a center of politics, center of trade and commerce and also of culture and writing.

And we also notice that most of the writers who gain prominence in Middle English period they were living in London, it was also because London was the Norman capital soon after the Norman Conquest, so since London was more happening than the other parts of the country many choose to migrate to London where they continued to build the more reputable literary career over there. And this also the time when Oxford and Cambridge begin to be founded and they also emerged as major centers of culture and language.

Oxford was founded in 1167 and Cambridge in 1209, so we begin to notice that these cultural artifacts and these institutions of repute were begin to be founded even as early as Middle English period. Let us now take a detail look at the various kinds of writings which were available during these centuries. We note that even when we take an entire century in hand,

we have maybe a couple of works worthwhile to talk about. so in that sense 12th century we have two major works Ormulum by Orm and another anonymous work The Owl and the Nightingale.

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+ 12th century

- **Ormulum** by Orm / Ormin
 - An interpretation of the Bible
 - Traces the history from the Roman Conquest
 - Uses poetic metre
- **The Owl and the Nightingale**
 - Arguments about various things
 - Courtly style
 - Allegorical nature

A page from Ormulum

The work Ormulum, it was more religious in nature it could be loosely translated as an interpretation of the bible, it was in that sense yet another attempt to bring bible and works of the bible closer to the common people. And this was also significant in a historical sense because it trace the history of the English from the Roman Conquest onwards. So in that sense this also through glimpses of the local life and the transitions from one ruler to the other. So historians continued to look at this work with a lot of interest.

And this was also the one of the first works one of the earliest works to use poetic meter and the other work “The Owl and the Nightingale” it was structured in a quite a narrative way and it included arguments about various things of philosophical nature things that concern daily life and even about more profound things related to life in general. So the arguments where structure in very courtly style and also it was more allegorical than many of the other works of that period, so apart from this two major works we do not have evidence for other kinds of literature that flourish during the time apart from the oral literature of those period.

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+ 13th century

- Layamon's *Brut* (1205)
 - Historiography of Britain in the form of a poem
 - First appearance of King Arthur
 - Linked older historical traditions with modern Englishness
 - The 'first voice in ME' – the use of English is less conscious, more colloquial, use of idioms and proverbs
- Wace's *Arthurian Chronicles*
- Popularization of Arthurian tales
 - French influence
- Romances – authors unknown
 - *King Horn*
 - *Havelok the Dane*

The Roman de la Rose
The Romance of the Rose
-
The most influential imported text of ME

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And in 13th century we also noticed that the literary output begins to look a little more productive little more prolific compared to the previous century. And Layamon's Brut which is arguably written in 1205 is perhaps the most important work other than the later works that came after the period of Chaucer. And this work was not purely literary in nature, this was in fact the historiography of Britain in the form of poem and this also draws attention to the fact that even history could be written in verse during those times because verse was easier for people to memorize, it also gave them a way to make oral transmission easier.

So verse did not have a kind of limitations that now we talk about because nowadays we know that predominantly any kind of historiography for it to be written in verse is quite an unthinkable feat. In that sense Layamon's Brut could be considered as very significant work which could blend in together elements of history and elements of poetry together. And this is also the work in which we find the first appearance of a King Arthur, we noted in one of the previous lectures that the legends of King Arthur is what made him more popular than the historical evidence of his own existence.

So we also find that Layamon's Brut tried to link older historical traditions with modern Englishness. So in that sense we find that the common people as well as in that sense we find that there is a lot we get to know about the old English period and about the culture of those times from Layamon's Brut. And many historians talk about Layamon's Brut as the first voice in Middle English especially in terms of language because in this work we find that the

use of English is less conscious it is more colloquial and there is more use of idioms and proverbs.

So in this sense, a more familiarity of the language could be find from the from Layamon's Brut onwards. And another significant work of this time is Wace's Arthurian Chronicles, he may began to note that king Arthur of the old English times, he assumes supreme importance during this period because we find him getting resurrected from all the other kinds of (()) (15:42) of history. And the time we also find the popularization of Arthurian tales from not just from England but also from France, we find a lot of French Ballads and French folktales talking about King Arthur's legends and many English writers also replicate that in their own writings in English.

And there were also these two romances of which there is historical evidence; King Horn and Havelok the Dane, the authors of which remain unknown. And the Roman de la Rose or The Romance of the rose is considered as a most influential imported text of Middle English period, this was written in French, this is said to have had a profound influence on writings in English and during the 13th century. It also has said to have laid the foundation for a particular kind of writings of romance to develop later in the 14th and 15th centuries as well.

