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# BEOWULF

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# BEOWULF



*Supplementary material written by Frederic Will*  
*Series edited by Cynthia Brantley Johnson*

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Beowulf:* HARSH STRUGGLE AND QUIET GRACE

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*Beowulf* is one of the world's great works of imaginative literature, set in early Christian England in the years before the end of the first millennium—a world of harsh cold, darkness, heroic warfare, minstrelsy, death, and struggle. *Beowulf* remains a timeless classic a thousand years after its birth because it both brings that old English history to life in our own era and resonates with the timeless quality of all great stories. At its opening, the epic transports us into a land of mystery where a lamented king has died. At the end of the poem the story comes full circle: we see that Beowulf, who was a young hero in the first half of the poem, as an aged hero, as deeply human as was the king whose death opens the epic. Between the beginning and the end, of course, are some truly incredible adventures filled with gore, guts, horror, and heroism.

*Beowulf's* beautifully poetic, tragic treatment of the themes of aging and wisdom secures its place among the world's masterpieces. But, of course, this is not merely a

poem about aging but a prototypical hero story, filled with dramatic events and bloody struggles. The poem sustains its air of beautiful mystery, and its painful awareness of the struggling transience of human life, at a gripping level throughout the epic, whether we are pondering the solemnity of funeral rites or hunched in suspense in the middle of one of *Beowulf's* many exciting battles. This is true not only of the story itself, which moves from youth to age as our characters face an endless series of threats; it is also true at the level of the language—of the poetry itself. For *Beowulf* is filled with poetic language of great sophistication and beauty, so beautiful that it is audible even in its contemporary English translations. Reading these—and, perhaps, attempting the poem in its original language—we can see metrical, metaphoric, and stylistic subtleties that can only have flourished in a high civilization.

The civilization that produced *Beowulf* has deeply influenced our own. The heroic world of early Norse England, with its great halls, its dauntless seafarers, and its heroic codes of behavior, may seem very far removed from our own world. But this Anglo-Saxon culture formed the basis for the Northern European, Germanic, and, of course, English cultures that still live on in America today. The values codified in the Anglo-Saxon communities of the first millennium—honor, persistence, hard work, valor—have come to us through hundreds of years and countless generations and still inform our laws and lives today.

### **The Origins of *Beowulf***

No one knows who wrote *Beowulf*. The original manuscript may first have been written out shortly after the

year 1000, and that date may have been a good three hundred years after the creation of the poem itself. Scholars have proposed dates ranging from 675 to the early twelfth century for the creation of the poem, based on criteria including the original inception of the poetic material, the first recitation of the material, or the point at which diverse strands of an oral tradition were stitched together. Adding to the uncertainty of this dating process is the fact that we do not know whether the poem *Beowulf* was a completely oral composition or was part written. If the author of the poem was a monk or other educated writer attached to an Anglo-Saxon monastery, which is one mainstream theory, we can push the date of composition of the poem much later than the year 700. If the author was a bard, a scop to the Norse, the creation of something like our present *Beowulf* may have occurred in the late seventh or early eighth century.

## **Historical and Literary Context of *Beowulf***

### *Manuscript and Publication*

*Beowulf* survived the vicissitudes of history in a single manuscript belonging to the private collection of Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631). After Cotton's collection was damaged by fire in 1731, *Beowulf* was moved to the British Museum, where it resides today. To look at this manuscript is to shiver with the realization that our cultural history is fragile: the margins of the text are visibly charred by the flames that so nearly deprived us entirely of this precious vestige of early English culture.

The first publicly available edition of *Beowulf* was published in 1815. Its first translation into modern En-

glish dates from 1837. Unlike *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1342–1400), *Beowulf* is a relatively recent part of the canon of English literature. Some scholars have linked the rising literary status of *Beowulf* to a British yearning for ancient national roots as its ever expanding empire brought it into contact with the powerful, and extremely old, civilizations of the East.

