

The Legend of John Barleycorn Timeline

How far back in time does the legend of John Barleycorn go? The answer depends on whether you look at the written historical record, its medieval poetic precursors, or its mythological origins.

1. The Written Record (16th–17th Century)

- **First Direct Name (1624):** The character **Sir John Barleycorn** first appears under that exact name in a printed London broadside ballad titled *“A Pleasant New Ballad to sing Evening and morn, Of the Bloody murder of Sir John Barley-corn”*.
- **The Precursor, *Allan-a-Maut* (Pre-1568):** Before the name "John Barleycorn" was used, the same exact allegory existed in Scottish tradition. A Scots poem titled *“Quhy Sowld Nocht Allane Honorit Be”* (featuring **Allan-a-Maut**, or *Alan of the Malt*) was compiled in the **Bannatyne Manuscript of 1568**, showing the tradition was well established by the mid-16th century.

2. Anglo-Saxon Paganism (Early Middle Ages, c. 500–1000 AD)

Folklorists often trace the themes of the legend back much further into Anglo-Saxon pagan traditions:

- **Beowa (Barley):** In early Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies and myth, there is a legendary figure named **Beowa** (whose name literally translates to *barley* or *grain*). • Beowa was associated with agriculture, threshing, and the seasonal cycle of growth, death, and renewal—the exact thematic core of the John Barleycorn ballad.

3. Agrarian Rituals and "Corn King" Myth (Pre-Christian Antiquity)

If viewed as an allegory for seasonal rebirth and sacrifice rather than just a specific song, its origins stretch into **pre-historic agrarian traditions**:

- **Seasonal Rebirth:** The core narrative—where a character is buried in the earth, re-emerges in the spring, is cut down/harvested, "tortured" (malting/brewed), and then rises to conquer his killers through intoxication—mirrors agricultural cycle metaphors that are as old as cereal farming itself.
- **The "Corn King":** In *The Golden Bough*, folklorist Sir James George Frazer linked John Barleycorn to ancient pagan vegetation gods and sacrificial "Corn Kings" (similar to Osiris or Tammuz) sacrificed to ensure soil fertility.

Summary Timeline Era Manifestation

Pre-Christian Antiquity

Pagan fertility rites and agrarian allegories of harvest/rebirth.

Early Middle Ages

Anglo-Saxon figure **Beowa** (*barley*) personifying grain.

16th Century

Scottish folk tradition of **Allan-a-Maut** (*Bannatyne MS*, 1568).

17th Century

First explicit appearance of "**Sir John Barleycorn**" in print (1624).

18th Century

Robert Burns writes his definitive version (1782), immortalizing the ballad in modern culture.