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The slide features a purple plus sign icon in the top left corner. The main title is 'Geoffrey of Monmouth' in a purple serif font. Below the title is a list of five bullet points, each preceded by a purple square. The text of the bullet points is in a black serif font, with 'King Arthur' and 'Excalibur' highlighted in red. In the bottom left corner, there is a small circular logo with a red and white design, and the text 'NPTEL' below it. On the right side of the slide, there is a vertical purple bar.

+ Geoffrey of Monmouth

- 1100-1155 (around)
- *Historia Regum Britanniae* – *The History of the Kings of Britain*
- Highly inaccurate!
- However, popularised King Arthur
- Made 'Excalibur' popular
- The legendary sword of King Arthur

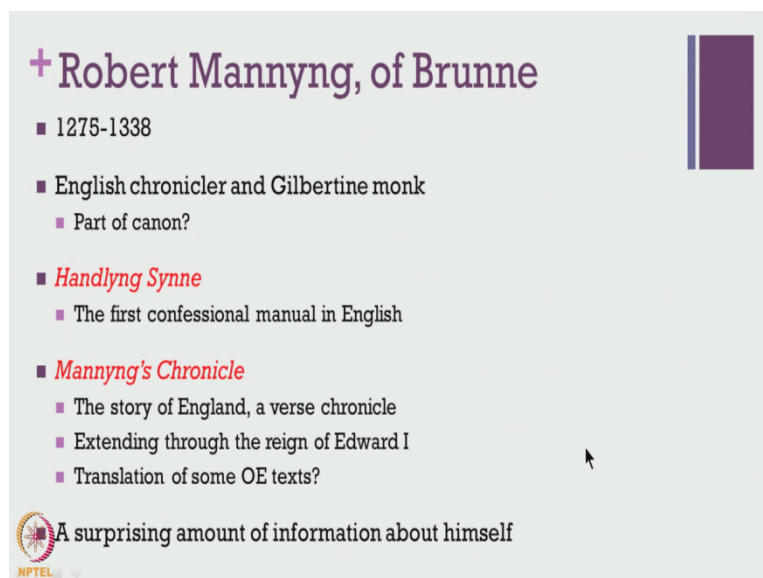
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Another very important figure of the Middle English period is that of Geoffrey of Monmouth, he said to have lived around 1100's; the exact dates are not yet known. And the most important and notable work of Geoffrey of Monmouth is that of The history of the kings of Britain and though this work was highly popular and many historians even rely on this work

for getting a glimpse of the past the cultural and social religious past, it is also said to be highly inaccurate.

But what makes this work quite distinct as a fact that he is the one who popularized the legends of King Arthur. So Geoffrey of Monmouth we recalled even in one of the earliest sessions that he is actually he lives through the legends recreated by Geoffrey of Monmouth in fact many of the things, many of the anecdotes attributed to king Arthur is from the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth. And he is also the one who made Excalibur popular, Excalibur being the legendary sword of King Arthur who which is said to have had some magical powers as well.

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Slide content:

- † Robert Mannyng, of Brunne
 - 1275-1338
 - English chronicler and Gilbertine monk
 - Part of canon?
 - *Handlyng Synne*
 - The first confessional manual in English
 - *Mannyng's Chronicle*
 - The story of England, a verse chronicle
 - Extending through the reign of Edward I
 - Translation of some OE texts?

A surprising amount of information about himself

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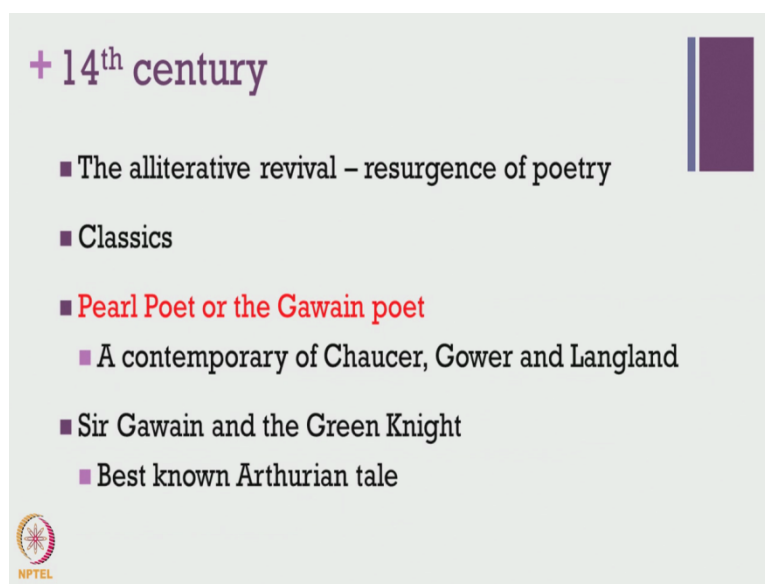
So there are lots of these stories about the Excalibur of King Arthur from the Middle English period onwards and we know that Excalibur has come to signify a lot of things about the cultural heritage of England even in the contemporary. And the other notable figure is that of Robert Mannyng of Brunne he was also a monk as well as a chronicler and it is also said that he was perhaps part of the canon during the times that he lived. And there are two works of notable repute Handlyng Synne and Mannyng's chronicle and Handlyng Synne is considered to be the first confessional manual in English literature.

