Beowulf

The great
English…Danish…German
Epic

Beowulf is important to the study of English myth because…well…it's the first real epic in English. Well, It's marginally in English anyway. Just as Gilgamesh was important because it was the first epic, and the Iliad and Odyssey were important as representing Greek culture, Beowulf is important in telling us about early English culture. The problem, of course, is that England was a mixing spot for a lot of other cultures. British history involves the Danes and the Germans as well as the Irish, the Scots, and the French…which leaves us with a lot of people who have a claim on Beowulf.

Why Beowulf?

- Oldest full-length poem in any Germanic Language (like us)
  - Vernacular rather than Latin
- Historic value
- Literary value
- Cultural value

Well, for one thing, it's worth mentioning that the poem doesn't even have a title in the original. It's just been given the name of the hero of the story – Beowulf.

Before this poem, everything worth reading is written in a Romance language, or a language based on Latin, rather than vernacular, or the languages that people spoke in every day life. That change over to vernacular is important; it tells us that this is a story for telling, not a story for teaching. Earlier epic poems in Latin were intended as schoolbooks or samples of how smart someone could be. Beowulf is something a little different; it's a good story about heroes, told for entertainment. That difference is huge. It gives the story more historic value, actually allowing us to tell when it was written down in history. It has literary value, because it sets up the way stories are told in English culture. And, of course, it has cultural value. British heroes are different from Greek ones or Norse ones…and they're the same in other ways. Beowulf lets us have a window into a weird and wonderful ancient culture.

Attracting Notice
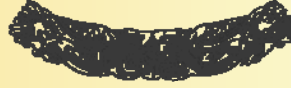
- Noticed in the 1700s
  - National pride
  - Claimed by
    - British
    - Danes
    - Germans
- Ancient/ Modern crossroads

Now, as mentioned before, several groups of people have a claim to Beowulf for different reasons:

British – written in old English

Danes – Set in Denmark

Germans – Culture is Pre-Christian North

The original popularity of the story is actually a matter of question. There's only one copy of it that we have, and if it were really a popular story, it seems logical that more copies would have survived. Then again, maybe people told the story orally rather than writing it down – we don't really know.
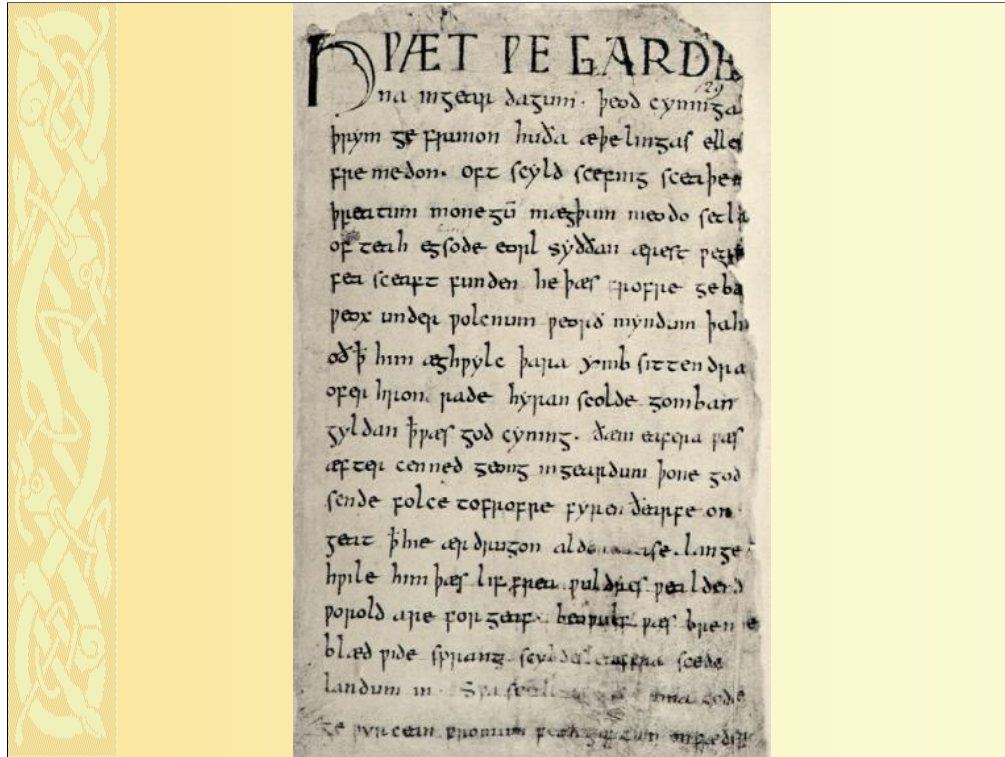
The Manuscript - facts
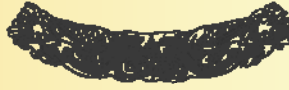
- **700-1020 AD/ CE**
  - Linguistic/ style
  - Miniscule influence
- **Part of codex**
  - 2 scribes
- **3,182 lines**
- **Nowell**
- **Cotton-Vitellius**

