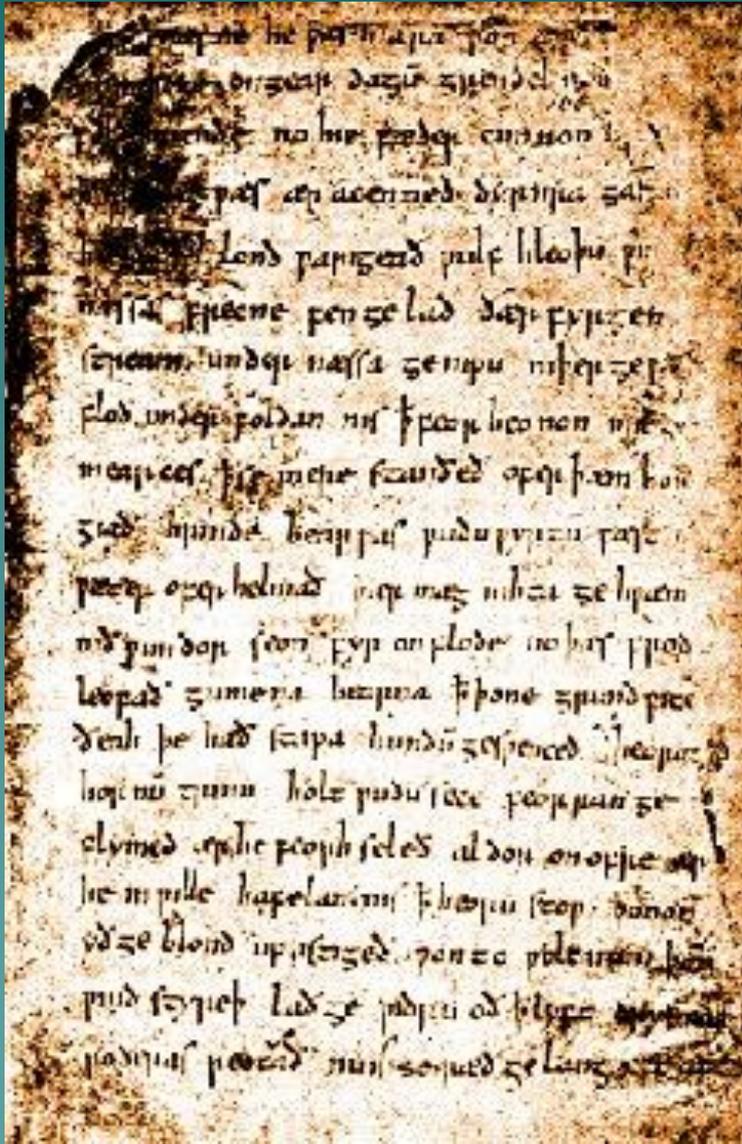


Beowulf: A Pagan and Christian Hero

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Beowulf: Textual History



- ◆ Composed between mid 7th c. and end of 10th c. in Anglo-Saxon, in England
- ◆ Originally an Oral Poem whose subject goes back to the 6th c.
- ◆ One manuscript in British Library

Historical Context for Story

- ◆ End of Roman Empire in 476 C.E.
- ◆ Angles and Saxon Invasion, 500 C.E.
- ◆ Conversion of Anglo-Saxon England, 6th-7th c.
- ◆ Poem is set in this early Medieval era when paganism was being challenged by Christianity

Map



Poetry and Meter

- ◆ Old English
- ◆ No stanzas or rhyming
- ◆ Each line of verse composed of two balancing halves separated by a caesura
- ◆ Each half line contains two stressed syllables
- ◆ Alliteration ties together half-lines
- ◆ No set syllable meter: 8-12 syllables

Oral Composition

- ◆ Scop—Anglo-Saxon oral poet
- ◆ Repetition
- ◆ Formulas
 - “scourge of many tribes”
 - Kennings: metaphorical formula—Whale’s Road; Sky’s Candle
- ◆ Themes or Motifs
 - Hospitality
- ◆ Imitation and Originality

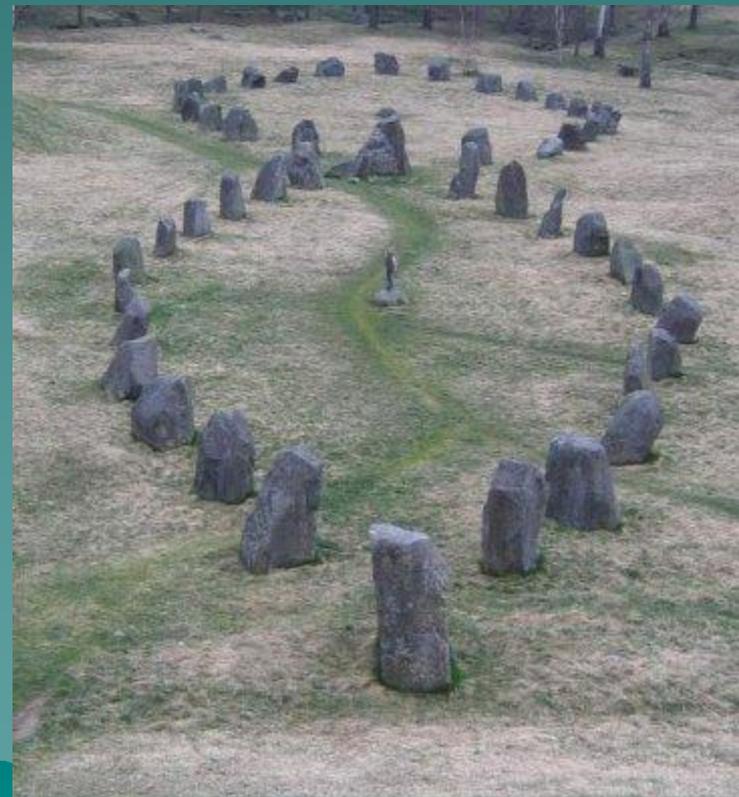
How does the oral poet add his original touch?