The nature of this confession could also be due to the religious tendencies that he had. And Mannyng's Chronicle was yet another work based on history and again this was the story of England written in verse and it is said that it is extended through the reign of Edward the first. And some even feel that Mannyng's chronicle was not very original that he had translated

some myths of many old English text put together in that sense perhaps it is more less a compilation or a translation of old English text as well.

And what makes Mannyng quite different from the others is that in his own works we find lot of biographical information about himself and this is a quite surprising because many writers were not used to talking about themselves, we also noted that many writers did not even bother to sign with their own names after the work was completed. In that sense, Mannyng shows commendable insight and talking about himself his own life and his own surroundings so that you know it becomes a useful historical tract in the later times.

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The slide features a light grey background with a purple vertical bar on the right side. The title '+ 14th century' is written in purple at the top left. Below it is a bulleted list of key literary events and works. The text 'NPTEL' is visible in the bottom left corner of the slide area.

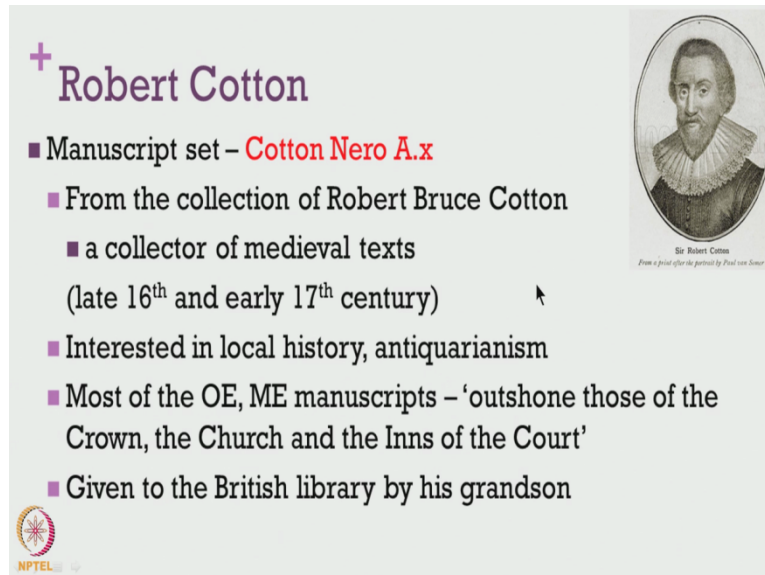
- The alliterative revival – resurgence of poetry
- Classics
- Pearl Poet or the Gawain poet
 - A contemporary of Chaucer, Gower and Langland
- Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
 - Best known Arthurian tale

in the 14th century we find ourselves moving closer towards the life and work of Chaucer and this is that period which is known as the period of the alliterative revival. Alliterative revival as the term signifies it is resurgence of poetry with particular kinds of alliterations and rhymes built into it. And we do not find England going back from this period onwards; we do find that there is an increased interest and an increased attention being provided to poetry and other forms of literature. This is also the time when England prepares itself to produce greater classics, shows more attention and more interest in the other classics of Greek and Latin.

And the notable feature of this time is a presence of a particular anonymous poet who has come to be known as the Pearl poet or the Gawain poet based on a set of poems known as the pearl poems or the based on the major work known as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. This is also the best known Arthurian tale from the Middle English times and pearl poet or the Gawain poet he is also said to be a contemporary of Chaucer, Gower and Langland about

whom we will hear more about in the next session and this century was more important because a sense of literature or sense of national unity sense of national literature is getting emerged from this period onwards.