### *Language and Form*

The first dimension of *Beowulf's* literary history is its language. *Beowulf* was composed in Late West Saxon, the standard vernacular used for writing down Anglo-Saxon poetry. This is an early Germanic form of English, before it had blended with Latin and French in the course of the Norman invasions of the eleventh century. *Beowulf* is written in alliterative verse, in which each line is divided into two metrical halves, with two stressed syllables in each half. At least one, and usually both, of the stressed syllables in the first half line alliterate (have the same beginning sound) with the first stressed word of the second half line. Recited to the harp in a fashion often described in the poem of *Beowulf*, this poetry must have been powerful and mesmerizing. Throw in a roaring fire, fifty thanes chomping on boar meat, and the dark outside, and you have the ingredients for vigorous and decidedly premodern entertainment.

### *Placing Beowulf in History*

*Beowulf* was composed by an Anglo-Saxon (or West Saxon) looking back to Scandinavian and North German lands from a distant pagan past. Therefore, we know that

this epic is to some extent a reconstruction of the past. Though we do not know the precise date either of *Beowulf* the poem or of the historical events from which it is drawn, scholars have made a few broad guesses. *Beowulf* itself seems to have been composed in the late seventh or early eighth century, while historical and archaeological evidence suggests that the period portrayed in the poem may be as early as the sixth century AD. One of the most sensational examples of such evidence comes from Anglo-Saxon archaeology. The Sutton Hoo burial ship, discovered in Suffolk, England, in 1938–39, lays out for us the vestiges of a hero's burial: a brilliant spread of gold and silver artifacts, of military and nautical equipment, corresponding to much of the heroic paraphernalia assembled for funeral rites in the poem *Beowulf*. The date of the Sutton Hoo burial is AD 620–630, which *may* put it a century and a half or two before the composition of the poem of *Beowulf*.

### *The Rise of Europe and England*

*Beowulf* is a product of the great historical developmental process that followed the breakdown of the Roman Empire in the West of Europe and led eventually to the establishment of the European nation states we know today. It lies at the beginning of this long historical transition, and is among the many literary documents that herald the development of what would become modern England.

By the early years of the fifth century AD, the Roman government of Britain had begun to collapse—as had the Roman hold on its entire empire. From archaeological and later chronicle evidence—such as that of Bede in his



*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed about 732, or the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, from the late ninth century—we know that during the fall of the Roman Empire, the British Isles were being colonized by Northern European tribes such as the Frisians, Danes, and Saxons. Slowly, and in the course of endless wars, these tribes mixed with the native Britons and Celts. A decisive event in this new colonization of the British Isles took place at the end of the sixth century, when Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine from Rome to Kent, where he established Christ Church, a beacon for the now rapidly expanding Christian population of England. From that date begins the “modernizing” process of the British Isles, in which the many disparate cultures and religions that had flourished under Roman rule were gradually brought under the reign of the Church.

It was not long before the extraordinarily rich Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition began to flourish. This Old English poetry preserves for us a library of fine texts, including *Widsith*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Battle of Maldon*, all of which emerge out of more or less the same temporal and literary crucible as *Beowulf*. In their pages we can sense the enormity and difficulty of historical, cultural, linguistic, and spiritual change under way as both the Christian and pagan worlds blend in a swirl of nostalgia, historical loneliness, and faith.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *Beowulf*

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- 410: Roman troops leave the Roman province of Britain.
- 450–600: After departure of Roman forces from Britain, a prolonged incursion of Germanic tribes (Angles, Saxons, Frisians) into Britain, where they struggled with the local inhabitants, the Welsh and British.
- 521: Raid by Hygelac (uncle of Beowulf in *Beowulf*) on the continent; record of this in work of Gregory of Tours.
- 597: Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory the Great, takes over as archbishop of Canterbury and starts to convert the locals to Christianity.
- 650–660: Sutton Hoo ship burial site in East Anglia.
- 670–735: Lifetime of The Venerable Bede, Northumbrian writer of the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.
- 700: Approximated date of the composition of *Beowulf*.
- c.732–804: Life of Alcuin of York, learned Christian

scholar who carried his teaching to the court of Charlemagne.

