

Beowulf



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Free Audiobook



Beowulf

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These symbols indicate the beginning and end of the passages linked to the listening activities.



An Anglo-Saxon iron helmet with bronze decorations (early 7th century), part of the Sutton Hoo treasure in the British Museum (see page 81).

The Historical *Context*

Beowulf is the earliest story in English literature; to put it in its historical context we need to look at 650 years of history.

In the 4th century, the Roman Empire in western Europe

began to break up. The Roman army left Britain in 410 CE and the Britons, who the Romans had conquered and who had become ‘Romanized’, couldn’t defend the country on their own. As a result, in the 5th century Germanic peoples began to invade¹ Britain. These invaders came above all from north Holland, north Germany and Denmark (see the map on page 9), and included different peoples: the most important were the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes. We call them ‘Anglo-Saxons’ now. The word ‘English’ comes from the language of the Angles: they called themselves ‘Engles’ and their language ‘Englisch’.

Beowulf, the hero of the poem *Beowulf*, is neither an Angle, a Saxon nor a Jute. His people are the Geats, from the southwest of modern-day Sweden, and the events of *Beowulf* take place in Denmark and Sweden.

1. **invade** : enter a country by force, with soldiers.

Statue of King Alfred the Great (see page 6) erected in Winchester in 1899.

However, the Geats had cultural and linguistic similarities with the Anglo-Saxons, and the story of Beowulf was taken to England by story-tellers, where it was told among the Anglo-Saxon peoples.

But, back to English history! Because of the Anglo-Saxon invasions, many Britons moved west, where they kept their language and culture alive in northwest England, Wales and Cornwall.

By the 7th century, the Angles had kingdoms in the east, north and centre of England, the Saxons had kingdoms in the south and south-west, and the Jutes had a kingdom in the south-east. Eventually, they were united in the early 9th century and they all became part of the kingdom of Wessex (the word means 'the West Saxons').

The Anglo-Saxons were pagans,² and in 597 the Catholic Pope in Rome, Gregory, sent a priest called Augustine to Britain to convert³ them to Christianity. Augustine became the first Archbishop of Canterbury,⁴ and within a hundred years the Anglo-Saxons had converted to Christianity, although pagan ideas did not disappear completely.

2. **pagan** : pagan religions are older than the main religions of the world. Pagans believe in many gods, and nature is important for them.
3. **convert** : persuade someone to change their religion.
4. **Archbishop of Canterbury** : the head priest of the Anglican Church, the most important person in the Christian community in Britain.





Some of the chess pieces in the form of Viking kings, queens and warriors found on the Isle of Lewis, in the Scottish Hebrides islands (2nd half of 12th century).

At the end of the 8th century the Vikings, fierce people from Norway and Denmark, began to carry out raids⁵ on the British coast. The raids soon became invasions. Alfred the Great, king of Wessex from 871 to 899, was the only king who successfully resisted them. Alfred won many battles against the Danes (the name now given to the Viking invaders), and some Danes chose to live peacefully in England. But Alfred was not just a warrior; he was also active in the creation of English culture, and had several religious works translated from Latin into Old English, the name of the Anglo-Saxons' language.

The Anglo-Saxon period came to an end in 1066, with another invasion. The Anglo-Saxon King Harold was defeated at the Battle of Hastings, on the coast of southeast England, by William, the leader of the Normans, a people descended from⁶ the Vikings who went to live in Normandy in north-west France. After his victory – the last invasion of England, known as 'the Norman Conquest' – William became King William I of England, known as 'William the Conqueror'.

5. **raids** : sudden violent attacks.

6. **descended from** : related to people who were born a long time before.

1 Comprehension check

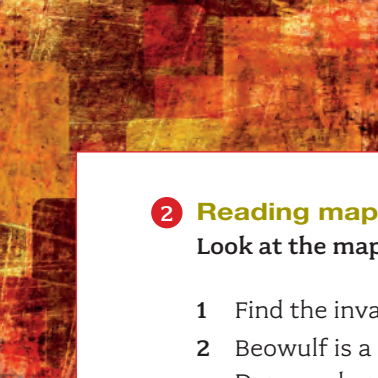
Answer the following questions.

