

MR. POGREBA, PARKER SCHOOL AP US HISTORY

CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONS: BEOWULF

IMAGE FROM THE NOVEL *GREDEL*

WHAT IS BEOWULF?

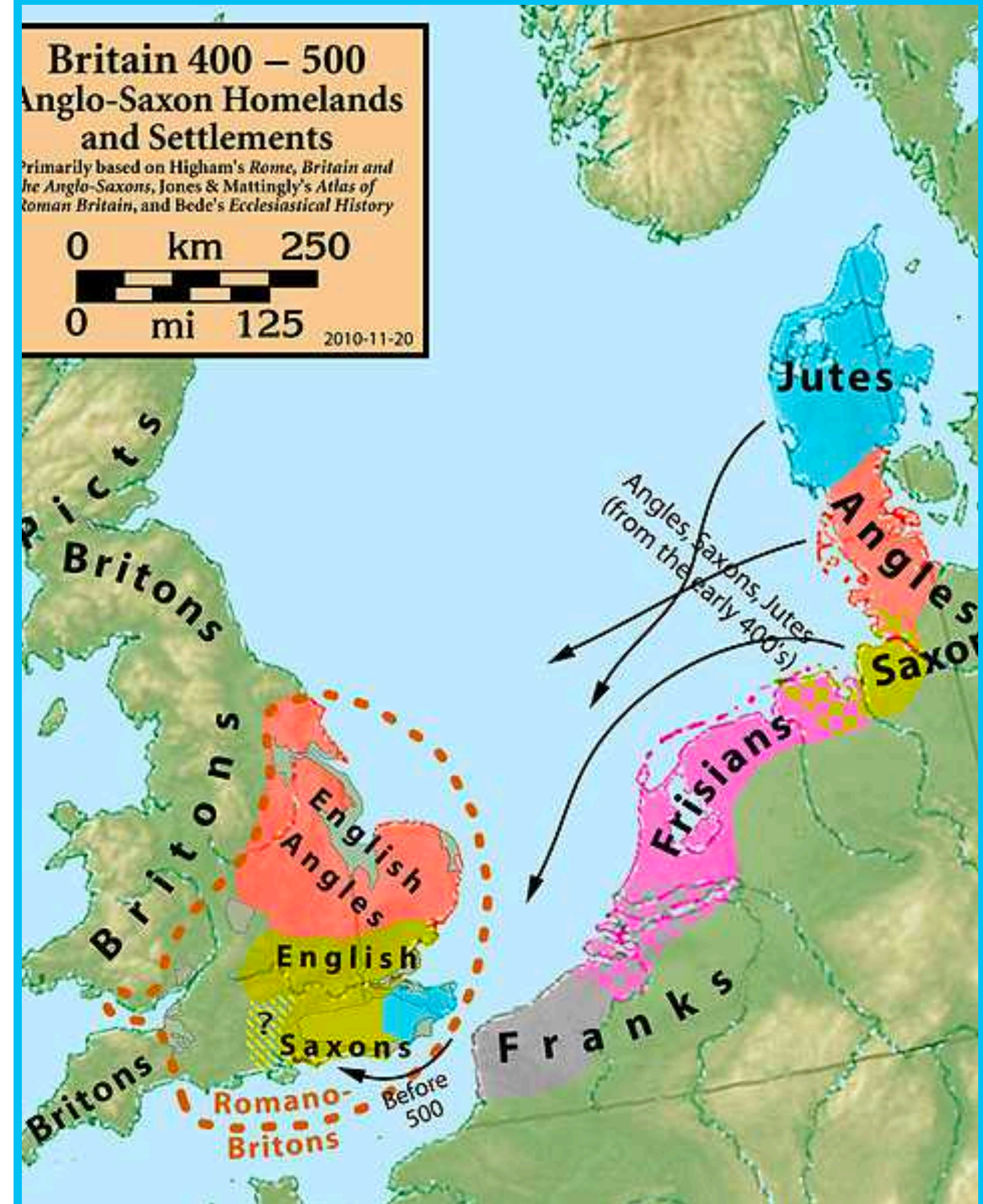
- The most significant **Old English** epic poem, originally passed on as part of oral tradition.
- The manuscript dates to about 1000 CE, but the exact date is unknown. Most scholars assume the poem was written in the 800s, describing vaguely historical events from the period between 450-600 CE.
- There is one manuscript in which Beowulf has survived to the present day. It was nearly destroyed in a fire in 1731, and it wasn't until 1845 that efforts were made to preserve the text.
- Was originally dismissed as a piece of valuable literature. Most critics said the work had no literary merit, and studied it for its historical value. J.R.R. Tolkien reversed this view with his influential lecture in 1936, "The Monster and Its Critics."