793: Destruction by Norsemen of the monastery at Lindisfarne; opening for many decades of invasions and depredations.

849–899: Life of King Alfred the Great of Wessex; did much to stop Norse incursions and to inspire cultural development in Britain.

991: Battle of Maldon, scene of English defeat by the Norse and topic of long Anglo-Saxon poem.

1000: Date of writing down of the manuscript of *Beowulf*.

1066: Victory of the Normans over the British at Hastings; end of the Anglo-Saxon age.

1571–1631: Life of Sir Robert Cotton, early owner of the manuscript of *Beowulf*.

1731: Manuscript of *Beowulf* survives fire and is moved to British Museum.

1815: First edition of *Beowulf* published.

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# BEOWULF



# I



**L**o! WE HAVE heard the glory of the kings of the Spear-Danes in days gone by, how the chieftains wrought mighty deeds. Often Scyld-Scefing<sup>1</sup> wrested the mead-benches from troops of foes, from many tribes; he made fear fall upon the earls. After he was first found in misery<sup>2</sup> (he received solace for that), he grew up under the heavens, lived in high honour, until each of his neighbours over the whale-road<sup>3</sup> must needs obey him and render tribute. That was a good king! Later a young son was born to him in the court, God sent him for a comfort to the people; He had marked the misery of that earlier time when they suffered long space, lacking a leader. Wherefore the Lord of life, the Ruler of glory, gave him honour in the world.

Beowulf,<sup>4</sup> son of Scyld, was renowned in Scandinavian lands—his repute spread far and wide. So shall a young man bring good to pass with splendid gifts in his father's possession, so that when war comes willing comrades shall stand by him again in his old age, the people

follow him. In every tribe a man shall prosper by deeds of love.

Then at the fated hour Scyld, very brave, passed hence into the Lord's protection. Then did they, his dear comrades, bear him out to the shore of the sea, as he himself had besought them, whilst as friend of the Scyldings,<sup>5</sup> loved lord of the land, he held sway long time with speech. There at the haven stood the ring-prowed ship radiant and ready, the chieftain's vessel. Then they laid down the loved lord, the bestower of rings<sup>6</sup> on the bosom of the barge, the famous man by the mast. Many treasures and ornaments were there, brought from afar. I never heard of a sightlier ship adorned with weapons of war and garments of battle, swords and corslets. Many treasures lay on his bosom that were to pass far with him into the power of the flood. No whit less did they furnish him with gifts, with great costly stores, than did those who sent him forth in the beginning while he was still a child alone over the waves. Further they set a golden banner high over his head; they let the ocean bear him; they surrendered him to the sea. Sad was their mind, mournful their mood. Men cannot tell for a truth, counsellors in hall, heroes under the heavens, who received that burden.



## II



**T**HEN BEOWULF OF the Scyldings, beloved king of the people, was famed among warriors long time in the strongholds—his father had passed hence, the prince from his home—until noble Healfdene was born to him; aged and fierce in fight, he ruled the Scyldings graciously while he lived. Four children sprang from him in succession, Heorogar, prince of troops, and Hrothgar, and Halga the good; I heard that Sigeneow was Onela's<sup>1</sup> queen, consort of the war-Scylfing. Then good fortune in war was granted to Hrothgar, glory in battle, so that his kinsmen gladly obeyed him, until the younger warriors grew to be a mighty band.

It came into his mind that he would order men to make a hall-building, a mighty mead-dwelling, greater than ever the children of men had heard of; and therein that he should part among young and old all which God gave unto him except the nation and the lives of men.<sup>2</sup> Then I heard far and wide of work laid upon many a tribe throughout this world, the task of adorning the