



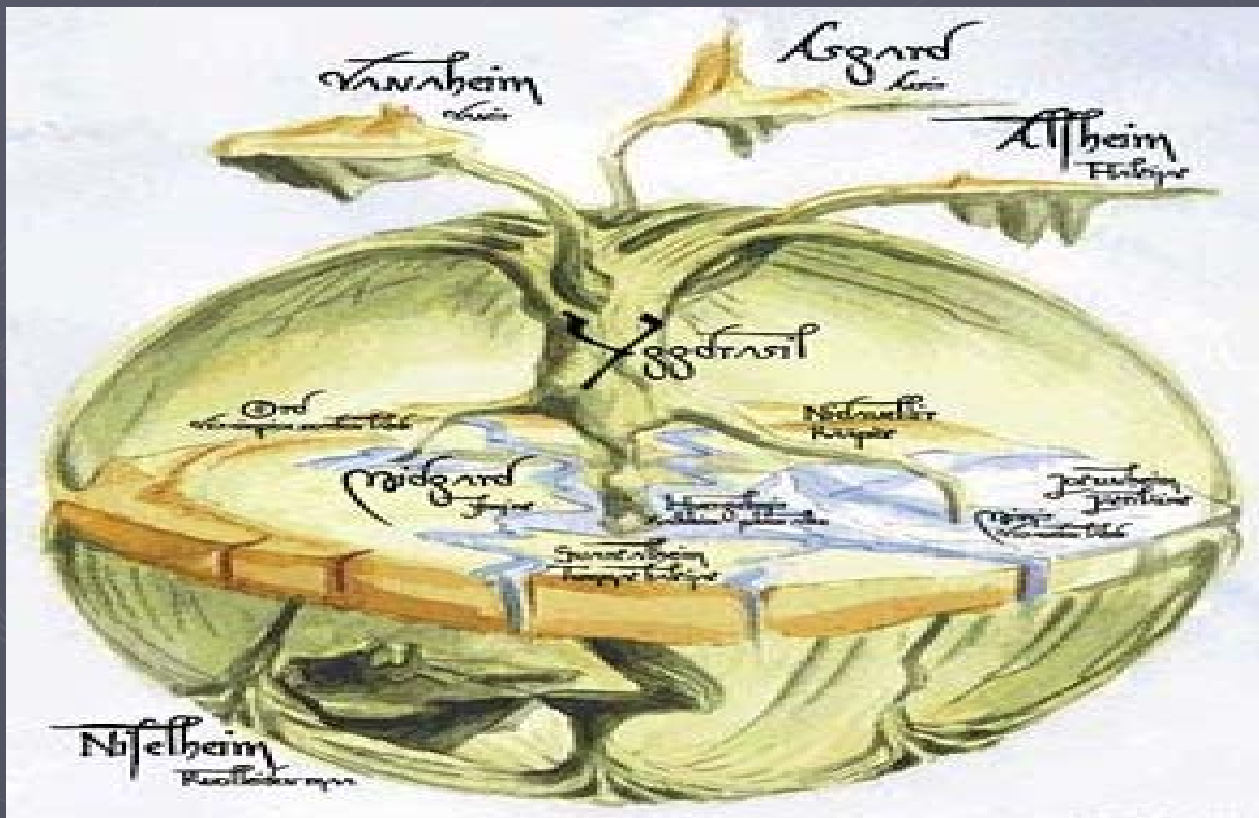
## What is the source of *Beowulf*?

It is a version of the widespread "Bear's Son Tale." There are over two hundred different versions, ranging from Iceland to Japan. The American Indians knew it. The hero is usually brought up by bears or as a child of bears, comparable to the story of Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome. This hero's name would be "Beewulf", a kenning for "Bear." Again the hero fights with his hands, having great strength so he can crush his enemies



# What was the Anglo-Saxon religion?

It was a dark fatalistic religion influenced by Norse Myth





# What figures in Norse mythology influenced ethics?

- ▶ Anglo-Saxon ethics had much in common with Norse/Scandinavian mythology.
- ▶ Woden (Odin) represents death, poetry, magic
- ▶ Woden's Day becomes Wednesday.





# Origin of poetry

- ▶ In Norse myth poetry was originally a sacred mead that came into possession of a giant (Kvasir) but was stolen by Odin, who assumed the shape of an eagle and carried it to the world of the gods
- ▶ Poetry was called Odin's theft or Kvasir's Blood

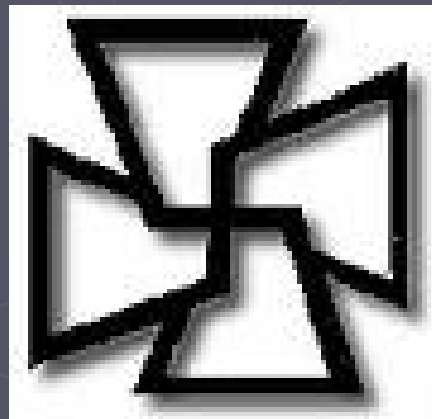




# Norse Myth continued



- ▶ Thunor (Thor) symbolized lightening and thunder. His symbol is the hammer and the twisted cross (swastika)
- ▶ Thursday comes from Thor's Day.











