

## Module 3: Exploring Good, Evil, and Noble Sacrifice

### Topic 2 Content: Introduction to *Beowulf*


#### Introduction

#### Introduction to Beowulf

- The Story of Beowulf
- Oral Tradition
- The Written Manuscript
- Composition

#### Introduction

*Beowulf* is widely recognized as the greatest masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon literature. It is an epic, or long narrative poem, that offers insight into the values of the Anglo-Saxon people. Click each of the tabs to examine key background information about the story of *Beowulf*.



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### The Story of *Beowulf*

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##### The Story of *Beowulf*

The story of *Beowulf* is named after its hero, a warrior from Scandinavia who lived during the 6<sup>th</sup> century. *Beowulf* is a member of the Geat tribe from what is now southern Sweden. As a young warrior, he journeys to Denmark to fight monsters on behalf of a tribe called the Danes. He eventually returns to his homeland and engages in battle with a dragon. *Beowulf* celebrates the culture and values of warriors, which are evident in the many battle scenes demonstrating strength and courage.



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#### Oral Tradition

Today it is not known for certain who first composed *Beowulf* or when, but the epic poem likely originated in England sometime during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. During this time period, few people had the means or abilities to read and write. Thus, the story of Beowulf was shared orally by minstrels called scop, or musicians who told stories by singing poetic verses along with musical accompaniment. As the story was passed down from one scop to another throughout the generations, it grew to encompass many elements of older Scandinavian and Celtic folk tales.



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#### The Written Manuscript

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#### The Written Manuscript

Eventually, the story of *Beowulf* was written down by Christian monks. The only surviving copy was probably produced sometime around the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. By this time, Christianity had become the predominant religion in England, and its influence permeates the text through references to the Old Testament, such as the creation story of Genesis and the tale of Abel and Cain. The sole original copy of *Beowulf* was damaged by a fire in 1731, but the surviving version is fairly complete and has since been preserved digitally.



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#### Composition

#### Introduction to Beowulf

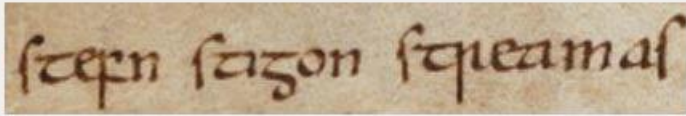
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#### Composition

The original language in which *Beowulf* was told is Old English, which is so different from the Modern English you speak today that it would be incomprehensible should you try to read or listen to it. For example, below is the first sentence of *Beowulf* in its original language:

Hwæt! Wé Gárdena in géardagum  
þeodcýninga þrym gefrúnon·  
hú ðá æþelingas ellen fremedon.

The surviving manuscript is comprised of a prologue and forty-three sections. The first three quarters of the poem tell the story of Beowulf as a young warrior. The final quarter portrays Beowulf in his later years as the aging King of the Geats.



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