- Put the peoples in the order in which they arrived in England.

A ☐ Anglo-Saxons	D ☐ Britons
B ☐ Romans	E ☐ Vikings
C ☐ Normans	
- What happened when the Roman army left Britain, and why?
- Where does the word 'English' come from?
- Was Beowulf an Anglo-Saxon?
- Two well-known characters in British history are Augustine and Alfred. Who were they?
- Who were the Vikings?
- Why is the year 1066 significant in English history?



Harold is killed at the Battle of Hastings, from the 'Bayeux Tapestry' (about 1066-82). This 80-metre artwork tells the story of the invasion.



2 Reading maps

Look at the map on the opposite page.

- 1 Find the invasions mentioned in the introduction.
- 2 Beowulf is a Geat: where do his people live? He goes to help the Danes: where do they live?
- 3 How many modern countries can you name on this map?

3 Reading pictures

Answer the following questions.

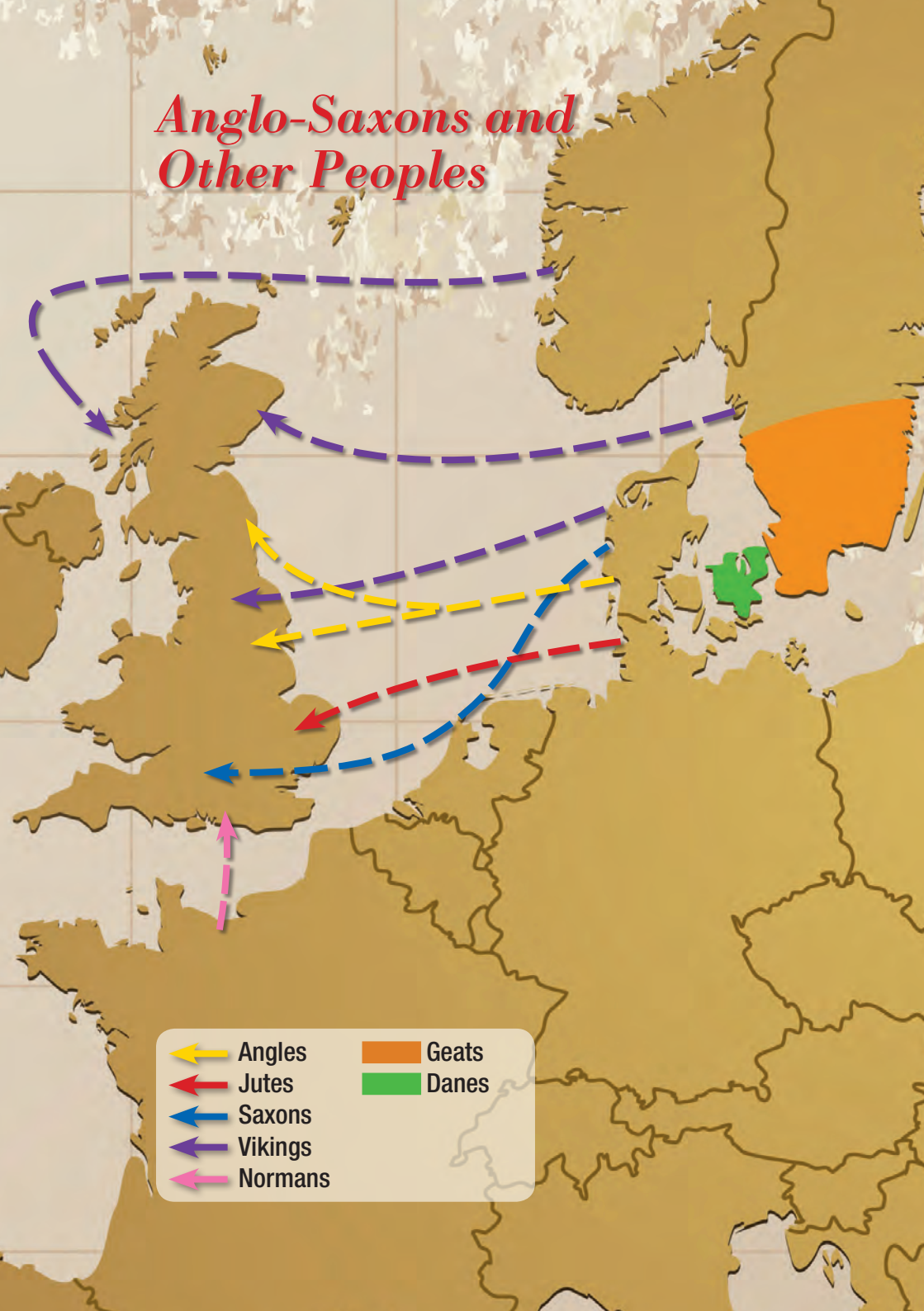
- 1 Look at the illustration on page 4. Suggest an adjective to describe the helmet. For example, do you find it calm, fierce, beautiful, frightening, mysterious... or what?
- 2 Look at the illustration on page 5. The statue suggests that King Alfred was both a warrior — a fighter — and a Christian. How does it do this?
- 3 Look at the illustration on page 6. The chessman in the middle is dressed differently from the others — how? Describe what he is doing. Do you think he is supposed to be funny or frightening?
- 4 Look at the illustration on page 7.
 - Can you name the weapons and armour? (You can look on page 14 for help.)
 - Who do you think are Anglo-Saxons and who are Normans?
 - Which character do you think is King Harold?

