



*Beowulf* survives in only one manuscript copied around 1000 AD. This manuscript is the British Library, London.

*Beowulf* is the first surviving epic written in the English language. The single existing copy of the manuscript dates from the late tenth century, although some scholars believe it dates from the first part of the eleventh century. It is found in a large volume that features stories involving mythical creatures and people. Two different scribes copied the poem, most likely using an existing copy. Between 1066 and the Reformation, the whole volume remained in a monastic library until Sir Robert Cotton gained possession of it for his own extensive library. A fire consumed much of his library, and the volume containing *Beowulf* became badly charred. Today the manuscript still exists, though it is falling apart rapidly due to the charring in the fire.

We do not have any definite knowledge about the poet--indeed, we do not even know the date of the poem's composition. Through the study of Old English verse, most scholars believe that the poem was composed much earlier than the Cotton manuscript, between 650 and 800. Some words in *Beowulf* do not adhere to the scansion of Old English verse; however, using the older forms of the words, dating from the period given, causes the lines to scan correctly. Yet accurately dating the poem is a difficult enterprise since it is evident that the *Beowulf* poet wished to place his work within an even more ancient tradition. *Beowulf* directly uses many ancient stories that have been preserved in later texts, such as the legend of Sigemund and the account of the war at Finnesburh. In addition, the poem is written with the traditional epic diction, with whole phrases taken from the other bards who sang the legends incorporated.

Despite his borrowing from other sources, perhaps in large quantities, the *Beowulf* poet nonetheless manages to add his own specialized view of his characters' world. First and foremost, *Beowulf's* author is a Christian, and he makes the Christian world extremely visible. He alludes to Cain and the Flood; he shows the Christian God's influence upon the pagan world of the Danes. Yet he is obviously aware of his culture's pagan past and attempts to describe it in great detail through rituals, such as the elaborate

Germanic sea-burials and the grand feasts in the mead-halls, and the ever-present belief in fate. Thus Beowulf's poet tries to recreate the past of his people for his people, almost with a nostalgic feeling for the bygone pagan day.

