



Anglo-Saxon
Literature,
Beowulf, and
The Seafarer

What is Old English?

- Germanic language introduced to the British Isles in the 5th century A.D.
- Spoken before the Norman Conquest in 1066 AD which introduced French as the language of the noble class.
- This language is the ancestor of the Modern English spoken today

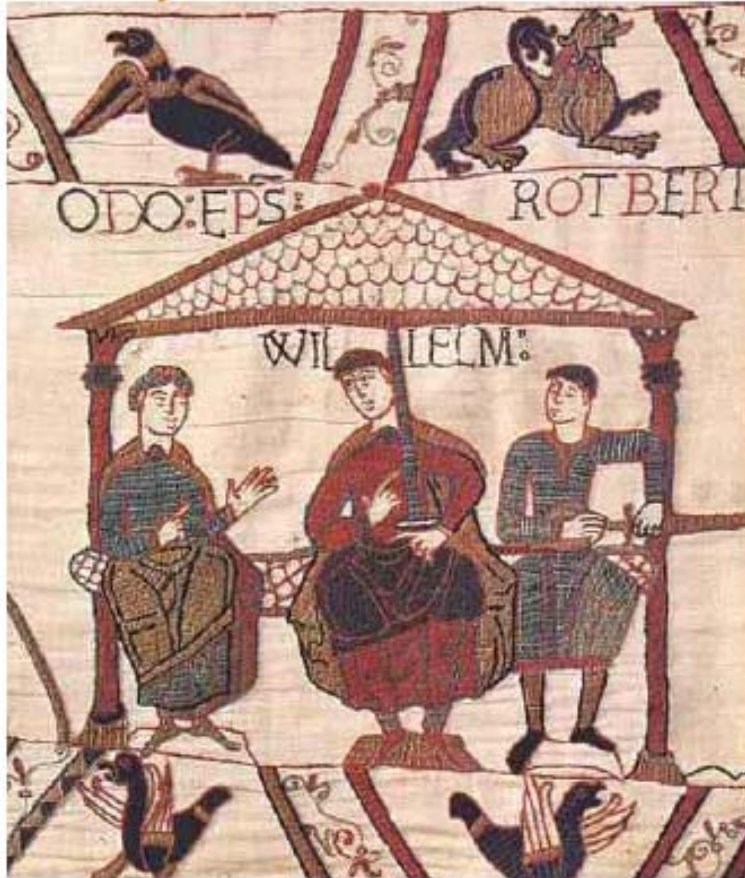
Where did Old English come from?

- After the Romans left Britain in 410 AD, the country was attacked beginning in 449 AD:

- Jutes (Jutland and Rhineland)
- Saxons (Germany)
- Angles (Denmark)
- Frisians (Netherlands)



Where did Old English come from?



- After the invasions and settlements, people began speaking a Germanic language later to be known as Old English.

- Use of the Old English dies out after the Battle of Hastings and the Norman conquest by William the Conqueror in 1066 which introduces French into the language.

What does Old English sound like?

- Old English sounds a lot like German or Scandinavian.

Lo, we of the Spear-Danes in the yore-days
Hwæt, we Gar-Dena // in geardagum

of the warrior-kings the glory have learned of,
ðeodcyninga // ðrym gerunon,

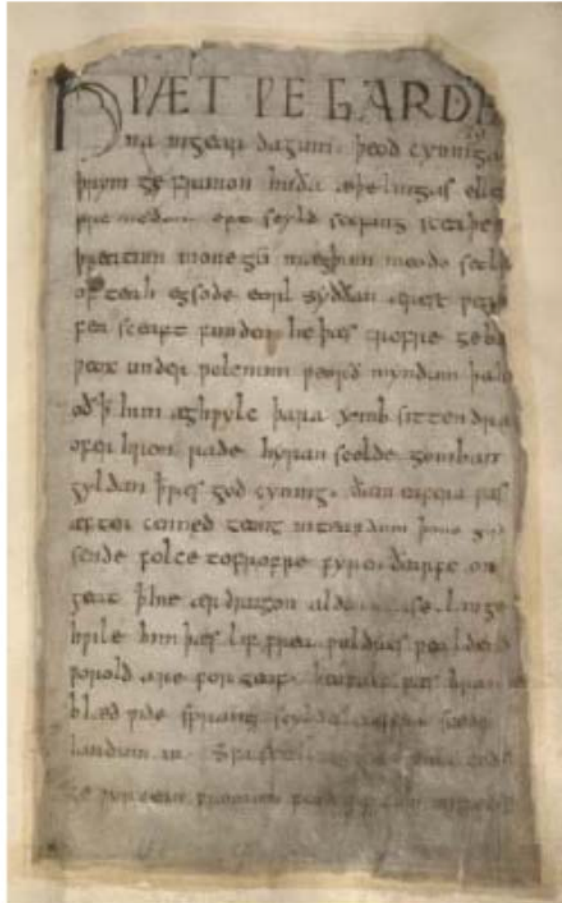
how the princes deeds of valor accomplished!
hu ða æðelingas // ellen fremedon!