4 Normans

The word 'Normans' comes from 'Northmen', another way of referring to the Vikings. They arrived in Normandy in 911, converted to Christianity and adopted the French language. The 'Norman Conquest' of England is their most famous expansion out of Normandy, but soon after this other Normans founded kingdoms in the south of Italy and Sicily.

Use the Internet or reference books to do some research on the Normans. Find out where they went.

Anglo-Saxons and Other Peoples



- Angles
- Jutes
- Saxons
- Vikings
- Normans

- Geats
- Danes

The Cultural *Context*

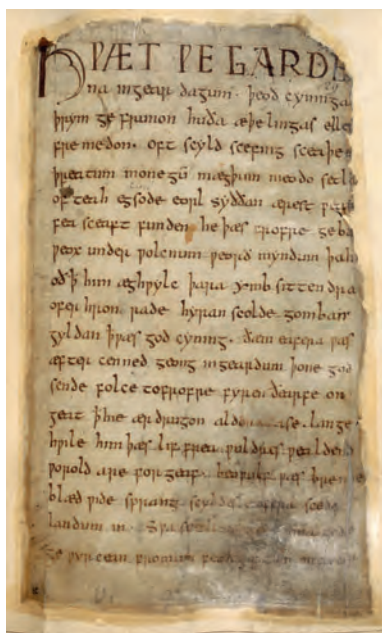
Beowulf, a poem of 3,182 lines, is the longest surviving poem in Old English, the name given to the language of the Anglo-Saxons. It is also the first important example of poetry in a European language that is not Greek or Latin.

There are a couple of references in *Beowulf* to historical events in Denmark from the 6th century, but almost all the poem is based on legends, not history.

The version of the poem that we have now was probably composed between 700 and 750. It was composed in England, even though the story takes place in Sweden and Denmark: Anglo-Saxons continued

to tell traditional stories from the Germanic world, even after they had invaded England.

Like other early poetry in other cultures, *Beowulf* was first told orally, for centuries,¹ before finally being written down. In Anglo-Saxon times only very few people could read or write, and there were very few books, which all had to



The first page of the British Museum's manuscript of *Beowulf*, written in Old English.

1. **centuries** : a century is a hundred years.



The Bard by Philip James de Loutherbourg (1740-1812). ‘Bard’ is an old word for a poet. This romantic painting does not represent historical Anglo-Saxon times – it is deliberately unrealistic and romantic!

