Anglo-Saxons, Beowulf, and the Epic Hero

References

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A few things to know…

- Bookended by a series of invasions of Britain

    *Germanic tribes in the 5ᵗʰ century

    *French in the 11ᵗʰ century

Invasions

*449: Jutes (Jutland, Denmark) cross North Sea and settle in Kent

*Angles and Saxons (from Germany) follow, bringing common language (ancestor of English)

* Many other peoples from northern Germany and southern Scandinavia

*Period of invasion lasts until about 700AD

Anglo-Saxon society: 6th-11th centuries

- Warrior–based
- Literacy: runic, then monastic scribing
- Religion:
  - Polytheistic/Nordic/animist
  - ~600: Christian (St. Augustine)
- Travel and trade
- Architecture and settlement
- Art and culture – e.g. Sutton Hoo
  The British Museum

Anglo-Saxon Timeline

Social attitudes

- Warrior–based
- Focus on the hero, and trial of personal worth
- Security and threat – survival in harsh world

- **Wyrd**
  - Fate – acceptance of the inevitable
- **Comitatus**
  - Loyalty and responsibility to group

Old English Language and Literature

- Germanic language, basis of common English

- Format (writing, spelling, structure) affected by the physical nature of recording
  - Runes

- Rich variety of styles of writing and literature

- Poetic techniques - very refined grasp of poetics both for oral delivery and contextual/literary emphasis

Poetic Techniques…

– Alliterative verse, and stressed half lines - very rhythmic. No syllabic rhyming in OE

– Formulaic repeated lines - oral technique to keep flow and alliteration going for hours

– Litotes (ironic understatement), **kenning** (combined nouns for description), synecdoche (part used for whole), metynomy (name substitution) - more than just simile/metaphor, control

– Discursions/digressions (tangential references and stories) - examples of issue at hand

Old English language and literature

- [The Wanderer](#):

  Ðonne onwæcneð eft wineleas guma,
  gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas,
  baþian brimfuglas brædan feþra,
  hreosan hrim ond snaw hagle gemenged.

  Þonne beoð þy hefigran heortan benne,
  sare æfter swæsne   Sorg bið geniwad

  Then the friendless man awakes again,
  He sees before him fallow waves,
  Sea birds bathing, preening their feathers,
  Frost and snow fall, mixed with hail.

  Then are the heavier the wounds of the heart,
  Grievous with longing for the lord. Sorrow is
  renewed

Beowulf

- Key point lies in how we have received the story of Beowulf - largely original/intact

- Not reinterpreted, rewritten, refined through ages

- Thousand year old manuscript written 950-1000 CE by 2 scribes, probably composed 700-800,West Saxon dialect, collected into Cotton Vitellius A.XV, now in British Library

- Longest extant OE poem - 3182 lines

- Beowulf Manuscript

- The Language of Beowulf

Beowulf

- Structure - Introduction and 3 distinct episodes
- 1000 lines each on Grendel, Grendel's mother, Dragon
- Continuity break between parts 2 and 3:
  - Cobbling together of 2 stories (are there lots of other Beowulf stories out there?)
  - Or deliberate juxtaposition (rise and fall of hero)?
- Emphasis on appropriate displays of nobility of character (and bonds of comitatus)
  - Hrothgar- king - rewards service
  - Beowulf - warrior - carries out dangerous forays
  - Wiglaf - loyal retainer - sticks by leader
  - Grendel's mother - family - seeks revenge for attack on son

Beowulf

Typical saga-epic format and story:

- Hero faces great monsters/threat/trial and achieves personally

- Threat is usually externalized (and demonized) as a Monster - Grendel, dragon, giants, demons, knights

- The individual in the social environment - the social hero or the individual hero

  - Achieve benefits for self or for others?

  - Internal or external challenge - safety or nobility

Influences on epic fantasy

Lord of the Rings:

- Various groups – Riders of Rohan (AS society), orcs (Grendel), elves, dwarves, wizards (druids)
- Languages and poetry
- Demonized, externalized threat to society
- Duty-bound heroes doing what is needed

Genre:

- Medievalism – swords'n'sorcery, wizards'n'warriors
- Lonely hero on epic quest to save the world
- Languages and literate emphases – runes, inscriptions
- Objects of power – rings, swords, magic
- Whole worlds and cosmologies

Tolkien and *Beowulf*

Saw his work on *Beowulf* as his major achievement

Key problems of interpretation -

• Monsters

• Literature or History?

• Can we understand a poem so far out of its social context?

The Epic Hero

- Undertakes role as duty to others, not as a personal achievement
- Strong sense of social morality, including code of behaviour to enemies
- Only becomes hero when needed, may be unwilling
- Does not necessarily have social status prior to heroics, but may achieve it. Considers it a consequence, not an aim, in heroics.
- Wyrd and comitatus.