

Beowulf

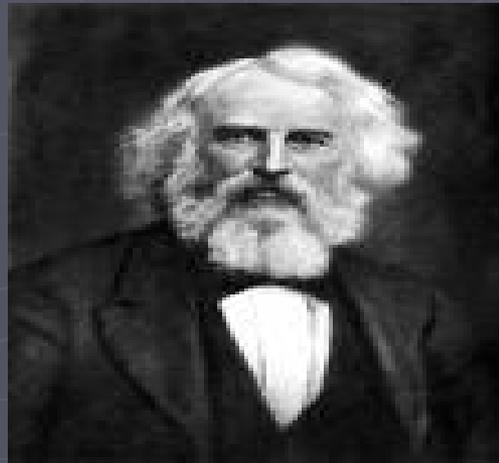


--Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

One of the most important remains of Anglo-Saxon literature is the epic poem *Beowulf*. Its age is unknown; but it comes from a very distant and hoar antiquity...It is like a piece of ancient armor; rusty and battered, and yet strong.

What is it about *Beowulf* that moved the American poet Longfellow to compare it to “a piece of ancient armor; rusty and battered, and yet strong”?

- ▶ Perhaps it is that the poet fused early Germanic history, legends, mythology, and ideals with Christian faith and values to create an enduring work of art that inspires as it entertains.
- ▶ Or perhaps it is that we still cherish many of the qualities that *Beowulf* embodies—among them courage, loyalty, and generosity.





Historical Perspective



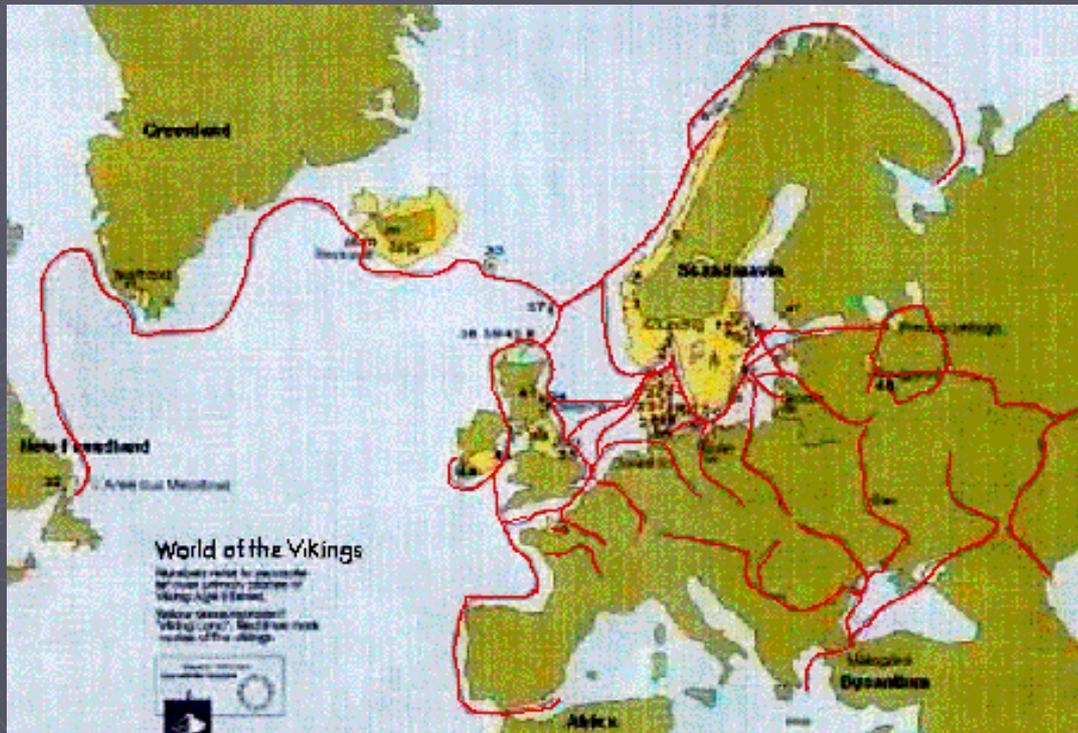
- ▶ Ancient civilizations, some of which were quite advanced, had arisen in other parts of the world well before the Anglo-Saxon period.
- ▶ For example, the great pyramids had already been built along the Nile.
- ▶ City states had risen and fallen in Mesopotamia.
- ▶ Persia had already united many lands.
- ▶ China was a unified, powerful empire.
- ▶ The beginnings of democracy had already come and gone in Greece.
- ▶ By contrast, Britain was a green, dark, isolated, sleepy island where civilization and empire had yet to bloom.

