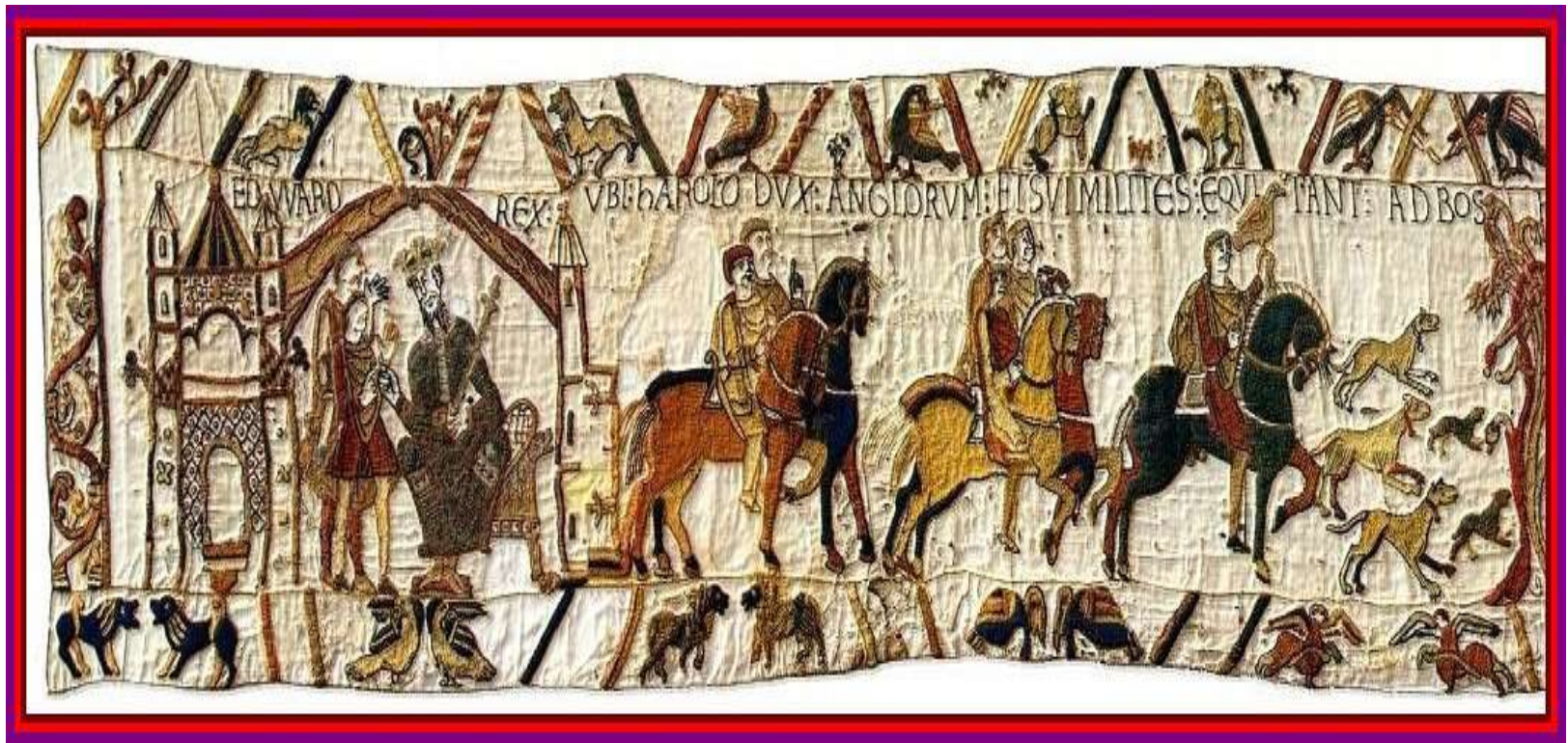


A close-up photograph of a wooden barrel, likely a cooper's barrel, showing its curved staves and a metal band. A wooden handle is attached to the side. The barrel is set against a dark, almost black background. The lighting highlights the texture of the wood and the metallic sheen of the band.

