



Beowulf

Although much of Anglo-Saxon oral production has been lost to us, the most famous **epic poem** of this period, *Beowulf*, has survived. A good example of Anglo-Saxon poetry and language, *Beowulf* is also an important historical document because it describes the customs and the ways of life of the old Germanic warriors.

Beowulf was originally made up of short poems which became a complete work in Northumberland in the 8th century and was probably written down by monks in Anglo-Saxon or Old English during the 10th century. Though fundamentally pagan, this epic poem also contains some Christian elements, mixing **historical facts** with **legends** and popular beliefs. With primitive simplicity, it narrates how the hero called Beowulf comes from across the sea with his companions and frees the Danish King's hall from the terrible monster Grendel. Beowulf dies fifty years later in the fight against a dragon devastating Sweden.

In the following passage, during the night, the monster Grendel comes out of the misty¹ marsh² and walks to Herot,³ hoping to kill the king's warriors sleeping in the Great Hall.

The Battle with Grendel

From *Beowulf*, chapter 11, adapted version

Grendel snatched¹ at the first Geat²
 He came to, ripped him apart,³ cut
 His body to bits with powerful jaws,⁴
 Drank the blood from his veins and bolted⁵
 5 Him down, hands and feet; death
 And Grendel's great teeth came together,
 Snapping life shut.⁶ Then he stepped to another
 Still⁷ body, clutched⁸ at Beowulf with his claws,⁹
 Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful¹⁰ sleeper
 10 And was instantly seized¹¹ himself, claws
 Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
 His mind was flooded¹² with fear but nothing
 Could take his talons and himself from that tight¹³
 Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
 15 From Beowulf, flee¹⁴ back to his marsh and hide there:
 This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.
 But Higlac's¹⁵ follower remembered his final
 Boast¹⁶ and, standing erect, stopped
 The monster's flight, fastened¹⁷ those claws
 20 In his fists¹⁸ till they cracked, clutched Grendel
 Closer.

GLOSSARY

- 1 full of fog
- 2 land full of water
- 3 the Danish King's castle

GLOSSARY

- 1 took hold of
- 2 inhabitant of South Sweden
- 3 tore him into pieces
- 4 animal mouth
- 5 ate quickly
- 6 quickly cutting
- 7 motionless
- 8 grasped, hold
- 9 curved nails
- 10 alert
- 11 clutched
- 12 filled
- 13 firm and strong
- 14 run
- 15 Beowulf's uncle and King of the Geats
- 16 proud claim
- 17 took firmly
- 18 hands closed tightly