England's Beginnings

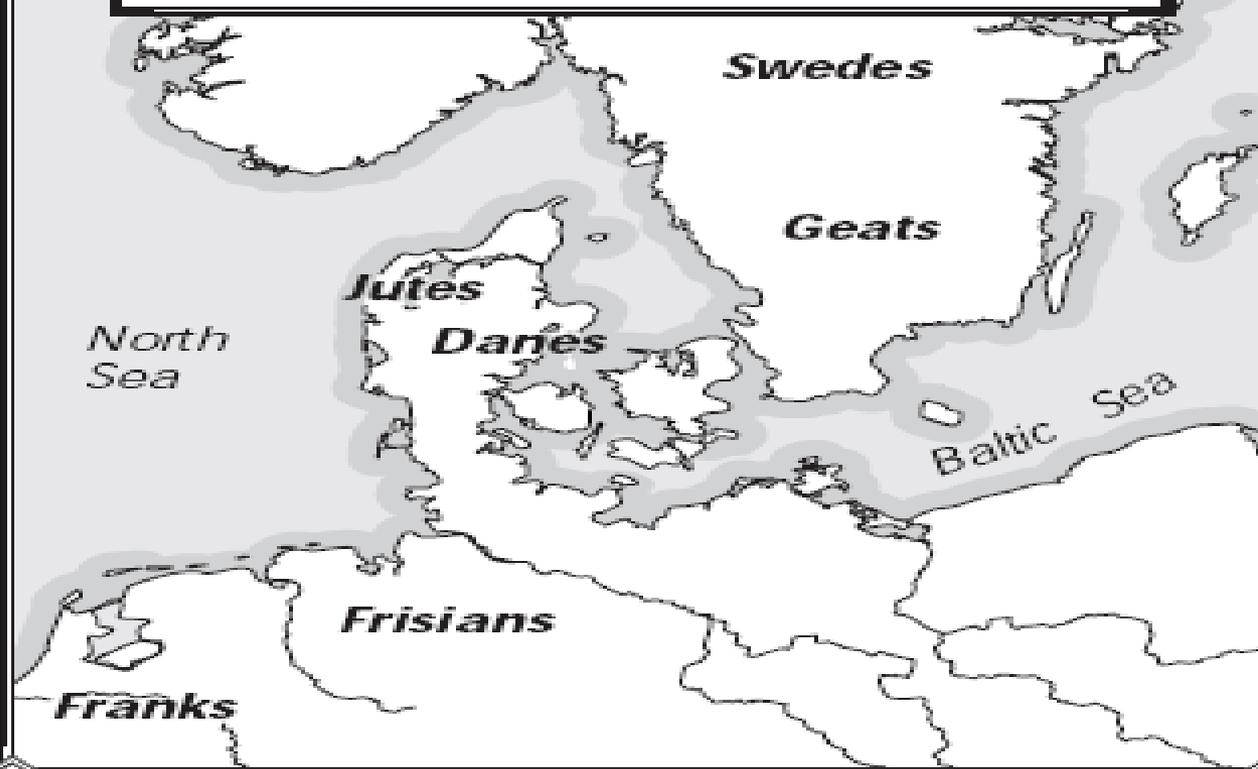
- ▶ Beowulf is an English poem, yet the setting is northern Europe in what is now Denmark and Sweden.
- ▶ The events described probably took place at the same time as invasions of England by Scandinavian tribes from Denmark in the 5th & 6th centuries.

- ▶ After the first foothold in c. 440, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes inhabited most of England by the middle 6th century.
- ▶ Although Beowulf appears to be a fictional character, Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle and king, is an historical character who was killed in battle c. 521.