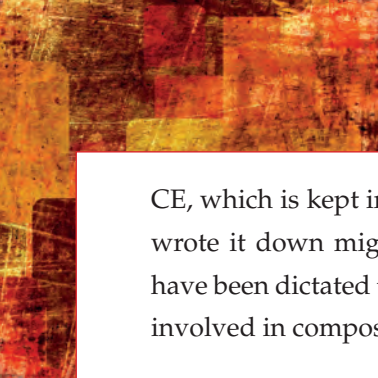
be written by hand. Printing books by machine in Europe was only invented in the 15th century, so before then stories were usually told orally instead of being read.

In *Beowulf* there are several references to the Anglo-Saxon performer – called a *scop* (pronounced ‘shop’) in Old English – who gave oral performances of poems on special occasions, singing or chanting² them while playing an instrument like a harp or lyre. The *scop* memorised stories; he could also invent new versions of stories by putting together phrases from different stories that he had memorised. The first written version of *Beowulf* is a manuscript³ from about 1000

2. **chanting** : speaking in a repetitive, musical way.

3. **manuscript** : an old example of a piece of writing, written by hand, not printed.





CE, which is kept in the British Museum in London. The person who wrote it down might have been a bard himself, or the poem might have been dictated to him. We have no idea of the names of the people involved in composing *Beowulf* or in writing it down.

1 Comprehension check

Make notes below to make a factfile about *Beowulf*.

- 1 Two reasons why *Beowulf* is famous
 - a
 - b
- 2 When it was composed
- 3 Why it was not written down at first
- 4 When it was written down
- 5 Name of the poet
- 6 Where the action takes place
- 7 Where the manuscript is kept now

2 A poem or story from your culture

Beowulf is an important part of the culture of Britain. Make a similar factfile about an important poem or story in your culture. Then use your factfile to give an oral presentation of the poem or story you have chosen.

3 Hwaet!

Look at the illustration on page 10. The first word of the manuscript is 'Hwaet!'. Anglo-Saxon *scops* began their performances with this word. What do you think it means, and why did they say it?

4 Bards

'Bard' is an old word for poets from Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but nowadays we use the word 'bard' to refer to Anglo-Saxon *scops* as well. Look at the illustration on page 11. The painter wanted to make a very romantic, non-realistic picture. Describe it in detail. Why is it not realistic? Do you like it? Why, or why not?

The Characters



From left to right, top to bottom: Unferth, Beowulf, Wiglaf, King Hrothgar, Queen Wealhtheow, Grendel's mother, the dragon, Grendel.

Before you read

1 Vocabulary

The weapons and armour below were used by warriors – experienced fighters – at the time of Beowulf. Match the words (1-6) with the pictures (A-F). Use your dictionary to check your answers. Which of them are for attacking, and which are for defending yourself? Which of them do you find attractive to look at (if any)?

- | | | |
|----------|----------|--------------------|
| 1 shield | 3 knife | 5 sword |
| 2 spear | 4 helmet | 6 chainmail armour |



2 Middle-earth

Many people have heard of 'middle-earth' through the novels of J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. But Tolkien did not invent the name. The word *middangeard* (meaning something like 'middle place') is used a few times in *Beowulf*, and similar names were used in Germanic myths to refer to the world of humans, which is below the world of the gods above.

Middle-earth is the place we are going to visit, and our story begins in a mead hall, a large building where a lord or king invited his people to eat, drink and listen to bards telling stories.

Now start reading or listening to Chapter One.



CHAPTER ONE

Heorot Hall



n the old times the kings of the Danes were heroes, and stories were told and songs were sung about them all over middle-earth.



track 02

The first king was Shield Sheafson. He arrived on the coast of Denmark as a baby, alone, in a boat filled with treasure. No one knew where he came from, but he grew into a fierce warrior and a great leader of men.

