

# The Epic Poem and Beowulf

# Epic Poems

- An “**epic**” is a lengthy narrative poem, ordinarily concerning a serious subject containing details of heroic deeds and events significant to a culture or nation.
- A work need not be written to qualify as an epic, although even the works of such great poets as Homer, Dante Alighieri, and John Milton would be unlikely to have survived without being written down.

# Characteristics of the Epic

- The hero is of imposing stature, of national or international importance, and of great historical or legendary significance.
- The setting is vast, covering many nations, the world, or the universe.
- The action consists of deeds of great valor or requiring superhuman courage.



# Characteristics Continued

- Supernatural forces—gods, angels, demons—insert themselves in the action.
- A style of sustained elevation is used.
- The poet retains a measure of objectivity.





# Other Examples of Epics

- *Gilgamesh* from Mesopotamia
- The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from Greece
- The *Aeneid* by Virgil from Rome
- *Paadise Lost* by Milton



# What characteristics of the heroic epic do we find in *Beowulf*?

- Tells of the traditions of the people
- Is a long, dignified narrative poem
- Tells of the actions of the hero
- Has definite verse
- The characters are of noble birth.



# Traits of the Hero

- The “epic hero” generally participates in a cyclical journey or quest, faces adversaries that try to defeat him in his journey, and returns home significantly transformed by his journey.
- The epic hero illustrates traits, performs deeds, and exemplifies certain morals that are valued by the society from which the epic originates.

