

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Beowulf** (A, 26-97) Anonymous 8<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.

Western literatures typically debut with an epic which characterizes the founding spirit of the nation/state in question. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—and a great number of ancient Greek epic poems now lost, the epic cycle—served that purpose; so did Virgil's *Aeneid*, and, in France, *The Song of Roland* (12<sup>th</sup> century). *Beowulf* is the earliest preserved epic of English literature, and though its language is more nearly Germanic than what was to become English, this poem touches on themes and issues which were to make themselves formative in subsequent literature in English. Heroism abounds, in this tale of tribal quid pro quos and warrior codes, a tale which embeds Beowulf himself in the soil of early Germanic literature—like the *Nibelungenlied*. But the poet of Beowulf, probably a Christian, probes through epic spiritual possibilities which transcend the heroic warrior code. At the heart of this drama lies the conflict of Beowulf, himself a pagan, to subdue the incarnate evil of the dragon Grendel. Throughout the narrative there is a continuous sense of the cruelty of passing time, and of the human's short tenure of life. This sense assures a unique elegiac dignity to *Beowulf*.

*Question: National Literatures and their Origins*

*Beowulf* is the first work of powerful imagination to grow from the English (or pre English) basis of the language of the British Isles. It is thus worth reflecting on the stamp provided by this text, which though barely known to readers of English until our own times, casts a shadow of greatness over the literary culture to follow it. Like much epic literature *Beowulf* embraces themes of heroism, love and fidelity, death, the aging process, and the dignity of death. Has your own literary tradition some such looming originary text in its background? Has American—as distinct from British—literature such a foundational text? The answer (as I see it) is probably no, for great literature was not a starting point for the American cultural world. That starting point, I would guess, was the American Constitution, or perhaps Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791). What do you think?

*Comparative Literature:*

1. *Beowulf* shares with the work of other epic traditions a concern with the heroic past. Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Inferno*—though in different senses—all concern a real/fictional past which underlies them. The great national epic of India, the *Mahabharata*, unfolds against a misty blend of tale and historical memory, which links the work to a remote past. Do you see some connection between this past orientation and the oral quality of much epic poetry?

2. *Beowulf* intersects with archeology at many points, the text being confirmed by barrows, funeral tumuli, place names, and artifacts, such as those found at the treasure burial site of Sutton Hoo in southern England. In other words these confirming sites and objects leave us in no doubt about the historical, as well as the legendary/fictive elements of the epic. The oldest epic literature worldwide has been intertwined with history, as is most famously illustrated in the case of Homer's *Iliad*. (Heinrich Schliemann's excavations at Troy, to ground our understanding of Homer's text, are only the most dramatic example of the service of archeology in filling out such understanding.) Do you think that archeological discoveries can advance our understanding of the epic as *literature*?