When Shield died, he was given a hero's funeral. His body was placed in a boat together with a treasure of gold, silver and jewels. There were weapons and armour, too, and a gold banner¹ was put high above his head to show everyone who he was. The boat was

1. **banner** : long piece of cloth, like a flag, with writing on it.



CHAPTER ONE

pushed out to sea and slowly disappeared out of sight. So, Shield returned to sea, where he had come from... No one knows if the boat, with its treasure, was ever found.

Shield Sheafson had a son called Beow, who ruled wisely and well for a long time. Beow's son, in turn, became the great king Halfdane. Halfdane had a daughter, who married the Swedish king Onela, and he had three sons: Heorogar, Hrothgar and Halga.

It was Hrothgar who became the next king. He was successful in wars, so that many men wanted to serve him and his army grew. He decided to build a great mead hall as a sign of his success and power, the most glorious mead hall in middle-earth.

Hrothgar called it Heorot Hall. He wanted his mead-hall to be the place from where he ruled his kingdom, but he also wanted it to be a place of happiness and celebration. So there were feasts every night in Heorot Hall: the people ate and drank and the bards sang stories of heroes and their adventures, and Hrothgar rewarded his followers with gifts of gold rings and and other precious things.

But the feasting and happiness did not last. There was a demon,² a monstrous deformed creature called Grendel, who hated the happiness of Heorot Hall. He lived far from men, on the bleak moors³ and on the coast where no one went.

One night, angry and envious⁴ because of the laughter and singing, Grendel came from over the dark moors to the brightness of Heorot Hall. The Danes had been feasting and drinking and were all asleep. Grendel burst into the Hall, seized⁵ thirty men, carried

2. **demon** : evil spirit or force of nature (see pages 22-23).

3. **bleak moors** : high, wild, open land; it is cold and unpleasant there.

4. **envious** : unhappy because you want something that another person has.

5. **seized** : took suddenly and violently.





CHAPTER ONE

them away to his lair⁶ and feasted greedily on their bodies. Later that night he returned... and left thirty half-eaten bodies covered in blood.

When morning came the Danes gazed⁷ in horror at what was left of their friends. King Hrothgar was so shocked that he couldn't speak.

But the horror wasn't over: this was just the beginning. The next night Grendel came back, hungry for more human flesh,⁸ and killed more of Hrothgar's men. After this night no one slept in Heorot Hall.

The great Hall, which Hrothgar and the Danes had been so proud of, was now abandoned by night. People went to sleep in the huts and buildings nearby, but even here they were not safe. Grendel was so strong, huge and terrifying that during the night he came over the bleak moors whenever he wanted, killing whoever he found: by night Heorot Hall was his, not Hrothgar's.

For twelve long years Grendel's rule of terror lasted, and the story of Grendel's attacks on the Danes and his appetite for human flesh was sung by bards all over the middle-earth.

One night a bard was singing a story of Grendel in the mead hall of king Hygelac in the land of the Geats, across the sea from Denmark. One man in particular paid great attention to the bard's song: his name was Beowulf. The bard reached the end of his song and said, 'And so the monster goes on murdering. No one can kill him.'

Beowulf stood up. 'I can kill him!' he shouted. 'And I will kill him!'

6. **lair** : place where a wild animal lives.

7. **gazed** : looked for a long time.

8. **flesh** : soft parts of the human body (not bones).

‘Brave man!’ said king Hygelac, who was also Beowulf’s uncle, and everyone shouted and cheered.

The next morning Beowulf chose fourteen of the bravest Geat warriors to go with him to Denmark and a boat was prepared for them. Hygelac was proud of Beowulf as he said goodbye, but secretly he wondered if he would ever see him again. And the wives, parents and children of the warriors had the same thought...

The boat sailed across the sea and the next day the warriors saw the cliffs of Denmark. But someone on the cliffs was watching the boat — a Danish watchman. When he saw fifteen warriors in armour and carrying weapons he was alarmed. He rode his horse down from the cliffs to the beach.

‘Who are you?’ he shouted, pointing at them with his spear. ‘Why have you come here? What do you want?’

Beowulf held up his right hand. ‘We come in peace,’ he said.

