

AP English Notes
20 September 2004

This article is found on *Beowulf* Background Information at
<<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Column/1122/BEOBG.htm>>.

The Germanic tribes from Europe who overran England in the second half of the fifth century AD, right after the Romans retreated from Britannia, brought with them the Old English, or, rather, the Angle, Saxon, and Jute interrelated tongues which combined and merged into ANGLO-SAXON, which in turn is also the basis of Modern English (*see* The English Language). They brought also a unique and specific poetic form and tradition, the formal character of which remained surprisingly constant until the end of their rule by the Norman-French invaders six centuries later (on September 28, 1066, to be exact) (Savage and Law).

Much of Old English poetry was probably intended to be chanted, with harp accompaniment, by the Anglo-Saxon *scop* (*skald*), or bard of the times. Often bold and strong, but also mournful and elegiac in spirit, this poetry emphasizes the sorrow and ultimate futility of life and the helplessness of humans before the power of fate and the natural forces.

Almost all this poetry is composed without rhyme, in a characteristic line, or verse, of four stressed syllables alternating with an indeterminate number of unstressed ones. This line strikes strangely on ears habituated to the usual modern rhythmic pattern, in which the rhythmic unit, or *foot*, theoretically consists of a constant number (either one or two) of unaccented syllables that always precede or follow any stressed syllable. Another unfamiliar but equally striking and most prominent feature in the formal character of Old English poetry is structural alliteration, or the use of syllables beginning with similar sounds in two or three of the stresses in each line.

All these qualities of form and spirit are exemplified in the epic poem *Beowulf*, written somewhere within the 8th century (750 BC) -- beginning and ending with the funeral of the great Danish king Hrothgar. Composed against a background of impending disaster, it describes the exploits of a Scandinavian culture hero,

The Old Germanic virtue of mutual loyalty between leader and followers is evoked effectively and touchingly in the aged Beowulf's sacrifice of his life and in the reproaches heaped on the *retainers* who desert him in this tragic but climactic second battle. The extraordinary artistry with which fragments of other heroic tales are incorporated to heighten the main action, and "with which the whole plot is reduced to symmetry," has only recently been fully recognized.

Another feature of *Beowulf* is the weakening of the sense of the ultimate power of arbitrary fate. The injection of the Christian idea of dependence on a just God is evident in the epic. [That feature is typical of other Old English literature, for almost all of what survives was preserved by monastic copyists. Most of it was actually composed by religious writers after the early conversion of the people from their faith in the older Germanic divinities.]

The manuscript, written in Old English, has a different grammatical system, very different from Modern English grammar. Old English, as was Latin, was a more complex language marked by much inflection: that is, affixes on a root word can stand in for function words like pronouns, so that a noun like "stow" will indicate its grammatical place in a sentence or clause by a series of endings: "... nis Ðæt heoru

AP English Notes
20 September 2004

stow!" (That is not a pleasant place!); or "He het þþa þþa stowe *Dominus videt*"

The translation of such a language thus seems far removed from what we experience as Modern English nowadays. The telling and retelling of the narration of Beowulf constrained the invention of mnemonic devices which made Beowulf a unique piece of writing when it was finally set down on paper. Thus, very unique verbal and poetic patterns evolved through centuries, finalizing into a poetic form which has fortunately been preserved and handed down to us. In *Beowulf* and other Old English poems of the times, dramatic effect was always accomplished through the use of such devices in the actual oral performance. Technically speaking, then, when such form of poetry is written down, it is neither completely oral nor graphic, yet, it translates into an awe-inspiring experience and beautiful tale. Such is the experience with Beowulf.

"Within the poem, no distinction is made between myth and history, although it is now read as though it were 'history with fabulous elements' or 'myth with some correspondence to fact.' *Beowulf* cannot accurately be described as fiction or fact. It is a kind of narrative comprised of analogical episodes, people, creatures more or less human, praise, blame, lyrical moments, grim comedy and even grimmer tragedy." (Savage)

"The poem makes an icon of a former age, constructed as such very consciously by a maker of poems, literate, somewhat literate or not at all literate, from familiar elements in this particular way. Analogies are built which bridge the pre Christian and Christian Germanic worlds, by making the characters in the poem noble, monotheistic preChristians, for an audience of Christian Germanic people; the poem is not anachronistic, and is, even in our terms, accurately placed according to 'history.' It is a story about 'those others who were ourselves'." (Savage)

The Geats

The Geats (Ya' ets) were Beowulf's clan - a seafaring tribe residing in the south of Sweden. As the poem suggests, the Geats appear to have been conquered and disappeared into history. They are also called the Weder Geats. The Geats are referred to as the Geatas, Guðð-Geatas (War-), the Sææ-Geatas (Sea-).

Given this history, F.R. Klaeber speculates that *Beowulf* himself was born in about the year 495. He defeats Grendel and his mother to save Hrothgar's kingdom in 515. Following Hygelac's raid in 520, he eventually becomes king of the Geats when Heardred was killed in 533. Fifty years after that, the poem says that *Beowulf* is killed by the dragon, but few scholars are willing to commit to any specific date.

Grendel was a monster, one of a giant race which survived the great flood, slain by *Beowulf*. There is reference that Grendel's origins stretch back to Cain, who killed Abel. (Genesis 4:4) He is of particular cause of trouble to Hrothgar because of his disregard for law and custom: he refuses to negotiate a peace settlement or to accept tributes of gold.

AP English Notes
20 September 2004

Slides Used on air

Beowulf

does name an actual
king, Hygelac who died in battle in 521.

Pseudo History speaks of Hygelac.

By the age of twelve, Hygelac was too large to ride a horse.

Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle and liege lord, was pulled into battle on a sled and he dies wearing a gold necklace/collar.

Beowulf

Danes' Lineage

Scyld

Beowulf (not our hero)

Healfdene

Hrothgar--Wealtheow

Hrethric Hrothmund Frewaru

+ Ingeld (the Heathabard)

Geats' Lineage

Hrethel

Hygelac (daughter--not named) + Ecgtheow

Beowulf (our hero)

Warrior Society Hierarchy

King

Thanes (Hearth Companions)

Wealth from Robbing

Arrogance and Violence

King Rewarded

Ring Bearer

Gift Giver

AP English Notes
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