ANGLO-SAXON HELMET AT BRITISH NATIONAL MUSEUM

ORIGIN OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

- English is thought to be derived from an early language, called **Proto-Indo-European**, considered to be the source of most of the languages of Europe, as well as languages in the Middle East and Northern India. From this original language (which does not exist today), the major languages of Europe are said to have developed.
- The Old English of Beowulf comes from the Germanic branch of Indo-European.
- The speakers who wrote the poem were **Anglo-Saxons**, tribal people originally from Germany, where the language and stories originated.
- The Anglo-Saxon period in England lasted from 449-1066 CE.
- Following the **Norman Conquest**, English began to transform again, from Old English to **Middle English**, as French words and phrasing became part of the language.



THEMES OF THE POEM

PRIDE AND LOF

- **Condemnation of Pride.** While truthfully recounting one's deeds, as Beowulf does, is acceptable, being full of pride is condemned. Hrothgrar comments about the prideful, "the world turns at his will; he does not know better."
- **Pride is unfavorably compared with lof,** a nearly untranslatable word which means the praise and esteem of one's countrymen and contemporaries.
- **Fame is the most permanent thing in the world,** the only thing that survives and ensures immortality.



“THE ANGLO-SAXONS BELIEVED THAT LIFE WAS A STRUGGLE AGAINST INSUPERABLE ODDS AND THAT A MAN'S WYRD OR WOULD BE WHAT IT WOULD BE. . . . LIFE WAS POTENTIALLY MEANINGLESS. THEY LOOKED TO THE HEROIC NOTION OF PERSONAL FAME TO FIND THE STRENGTH TO RESIST WYRD. THE ANGLO-SAXONS HAD AN INCOMPARABLE SENSE OF THE TRANSIENCE AND POINTLESSNESS OF MORTAL LIFE. ONLY A MAN'S NAME LIVED ON, AND THEN ONLY IN THE MOUTHS OF OTHERS, USUALLY THE POETS.”

HOWARD CHICKERING

WYRD

- **Wyrd** is the Germanic god of fate, or destiny.
- In original German myth, Fate was three sisters, named Wilbet, Worbet and Ainbet. As the Christian faith increasingly influenced the Germanic peoples, Wyrd was increasingly seen as one entity, associated with God.
- Derived originally from the Anglo-Saxon word “weorþan.”
- Practically, belief in Wyrd implied a rejection of individual control of one’s destiny.
- Similar to the concept of predestination.



NORSE RUNES FOR THE WEB OF WORD

NORSE AND CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS

- The text shows a people in the midst of cultural transition.
- While the text was written by a Christian monk, it certainly endorses pagan themes of the ancient Norse. Scholars today still debate whether or not the Christian elements of the poem are authentic or added.
- Some Christian Elements
 - The inclusion of God or Christ as the object of praise/ worship happens 53 times in the entire poem
 - **Biblical allusions**
 - like a reference to the flood
 - The concept of Grendel as the descendant of Cain