What we do know is when the copy we have was written. Judging by the style of the language and the form of the letters, it's dated to 700-1020 AD. Now, let me explain what that means. Language, like most things in history, grows as it is used. Sometimes the way words are spelled, and sometimes it's the way they're ordered. For example, before William Tyndale and Shakespeare, English was a noun-based language. That means that you would say, "you, thy bed lift and thou shalt perambulate" instead of "take up your bed and walk." By looking at the order of words and how things are actually phrased in Beowulf, scholars can figure out the date.

Also, the form of the letters. It may seem weird to us, but before Charlemagne in 800 C.E. letters weren't standardized. Ever scribe made their letter "T" slightly different. It made things really hard to read, but there wasn't enough organization in the world yet for anyone to MAKE a standard. When Charlemagne came to power, he set up a system of lettering called Carolingian Miniscule that set a standard font everyone used and recognized. What that means for dating Beowulf is that scholars can see the beginnings of use of that font. That means it's got to be from a certain time span.

Originally, the poem was written down by at least 2 scribes. We know that because there are 2 different kinds of handwriting in the codex (one much neater than the other). The poem runs over 3,000 lines, and we think we have the whole thing. The copy we have was owned somewhere around the 1600s by a guy named Nowell, who nicely signed his name on the front page for us. About 2 centuries later, the pages (loose pages, not bound) were bought by a British collector named Cotton, who had them bound into a book with a bunch of other old Saxon manuscripts. He stored this priceless volume in his wood-paneled library near the fireplace…

..which ended up starting a fire. Most of the manuscript was saved, but the fire took its toll, as did a number of "preservation" efforts that involved cutting down the size of the pages to place them in frames. And, of course, cutting down the pages resulting in the loss of about 2000 characters.

Originally, Beowulf was made available to the educated community in a Latin translation, but the translation was seriously lousy, which attracted the attention of Danish scholar Thorkelin. The manuscript was re-evaluated, re-dated, and the battle over whose story this really was began.

The Manuscript - Style

- Events described dated to 400-500 AD
  - Cross ref – Gregory of Tours
- Epithets indicative of oral influence
- Last great hero of race
- Christian/ Pagan mixture

Beowulf, like most epics, tells a story that happened "a long time ago in a galaxy far-far away." In this case, it's two or three hundred years before it was written. We know that partially because some of the people's names and place names show up in a book called the history of the Franks written by Gregory of Tours. Now, don't get me wrong, having those place/people names doesn't make the story true…it makes it "based on a true story."

There are other hints as well, like the epithets – titles or names that are repeated whenever a character is talked about. Those are usually a sign that the story was originally told orally rather than written, which tells us that, like Homer's epics, Beowulf may be a compilation of a bunch of well-known tales, strung togeter into one piece.

Beowulf is the last great hero of his people, and in a way he is a tragic figure as well as a hero. The poem is a mixture of pagan custom with gods and monsters and Christian belief with demons and the power of God. It's a story of transition, using the wonder of the old ways and mixing it with the beliefs of the new.

Language

- Old English – Anglo Saxon
  - Germanic
  - Vs. modern mixed w/ French
- Traditional poetic form

The language in Beowulf is…well…different. It's Old English, which doesn't bear much apparent resemblance to anything we speak. Basically, it's got a lot in common with German, and it hasn't been mixed with much French yet, like our modern English.

Beowulf follows traditional poetic structure…in its original form.

Old English:

Nolde eorla hlēo   ænige þinga
þone cwealmcuman   cwicne forlætan,
nē his lifdagas   lēoda ænigum
nytte tealde.   Þær genehost brægd,
eorl Bēowulfes,   ealde lāfe,
wolde frēadrihtnes   feorh ealgian,
mæres þēodnes,   ðær hie meahton swā.
Hie þæt ne wiston,   þā hie gewin drugon,
heardhicgende   hildemecgas,
ond on healfa gehwone   hēawan þōhton,
sāwle sēcan,   þone synscaðan
ænig ofer eorþan   irenna cyst,
gūðbilla nān   grētan nolde;
ac hē sigewæpnum   forsworen hæfde,
ecga gehwylcre.   Scolde his aldorgedāl
on ðæm dæge   þysses lifes
earmlic wurðan,   ond se ellorgāst
on fēonda geweald   feor siðian.
   Ðā þæt onfunde   sē þe fela æror
mōdes myrðe   manna cynne,
fyrene gefremede   - hē fāg wið God -
þæt him se lichoma   læstan nolde,
ac hine se mōdega   mæg Hygelāces
hæfde be honda;   wæs gehwæþer ōðrum
lifigende lāð.   Licsār gebād
atol æglæca;   him on eaxle wearð
syndolh sweotol,   seonowe onsprungon,
burston bānlocan.   Bēowulfe wearð
gūðhrēð gyfeþe;

