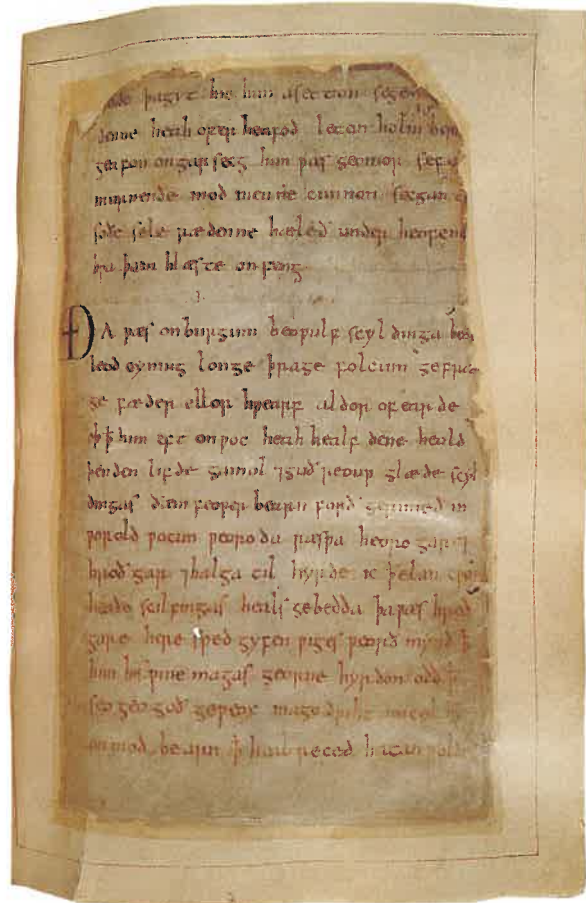


Page from the *Beowulf* manuscript (c. 1000). Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, f.133.



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Beowulf

Beowulf is to England what Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are to ancient Greece: It is the first great work of the English national literature—the mythical and literary record of a formative stage of English civilization. It is also an epic of the heroic sources of English culture. As such, *Beowulf* uses a host of traditional motifs, or recurring elements, associated with heroic literature all over the world.

The epic tells the story of Beowulf (his name may mean “bear”), a Geat from Sweden who crosses the sea to Denmark in a quest to rescue King Hrothgar from the demonic monster Grendel. Like most early heroic literature, *Beowulf* is oral art. It was handed down, with changes and embellishments, from one minstrel to another. The stories of *Beowulf*, like those of all oral epics, are traditional ones, familiar to the audiences who crowded around the harpist-bards in the communal halls at night. The tales in the *Beowulf*



Prow of the Oseberg ship.
University Museum of National Antiquities, Oslo, Norway.

epic are the stories of dream and legend, of monsters and of god-fashioned weapons, of descents to the underworld and of fights with dragons, of the hero's quest and of a community threatened by the powers of evil.

By the standards of Homer, whose epics run to nearly 15,000 lines, *Beowulf* is relatively short—approximately 3,200 lines. It was composed in Old English, probably in Northumbria in northeast England, sometime between the years 700 and 750. The world it depicts, however, is much older, that of the early sixth century. Much of the poem's material is based on early folk legends—some Celtic, some Scandinavian. Since the scenery described is the coast of Northumbria, not Scandinavia, it has been assumed that the poet who wrote the version that has come down to us was Northumbrian. Given the Christian elements in the epic, this poet may also have been a monk.

The only manuscript we have of *Beowulf* dates from the year 1000 and is now in the British Museum in London. Burned and stained, it was discovered in the eighteenth century: Somehow it had survived Henry VIII's destruction of the monasteries two hundred years earlier.

Beowulf: People, Monsters, and Places

Beowulf: a Geat, son of Edgetho and nephew of Higlac, king of the Geats. Higlac is both Beowulf's feudal lord and his uncle.

Brecca: chief of the Brondings, a tribe, and Beowulf's friend.

Grendel: man-eating monster who lives at the bottom of a foul mere, or mountain lake. His name might be related to the Old Norse *grindill*, meaning “storm,” or *grenja*, “to bellow.”

Herot: golden guest-hall built by King Hrothgar, the Danish ruler. It was decorated with the antlers of stags; the name means “hart [stag] hall.” Scholars think Herot might have been built near Lejre on the coast of Zealand, in Denmark.

Hrothgar: king of the Danes, builder of Herot. He had once befriended Beowulf's father. His father was called Healfdane (which probably means “half Dane”). Hrothgar's name might mean “glory spear” or “spear of triumph.”

Unferth: one of Hrothgar's courtiers, reputed to be a skilled warrior. His sword, called Hrunting, is used by Beowulf in a later battle.

Welthow: Hrothgar's wife, queen of the Danes.

Wiglaf: a Geat warrior, one of Beowulf's select band, and the only one to help him in his final fight with the dragon. Wiglaf might be related to Beowulf.



Viking coin minted in England (10th–11th century). Most such coins consist of precious metals extorted from the English as tribute.

British Museum, London.