



Anglo-Saxon literature

John Earle

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Purchase of this book includes free trial access to www.million-books.com where you can read more than a million books for free. This is an OCR edition with typos. Excerpt from book: CHAPTER III. THE HEATHEN PERIOD. For many a petty king ere Arthur came ruled in this isle, and ever waging war each upon other, wasted all the land ; and still from time to time the heathen host swarm'd over seas, and harried what was left. And so there grew great tracts of wilderness, wherein the beast was ever more and more, but man was less and less, till Arthur came. For first Aurelius lived and fought and died, and after him king Uther fought and died, but either fail'd to make the kingdom one. And after these king Arthur for a space, and thro' the puissance of his Table round, drew all their petty principdoms under him, their king and head, and made a realm, and reign'd. Alfred Tennyson, textit{The Coming of Arthur. For the first hundred and fifty years of their life in this island our ancestors were heathens. This time has no place in the English memory through any legendary or literary tradition that is associated with the Saxons. The legends of this time which retain a place in literature are not Saxon but British. This is the era of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. There is no book or piece of Saxon literature that can in any substantial sense be ascribed to the heathen period; for I cannot go with those who assign this high antiquity to the " Beowulf." There is a book that claims to be a product of this time, but it is neither Saxon nor heathen. It bears the name of Gildas, a Briton, and it is a fervently Christian book, written in Latin. It has two parts, one being a Lament of the Ruin of Britain, the other a Denunciation of the conduct of her princes. Its genuineness has been questioned, and it has also been ably defended.¹ The strong point in favour of the book is, that it existed and was reputed genui...

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