Modern English:

Would not earls' protector   for any cause
the lethal guest   alive release,
nor his life-days   to people any
useful he reckoned.   There many brandished,
warriors of Beowulf,   ancient swords,
wished prince-lord's   life protect,
famed chieftain's,   if they could so.
They it not knew   when they fray joined,
hard-minded   battle-fighters,
and on hand each   to hew resolved,
Grendel's soul to seek,   that the sin-scather
any on earth   of irons best,
of war-blades none   wound would not;
but he victory-weapons   bewitched had,
edges all.   Must his life-departure
on that day   of this life
wretched be,   and the alien spirit
into fiends' power   far-off travel.
   Then it found,   he who many before
mind's miseries   on mankind,
crimes committed   - he clashed with God -
that him the body   obey would not,
but him the keen   kinsman of Hygelac
had by hand;   was each by other
living loathed.   Limb-pain felt
dreadful monster;   him on shoulder was
huge-wound seen,   sinews sprang apart,
burst bone-locks.   To Beowulf was
war-glory given;

But you'll have a hard time reading it. Above is a side by side Old English/ Modern English translation. The audio recording is also linked on the webpage if you want to hear what the Old English sounds like.

Who came up with this?

- Possibilities
  - Direct transcription/ compilation
  - Bankrolled by Danish conqueror
  - Anglo-Saxon king trying to claim a great heritage

The Setting
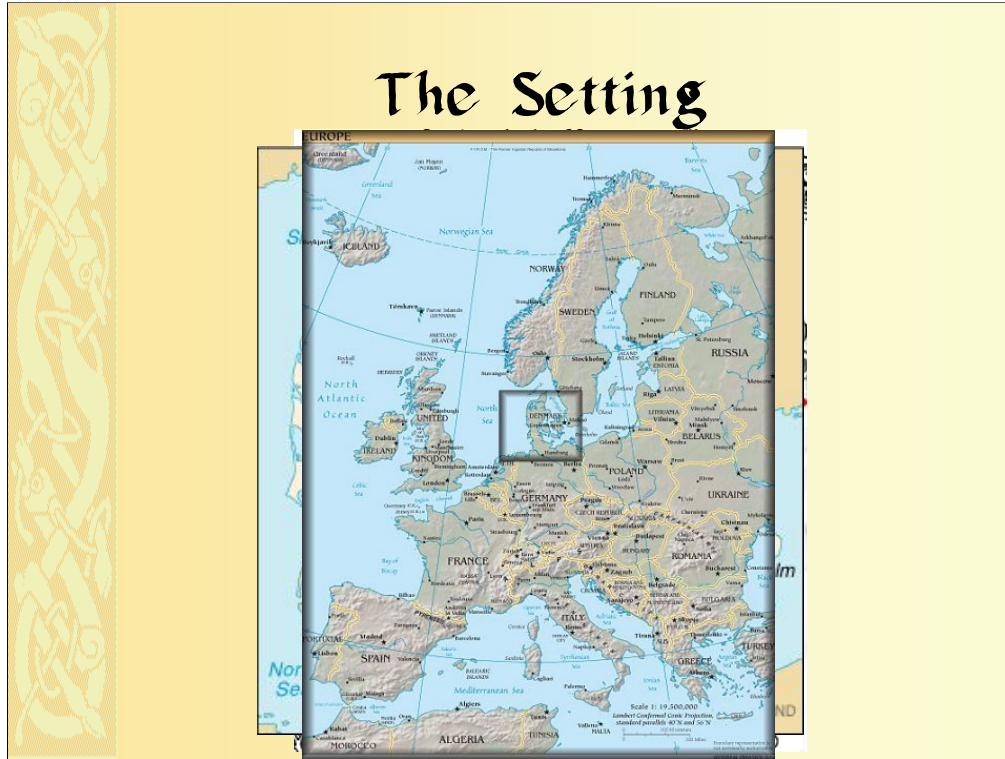
The poem is set off the coast of Denmark on a spit of land under contention between two groups of guys called the Danes and the Geats

The Setting

- Scandanavia at war
  - Geat = Sweden (live in)
  - Dane = Denmark
- Lay of the land
- Boats, beer, bravery, and booty

The Geats live in Sweden, and the Danes live (shock) in Denmark. These two nations are at war, and essentially, you can think of them as two clans of Vikings. They live for battle, honor, and bravery. And, of course, they spend a lot of time drinking and trying to get to the treasure. Just think big, hairy pirates with horned helmets, and you'll be on the right page.

