

Beowulf is the oldest surviving epic poem in the English language and the earliest piece of vernacular European literature. It was written in the language of the Saxons, "Old English," also known as "Anglo-Saxon." Originally untitled, in the 19th century the poem began to be called by the name of its Scandinavian hero, whose adventures are its primary focus. Historical elements run through the poem, yet both the hero and the story are fiction.

Origins of the *Beowulf* Poem:

Beowulf may have been composed as an elegy for a king who died in the seventh century, but there is little evidence to indicate who that king may have been. The burial rites described in the epic show a great similarity to the evidence found at Sutton Hoo, but too much remains unknown to form a direct correlation between the poem and the burial site.

The poem may have been composed as early as c. 700, and evolved through many retellings before it was written down. Whoever the original author may have been is lost to history.

History of the *Beowulf* Manuscript:

The sole manuscript of the *Beowulf* poem dates to c. 1000. Handwriting style reveals that it was inscribed by two different people. Whether either scribe embellished or altered the original story is unknown.

The earliest known owner of the manuscript is the 16th century scholar Lawrence Nowell. In the 17th century it became part of Robert Bruce Cotton's collection and is therefore known as *Cotton Vitellius A.XV*.

It is now in the British Library.

In 1731, the manuscript suffered irreparable damage in a fire.

The first transcription of the poem was made by Icelandic scholar Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin in 1818. Since the manuscript has decayed further, Thorkelin's version is highly prized, yet its accuracy has been questioned.

In 1845, the pages of the manuscript were mounted in paper frames to save them from further damage. This protected the pages, but it also covered some of the letters around the edges.

In 1993, the British Library initiated the Electronic *Beowulf* Project. Through the use of special infrared and ultraviolet lighting techniques, the covered letters were revealed as electronic images of the manuscript were made.

The Author or Authors of *Beowulf*:

Beowulf contains many pagan and folkloric elements, but there are undeniable Christian themes as well. This dichotomy has led some to interpret the epic as the work of more than one author. Others have seen it as symbolic of the transition from paganism to Christianity in early medieval Britain. The extreme delicacy of the manuscript, the two separate hands that inscribed the text, and the complete lack of clues to the identity of the author make a realistic determination difficult at best.

The *Beowulf* Story:

Beowulf is a prince of the Geats of southern Sweden who comes to Denmark to help King Hrothgar rid his fabulous hall, Heorot, of a terrible monster known as Grendel. The hero mortally wounds the creature, who flees the hall to die in its lair. The next night, Grendel's mother comes to Heorot to avenge her offspring and kills one of Hrothgar's men.

Beowulf tracks her down and kills her, then returns to Heorot where he receives great honors and gifts before returning home.

After ruling the Geats for half a century in peace, Beowulf must face a dragon who threatens his land. Unlike his earlier battles, this confrontation is terrible and deadly. He is deserted by all his retainers except his kinsman Wiglaf, and though he defeats the dragon he is mortally wounded. His funeral and a lament end the poem.

For a more comprehensive overview of the plot, descriptions of characters and explanations of terms, see:

- The Beowulf Story
- Primary Characters in Beowulf
- Additional Characters
- Terms Used in Beowulf

The Impact of *Beowulf*:

Much has been written about this epic poem, and it will surely continue to inspire scholarly investigation and debate, both literary and historical.

For decades students have undertaken the difficult task of learning Old English in order to read it in its original language. The poem has also inspired fresh creative works, from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead*, and it will probably continue to do so for centuries to come.

Translations of *Beowulf*:

The first translation of the poem out of Old English was into Latin by Thorkelin, in connection with his transcription of 1818. Two years later Nicolai Grundtvig made the first translation into a modern language, Danish. The first translation into modern English was made by J. M. Kemble in 1837.

Since then there have been many modern English translations. The version done by Francis B. Gummere in 1919 is out of copyright and freely available at several websites, including at About's Classic Literature site. Other online editions are also available. Many more recent translations, in both prose and verse form, are available in print today and can be found in in most bookstores and on the web; a selection of publications is here for your perusal.

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