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**


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**


The Anglo-Saxon epic did you know? The original “eowulf 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 (/ˈbeɪəwÊŠlf/; Old English: BÄ“owulf [ˈbeowulf]) 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 al English: An illustration of Beowulf fighting the d... 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 Louis Borges, and J. R. R. Tolkien.