Boats

The heroes of Beowulf arrive on a ship, and ships play an important role throughout the story. The picture above is a modern-made model of an ancient Danish ship from around the time Beowulf occurs. You should notice that it's not that hefty a craft and that the edges of the boat aren't that far above the water line. These boats were fast and very stable, but easily swamped. The ability to move across the water quickly (frequently with the help of lots of oars) made the Vikings feared enemies who could attack without a great deal of notice.

Boats were a way of facing up to the unknown represented by the water. When a warrior died, he was sent off in a death-ship, his possessions (and sometimes his wife) given over to the sea or to the flame.

Sutton Hoo Burial Grounds, aerial view (1983)

Mound 2

uncovering the Sutton Hoo ship burial (1939)

How do we know about the boats…well…we found one used in a burial. At Sutton Hoo, a grassy hill turned out to hide one of the greatest archaeological finds of the century…more info about it can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutton_Hoo and it's really worth reading. It's a heck of a story.

Beer

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

One of the major settings of the story is the golden hall – a really really big beer hall. This hall is the king's palace and his bar. The heroes of Beowulf are warriors…but what do you do with warriors when they're not at war. Welll….you get them drunk and tell them stories and honor their bravery. Doing all of that in a central location keeps your warriors close at hand and keeps your place as king secure.

Of course, in Beowulf, it also creates a monster-buffet, but that's another story.

Bravery

Approx 32" blade

Those warriors consider bravery more important than life…like the Greeks, they are deeply concerned about honor and valor. They want stories told about THEM, and insulting a warrior's honor is like calling his mother names. The weapons from Sutton Hoo tell us that these guys were amazing…tough, but amazing. They might not have fought dragons and demons, but they weren't people you wanted to tangle with.

Loot

Vendel chieftain's sword from ca. AD 700

And they love shiny stuff. The warriors in Beowulf are paid in weapons and gold. The gifts are rewards for their bravery. The next 3 images are all of weapons and jewelry from the time of Beowulf. Look at the craftsmanship and detail…they're really amazing.

This is a sword hilt, hand crafted and inlaid with gold. Also…notice that the guard or hilt is really tiny. No finger protection here…Beowulf's warriors are too manly to worry about fingers getting sliced off.

Loot

This is a brooch, or cloak pin hand crafted from gold. Notice the knotwork. You may think of Irish or Celtic cultures when you see that pattern…but the Danes and Geats come from the same cultural background. Remember, Beowulf is an English/Danish/German story. Those cultures are wound together through invasion and shifting cultures, and they share a lot of art and culture.

Loot
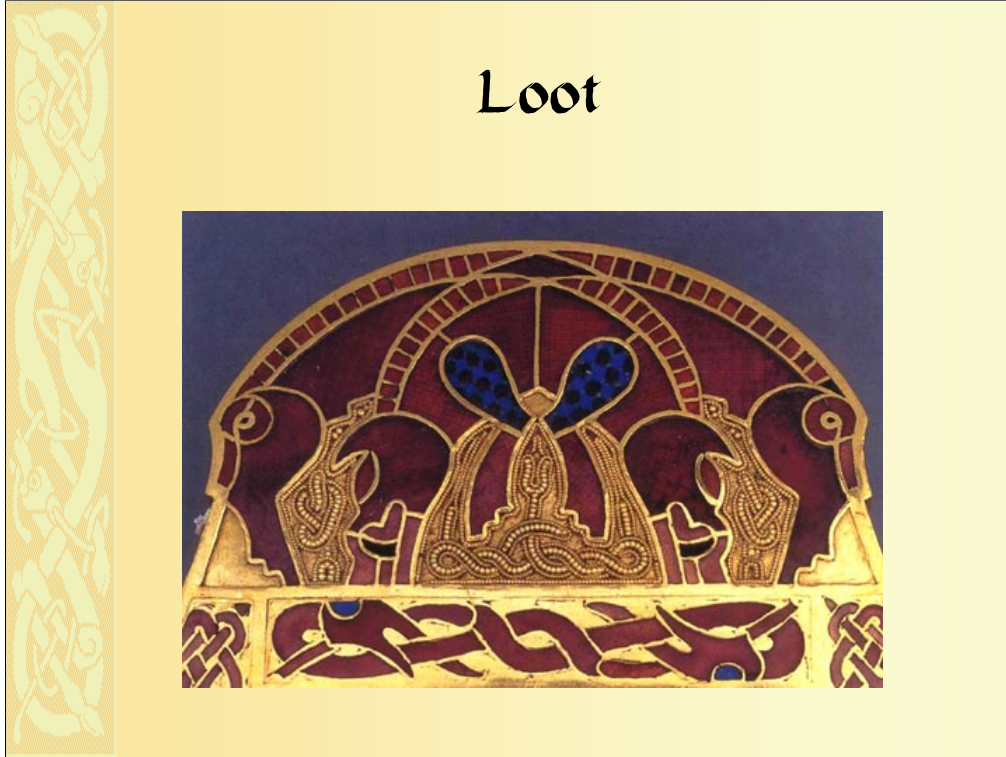
And last, but not least, another pin. Yeah, this really is from the 700s…but the craftsmanship is amazing. When Beowulf's warriors get loot, this is the kind of stuff they're getting.