- ▶ The story includes Beowulf's early adventures in Denmark through his succession to Hygelac's throne after the death of both Hygelac and the son whom Beowulf helped to succeed him.
- ▶ Thus, Beowulf's story occurs in the homelands about the same time the first Englishmen were migrating to England and establishing themselves as a dominant culture.



Early Denmark and Sweden During the Time of Beowulf



Meet the Geats, Danes, and Swedes of *Beowulf*

By the time that Beowulf was written down, Germanic tribes from Scandinavia and elsewhere in northern Europe had been invading England's shores for centuries. The principal human characters in Beowulf hail from three Scandinavian tribes: the Geats, the Danes, and the Swedes.



The Geats

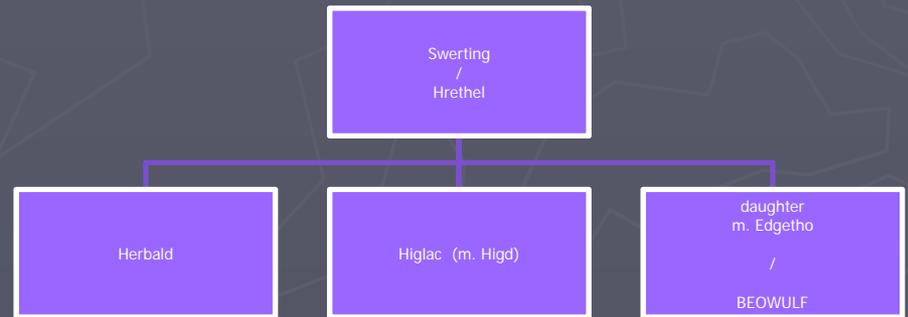
The Geats

/

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/

Hrethel



What is the date of Beowulf?

- ▶ It is not known exactly, but it tells of people who lived in Denmark or southern Sweden between 550 and 600 A.D.
- ▶ The tribes who made the poem came with the Angles, Saxons, and the Jutes to conquer Britain.
- ▶ Finally, in Britain, or England, between 800 and 900 A.D. someone wrote Beowulf down in the West-Saxon dialect.
- ▶ About 1000 A.D. someone transcribed a single copy of the manuscript, probably a monk from Northumbria.

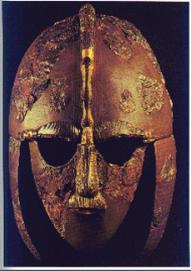
Pagan and Christian Elements in Beowulf



- ▶ The monasteries served as centers of learning in this period, just as they would in the Middle Ages.
- ▶ In England the cultural and spiritual influence of monasteries existed right alongside the older Anglo-Saxon religion.
- ▶ The monasteries preserved not only the Latin and Greek classics but also some of the works by popular literature, such as *Beowulf*.



- ▶ The original copy of *Beowulf* has been lost. A copy is now safely guarded in the British Museum.
- ▶ A single copy survived Henry VIII's destruction of all the monasteries and the great libraries.
- ▶ It has two distinct handwritings and the edges are burned and ragged as the result of a fire in 1731.



Why is this poem important to us?

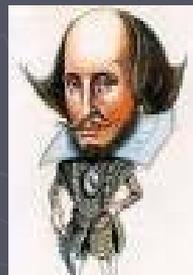
- ▶ It is the sole survivor of a great epic tradition.
- ▶ It is great poetry.
- ▶ It is an archaeological relic which is most interesting.
- ▶ As a linguistic document, it's full of revelations.
- ▶ It gives us information about Old English social life and politics.



