

Beowulf 600-900. (conjectural)

The mystery of *Beowulf* is wrapped up in the obscurity of the dates of its composition. Boethius and Cassiodorus, for example, were scholars, diplomats and administrators within a well recognized hierarchy—the retainers and employees of the Ostrogothic Kingdom. They were easy to locate inside history. We can date their lives and works with no problem. The author of the Old English epic *Beowulf*, which runs to 3182 alliterative lines, in West Saxon Old English, offers us a complex mixture of ancient tales, contemporary (to him) history, folklore, and imagination. Quite possibly the poem has its origins in oral traditional poetry, to which the accretions of three centuries, plus multiple actions of ‘writing it down’ have further obscured the question of authorship. The accordingly wide range of dates, for the creation of this unique poetry, seems to be an unavoidable bow to history.

General character of the epic

The central tale of the epic does little to explain itself—its historical setting, the value system it displays—and barrels forward from one powerful (and often violent) scene to the next. Parallels from other cultures are the only footsteps by which to measure the text before us. We feel sure that the Scandinavian and North German culture worlds provide a fixed cultural backsetting to *Beowulf*. The *Nibelungenlied* (for example) provides a Beowulf-like darkness of setting, with similar vast but shadowy movements, often violent, which pass across it. We find in that Germanic epic the same blend of pagan tales with Christianity, which we find in *Beowulf*. Not only, then, must we grasp at literary straws, when trying to ascribe a time and place to *Beowulf*, but we must go as far field as Homer and Virgil in our efforts to place and trying to relate this Anglo Saxon epic.

For all this dating and authorship obscurity, we know that *Beowulf* is concerned with geopolitical struggles among certain dominant Scandinavian clans throughout the sixth century, while the poem is building on references to the many connections between England and Scandinavia at the time. Archaeological evidence from Denmark has gone far to suggest the world of vast burial sites and halls, which are both prominent features of the *Beowulf* world. Rich but misty is that world.

The tale itself

Hrothgar King of the Danes is in trouble; His great hall, Heorot, is being harassed by the monster named Grendel. (Stop for a moment! Ask yourself what kind of mindset creates an initial picture of this sort. Is the work a fancy? A monster thriller pulled out of the imagination of the author? A buried Christian discourse on evil and virtue?) The young hero, Beowulf, comes to Hrothgar’s aid, slaying Grendel with his bare hands. Then he kills Grendel’s mother, with a sword which he has found in her lair. In both these interventions Beowulf acts as a virtuous knight in armor, expelling dark forces.

Later in his life Beowulf becomes King of the Geats, a Scandinavian tribe, and finds that his kingdom is besieged by a dragon. Discovering that some of his treasure has been stolen from his own burial mound, he attacks the dragon and kills him, as he had killed Grendel and his mother, but is himself mortally wounded. He is cremated, and a burial mound is erected in his honor. He joins the army of heroic kings.

Grendel’s mother

Funerals bookend the epic, the first the funeral of the Scyld, the second the funeral of Beowulf himself. The fighting between Beowulf and Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon who appears destructively later (fifty years later) in the epic, is fierce and bloody. Beowulf tears Grendel’s arm off, brutally wounding

him and sending him in flight into the mountains, where he dies. Beowulf puts on display 'the whole of Grendel's shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp.'

Grendel's mother is aroused to fury, by this desecration of her son, and while Beowulf himself is absent, in another lodging, she attacks Hrothgar's hall, where the murder of Grendel had originally taken place. She violently kills the most loyal retainer of Hrothgar, then races back to her lacustrine cave. (The uncanny décor of the poem is not explained or justified—it is just the lived world of the poem. Beowulf and Hrothgar pursue her—no stopping, no pausing, no 'taking time to reflect'—as Beowulf plunges into the depths of the Grendel lake, fending off assaults from sea monsters as he goes. (The 'depth psychology' of this pursuit is nightmarish, ravaging the purposeful, reestablishing this primal epic at the core of the epic imagination) Finally arriving at Grendel's mother's lair, Beowulf spots a sword on the wall, correctly assumes that it is of monster-slaying potency, and dispatches the monster mother's head. As he departs from the scene of carnage, Beowulf comes on the corpse of Grendel, which he decapitates, returning to the surface and to a grateful Hrothgar, who welcomes back the hero. Accepting the fruits of Beowulf's courage, Hrothgar treats the hero to a didactic speech, in which he reminds him not to give way to pride, or to forget those who have helped him along his way. We wonder in vain whether there is a touch of humor in the odd placement of this moral harangue.

