

## Notes for the “Prologue” to Beowulf

- Hear me!      You try getting the attention of a roomful of drunken vikings sometime. Lines 1 – 3 introduce the themes of **heroes**, **glory**, and the fact that **heroes** win **glory** through **violence**.
- Shild. . . changed his own fate... Certain things are **fated** to be, but others can be changed through **bravery**.
- Tribute and obedience. . .      Vikings didn’t always fight. Just by threatening they could induce villages to pay them to go away and leave them in peace.
- Kingless and miserable. . .      You need somebody to be in charge. Otherwise, **CHAOS**. And when the old king dies, it’s good to have a new man ready to go. (Among the Anglo-Saxons, though, the crown does **not** automatically go to the eldest son.) Note here that it’s **God** (rather than **Fate**) that blesses the Danes with the prince.
- Golden rings. . .      Welcome to the **comitatus**. The **thanes** give their loyalty and strength to the king, as well as all the **loot** they win in battle. The **king** provides them with **leadership** and **divides the spoils generously and wisely**.
- So young men build. . .      The **scop** (poet) was not only an entertainer. At many points he dispenses **moral lessons**.
- When his time came. . .      **Death** is never far off -- in fact the whole epic poem of Beowulf is an elegy to a glorious bygone day – and when it comes it’s **cold and lonely**. (Remember that little **sparrow** flying through the **storm-tossed night**.)
- They heaped up treasures. . .      It seems a shame to **waste** all that **treasure**, but, to this day, we express **emotion** through **material items**, in **funerals** no less than for other occasions.
- Whose hands/ Opened to take that motionless cargo. . .      The Anglo-Saxons are ostensibly **Christian**, but you can see some **doubts** linger. Who does know *s what* will happen after we **die**. Where is Shild now?
- Healfdane. . .      There’s a lot of **anthropology** hidden in the poem. Here we learn about **marriage customs** between different groups of Anglo-Saxons.
- Hrothgar. . .      The “**king**” of the **Danes** (he doesn’t rule an entire nation as later kings did) as the events of this story unfold.
- To build a hall. . .      **Hrothgar** uses his wealth to build a huge **mead-hall** (a la **Donald Trump** or **Bill Gates**) called **Herot**. But even as the scop is building **Herot**, he reminds us of what eventually happened to it -- **ruin and destruction**.
- His boast. . .      **Boasting** was not seen by the Anglo-Saxons as a negative trait – if, of course, you make good on your boast. (This same trait can be seen in the modern professional athlete.)