IMAGE OF WODEN AFTER 1066

NORSE WARRIOR CULTURE

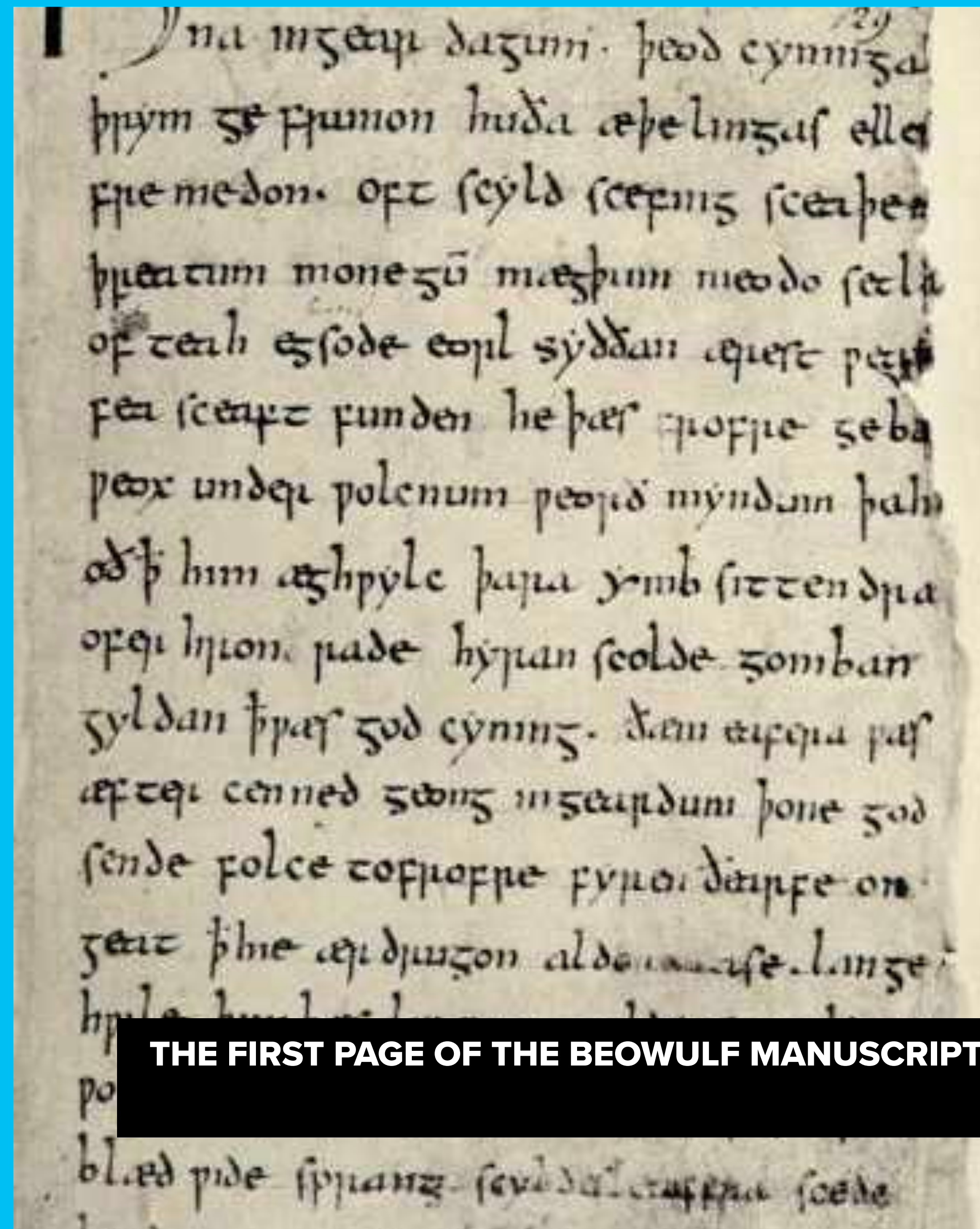
- **Dual Role of Protection**-Norse Society was based on loose political relationships. A powerful warrior (a thane) would lead a group of warriors and their families. This relationship was often hereditary, but loose.
 - The relationship was rooted in the exchange of gold for valor.
 - The comitatus oath
- **Warrior Culture.** The final goal for every warrior was to be defeated in battle. Death by old age was not preferred, as only warriors who were killed in battle were accepted in **Valhalla**, the the warrior heaven in Norse mythology.



LITERARY TECHNIQUES OF THE POEM

KENNINGS

- **Kennings** are compound poetic phrases substituted for the usual name of a person or thing. The term kenning comes from the Old Norse phrase kenna eitt við, "to express a thing in terms of another", and is commonly found in the epics of Old English and Norse literature.
- Kennings often rely on mythological stories for added meaning.
- Kennings can be combined for even more effective meaning. Poets were not limited to two words, but could string a series of effective descriptors together.
- Examples
 - Whale-road (Ocean)
 - slaughter-dew (blood)
 - spear-din (battle)
 - slaughter dew worm dance (bloody battle to the death)



THE FIRST PAGE OF THE BEOWULF MANUSCRIPT

ALLITERATIVE MEASURES

- For our purposes, Anglo Saxon poetry does not concern itself with rhyme or consistent meter, but with measure defined by the use of **alliteration**. Each line of poetry has two connected **hemistiches**, or half-lines, joined by alliteration. Between each hemistich, there is a pause, called a **caesura** in poetry.
- Note that each hemistich tends to be a complete poetic phrase or idea, and that the emphasized syllables are alliterative.

WULF AND EADWACER

Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife;
willað hy hine aþecgan, gif he on þreat cymeð.

Ungelic is us.

Wulf is on iege, ic on oþerre.

Fæst is þæt eglond, fenne biworpen.

Sindon wælreowe weras þær on ige;

willað hy hine aþecgan, gif he on þreat cymeð.

Ungelice is us.

Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode;

þonne hit wæs renig weder ond ic reotugu sæl,

þonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde,

wæs me wyn to þon, wæs me hwæpre eac lað.

Wulf, min Wulf, wena me þine

sece gedycan, þine seldcymas,

murnende mod, nales meteliste.

Gehyrest þu, Eadwacer? Uncerne earne hwelp

bireð wulf to wuda.

