

Ancient Literature

Ancient Literature – Quick Reference Notes

1. Definition & Scope

- **Ancient literature:** Written works created before the fall of the Western Roman Empire (c. 5th century CE) and, in many traditions, up to the early medieval period.
 - Encompasses **myth, epic, lyric, drama, religious texts, historiography, philosophy, and legal codes**.
 - Primary media: **clay tablets, papyrus scrolls, stone inscriptions, parchment codices**.
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2. Major Civilizations & Their Canonical Works

Civilization	Language(s)	Key Genres	Representative Works	Approx. Dates
Mesopotamia	Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian	Epic, myth, law, omen literature	<i>Epic of Gilgamesh</i> , <i>Enuma Elish</i> , <i>Code of Hammurabi</i>	3rd mill.–1st ? mill. BCE
Ancient Egypt	Egyptian (Hieroglyphic, Demotic)	Pyramid texts, funerary lit., wisdom literature	<i>The Book of the Dead</i> , <i>Instruction of Ptahhotep</i>	2600? BCE–4th? cent. CE
Ancient India	Sanskrit, Prakrit, Tamil	Epic, dharma? shastra, poetry, drama	<i>Rig?Veda</i> , <i>Mah?bh?rata</i> , <i>R?m?yana</i> , <i>N??ya??stra</i>	1500? BCE–5th? cent. CE
Ancient China	Classical Chinese	Poetry, philosophy, historiography	<i>Sh?j?ng</i> , <i>Analects</i> , <i>Dao De Jing</i> , <i>Records of the Grand Historian</i>	11th? cent.–2nd? cent. CE
Hebrew/Israelite	Biblical Hebrew	Religious narrative, law, poetry	<i>Tanakh</i> (Torah, Prophets, Writings)	12th–2nd? cent. BCE
Classical Greece	Greek	Epic, lyric, tragedy, philosophy	<i>Iliad</i> , <i>Odyssey</i> , <i>Sappho</i> , <i>Aeschylus</i> , <i>Plato</i>	8th–4th? cent. BCE

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Hellenistic & Roman	Greek, Latin	Epic, satire, history, rhetoric	<i>Metamorphoses</i> (Ovid), <i>Aeneid</i> (Virgil), <i>Historiae</i> (Tacitus)	3rd? cent.–5th? cent.?CE
Mesoamerica	Classical Nahuatl, Maya glyphs	Myth, codices, poetry	<i>Popol Vuh</i> , <i>Dresden Codex</i>	3rd? cent.–16th? cent.?CE
Other Regions	Various (e.g., Old Persian, Coptic)	Inscriptions, religious texts	<i>Avesta</i> , <i>Nag Hammadi Library</i>	1st?mill.–5th?cent.?CE

3. Core Genres & Their Features

3.1 Epic

- **Structure:** Long narrative, heroic protagonist, divine intervention, journey/quest.
- **Function:** Cultural identity, moral exemplars, legitimizing rulers.
- **Examples:** *Gilgamesh* (Mesopotamia), *Iliad* & *Odyssey* (Greece), *Mahābhārata* (India).

3.2 Lyric & Poetry

- **Form:** Short, personal voice; often performed with music.
- **Themes**