



# Beowulf

The epic poem *Beowulf* is one of the most widely read works in the English language. Though scholars do not know the precise origins and author of the *Beowulf* text, it was most likely composed in the 8th century AD. *Clash of the Gods: Beowulf* explores the significance of this classic epic, investigating how and why this tale of heroism has been so widely read for generations. The poem follows the triumph of the young prince known as Beowulf as he traveled from his home in southern Sweden to help King Hrothgar of Denmark overcome the vicious monster Grendel. This one-hour episode traces the central events in the poem as Beowulf and his warriors are pitted against an increasingly challenging series of foes.

As the *Beowulf* epic continues to capture the imagination of readers, historians and archaeologists have searched for physical evidence that might confirm whether or not a real-life Beowulf existed. Radio carbon testing, archaeological excavations, and careful analysis have unearthed new information regarding the context in which the story was created and why these Norse myths have prevailed. Did a mead hall much like Heorot,

the gathering place for warriors, actually exist? Did a hero much like Beowulf once lead the Geats? This program examines these new dimensions to the *Beowulf* epic, and provides an excellent visual companion to this landmark text.

## Curriculum links

*Clash of the Gods: Beowulf* would be useful for English literature and global studies courses, and for course units on mythology and literary theory. It is appropriate for 8th-grade students and above.

## Vocabulary

Using the dictionary at [www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com) or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

<b>adversity</b>	<b>impervious</b>	<b>myriad</b>	<b>resonate</b>
<b>distinction</b>	<b>mayhem</b>	<b>nemesis</b>	<b>wanton</b>
<b>exemplary</b>	<b>mercenary</b>	<b>pagan</b>	

## Pre-viewing Activity

The events explored in *Beowulf* are set in early 6th-century Scandinavia. Before reading the text or watching this program, ask students to look at a map of this region during that era and discuss the major groups and population centers during this time period. Students should also discuss when and where scholars believe the poem was written.

## Discussion questions

**1.** When and where do scholars believe the *Beowulf* text was written? What are some clues they have used to explain why they believe it was written during this time period?



2. In this program, the narrator discusses the decline of “paganism” and the rise of Christianity. What did this shift mean, and why was it significant?
3. Why do you think King Hrothgar called upon Beowulf to help him slay Grendel? Why do you think Beowulf was willing to accept this challenge?
4. During Beowulf’s era, what were some of the funeral procedures for warriors?
5. This documentary explores the discovery of artifacts at Sutton Hoo. How do these artifacts possibly shed light on the Beowulf epic? Do you think these findings are important? Discuss.
6. Archaeologists have uncovered a structure that seems very similar to the hall known as Heorot in Beowulf. What was the importance of these halls? Do you think these artifacts shed light on ancient Anglo-Saxon society?
7. How did Grendel’s mother attempt to seek revenge for the loss of her son? What do you think is the importance of this section of the epic in comparison with the first section? Discuss.
8. This program discusses the importance of dragons in mythology. What have dragons traditionally represented in literature?



9. How did the rise of Christianity influence the Beowulf epic, according to the scholars in this program?
10. Why do you think Beowulf is still considered a classic of English literature?

## Extended activities

1. As a leader who personifies “heroism,” Beowulf is one of the earliest examples of a “hero” in English literature. After watching this program, ask students to return to the text of Beowulf. Students should choose a section of the poem which they think captures Beowulf’s heroism, either through a description of him, or through a description of his actions. Then, ask students to write a 2-page essay

about why this passage speaks to Beowulf’s heroism, and why his character continues to be used as an example of heroism in action.

2. This program discusses the archaeological findings at Sutton Hoo which provide insight into the era in which Beowulf was set. Online or at the library, students should research the archaeological evidence unearthed at Sutton Hoo. Then, ask them to write a short report or prepare a visual presentation exploring the artifacts at Sutton Hoo in relation to the Beowulf epic. In a larger class discussion, students should share these projects and examine the significance of the Sutton Hoo findings.
3. The hall created by King Hrothgar, known as Heorot, was a location of great significance in Beowulf. Historians and archaeologists have reconstructed examples of these halls based on descriptions and physical artifacts. In small groups, ask students to create visual presentations depicting Heorot or similar Viking halls. These projects can be presented as 3D models, in PowerPoint format, or on posterboard. Students should choose one group member to discuss the significance of these halls in Beowulf and the era in which the poem is set.
4. Throughout the poem, Beowulf faces a series of enemies. From Grendel, to his mother, to the evil dragon, each of these monsters presents the hero with an intense challenge. Ask students to imagine that Beowulf was not killed at the end of the epic, and to create another challenge for him to face. Students can present their work as a graphic novel, comic book, poem, or short story, but they should be sure to connect their extension of the epic to previous portions of the text.

## Websites & books

### WEBSITES

The Electronic Beowulf: [www.uky.edu/~kiernan/eBeowulf/main.htm](http://www.uky.edu/~kiernan/eBeowulf/main.htm)

Background information from the BBC: <http://feeds.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A994665>

More about the Sutton Hoo excavation: [www.suttonhoo.org/tour.asp](http://www.suttonhoo.org/tour.asp)

About Beowulf translations: <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/Literature/subcollections/Ring1BeowulfAbout.html>

### BOOKS

Anderson, Sarah (editor) and Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy (translators). *Beowulf: A Longman Cultural Edition* (Longman, 2004).

Baker, Peter. *Beowulf: Basic Readings* (Taylor & Francis, 2000).

Heaney, Seamus (translator). *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (WW Norton & Company, 2001).

Heaney, Seamus (translator) and John D. Niles (illustrator). *Beowulf: An Illustrated Edition* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).