

MODULE CODE: CSEN7028
TITLE: *Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxon Heroic*
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LEVEL: 7
CREDITS: 20

TEACHING METHODS: Seminars 10%
Directed Learning 90%

JACS CODE: Q320

AIM(S)

- To provide students with a detailed knowledge and understanding of the 'heroic' in Anglo-Saxon literature and culture, underpinned by a range of theoretical approaches.
- To critically examine 'Old English' vernacular writing.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this module students should be able to:

- demonstrate a high level of knowledge and understanding of a variety of literary and artistic works from Anglo-Saxon England;
- demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the values and preoccupation of Anglo-Saxon culture in England;
- show a high level of awareness of the ways in which this culture and its literature, and art more broadly, relate wider socio-political contexts and particularly to the nature of Anglo-Saxon Christianity;
- demonstrate theoretically informed awareness of the nature of the 'heroic' within Anglo-Saxon culture in England;
- demonstrate a high level of knowledge and understanding of the ways in which Anglo-Saxon history and culture have had a marked influence on modern perceptions of Englishness and Britishness.

CONTENT

- This module will explore the nature of the 'heroic' within a wide range of Anglo-Saxon texts, setting those texts within their broader social-political and religious context. Contexts to be explored will include:
 - the Anglo-Saxon migration and settlement;
 - conversion to Christianity;
 - the Anglo-Saxon aesthetic, including manuscript illumination and stone sculpture.
- The 'heroic' is a central theme of the literature of Anglo-Saxon England. It is used in the literature of warfare such as *The Battle of Maldon*, and also has an important place

in religious and meditative writing such as *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Wanderer* where the pagan heroic ethic is debated and redefined. The text in which the heroic comes under most scrutiny is *Beowulf*, which is used as the focal point for this module.

- All the texts studied were written in the vernacular of Anglo-Saxon England, known to modern scholars as ‘Old English’, and the module aims to give students knowledge of the original texts. However, the essential texts are made available in Modern English translations, with the original Old English texts in parallel, and these parallel text editions form the basis for much of the reading for the course.
- The module will also consider the impact of, and critical responses to, the ways in which Anglo-Saxon history and culture have had a marked influence on modern perceptions of Englishness and Britishness.

ASSESSMENT

Course work (100%)

One Assignment 5000 words (100%)

The topic of the assignment is chosen by the student in consultation with the module tutor but must be related to the content of the module.

[Sample assignment: ‘Consider the view that Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry presents "a complex vision of reality whereby conflicting desires and codes of conduct meet"’ (John Niles).]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Essential

Swanton, M. ed. and trans. *Beowulf*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.

Welch, M. *Anglo-Saxon England*, English Heritage, London: Batsford, 1994.

Other primary texts to be studied include, *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Wanderer*, *The Dream of the Rood*, and selections from Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*. These and other texts are provided in the Module Reader, supplied at the beginning of term.

Recommended

Backhouse, J. Turner, D.H. and Webster, L. eds, *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art 966 1066*, London: The British Museum, 1984.

Baker, P. S. *Introduction to Old English*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

Brown, M. *Manuscripts from the Anglo-Saxon Age*, London: The British Library, 2007.

Calder, D.G and Allen, M.B. J. eds. *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1976.

Campbell, J. John, E. and Wormald, P. *The Anglo-Saxons*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1982.

Damico, H. and Hennessey Olsen, A. eds, *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Dodwell, C. *Anglo-Saxon Art: a new perspective*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982.

Godden, M. and Lapidge, M. eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Greenfield, S.B and Calder, D.G. *A New Critical History of Old English Literature*, London: New York University Press, 1986.

- Henderson, G. *From Durrow to Kells: the insular gospel books 650–800*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1987.
- Higham, N. *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons*, London: Seaby, 1992.
- Magennis, H. *The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Mitchell, B. *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- Mitchell, B. and Robinson, F.C. *A Guide to Old English*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.
- Nicholson, L.E. and Warwick Frese, D. eds. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: essays in appreciation*, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.
- O'Brien O'Keefe, K. ed., *Reading Old English Texts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Pearsall, D. *Old English and Middle English Poetry*, London: Routledge, 1977.
- Shippey, T.A. *Old English Verse*, London: Hutchinson, 1972.
- Stenton, F. *Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.
- Webster, L. and Backhouse, J. eds. *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600–800*, London: The British Museum, 1991.
- Wilson, D.M. *Anglo-Saxon Art: from the seventh century to the Norman Conquest*, London: The Overlook Press, 1986.
- Wrenn, C. L. *A Study of Old English Literature*, London: Harrap, 1967.

The Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* DID you know? The original *Beowulf* manuscript . . . exists in only one copy. Scholars contend that the poet may have lived anytime between the middle of the seventh century A.D. and the end of the tenth century. However, we do know where the poem was written. In the fifth century, bloody warfare in northern Europe had driven many Germanic-speaking tribes, including groups of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, to abandon their homes. Many of these groups settled in England, where they established what is now called Anglo-Saxon civilization. The people of the Anglo-Saxon period spoke a language known as Old English, the language in which *Beowulf* was composed. *Beowulf* (/ˈbeɪˈwʊlf/; Old English: *Bēowulf* [ˈbeːowuɫ]) is an Old English epic poem in the tradition of Germanic heroic legend consisting of 3,182 alliterative lines. It is one of the most important and most often translated works of Old English literature. The date of composition is a matter of contention among scholars; the only certain dating is for the manuscript, which was produced between 975 and 1025. Scholars call the anonymous author the "Beowulf poet". The story is set in pagan Scandinavia... The Anglo-Saxon value of fairness is reflected by *Beowulf*. He asks Hrothgar the favor of fighting alone with Grendel with only the help of his men, as stated in this line, "That this one favor you should not refuse me—that I, alone and with the help of my men, may purge all evil from this hall." *Beowulf* also demonstrates fairness when he decides that he will use no weapons with his battle with Grendel. *Beowulf* hears about the fact that Grendel's scorn of men is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none, therefore neither will *Beowulf*. Another Anglo-Saxon belief is also demonstrated by *Beowulf*, this being the value of boasting. The Old English epic poem *Beowulf* is written in Old English: An illustration of *Beowulf* fighting the dragon. Anglo-Saxon Heroic poetry is the closest one can get to the oral pagan literature of the heroic age of Germania. The verse used is usually alliterative and stressed, is without any rhyme. One of the earliest surviving Anglo-Saxon Heroic poems, dating somewhere around the 8th Century, is the *Widsith*, an autobiographical record of a scop. *Widsith*, the "far wanderer" narrates his travels through the Germanic world and mentions all the rulers he visits. Some of his characters figure in other poems, like *Beowulf* and *Hrothgar*. On the surface, *Beowulf* is a heroic poem celebrating the exploits of a great warrior, one who reflects the ideals of the Heroic age. But *Beowulf* is also a record of marvels, with a plenitude of historical elements in it. Suddenly, *Beowulf* sees another giant sword and this weapon is magical, and he succeeds in decapitating the monster. The sword melts to its hilt and *Beowulf* returns to the lake's surface carrying the head and the hilt of the sword. Finally, the Danes can celebrate the death of two monsters. It is said that he still lies there with his gold. HISTORY *Beowulf* is the earliest major work in English. The earliest manuscript copy of the poem is stored in the British Library, and is dated around 1010. Through the ages, there have been many translations, notably one by Alfred Lord Tennyson. *Beowulf* has always been regarded as a classic, and has inspired many writers over the ages including W. H. Auden, Jorge Luis Borges, and J. R. R. Tolkien.