# Norse Myth continued

- ▶ Anglo-saxons believed that immortality or *lof* – *fame that survives death*– could be earned through heroic action.
- ▶ *The deity Wyrd (Norms) in Norse myth represents fate in life*



# Worldview

- ▶ An important element of the Anglo-Saxon worldview was the concept of fate (wyrd).
- ▶ Specifically, the Anglo-Saxons believed that a hero could postpone death through personal bravery but that fate eventually would win out.











# Norse Influence



- ▶ The dragon is the protector of the treasure; the fiery dragon is the personification of "death the devourer" and the guardian of the grave mound (where warriors' ashes & treasure lay)
- ▶ The dragon was the living embodiment of evil and death. [Danes sailed boats with prows carved in shape of dragons' heads and fangs]
- ▶ Jormungand, the Midgard Serpent, is the dragon of the Northlanders.
- ▶ The dragon is an archetypal figure that emerges from the bowels of the earth and dominates the air with its flames.
- ▶ Translator Seamus Heaney says that the dragon appears less a physical opponent than an embodiment of **wyrd**.



# Norse Myth & Grendel

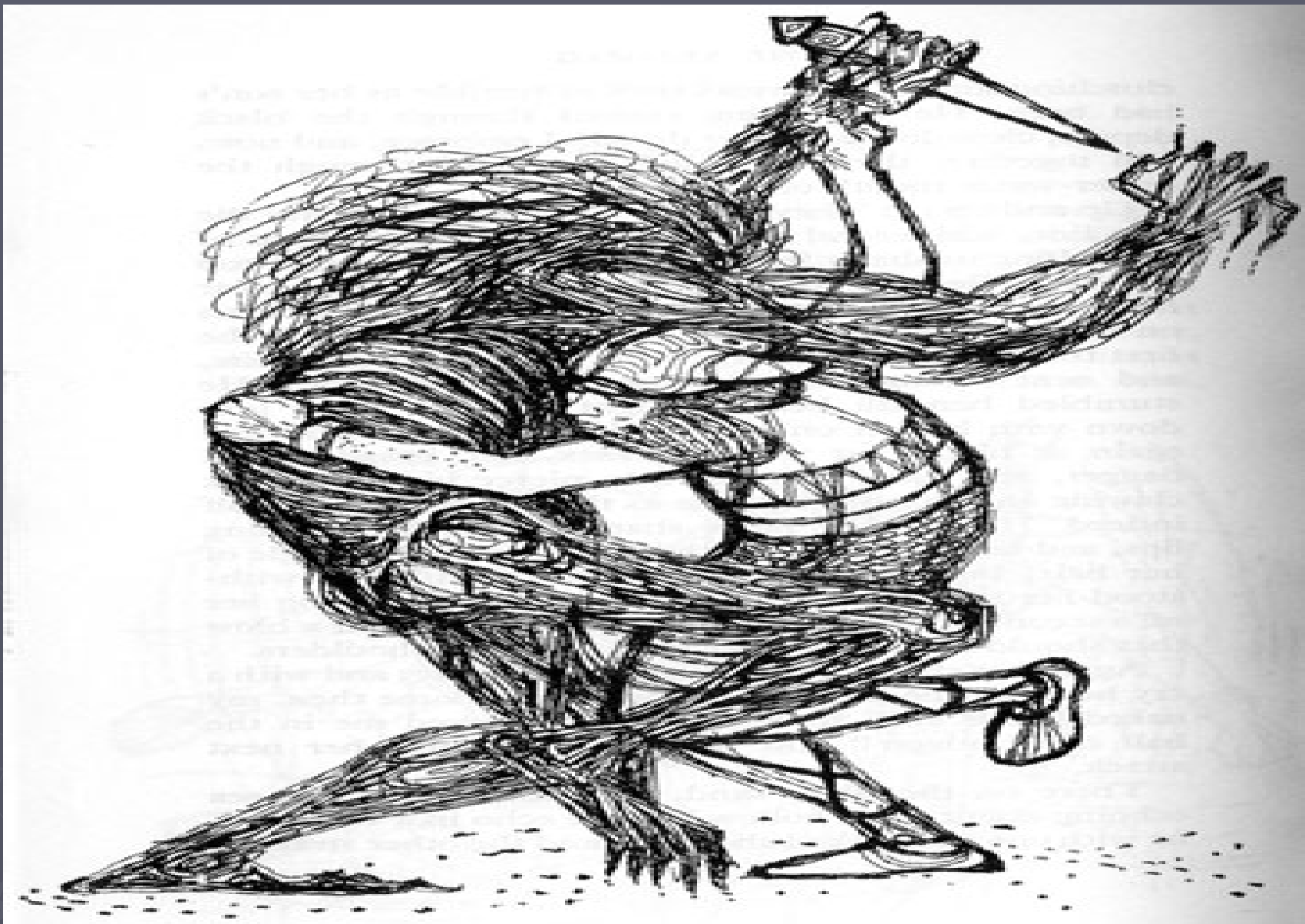


# Grendel's Origin





- ▶ Grendel's character has roots in Old Norse stories of the *draugar*, or dead men of supernatural strength who walked at night, spreading evil and terror. Often a *draugar* had a mother even more terrible than he — a *ketta* or she-cat.



# What earthly virtues did Anglo-Saxons value?

- ▶ Bravery
- ▶ Loyalty
- ▶ Generosity
- ▶ Friendship





# The Epic Hero

- ▶ The **epic hero** is the central figure in a long narrative that reflects the values and heroic ideals of a particular society. An epic is a quest story on a grand scale.
- ▶ Beowulf is ancient England's hero, but he is also an **archetype**, or perfect example, of an epic hero.
- ▶ The hero archetype in Beowulf is the dragon slayer, representing a besieged community facing evil forces that lurk in the cold darkness (Grendel).



# Beowulf, the epic hero

- ▶ Beowulf, like all epic heroes, possesses superior physical strength and supremely ethical
- ▶ He embodies the highest ideals of Anglo-Saxon culture. In his quest he must defeat monsters that embody dark, destructive powers. At the end of the quest, he is glorified by the people he has saved.



# The Oral Tradition



- ▶ To the anglo-saxon poetry was as important as fighting, hunting, & farming.
- ▶ The anglo-saxon bard was a honored member of society.
- ▶ The anglo-saxon communal hall, besides offering shelter and a place for council meetings, provided space for storytellers & their audience
- ▶ As in other parts of the ancient world (Homeric Greece), skilled story tellers, or bards [*rhapsodes*], sang of gods and heroes.