# BEOWULF

“In all civilizations, poetry precedes prose.”



# Background of the Epic

- Oldest written text in English.
- Composed in Anglo-Saxon (Old English) between 600 and 700 CE.
- Written down sometime in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.
- There is a manuscript of it in the British Library, that barely survived a fire.
- It is a literary picture of melding religious traditions, Norse, Celtic, Roman, and Christian.

# Background of the Epic

**Beowulf** also illustrates the transition of the heroic world to the medieval world. The world of violence and ruined civilization fades with the old gods, as the Christian promise of virtue and mortal valor overcoming the forces of evil gains prominence. A new culture, including a more peaceful world, dawns in the background of this epic poem. The epic takes place in a land between two seas, on *middanyear*, or “middle earth.” The warriors are described as *hæleth under heofenum*, or “heroes beneath the heavens.”



# Background of the Epic

- **The tale is told in two parts, and possibly was originally two separate epics, united by the scribe who wrote them down, and into history.**
- **In the first part, the young David-like warrior fights a hideous monster and defeats it.**
- **In the second part of the epic, the old king saves his world from the torments of an ancient scourge, and dies in the effort.**

# Literary Sources for Beowulf

- The Bible, particularly the Old Testament. No reference is made to Jesus, and the references are closer to the heroic world, more akin to Old Testament style.
- Roman Epics, particularly *The Aeneid*, which had been translated into Old English, likely by Alcuin, a scholar of the times. Possibly, the author was a scholar who also knew of Greek epics.
- Also, the Romans – perhaps thinking they would one day return to Britannia – buried treasure hoards throughout England, as the Roman army retreated and various Celtic tribes laid waste to their cities. Towards the close of the first millennium, some of these were unearthed in Saxon Britain. The Vikings, perhaps taking a cue from the Romans, also buried hoards of treasures.



# Literary Sources for Beowulf



- These treasure hoards, like the one guarded by the dragon in Beowulf, have been discovered in England as recently as 1992. During the time of Beowulf, such discoveries harkened back to the lost civilization – and Christian reasoning is applied to its demise.

# Conventions of the Verse

- In Old English, the verse is composed in alliterative trochaic (occasionally iambic) tetrameter,\* divided by a caesura. (Compare translations.) This hammering, marching *tetrameter* fits the rhythm of the old language, but is very difficult for translators to fit to Modern English, which has been assuaged by French. The common rhythm of Middle and Modern English, as you know, is iambic *pentameter*.
- And too, thanks to French, Middle and Modern English have gained many more common *assonant* (vowel) sounds, which makes the *consonant alliteration* of Old English, again, difficult to translate. (Compare translations.)



# Example of Old English, from Beowulf

1. **Ðā cōm of mōre under mist-hleoþum**
2. **Grendel gongan, Godes yrre bær,**
3. **mynte se mǎn-scaða manna cynnes**
4. **summe besyrwan in sele þām hēan.**
5. **Wōd under wolcnum, tō þæs þe hē wīn-reced,**
6. **Gold-sele gumena gearwost wisse,**
7. **fættum fāhne. Ne wæs þæt forma sīð**
8. **þæt he Hrōþgāres hām gesōhte.**
9. **Næfre hē on aldor-dagum ær nē siþð an**
10. **heardran hæle heal-ðegnas fand.**
11. **Cōm þā tō recede rinc sīðian**
12. **drēamum bedæled. Duru sōna onarn**
13. **fȳr-bendum fæst syþðan hē hire folmum gehrān:**
14. **onbræd þā bealo-hȳdig, ðā hē gebolgen wæs,**
15. **recedes mūþan. Raþe æfter þon**
16. **on fāgne flōr fēond treddode,**
17. **ēode yrre-mōd; him of ēagum stōd**
18. **ligge gelīcost lēoht unfæger.**