Language

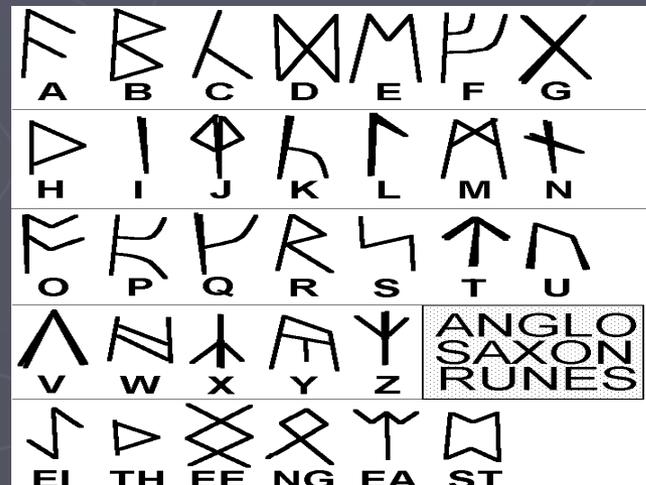


- ▶ English is divided into three periods: Old English (ca.449-1100), Middle English (ca. 1100-1500), and Modern English (ca. 1500-).
- ▶ Old English is sometimes known as Anglo-Saxon.
- ▶ The English language changed from Old English to Middle English in 1100 and from Middle English to Modern English in 1500. These shifts took place over hundreds of years.
- ▶ It is important to realize that the wide-spread notion of a standard language or even of standardized spelling are modern notions made possible by the printing press.



Language Evolution continued

Old English makes use of unfamiliar letters, most of which derive from the runic alphabet, an alphabet used by the Germanic peoples.





The Features of an Epic



- ▶ Takes the form of a long narrative poem about a quest, told in formal, elevated language
- ▶ Narrates the exploits of a larger-than-life hero who embodies the values of a particular culture
- ▶ Begins with a statement of subject and theme and, sometimes, a prayer to a deity
- ▶ Deals with events on a large scale
- ▶ Uses many of the conventions of oral storytelling, such as repetition, sound effects, figures of speech, and stock epithets
- ▶ Often includes gods and goddesses as characters
- ▶ Mixes myth, legend, and history [Holt 55]

Other Examples of Epics

- ▶ *Gilgamesh* from Mesopotamia



- ▶ The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from Greece

- ▶ The *Aeneid* by Virgil from Rome



- ▶ *Paradise Lost* by Milton



Why is the poem an epic?

It is the first great work of the English national literature—the mythical and literary record of a formative stage of English civilization. It is also an epic of the heroic sources of English culture.



What characteristics of the heroic epic do we find in *Beowulf*?

- ▶ Tells of the traditions of the people
- ▶ Is a long, dignified narrative poem
- ▶ Tells of the actions of the hero
- ▶ Has definite verse
- ▶ The characters are of noble birth.





Anglo-Saxon Elements



- ▶ Stern, barbarous life
- ▶ Religious feeling, fatalism of Anglo-Saxon
- ▶ Mixtures of savagery, sentiment, and nobility
- ▶ Love of nature and especially being influenced by the sea
- ▶ Common sense, power of endurance, seriousness of thought
- ▶ Emotional, imaginative, sensitive.



Also—the ideals are

- ▶ Love of glory
- ▶ Allegiance to lord or king
- ▶ Reverence for women
- ▶ Love of personal freedom
- ▶ Open-handed hospitality of lord tothane
- ▶ Honoring truth
- ▶ Repression of too much sentiment



Four episodes of *Beowulf*

- ▶ The purging of Herot, the Danish mead-hall of Hrothgar, the king, from Grendel, the giant
- ▶ The killing of Grendel's mother down in her watery lair
- ▶ The triumphant return of the hero to his homeland
- ▶ After fifty years of peace, the hero-king saves his own people by slaying the fire-drake, but he dies in this attempt.



Beowulf as Verse Form

- ▶ Four stressed syllables with three syllables alliterated /'(')/'
- ▶ Alliteration means repetition of the same letter sound, usually the first letter of the accented syllable. "Ship, its timbers icy, waiting" (three s's – one c)
- ▶ The verse does not rhyme
- ▶ Lines have a pause in the middle, called a caesura, or are end-stopped (definite pause at the end of the line)
- ▶ Rhythm is free.
- ▶ Use of parallelism – ideas expressed in the same form or repeated for emphasis
- ▶ Use of kennings – two words separated by a hyphen as sea-horse, a ship; whale's road, the sea; sky-candle, the sun
- ▶ Gnostic sentences – used for emphasis as "There was a king!"
- ▶ Written to be accompanied by a harp with a person singing—meant to be heard, not read.

Beowulf is...

a long, dignified narrative poem of 3,182 lines telling the story in a serious way of a hero and his great deeds trying to save people in danger

