

# Beowulf: a legendary warrior

## The Anglo-Saxon invaders and their world

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century the Roman Empire collapsed and the Romans were forced to withdraw their troops from Britain, so Anglo-Saxons tribes from Germany were free to invade and settle in different areas throughout England. By 441 these various Anglo-Saxon tribes formed the new power in Britain, shaping its culture, customs, literature, law and traditions. Their main literary contribution is the epic poem **Beowulf** which blends together some Viking features and the tribal culture of the Anglo-Saxons, along with a later Christian perspective, since the manuscript was believed to have been copied by a monk.

The main features of the Anglo-Saxon world we can find in the poem are the following:

- there were independent tribes and each tribe had their own king;
- they built walled farms and wood-hut villages;
- they used bronze and iron tools, and grew crops;
- they were often at war with each other;
- life was unstable and often violent due to these wars;
- warriors believed in the values of honour and loyalty to both the tribe and the king. To be remembered after death was particularly important. *Beowulf* celebrates a mythical warrior whose heroic death will make him immortal;
- these were oral cultures and scops (singers and poets) were the historians of the time;
- these cultures were non-Christian.

The most famous Anglo-Saxon epic poem deals with a hero, his fights against three monsters, battles, blood, death and fame.

## Beowulf

Beowulf, the protagonist, is a young nobleman from Geatland: first he goes to help the Danish King, Hrothgar, against two terrible monsters, Grendel and his mother, then he goes back to his land where he becomes king. Fifty years later, once again, he has to fight a dragon in a mortal combat and the poem ends with his testament and funeral. Like classic epic heroes, Beowulf is also characterised by such qualities as **courage, loyalty, generosity, honour** which he uses for the good of his people and country. He follows a strict 'warrior's code', typical of the military aristocracy he represents. He fights only when circumstances force him, and for practical reasons; he fights alone to defend his reputation as well as to avoid shame. His personality is that of a mortal human being with strengths and weaknesses which cause him inner conflicts. Moreover, he follows the pattern of **journey-initiation-quest** of any typical hero. In fact, Beowulf sets on a journey to fight the monster so as to deserve to rule his own country. The presence of fate (*wyrd*) is accepted as inevitable when he dies and the commemorative songs by his people make him immortal.

## An epic poem

### Structural characteristics of traditional epic

The most common stylistic conventions of a traditional epic poem are:

- it usually opens with the theme of the epic;
- the poet invokes a Muse, one of the nine daughters of Zeus, in order to have divine inspiration;
- the narrative opens *in media res*. This means 'in the middle of things', then there are flashbacks later on in the narrative;
- catalogues and genealogies are given to provide a broader, universal context to the action. They are in the form of long lists of objects, places, and people. This is also a way to pay homage to ancestors;
- the main characters give long formal speeches;
- the epic simile is widely used, which is a long, more complex and ornate comparison;
- repetition and stock phrases are common, since they favour memorisation. Most of them are widely used in the poem.

## Language and style

- **Scop.** The author of the poem is unknown. It was probably a *scop*, the Old English term for the poet, which means 'the maker'. The poet shapes the poem, but he doesn't necessarily invent the story, which is likely to be traditional in content.
- **Alliteration.** It is the repetition of consonant sounds or vowel sounds in closely placed words or syllables. Since Anglo-Saxon poetry does not use rhyme, alliteration is the main musical component in a line of *Beowulf*.
- **Caesura.** The space or pause in the middle of a line of Anglo-Saxon poetry that divides it into two half-lines or hemistichs. In *Beowulf*, each half-line contains two stressed syllables (and an indefinite number of unstressed syllables).
- **Kenning.** The periphrasis, in which an item is described (often in terms of its function or action) without naming it. Examples from *Beowulf*: the sea is called 'the swan-road' and 'the whale-road'; a king is called 'the ring-giver'.
- **Litotes.** It is understatement. As for its content, the style of *Beowulf* deals with the matter of ancestry which is first a way to chronicle history and make the past memorable, second a deviation typical of orality, then a musical device.