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+ Robert Cotton

- Manuscript set – **Cotton Nero A.x**
 - From the collection of Robert Bruce Cotton
 - a collector of medieval texts (late 16th and early 17th century)
 - Interested in local history, antiquarianism
 - Most of the OE, ME manuscripts – ‘outshone those of the Crown, the Church and the Inns of the Court’
 - Given to the British library by his grandson

Sir Robert Cotton
From a print after the portrait by Paul van Somer



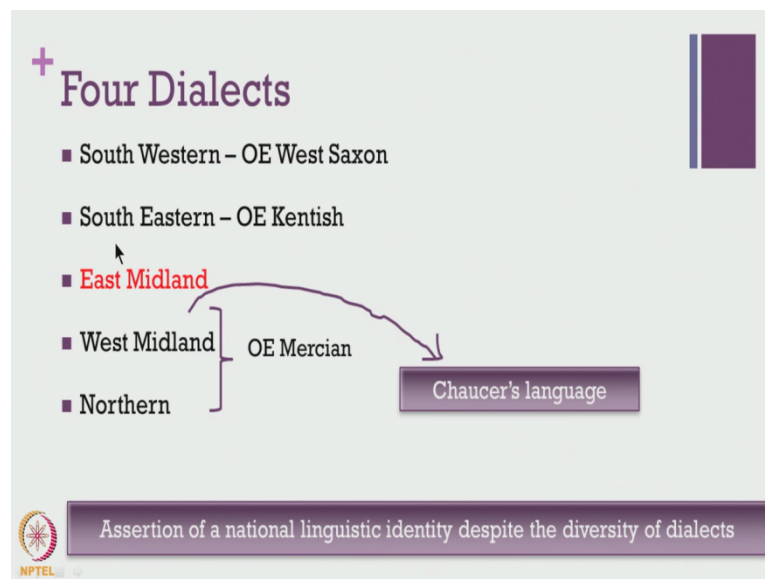
How has it become possible for us to access these old English and Middle English text, perhaps one should be very thankful to this major figure Robert Cotton, and most of these works that we talk about whether it is an old English text like Beowulf or Middle English text like Gawain and the Green knight all these manuscripts has become accessible because they are present in this particular set known as Cotton Nero A.x and this was from a personal collection of this visionary figure known as Robert Bruce Cotton, he was a quite a successful and wealthy person who lived in the later 16th and earlier 17th century who should utmost interest as a collector of medieval text, he had a lot of interest in local history and he was also noted antiquarian of his times.

So we find him collecting most of the original old English and Middle English manuscripts which were available and he is also said to have credited to have preserved them so that they did not go extinct in any way. In fact, about his manuscripts historians feel that his collection outshone those of the crown, the church and the Inns of the court. This is very important because as we have noted earlier most of the manuscripts and most of the literary collection was available either with the court or with the church, the monasteries where in charge of it most of the times or it was with the Inns of the court which primarily comprise with the 4 institutions which together constitute the judiciary of those times.

So Robert Cotton is said to have had a collection which outshone all of these collections put together and one should be very thankful to Robert Cotton for showing this kind of a passion to preserve these extended text. And his grandson at a later point was quite kind enough to donate this entire set to the British library where it is still preserved. So in many sense we also begin to note that the Middle English and the old English period is important not just because of the efforts of the people who lived just during the time, but also because of the interest that posterity began to shown in their works and also because of the sense of national heritage which became all the more important in the later centuries.

So preserving an old English text or a Middle English text was not just about preserving literature, but it was also about preserving a heritage which had been handed out. So in that sense one remains internally grateful to many figures such as Robert Cotton who perhaps did not lived in the said age, but contributed to the age in many different ways than the one who were living in these ages could ever even begin to think of or comprehend.