Old English Literature: c. 680- 1066

- **658-680:** Caedmon's "Hymn"—earliest poem in English recorded in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (completed in 731). The first vernacular poem in English.
- **975ish:** "The Wanderer," "The Seafarer," and "The Wife's Lament"—elegies for the loss of one's lord and companions; loneliness, exile, and utter desolation.
- **1000:** (written down for first time) *Beowulf*—epic poem about Beowulf – Anglo-Saxon hero.

Literary Terms in Anglo-Saxon Literature

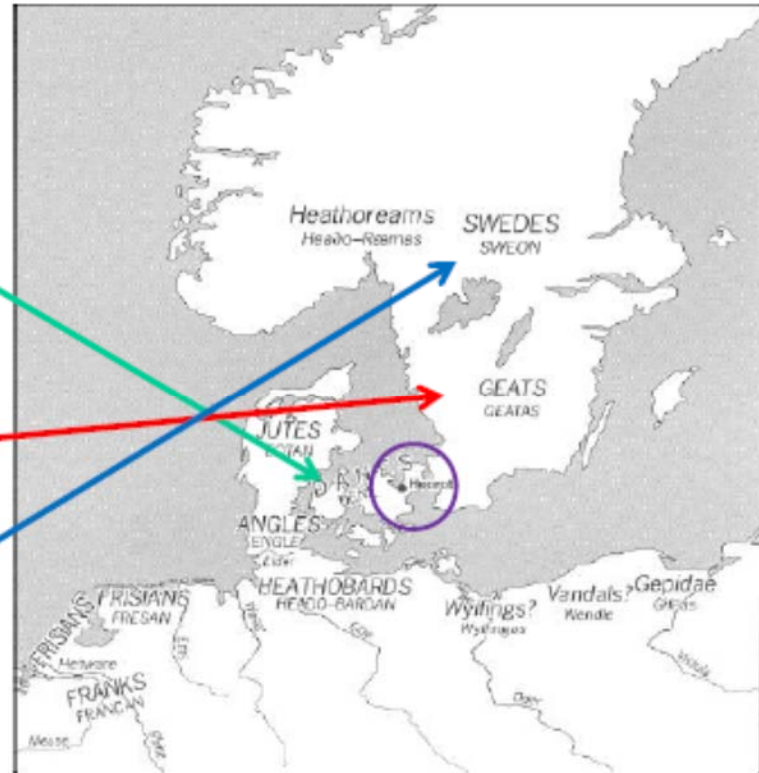
- **Alliteration**: Repetition of initial consonant sounds
- **kennings**: two-word metaphors used to replace a noun
- **Caesura**: a pause in speech or meter
- **Allusion**: a reference used in literature



- The manuscript from which modern scholars translate their versions of Beowulf was probably written about 1000 AD.
- The story itself had been passed down and spread in the oral form for centuries before it was ever written down.
- It is set in the 5th or 6th century Scandinavia. It was probably first composed around 750 AD.

The chief characters in *Beowulf* are Scandinavians:

- the Danes, who are attacked by Grendel and saved by Beowulf;
- the Geats, of whom Beowulf afterwards becomes king;
- the Swedes, whose conflicts with the Geats are recounted in passages in the later part of the poem.



Anglo-Saxon Wyrds to Know

- **Wyrd** – Germanic fatalism; acceptance of the inevitable.
- **Scop** – a traveling minstrel/bard
- **Wergild** – payment made to a family for the wrongful death of a person (man-money).
- **Friths** –objects of value that represent a tribe (cups, rings, torques, etc.).

Anglo-Saxon Wyrds to Know

- **Flytings** – battle speeches
- **Thegn** – a companion/servant/soldier of the king (thane).
- **Runes** – script used to write Old English before the introduction of the Latin alphabet.
- **Comitatus** – (Latin) strategic interweaving of family threads and tribal allegiances

Christianity vs. Anglo-Saxons

- Monks were the first to write down the poem – did they change things?
- Anglo-Saxons were newly introduced to Christianity at the time of the narrative.
- NOT a natural or comfortable religion for Anglo-Saxons
- Heroic codes compete with newer religious doctrines
 - Pride and Boasting vs. Modesty / Self-Abasement
 - Destroy enemies vs. Love thine Enemy
 - Gain treasure and fame vs. Shun earthly treasures for heavenly ones
 - Do deeds to protect self/family/lord vs. Altruism (good for good's sake)

Themes and Motifs

- The characters outside the male community are disruptive: monsters, women, etc.
- Nothing lasts; human relations are fraught with discord; all treasure comes laden with history.
- No human effort can change the course of *wyrd* or counter God's will.