Scop Within Tale

- ◆ “Meanwhile, a thane
- ◆ Of the king’s household, a carrier of tales,
- ◆ A traditional singer deeply schooled
- ◆ In the lore of the past, linked a new theme
- ◆ To a stricter meter. The man started
- ◆ To recite with skill, rehearsing Beowulf’s
- ◆ Triumphs and feats in well-fashioned lines,
- ◆ Entwining his words.
- ◆ He told what he’d heard
- ◆ Repeated in songs about Sigemund’s exploits...” (866ff)

◆ “There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes, a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes...A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on...Each clan on the outlying coasts beyond the whale-road had to yield to him and pay tribute. That was one good king.”

Shield Sheafson: Founder of Danes



◆ Heorot was the name...the hall towered, its gables wide and high and awaiting a barbarous burning. That doom abided, but in time it would come: the killer instinct unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant."

Heorat built by Hrothgar



Rekonstruierte nordische Halle. Nach Valtyr Gudmundsson, Den islandske Bolig i Fristatstiden.
(Aus Olrik, Nordisches Geistesleben. Verlag von Carl Winter, Heidelberg.)

Grendel: Off spring of Cain

- ◆ “Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark, nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him to hear the din of the loud banquet every day in the hall, the harp being struck and the clear song of a skilled poet telling...how the Almighty had made the earth...”

Pagan Shrines and Rituals Fail

- ◆ “Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed offerings to idols, swore oaths that the killer of souls might come to their aid and save the people. That was their way, their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge of good deeds and bad, the Lord God, Head of the Heavens and High King of the World, was unknown to them...”

Battle with Grendel as Feud

- ◆ Battle described in context of feuding: Beowulf's father had come before as a suppliant fleeing feud-blood and Hrothgar paid the *Wergild*
- ◆ Unferth's story told: "you killed your own kith and kin, so for all your cleverness and quick tongue, you will suffer damnation in the depths of hell."
- ◆ Implies that battle with Grendel is a Feud

Celebration

- ◆ Story of Sigemund Dragon Slayer told
- ◆ Thanks given to God
- ◆ Gifts given to Beowulf
- ◆ Finnsburg story sung
- ◆ Gift of necklace from Wealtheow



Finnsburg Story

- ◆ Hildeburh, Danish princess, married Frisian King, Finn
- ◆ Son and brother killed
- ◆ Danes renew feud and Finn is killed, hall looted, and Hildeburh brought back to Denmark
- ◆ Failed Marriage truce; foreshadows fall of Heorot and Danes



Ring-Hoard (ca. 375-550CE):
Timboholm, Parish of Skövde, Västergötland

- ◆ “Grendel’s mother, monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs...grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge.”

Grendel’s Mother Renews Feud



Victory with Sword



ca. 200-500CE, from Nydam Mose [Northern Germany] - Behmer Type IV - ratio 1:5

- ◆ Hrunting, sword given by Unferth, breaks
- ◆ God wards off death blow
- ◆ He sees a magic sword: “an ancient heirloom from the days of the giants...but only Beowulf could wield it in battle.”
- ◆ Revenge and mutilation

Beowulf and Geats

- ◆ Returning home, he gives his king the treasure Hrothgar had given
- ◆ Tells Story
- ◆ Secondary story about Feawaru, Hrothgar's daughter: "hopes this woman will heal old wounds and grievous feuds."
- ◆ "But generally the spear is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed, no matter how admirable the bride."
- ◆ Foreshadows feuding: a glimpse of an heirloom will spark an argument—war between Heathobard and Dane

Beowulf as King

- ◆ Freawaru story of feuding creates context for Geats feud with Dragon
- ◆ Fights a Dragon
- ◆ Tells his men to stay back
- ◆ Wiglaf is loyal and helps him
- ◆ “They had killed the enemy, courage quelled his life; the pair of kinsmen, partners in nobility, had destroyed the foe. So ever man should act, be at hand when needed;”

Heroic Death

- ◆ Beowulf: “I took what came, cared for and stood by things in my keeping, never fomented quarrels, never swore to a lie. All this consoles me, doomed as I am and sickening for death; because of my right ways, the Ruler of mankind need never blame me when the breath leaves my body for murder of kinsmen.”
- ◆ Then he asks to see treasure hoard

Feuding is Real Fear

- ◆ Wiglaf: "Now war is looming over our nation, soon it will be known to Franks and Frisians, far and wide, that the king is gone. Hostility has been great among the Franks since Hygelac sailed forth at the head of a war fleet into Friesland...Nor do I expect peace or pact-keeping of any sort from the Swedes."
- ◆ Recalls a feud with Swedes and notes that they will take the opportunity now for revenge

Summary

- ◆ Beowulf is the first English poem but it reflects the era and culture of the Early Middle Ages in N. Germany and Scandinavia
- ◆ Poem reflects the uneasy assimilation of Christianity with Pagan culture
- ◆ Christianity is limited to the basic belief in a Creator God; **Wyrd** is powerful belief in Fate
- ◆ **Feuding** between men is the real source of Fear, not Monsters
- ◆ Beowulf is a hero because he was:
Loyal; Brave; Cared about the People;
Generous