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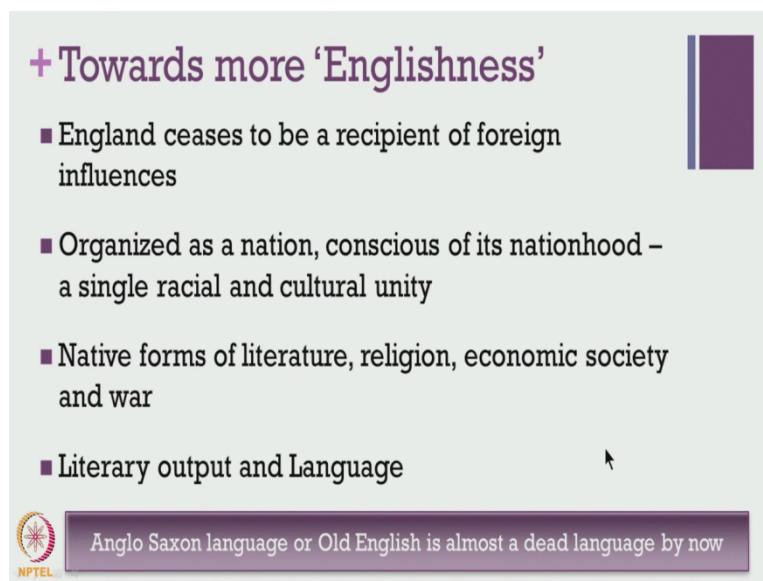
Coming back to some linguistic aspects, there were four major dialects during this time; south western it had emerged from the old English West Saxon, south eastern which emerged from the old English Kentish, East Midland and west midland and also Northern, so all of these dialects were in some form a continuation from the old English language from the old English dialects. We also note that the two dialects east midland and west midland, they had together emerged from the old English Mercian and in this context the east midland dialect assumes more importance because this was a one who became Chaucer's language and since East Midland was spoken more in London and also it became the major literary vehicle of

Chaucer East Midland dialect is a one from which contemporary English set has emerged as well.

So this is also this 5th kind known as the northern dialect and we find that almost all of these dialects were quite different from one another it is said that even if they lived just 50 miles apart and if they spoke these different dialects they were not comprehensible to one another. So these dialects were almost like 5 different languages but and each writer was quite free to use which ever dialect that he or she preferred. And the spellings and the grammars differed on the individual kind of uses and it all depended on which spelling each author preferred to use.

In some form this is said to have got most standardized with Chaucer writing entirely in the east midland dialect and also giving it a sense of reputation and more acceptance because it was mostly spoken in the city of London. In terms of dialectical differences, England begins to assert itself as a single national linguistic identity whose diversity does not affect in any way the evolution of language or the emergence of English into a single unit.

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+ Towards more 'Englishness'

- England ceases to be a recipient of foreign influences
- Organized as a nation, conscious of its nationhood – a single racial and cultural unity
- Native forms of literature, religion, economic society and war
- Literary output and Language

Anglo Saxon language or Old English is almost a dead language by now

NPTEL

And towards the time of Chaucer we also find England moving towards more Englishness and this is a kind of definition and the classification which is stated on to define rest of the centuries as well. And from the this period, from the end of the 14th century and from the end of the 13th century onwards, we find England also ceasing to be a recipient of foreign influences than Norman French influence had considerable got mitigated. England is more about native forces and the native influences, it is more organized as a nation, more conscious

of her nationhood and also they had emerged to into a single racial cultural unity not taking into account the many things that differentiated them in terms of (())(26:19) identities or in terms of linguistic and dialectical differences.

And also at this point of time we find that though in England continues to receive lot of influences from the neighboring countries and also from all kinds of cultural and linguistic imports from other languages, England begins to form her own kind of literature her own kind of religion begins to practice her own economics society and also develops their own methods of war. So that makes a nation quite distinguishable in many ways and we find the literature of the times beginning to reflect all of these elements in them.

And with the advent of Chaucer which we will begin to notice in the next session, we also notice that these native influences are more pronounced, there is a more English kind of writing which begins to emerge with about which we can discuss more about without relating them with the other kind of influences. And this literary output and language of the Middle English times we find it getting more consolidated towards the end of the Middle English period and with the advent of Chaucer. And at this point it is very important to note that Anglo-Saxon language or the old English language is almost like a dead foreign language now.

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+ Chaucer: (1340-1400)
the 'real' starting point

"The first of our really National Poets":
Hudson

"Chaucer is the Father of English poetry":
Dryden

"The Opening Moment of English Literature"

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And we do not find language going back to the roots of Anglo-Saxon tongue from this time onwards the Norman French influence stays on, there are about 10,000 words borrowed words from French which becomes part of English language in many ways England acquires

a new stature by the time Chaucer comes to the scene. So let us wind up this session by giving a brief prelude towards the next session which is going to be about the age of Chaucer, many historians feel that Chaucer is the real starting point of English literature and so much so that whatever we discuss in today's lecture is completely overshadowed by the presence of Chaucer.

And with the advent of Chaucer many later historians feel that he is the first of our really national poets, some consider him as the father of English poetry and he is generally considered as the opening moment of the English literature proper. So with this we come to an end to this today's session and we have noted how the old English period and the Middle English period were quite important and significant in shaping the laying the foundations of English literature and shaping how literature would be in the forthcoming centuries. So we look forward to seeing you in the next session with the age of Chaucer, thank you for listening.