# First Page of Beowulf





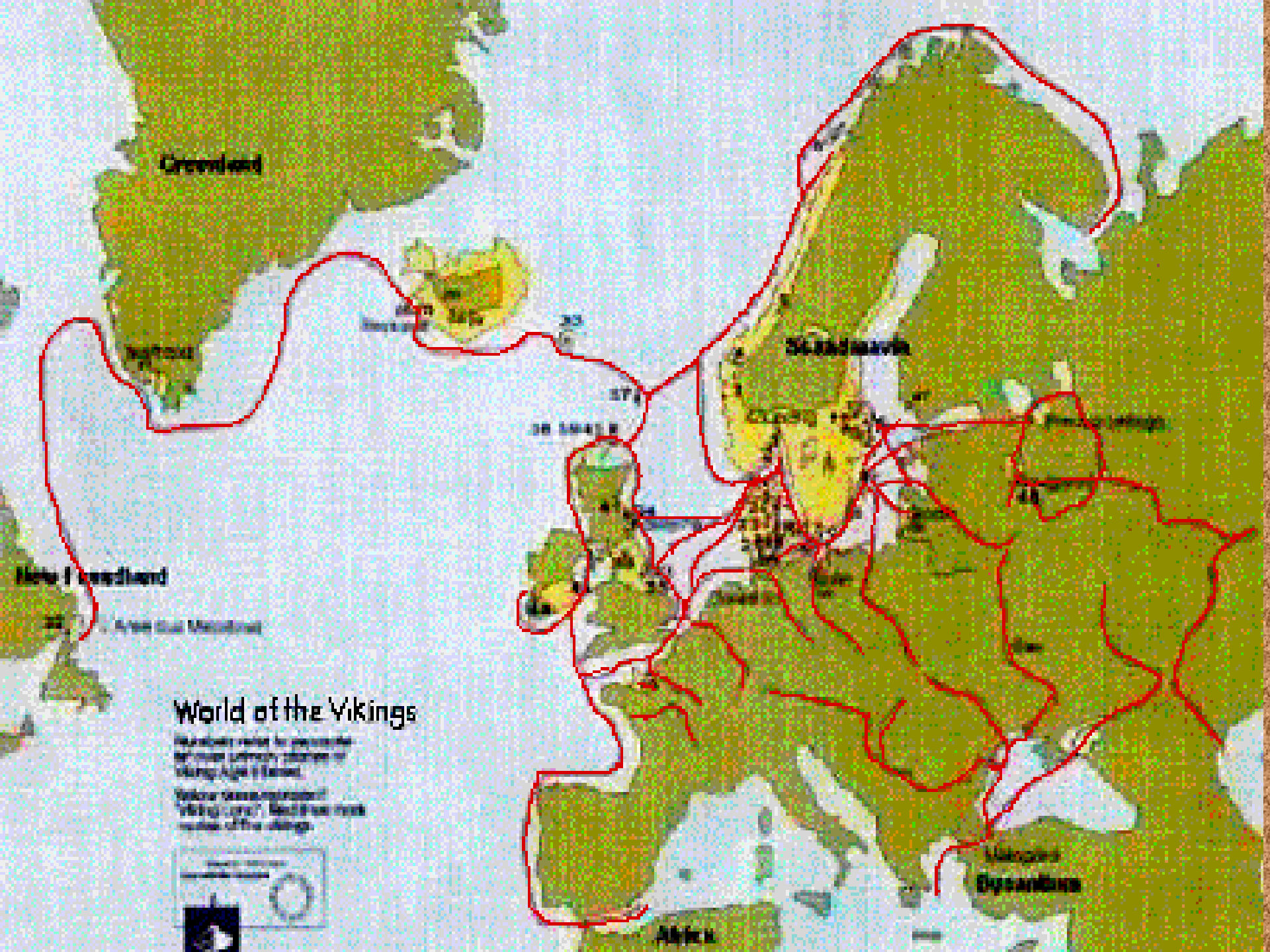
# Beowulf

- The Old English poem *Beowulf* follows Beowulf from heroic youth to heroic old age.



# Origins

- *Beowulf* survives in one manuscript, which is known as British Library Cotton Vitellus A. 15.
- At least one scholar believes the manuscript is the author's original, but most scholars believe it is the last in a succession of copies.
- *Beowulf* may have been written at any time between circa 675 A.D. and the date of the manuscript, circa 1000 A.D.



Greenland

New England

Scandinavia

Islamic Expansion

Africa

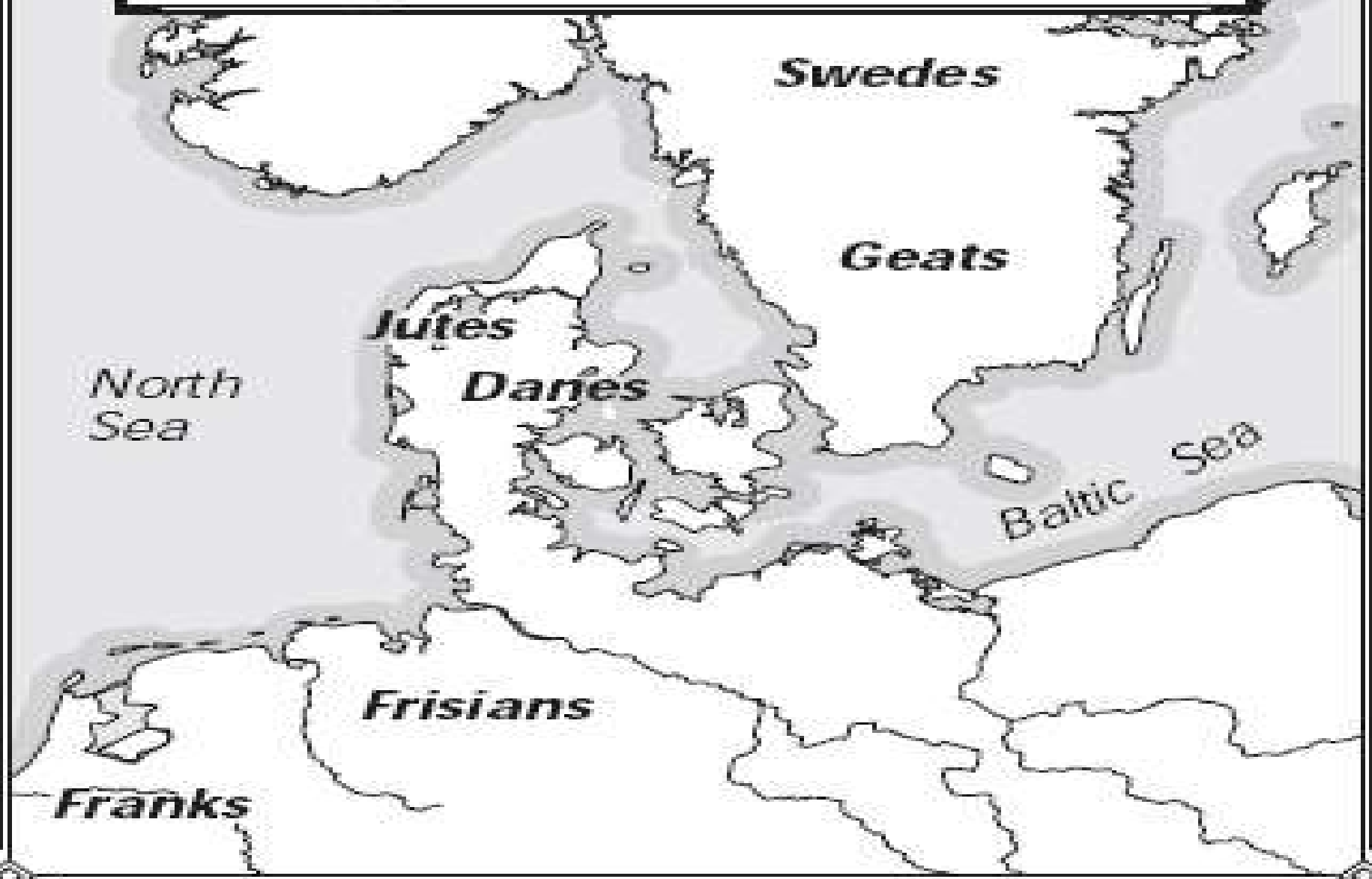
## World of the Vikings

Map shows extent of territories  
of major Viking powers of  
Viking Age (800-1050).