- ▶ The Irish *allamhs* were both historians and entertainers who preserved their culture's myths & legends. The Irish *shanachies*, the tellers of tales of history, were entrusted with 178 accounts.





# Story Tellers



- ▶ Other cultures have their traditional storytellers, too. These include Navajo singers, who recite stories in Blessingway ceremonies that last for days, and the Inuit of the far north, who use whalebone knives to trace scenes from their traditional stories in the snow and mud.
- ▶ All these storytellers preserve oral traditions and in the end influence the written literature of their people.

# The Anglo-Saxon Storyteller or Bard

- ▶ The Anglo-Saxons did not regard these bards – whom they called **scops (pronounced shop)** – as inferior to warriors.
- ▶ The poets sang to the strumming of a harp.
- ▶ As sources for their improvisational poetry, the storytellers had a rich supply of heroic tales that reflected the concerns of a people constantly under threat of war, disease, or old age.



# Beowulf, the text

Section Title	Section #s	Page #s
The Monster Grendel	1 - 3	21 - 24
The Arrival of the Hero	4 - 5	24 - 26
Unferth's Challenge	6 - 7	26 - 31
The Battle with Grendel	8 - 11	31 - 36
The Monster's Mother	12 - 13	36 - 38
The Final Battle	14 - 17	43 - 48

# Anglo-Saxon Concepts

The Anglo-Saxons had a custom called **wergild**, of paying compensation to the relatives of the people they murdered. If the murdered person was not related to the murderer, then this kind of payment was considered satisfactory by the relatives of the victim. No such way of making amends existed, however, for taking the life of one's own kin.

# Anglo-Saxon Concepts continued

According to the Anglo-Saxon code of the *comitatus*, warriors must defend their lord to the death. Some critics see the failure of Beowulf's men to come to his aid — a catastrophic breach of *comitatus* — as an ominous forecast of the demise of the Geats. In ll. 802 – 809 Beowulf wants to see the treasure to assure himself that he has provided for his people's welfare after he is gone. Dispensing treasure as a symbol of the loyalty between a king and his people, according to the Anglo-Saxon code, is *comitatus*.



# Anglo-Saxon Mead Hall



- ▶ Herot means "hart" or "stag." The hart was an Anglo-Saxon symbol of kinship.
- ▶ Archaeologists have confirmed that Herot was built of wood held together with iron bands. The gabled roof was overlaid with gold, and the floor was inlaid.
- ▶ The mead hall was a communal gathering place. Warriors gathered here to drink mead and celebrate victories. The community gathered here to hear ancient epic tales told by scops.
- ▶ In literature, the mead hall symbolizes safety, fellowship, and all that is good in humanity. The Anglo-Saxons lived in a dark, cold, often frightening world. The mead hall was a bright spot in this darkness.