

Goals for the *Beowulf* lectures

- Examine poetic features of *Beowulf*
- Look at mixture of pagan and Christian elements
- Present a reading arguing for a three-part structure of the poem
- Examine “the heroic” in the poem

I. *Beowulf*–Contexts

A. Linguistic – Old English

B. Historical

1. Romans (43-410 C.E.)

2. Germanic Tribes – Angles, Saxons, Jutes

3. Danish invasions (9th century)

4. Norman invasion – 1066

C. "Cultural"

1. Tribal affiliation

2. Sutton Hoo

The London Stone



London Stone, circa 2005



Sutton Hoo Belt Buckle



Sutton Hoo Helmet



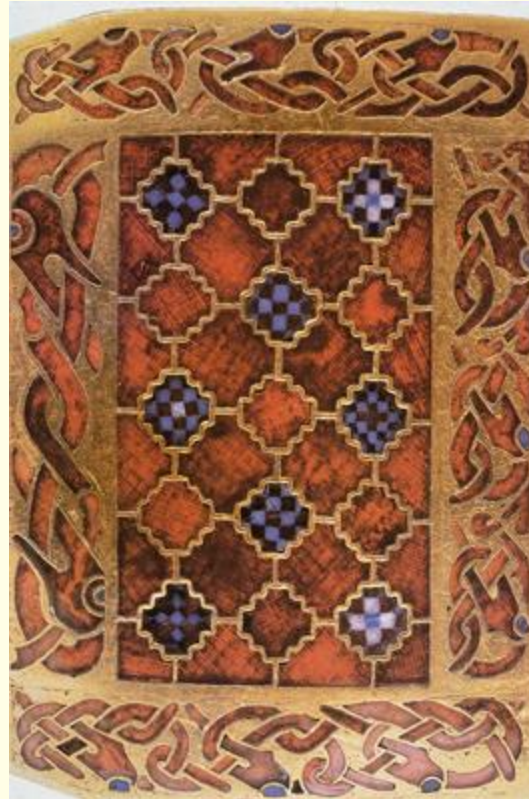
Sutton Hoo Buckles



Sutton Hoo Buckles



Sutton Hoo Hinge Clasp



Sutton Hoo Bowls



Sutton Hoo Purse



Sutton Hoo Purse Details



Sutton Hoo Sceptre



Sutton Hoo Shield



Sutton Hoo Shield



Sutton Hoo Shield Detail



Other Old English texts

- Caedmon
- Bede
- “The Battle of Maldon”
- “The Dream of the Rood”
- “The Wife’s Lament”
- Old English riddles

II. *Beowulf* as Oral Formulaic Poem

- Performed from memory as part of an oral tradition using a style that facilitated this type of poetic performance
- A. Type scenes I. 3020
- B. Alliteration (opening)
- C. Kenning (1341; 1966)
- D. Caesura (46)

III. Christian/Pagan Mix

- A. How did we get this MS?
 - A. Monastic transmission
 - B. Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?
- B. Grendel and Cain (l. 85 ff)
- C. Pagan worship scene (l. 170ff)

Values of this poem?

- Beowulf never kills his kin l. 2736
- Unferth l. 587
- Hathkin and Hrethel l. 2432

- World of fratricide/world of Heorot

IV. Light and Darkness Imagery

- A. Monsters in a strange, dark land
 - 85; 158; 755;1407
- B. Inversion of social order
 - 144

V. Beowulf: Two parts or Three?

- Tolkein argues that the poem is in two parts
- Looking at the “digressions” in the poem, I will argue that it actually breaks into three parts, a reading that acknowledges the importance of Grendel’s mother

VI. “Digressions”

- A. The Opening
- B. Foreshadowings
- C. Flashbacks/insertions

VI. Digressions

- A. Opening passage
 - 1. Genealogy
 - 2. Circular structure
 - 3. Representing a “good king”
 - 4. Ironic Foreshadowing

VI. Digressions

- B. More Foreshadowing—
- Future Destruction of Heorot
 - Lines 20, 81, 1016

VI. Digressions

- C. The Fight at Finnsburg/Lay of Finn (1062)
 - 1. Sung to Hrothgar's court after Grendel's defeat
 - 2. Story of failed alliance by marriage
 - 3. Linked to situation of Queen Wealtheow/Grendel's mother

VII. Gender in Beowulf

- A. Connected figures in Wealtheow/
Grendel's Mother
- B. Refutation of Tolkein thesis
- C. Status of women in Anglo-Saxon culture
- D. The monstrous feminine

Gender in BW

- Connected figures in *Wealtheow/Grendel's Mother*
- Both defined as mothers and connected passionately to their sons

VII. Grendel's Mother

Tolkein's thesis doesn't recognize importance of Grendel's mother

Grendel's mother is at the center of the poem
(Niles)

Her part takes up 13% (400 lines)—almost as much as Grendel

Women in Anglo-Saxon society

- Women in Anglo-Saxon society were limited in their roles, but not powerless
- Scandinavian saga
- Carol Clover: the importance of power vs. gender in societal hierarchies

Grendel's Mother as monster

- The concept of abjection (Kristeva)
 - “that which is expelled from a society in order to define cultural borders” (Trilling 3)
 - Abjection and the maternal
 - Abjection—me and not me
 -

Grendel's Mother

- She represents horror at maternal power (and women who crosses boundaries (female power, the human/not-human))
- But unlike Grendel, Grendel's mother's actions are very understandable within feud culture and her emotional ties to her son make her like the Danes
 - (Trilling)

Grendel's Mother

- Represents a fundamental threat to the society
- Notable that Beowulf arms so thoroughly to meet her, dispatches her so immediately and doesn't not bring her head back as a trophy
- Is she a greater threat than her son? Why?

VIII. The heroic in *Beowulf*

- A. Defining good king in opening lines
- B. Hrothgar's parting speech to Beowulf
- C. Heremod as counter-example
- D. Beowulf's decision to fight dragon alone
 - - Is it heroic?