Vikings (800-1050) reached  
"Viking world". Map shows their  
routes of the Vikings.



# Early Denmark and Sweden During the Time of Beowulf



# Elements of Norse Myth

- Anglo-saxons believed that immortality or “lof” – *fame that survives death– could be earned through heroic action.*



# Worldview

- An important element of the Anglo-Saxon worldview was this concept of fate, “wyrd.”
- Specifically, the Anglo-Saxons believed that a hero could postpone death through personal bravery but that fate eventually would win out.



# England's Beginnings

- Beowulf is an English poem, yet the setting is northern Europe in what is now Denmark and Sweden.
- The events described probably took place at the same time as invasions of England by Scandinavian tribes from Denmark in the 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> centuries.

# England's Beginnings Continued

- After the first foothold in c. 440, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes inhabited most of England by the middle 6<sup>th</sup> century.
- Although Beowulf appears to be a fictional character, Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle and king, is an historical character who was killed in battle c. 521.

# Authorship

- There is no indication of who wrote *Beowulf*.
- Scholars have suggested at least two possible candidates, but neither of these identifications has been generally accepted.



## The Anglo-Saxon Storyteller or Bard

- The Anglo-Saxons had bards the called “scops” (pronounced shop) who sang and told epics like Beowulf.
- They did not regard scops, sang to the strumming of a harp, as inferior to warriors.
- As sources for their improvisational poetry, the storytellers had a rich supply of heroic tales that reflected the concerns of a people constantly under threat of war, disease, or old age.
- <http://www.bagbybeowulf.com/video/index.html>





# Associated “Theme” Words

- Fortitude and Wisdom
- Glory and Treasure
- Wyrd (fate) and Providence
- Loyalty, Vengeance and Feud
- Evil and Monsters

# About Theme

- The theme is the BIG IDEA (central or controlling idea) of a work of fiction, a view about life or people in general that it puts forward without saying it outright.
- That means you have to figure out the theme for yourself – you must make “inferences.”
- It is revealed through the characters and plot of the story.
- Also, it is always a statement – never a single word.

# Theme Continued

- To find a theme, try to consider what the “conflict” of a story is.
- In *Romeo and Juliet* the conflict is their love in the face of their families’ hatred. Their love overcomes this conflict only through their deaths, helping inform us of the theme.
- The theme of *Romeo and Juliet* might be summed up in a statement like “love is powerful and can overcome hatred – but at a price.”

# “Narrative Voice”

- *Beowulf* has an omniscient (all-knowing) narrator.
  - The narrator comments on the character's actions, and knows and is able to report on what they think.
  - The narrator is aware of things that are not known to the epic's characters.

# Anglo-Saxon Literary Elements

- “Alliteration” – the repetition of initial sounds of words.
- “She sells seashells by the sea shore”
- From Beowulf:
- *Ferdon folc-togan feorran and nean*
- Chieftans came from far and near



# Anglo-Saxon Literary Elements

- A “kenning” is a metaphorical phrase made of a compound word used to name a person, place, or thing *indirectly*.
- Kennings typically create an *image*.

# Anglo-Saxon Literary Elements

- Examples of kennings from Beowulf:

Gold-shining hall = Herot

Guardian of crime = Grendel

Cave-guard = dragon

# Anglo-Saxon Literary Elements

- What might these kennings mean?

Bone-box

Whale-road

Sky-candle

Light of battle

Helmet bearers

Giver of gold

Storm-of-swords

# Anglo-Saxon Literary Elements

Bone-box: grave of human body

Whale-road: sea

Sky-candle: stars, moon, sun

Light of battle: sword

Helmet bearers: warriors

Giver of gold: King

Storm-of-swords: war, battle

# Modern Examples of Kennings

- Gas guzzler
- Headhunter
- Muffin top
- Rug rat
- Eye candy
- Cancer stick
- Couch potato



# Guide for Summary

- [http://www.slideshare.net/elkissn/summarizing-a-story?utm\\_source=slideshow03&utm\\_medium=ssemail&utm\\_campaign=share\\_slideshow](http://www.slideshare.net/elkissn/summarizing-a-story?utm_source=slideshow03&utm_medium=ssemail&utm_campaign=share_slideshow)