‘Continue!’ said the watchman.

‘My name is Beowulf, and my men and I come from the land of the Geats, across the sea,’ said Beowulf. ‘We have come to help your king, Hrothgar. We have heard about this demon, Grendel. We are here to kill him!’

‘Kill Grendel? Brave words!’ said the watchman, ‘but no one has ever fought against Grendel and lived — he is a monster! But... you’re the biggest man I’ve ever seen. I want to believe you! Follow me! I’ll take you to Heorot Hall.’

The text and **beyond**

FCE 1 **Comprehension check**

For questions 1-9, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think fits best according to the text.

- 1 What does the story say about Shield Sheafson?
 - A ☐ He came to Denmark as a warrior and became a great leader of men.
 - B ☐ Strangers brought him to Denmark, where he was adopted by Danes.
 - C ☐ He arrived in mysterious circumstances but became a great king.
 - D ☐ He Was given a magnificent funeral, with the treasure he had arrived with.
- 2 Why did Hrothgar build Heorot Hall?
 - A ☐ as a sign of his prestige
 - B ☐ as thanks for his victories in battle
 - C ☐ because he needed more space for his warriors
 - D ☐ as a place to show his precious treasure
- 3 Why did Grendel attack Heorot Hall?
 - A ☐ He wanted revenge for the way men had treated him badly.
 - B ☐ He was attracted to the warmth and light of the mead hall.
 - C ☐ He was a monster, and so he naturally hated human beings.
 - D ☐ The noise of people enjoying themselves made him angry.
- 4 Which sentence best describes Grendel's first attack on Heorot Hall?
 - A ☐ Grendel took many Danes away and brought the remains of their bodies back.
 - B ☐ The Danes were waiting for him, but he was far too strong for them.
 - C ☐ Grendel killed many Danes and dragged their bodies away with him to his lair.
 - D ☐ The Danes weren't expecting him, but they fought him courageously.

- 5 What was the reaction of Hrothgar and the Danes the morning after Grendel's first attack on Heorot Hall?
- A ☐ indignant, wanting revenge
 - B ☐ very sad and frightened
 - C ☐ shocked but angry
 - D ☐ speechless and horrified
- 6 What happened as a result of Grendel's first attack on Heorot Hall?
- A ☐ Grendel went to live in Heorot Hall, and ruled Denmark from there.
 - B ☐ Heorot Hall was left undefended, and Grendel did whatever he wanted.
 - C ☐ The Danes abandoned Heorot Hall, but defended the buildings nearby.
 - D ☐ Fighting between Grendel and Hrothgar's men continued for twelve years.
- 7 Under what circumstances did Beowulf hear about Grendel?
- A ☐ Warriors who had been travelling in Denmark told him.
 - B ☐ There was an appeal for help from the people of Denmark.
 - C ☐ Hrothgar had sent messages to the court of King Hygelac.
 - D ☐ He was listening to a poem about the events at Heorot Hall.
- 8 How did the Geats feel about Beowulf and his men going to Denmark?
- A ☐ They were happy but envious; they wanted to go with them.
 - B ☐ They admired Beowulf and his men but they were worried.
 - C ☐ They were sure Beowulf and his men would kill Grendel.
 - D ☐ They secretly thought that Grendel would kill Beowulf and his men.
- 9 How did the Danish watchman feel when he saw Beowulf's boat arriving?
- A ☐ He was confused because he didn't recognise any of the Geats.
 - B ☐ He was glad that help was finally arriving; Grendel would be killed.
 - C ☐ He was worried that the Geats were going to invade Denmark.
 - D ☐ He admired the weapons of the Geats, which were better than his own.



track 03

2 Listening

Listen to an interview with an Anglo-Saxon expert about mead halls and answer the following questions.



A modern reconstruction of a mead hall.

- 1 What is mead, and what is it made of?
- 2 How old is mead?
- 3 Is mead still found today?
- 4 How many rooms were there in a mead hall?
- 5 What was a mead hall used for? Name three uses.
- 6 What is the symbolic role of the mead hall in *Beowulf*?
- 7 Are there mead halls in *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien?