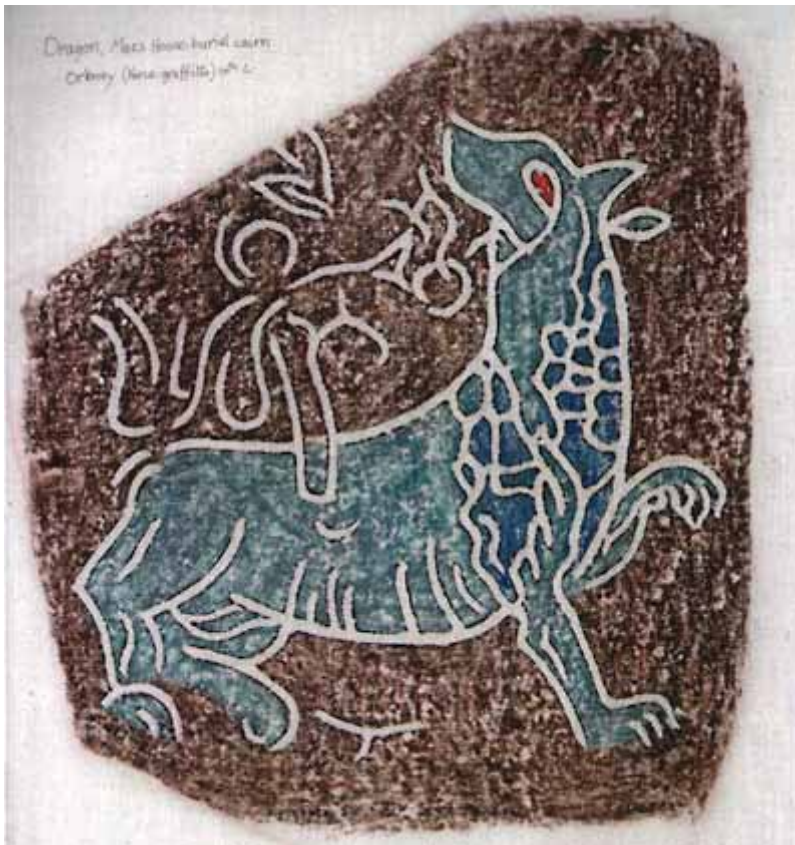


# Conventions of the Verse

## ***Beowulf* has its share of epic poetry conventions:**

- Long verse that deals with the origins of a nation, people or religious beliefs
- Gods and other supernatural beings play a role
- Human, mortal, heroes, national or religious, fight against great odds and triumph, but also die in the end
- The setting is global
- The diction is elevated, and it's written in verse
- The narrative often starts *in medias res*
- There is an episodic plot structure

# Conventions of the Verse



- And it contains literary\* devices such as kennings, epithets, epic similes, and stylized (epic) metaphors. You know what these are!
- Here are some cool kennings from the text, but you'll need to find your own for your project:
- *Whale path or swan's road, wave horse, word hoard, sword liquid, edge, ring-bearer, bone house, walking weaver, heaven's gem...and knights of learning! (Guess!)*

# Conventions of the Verse



- *Beowulf* also contains *elegiac verse*: which means like an elegy, or poem of sorrow for the dead, or an ode, which is to honor a person or even.
- The epic begins and ends with funerals, and between these spans the life journey of the hero, Beowulf.

# Qualities of the Epic Hero

- The untested young hero, often of uncertain parentage, is called forth to seek truth. He is sometimes accompanied by a “second,” who reinforces the human suffering they face. Often, too, he finds a mentor to help and guide him in times of trouble. He fights against superhuman odds, traveling to the realm of death itself, suffers great loss, but through his own human power, achieves glory and rewards. The journey leads him to learn a key aspect of human life (tied to the epic question) and the inescapable fact of human mortality.