The Plot

- 3 battles
- 2 parts
- Hero/ adventure
- Old world vs. new
- Originally separate, but woven together well enough to be literature

The story revolves around battles…no surprise there. It has 2 parts, one with the young Beowulf-the-hero, and theother with the old Beowulf-the-king. The 2-part style supports the idea of different stories combined into a single legend. The old story of the hero is much more the pagan story – the mighty warrior fighting the magical powers of darkness and chaos. The second is far more rooted in a new world of politics, stable government, and a king who sacrifices himself for his people.

The Hero

- Beowulf = Bee + wolf/ hunter = bear
- Call – comes in search of monsters
- Fortune & glory
- Bravery & honor
- Die with honor

Beowulf is a combination of bee and wolf or hunter. Strange as it seems to us, one of the scariest creatures of the north was the bear…and a hunter of bees is a bear. (think Pooh and honey)

The story runs on the traditional hero outline. Beowulf is called away from home by the chance for fortune and glory, he acts with bravery…and his ultimate goal is to die with bravery and honor. He is remembered as dying well with a faithful friend, and he asks no more than that.

Themes

- Feudalism
  - King/ Thanes
- Revenge
  - Blood debt
- Reward
- Wyrd

Beowulf shows us a feudal system…a state run on honor and nobility, coming down from the power of the king to his thanes, or warriors, and then on to the "little people" of the country. It also shows us the importance of revenge, paying back a blood debt, as a part of honor. And, of course, the society of Beowulf is like the ancient Greeks – you expect payola for your mighty-warrior-services, and, if you don't get it you have the right to be unhappy. Remember Achilles refusing to fight because he lost his girl?

And then there's the wyrd. Wyrd is the Anglo-Saxon version of fate. It's kinda like honor and karma all wrapped up together. Essentially Wyrd is your ultimate fate, what is going to happen to you, but it's not just some pre-determined set of events. It's a pre-determined set of events put into place by a thousand tiny choices and actions, some of them before you were born. The Anglo-Saxon wyrd is the course of your life, set up by a huge web of events and choices, all coming down to determine what you're going to do…what you're fated to do.

Cast

- Beowulf
- Herot
- Grendel
- Grendel's Mother
- Hrothgar
- Wealhtheow
- Aeschere
- Unferth
- Wiglaf

These are the folks you should know in the story…it may actually help to get a running cast of characters, since the Old English names are frequently first-class tongue twisters.

Meanings?

- Cultural/ historical
  - Berserkers
  - Anglo-Saxons seeking legitimization
  - Quest for order
  - Choosing what of the past to carry into the present
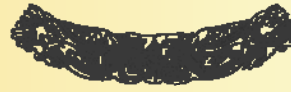 - National pride/ past

Meanings?

- Freudian/ Jungian
  - Subconscious
  - Monsters
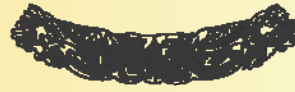 - Mother image
  - Dragon/ defense of land

Meanings?

- Social
  - "Other" – indigenes
  - Leader must prove his worth
  - Rank & reward for service
  - Sacrifice for a greater good
  - Loyalty, nobility, law

Celt

- Pronounced Kelt
- People stretching from Ireland to Germany
- Culture preserved in British isles
- Culture mingled with Norse/ Viking/ AngloSaxon

Celts

- Iberian – from Portugal or Spain
- Aryan – Central Asia
- Gael – Ireland/ Scotland from Gaul (France)