3 Vocabulary – traditional monsters

A Several words have been used to refer to Grendel in different versions of the story. Match the six words in the box to the definitions below. You can use dictionaries to help you. There is an example at the beginning (0).

monster ogre troll ghoul devil ~~demon~~

- 0 an evil spirit or force of nature ...~~demon~~.....
- 1 an ugly creature in old stories from northern Europe that lives in a cave, and that can either be very small or very big
- 2 a creature that eats dead people, often taking bodies from graves
- 3 a creature that is big, ugly and frightening, which can seem like a human or like an animal, as in the case of the one in Loch Ness, Scotland
- 4 an evil creature (some religions use the singular term “the Devil” to refer to the most powerful evil spirit that exists)
- 5 a big, frightening and cruel person in children’s stories, who often eats people

- B Have you met any of the six words on part A in any other stories? Do you know any characters from stories who are described with these words?
- C Which of these words are most suitable for Grendel, in your opinion? And which is least suitable, in your opinion?

4 Vocabulary – new monsters

- A In modern English, the six words in activity 3 are also used with different meanings. Match the examples 1-6 with the definitions a-f below.

- 1 ☐ She loves watching the news about natural disasters – she's such a *ghoul*!
 - 2 ☐ He looks like a lovely little boy, but in reality he's a little *devil*! He drives his poor parents mad.
 - 3 ☐ He's a *demon* in the kitchen; he makes great meals.
 - 4 ☐ I love chocolate, so my friends gave me a *monster* box of chocolates for my birthday!
 - 5 ☐ Unfortunately, a *troll* started posting on our website. Some of our users were really upset.
 - 6 ☐ My friend's father seemed an *ogre* when I first met him, but later I realised that he was quite kind beneath his outside appearance.
- a someone who deliberately sends rude or irritating messages to discussion groups on the Internet
 - b (adjective) huge, enormous, exceptionally big
 - c someone who is interested in or enjoys hearing about unpleasant situations that involve injury or death
 - d a very naughty child
 - e someone who does things very enthusiastically and well
 - f someone who seems cruel and frightening. This person might really be like that, or only seem to be so

- B Make sentences using some of the words above about people or contexts that you know.

Before you read

1 Heroic behavior

Upon arrival at Heorot Hall, Beowulf is taken to meet King Hrothgar. Which of the following do you think he says? He says six of them; the other six are wrong — he doesn't say them. Put a tick (✓) or a cross (X) in the boxes, and compare your ideas in class. Then check your predictions while you read or listen to Chapter Two.

	YES	NO
1 He introduces himself to Hrothgar by saying his name and the names of some of his relatives.	☐	☐
2 He introduces himself to Hrothgar by saying his name alone; he mentions no relatives.	☐	☐
3 After introducing himself, the first thing Beowulf says is that he (Beowulf) will obey Hrothgar at all times.	☐	☐
4 After introducing himself, the first thing Beowulf says is that he (Beowulf) has had great victories against his (Beowulf's) enemies.	☐	☐
5 Beowulf says that he has sometimes forgiven enemies if they were noble.	☐	☐
6 Beowulf asks Hrothgar for the seven bravest men in Denmark to fight Grendel with him.	☐	☐
7 Beowulf tells Hrothgar that he will fight Grendel alone.	☐	☐
8 Beowulf tells Hrothgar that he will fight Grendel without weapons, with his bare hands.	☐	☐
9 Beowulf tells Hrothgar that he will fight Grendel with his famous sword, which has always brought him victory.	☐	☐
10 Beowulf says that victory will make him famous and it will also bring fame to Hygelac, the king of the Geats.	☐	☐
11 Beowulf asks Hrothgar to send his armour back to his father if he is killed in the fight with Grendel.	☐	☐
12 Beowulf asks Hrothgar to ask his father to come to Denmark to take his body if he is killed in the fight with Grendel.	☐	☐