# Qualities of the Epic Hero

- The old hero fights his last battle and passes the torch, for all temporal things must perish, man and civilization. Sometimes, the earthly hero achieves apotheosis, but not always. Although the message at the end of an epic is often foreboding, a kind of resurrection is imminent, and like a phoenix or the Christ, from the ashes of the old civilization, a new one will rise. The simple message to Nicodemus is one all humans in a temporal climate recognize. (See Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*.)\*

# Qualities of the Hero

- Remember, only a mortal human being can be a hero. The real struggle is the one we face each day, as our eternal minds cope with mortal flesh—and we endure, continuing to have the courage to love, hope, and see splendor and beauty around us—and sometimes to fight and die for a noble cause in a world that is ultimately transitory.





# Qualities of the Hero

Beowulf the hero embodies virtues that are emblematic of the shift in times:

- He has humility, not pride, although he boasts and is also interested in achieving glory.
- His loyalty and selflessness come before personal glory.
- He is strong, virtuous, courageous, and honorable, and he is judged by his honor as much as by his deeds.
- He is also blessed, due to his particular faith in Christianity, although he too, is tempted by the treasure trove of the dragon.

# Literary Descendents of Epic Poetry

- Dark Ages: Beowulf
- Middle Ages: Medieval Romance
- Renaissance: Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser\*
- Enlightenment: Menippean Satire
- Romantic Era: Gothic Novels
- Modern: Science Fiction / Fantasy

A photograph of a sword and its scabbard. The scabbard is at the top, with a brown and tan striped pattern. The sword is below it, with a silver blade and a dark hilt. The background is a solid red color. The title "Images from the Heroic World" is written in yellow text across the middle of the image.

## Images from the Heroic World

- Water monster
- Trolls and dragons
- Underwater fights in a supernatural place
- Magic swords
- Dragons and errant knights, freeing the maiden
- Death and glory
- Funeral pyre
- Faithless or faithful companions
- Blood and gore
- Blood feuds and revenge; killing of kin



## Images from the Judeo-Christian World

- Grendel as a descendent of Cain
- Hrothgar worships pagan gods
- Hrothgar's throne cannot be touched
- One pure and virtuous man saves the souls of others
- Humility of Beowulf
- Trust in Divine Providence and Divine Intervention
- Dragon guards the treasures of earth which are returned to the earth
- Curse on those who do not come to the aid of the king
- Rule with wisdom and humility, honor, courage, faith, loyalty, hope

# The Danes

- Scylding (Shielding): Danish people
- Hrothgar: King of the Scyldings (Danes)
- Herot: Glorious palace of Hrothgar (on island of Seeland)
- Grendel and his Mother: Descendants of Cain
- Unferth (Un-peace): Jealous of Beowulf
- Hrunthing: Unferth's sword
- Aeschere: Hrothgar's favorite sword-thane
- Wealhtheow and Freawaru: Wife and daughter of Hrothgar

# The Geats

- Hrethel: Father of Hygelac, King of Geats
- Hygelac: King of Geats, uncle to Beowulf
- Ecgtheow: Father of Beowulf, married to Hygelac's sister
- Beowulf: Hero, who is not known for valor at the beginning of the epic
- Hygd: Queen of Geats
- Heardred: Son of Hygelac, killed by Onela, brother-in-law to Hrothgar
- Hrunting: Beowulf's sword
- Wiglaf: Beowulf's loyal companion



A scenic landscape featuring snow-capped mountains and a body of water in the foreground. The mountains are partially shrouded in mist or low clouds. The water reflects the surrounding landscape, creating a serene and atmospheric scene. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, greys, and whites, with some green on the lower slopes of the mountains.

# The Parts In Our Textbook

**The Wrath of Grendel**

**The Coming of Grendel**

**The Coming of Beowulf**

**The Battle with Grendel**

**The Monster's Lair**

**The Battle with Grendel's Mother**

**The Last Battle**

**The Spoils and The Farewell**



# Words to Know:

- Narrative poem, alliteration, kenning
- Pagan
- Mere: boundary of the sea and land
- Fen: marsh
- Guerdon: reward
- chain mail
- Thane: member of the court who performs various functions, for example, *mead-thane*
- Mead: fermented honey beverage
- Mead Hall
- Keen: lament for the dead



