

Beowulf

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INTRODUCTION

Beowulf is an epic poem composed somewhere between the middle of the seventh and the end of the tenth century A. D., about four centuries before the Norman Conquest. Composed in Anglo-Saxon/Old English, yet set in Scandinavia, it recounts the deeds of a Scandinavian prince (Beowulf) and reflects the world of 6th-century Geats, Danes and Swedes, who were rigidly feudal, highly civilized, violent, and also newly Christian. Beowulf's actual composition is dated at around the 8th century, because of its high degree of Christian content, paralleling the time of England's conversion from paganism to Christianity. Consisting of 3,182 lines in verse, its author is unknown and believed to have been a medieval poet or scop, who wrote down the poem's events. The poem was probably carried from generation to generation through a spoken retelling, as Old English verse was traditionally heard rather than read, its audience being mostly illiterate. The events, set in a pagan Germanic society governed by a heroic code of honor, would have been familiar and pleasurable to its listeners. Many of the events are legendary and bear similarities to other Germanic historical and mythological literature in Old English, Norse and German.

CONTEXT

Though it is often viewed both as the archetypal Anglo-Saxon literary work and as a cornerstone of modern literature, Beowulf has a peculiar history that complicates both its historical and its canonical position in English literature. By the time the story of Beowulf was composed by an unknown Anglo-Saxon poet around 700 a.d., much of its material had been in circulation in oral narrative for many years. The Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian peoples had invaded the island of Britain and settled there several hundred years earlier, bringing with them several closely related Germanic languages that would evolve into Old English. Elements of the Beowulf story -including its setting and characters - date back to the period before the migration. The action of the poem takes place around 500 a.d. Many of the characters in the poem - the Swedish and Danish royal family members, for example - correspond to actual historical figures. Originally pagan warriors, the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian invaders experienced a large-scale conversion to Christianity at the end of the sixth century. Though still an old pagan story, Beowulf thus came to be told by a Christian poet. The Beowulf poet is often at pains to attribute Christian thoughts and motives to his characters, who frequently behave in distinctly un-Christian ways. The Beowulf that we read today is therefore probably quite unlike the Beowulf with which the first Anglo-Saxon audiences were familiar. The plot of the poem concerns Scandinavian culture, but much of the poem's narrative intervention reveals that the poet's culture was somewhat different from that of his ancestors, and that of his characters as well.

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