Þæt mon eape tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,

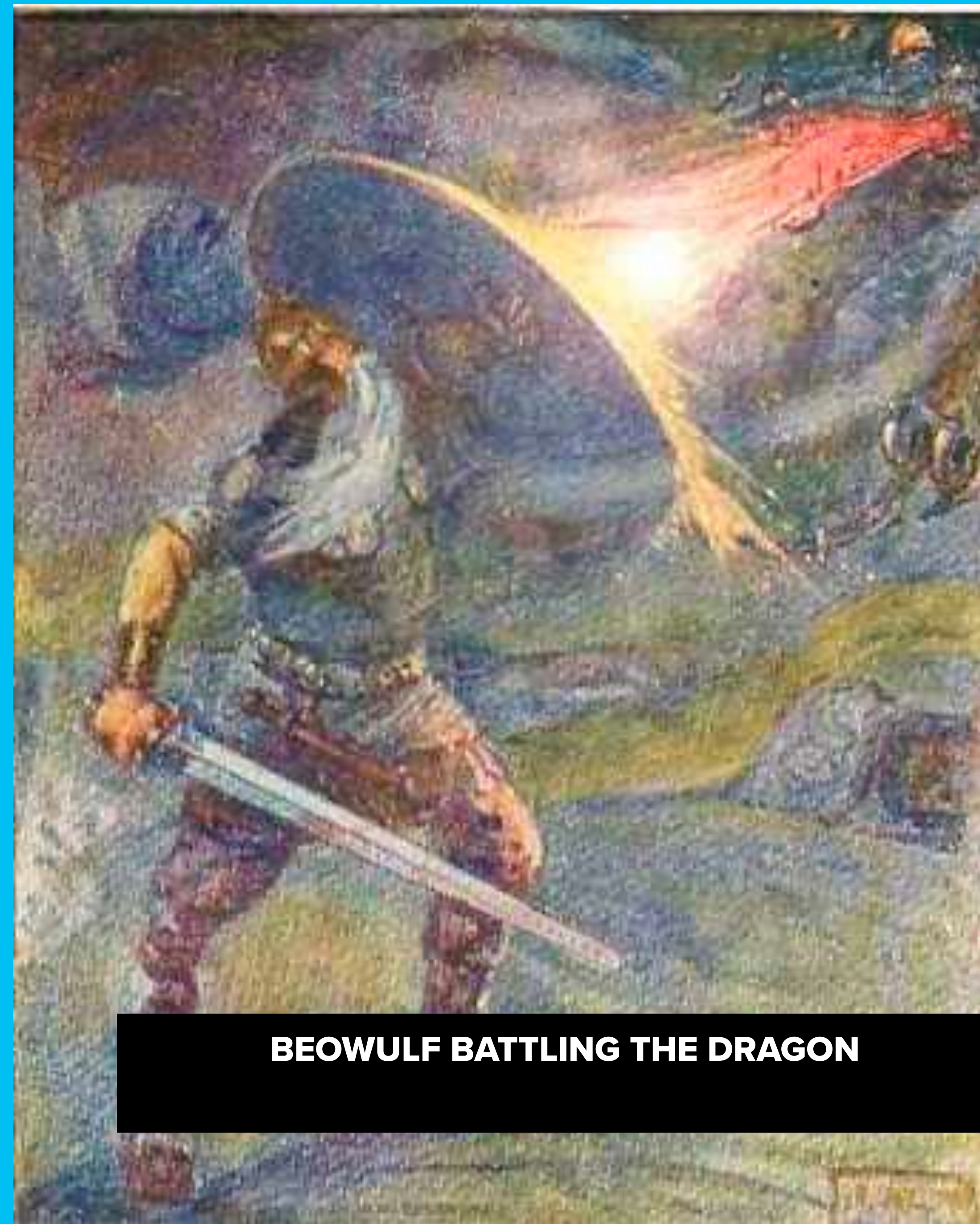
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OLD ENGLISH POEM "WULF AND EADWACER"

"THUS AGES PASS,
AND MEN AFTER MEN, MOURNING VOICES
OF WOMEN WEEPING. SO THE WORLD PASSES;
DAY FOLLOWS DAY, AND THE DUST GATHERS,
HIS TOMB CRUMBLES, AS TIME GNAWS IT,
AND HIS KITH AND KINDRED OUT OF KEN DWINDLE.
SO MEN FLICKER AND IN THE MIRK GO OUT.
THE WORLD WITHERS AND THE WIND RISES;
THE CANDLES ARE QUENCHED. COLD FALLS THE NIGHT."

EPIC POEM

- Beowulf is an example of an epic poem. In broad terms, an epic poem is a retelling of the life and deeds of a heroic or mythological figure.
- The Iliad, Odyssey, Gilgamesh, Ramayana, and The Nibelungenlied are examples of epic poems.
- Epic poems are written in high style, using elevated language and popular forms.
- Epic poems are always about individuals who are historically/culturally significant.
- Epic poems tend to follow the conventions of the **epic hero cycle**.



BEOWULF BATTLING THE DRAGON