Fifty years later

A slave steals a precious cup from the lair of a dragon, and when the creature realizes what has happened, he surges out of his lair, destroying everything he can find. He lives on the same vitriol as had Grendel's mother. Beowulf goes out to meet him, and to protect the land, but in mortal combat is slain by the dragon. Beowulf is cremated. His ashes are deposited in a royal tomb, visible from the sea. He is a potent landmark for seafaring mortals.

And scattered throughout

The artistry of the poem thrives on the handling of time. The 'fifty years later' words, with which we switch to the dragon narrative, jolt our understanding of Beowulf's durability, and freshen our astonishment at both his power and his availability. That is not the only way in which temporal layering thickens the poem. Beowulf's feats are highlighted—as in his swimming across the sea from Frisia, carrying thirty suits of armor—as are interspersed lays and tales of the Geatish people, or the discussions between Beowulf and the monster Unferth about the latter's sword, and its propriety as a weapon against Grendel's mother. All of these apps enrich the sense of time in which the poem transpires. Within the background of enrichment tread the exploits of Beowulf himself, hardly sketched as a personality, and yet, in his intent murkiness, furiously faithful to task, fearless before the worst of struggles.

The survival of the poem of Beowulf and its path into the Middle Ages

Obscurity and questions envelop the epic of *Beowulf*. Was the poem originally oral, and then preserved by transformation into writing? If so, at what time did that take place? Or was the epic basically a written text, put to pen and paper at some point in a recent oral career? Was the work orally maintained at an early mediaeval period, like the year 600, which would mean the genesis of the work overlaps with the period of Boethius and Cassiodorus, scholars of the written word, even of the subtleties of translation, and thoughtful interpreters of the Christian textual tradition? Precision on that set of dating queries is still beyond us.

The aura of the complexity of the Middle Ages

What we can pin down, as we analyze this epic, is the beginning of our grasp of the complexity of the Middle Ages. Compared to those ages—a millennium between Augustine and Pico della Mirandola (for instance), the classical period, perhaps even the 'modern' period, display kinds of coherence unknown in the Middle Ages. Ancient Greek culture of the fifth century B.C., for instance, was culturally coherent, comprising the gradual coalescing of Hellenic ethnic groups (Ionians, Dorians, Aetolians) into a single cultural tone. A single set of values was gradually appearing, even among communal groups as

antagonistic as the Athenians and their rival cultural communities—like the Melians. Even in its vastness, Rome was a relatively coherent concept, for a millenium embracing most of western Europe with a single language, and a governmental structure which carried with it appendices of cultural values unbroken until the crumbling of the Empire in the fifth century.

With the piecemeal disintegration of the Roman Empire begins a millenium in which western Europe fragments into the prenational units which grew from the amalgam of Empire itself, and its many tributary tribe-states. An enormous but still incoherent gathering of tribes and cultures yeasted out around the Capital of Christendom, Constantinople, as well as around the larger groups composing what would gradually become the nations of Western Europe. Within those groups, however, diversity was the name of the game. From the darker Scandinavian epics, to the courtly poetries of the proto-Romance region, to the ecclesiastical and historical writings of the Anglo Saxons and Irish, there was immense variation of tone and purpose. It is hardly to be wondered, then, that by opening with two learned bureaucrat scholar-writers and following them with a mysterious epic, which may well date from the same time, we are readying ourselves for a network of historical surprises which will not easily settle into an undisturbed picture.

Study guides.

What is the meaning of the monsters swimming snakes and dragon that populate this epic? Are they forces of evil, 'symbols' of the dark side of the created world? Does Beowulf represent their inverse, the purity of the world in action? Or is that to attribute too much philosophical importance to Beowulf? Would we be wiser to compare him with a Homeric hero like Odysseus, who though a trickster is nonetheless intent on solving the problems of evil (the suitors), getting back home, and collaborating with his son to drive out the forces of evil (the suitors).

Has Beowulf elements of a miracle man about him?

Does the epic of Beowulf spring from a literary imagination? Would that be the imagination of Germanic epic poetry, roughly contemporaneous with Beowulf? Does the hero transform the world by the way he passes through it? Do we, in fact, feel that there is an author for this epic? Has the poem the trademarks of a personal set of attitudes, or is this work more nearly a tale? Is there a moral in this tale?