

# The Old English Period

450-1150

INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

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- Literature is as old as human language.
- It starts with words, and with speech → the 1<sup>st</sup> literature in any culture is oral
- In English, the 1<sup>st</sup> signs of oral literature tend to have **3 kinds of subjects matter**:
  1. religion
  2. war
  3. the trials of daily life



- The fragments that remain confirm that the motivations & inspirations for producing literature, & for listening to it (or later, reading it) are the same all through history →

Literature can give:

- comfort
- consolation (as religious lit. often does)
- can illuminate our problems
- can affirm & reinforce social, political & ideological standpoints.



- Caedmon's Hymn → the 1<sup>st</sup> fragment of lit. (around 670) and it also considered as the 1<sup>st</sup> Christian religious poem written in English. It was preserved by the monks of Whitby.
- Christian monks & nuns, in effect, the guardians of culture → as they were virtually the only people who could read & write before the 14<sup>th</sup> C.



- All the texts in the oral tradition in Anglo-Saxon literature are poetry → most are short (**Beowulf is the only long epic poem**) & full of images.
- The characteristic of Old English poetry:
  - verse form → a double line with a break in the middle
  - the use of repeated sounds, poetic tropes → enable a writer to describe things indirectly & which require a reader imaginatively to construct their meaning.



# Beowulf

- An Epic written in the 11<sup>th</sup> C. Wessex dialect → the beginning of a heroic tradition (emphasizing strength & the territorial imperative).
- The characters & setting: Germanic
- Beowulf is a classic- mortal hero, who comes from afar. He has defeated the mortal enemy of the area ~ the monster Grendel ~ & has thus made the territory safe for its people.

# **HOMEWORK**

**FIND THE SIMILARITIES  
& DIFFERENCES  
BETWEEN THE TWO  
WRITTEN TEXT**



# Sources

Beckoff, Samuel. English Literature I. New York: Monarch Press, 1971.

Carter, Ronald and John McRae. The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland. London: Routledge, 1997.

