

Beowulf: An Epic Poem

Introduction

The story of the hero Beowulf (written as an epic poem) is the only surviving complete poem from Anglo-Saxon times. It is over 3000 lines long and was written in Old English by an Anglo-Saxon poet (minstrel) or 'scop' (pronounced 'shop'). The tale tells of the life and adventures of one of the princes of Sweden, Beowulf, who spends his time fighting monsters (Grendel and his mother in particular) across Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Scandinavia).



The Poem

The poem is set in three parts and opens with Grendel terrorising the people of Denmark. In the nearby country of Sweden, the prince of the Geats (a kingdom in southern Sweden), Beowulf, hears of the monster and takes his warriors (thanes) with him and sets sail to help the King (Hrothgar) and his people.

Beowulf fights the monster in unarmed combat and after a long battle, he eventually wins by ripping off its arm. The Danish people are overjoyed and celebrate in the King's hall with Beowulf, but Grendel's mother has plans of her own.

She takes revenge on Hrothgar by attacking the King's hall, killing the King's best friend (Aeschere) and taking his body away, along with the arm of her dead son. Beowulf follows her to her underwater lair and fights another long and exhausting battle. At last, he grabs a magical sword from her and kills her too. Beowulf and his warriors set sail for home in Sweden.



50 years later, Beowulf is now king of the Geats and his own kingdom is being threatened by a fierce dragon. Once more, Beowulf takes his warriors and sets off to fight. The battle is fierce and all of the soldiers except one (Wiglaf) flee. Beowulf is fatally wounded, but still manages to cut the beast in half with his sword.

A translation of part of the poem

Grendel the Murderer

{Grendel attacks the sleeping heroes}

When the sun was sunken, he set out to visit
The lofty hall-building, how the Ring-Danes had used it
For beds and benches when the banquet was over.
Then he found there reposing many a noble
Asleep after supper; sorrow the heroes,
Misery knew not. The monster of evil
Greedy and cruel tarried but little.

{Grendel drags off thirty of them, and devours them}

Fell and frantic, and forced from their slumbers
Thirty of thanemen; thence he departed
Leaping and laughing, his lair to return to,
With surfeit of slaughter sallying homeward.

In the dusk of the dawning, as the day was just breaking,
Was Grendel's prowess revealed to the warriors.



When was the poem composed and written down?

In Anglo-Saxon times, poems and stories were told by a travelling minstrel or scop as most people could not read or write. The poem must have been passed down through the generations, being modified by each storyteller, until the existing copy was written down by two scribes somewhere in Anglo-Saxon England over 1000 years ago.