

Beowulf is the longest surviving poem in Old English – that is the first form of the English language, which developed from the dialects of the different Germanic tribes that invaded England in the 5th century, mainly Angles, Saxons and Jutes.

The poem is anonymous and unfinished – it is, in fact, a long fragment of 3,182 lines. It has come to us in the form of a manuscript dating from the late 10th or early 11th century, but it was probably first written down in the 8th century. The manuscript is the only original copy of the poem and is kept in the British Library in London. It is known as the “Cotton Vitellius AXV”.

Although it is written in Old English, the story tells about a hero, Beowulf, who was not an Englishman, but a Geat. The Geats were a seafaring tribe who lived in what is now southwest Sweden.

All the events narrated take place in Denmark and Sweden, and go back to the period that preceded the invasions of Britain. The invaders were pagan and also took their legends and folklore to Britain. These were transmitted orally for centuries, until they were written down and given unity in the poem that we know.

Beowulf is an epic poem, centred around the heroic deeds of the protagonist, who kills monsters and fights enemies of all sorts, including a dragon. The story glorifies all the values that are traditionally associated with epic: courage in battle, loyalty to one’s chief and one’s people, strength, generosity and endurance .

The important characters are all warriors, who want to conquer glory and honour; in this way, they will be remembered after death. Women seldom appear, and only in minor roles.

Like most medieval manuscripts, *Beowulf* was probably written down by a monk in a monastery. He added Christian elements and references to the Old and New Testament to the poem. The style is elevated and poetic. The vocabulary is vivid and various, made richer by similes and *kennings*. A *kenning* is a periphrasis, characteristic of Old Norse and Old English poetry, used instead of the usual name of a person or thing. So, for example, a boat is called “a wave traveller”, a sword “light of battle”,

blood becomes “battle sweat”. There is no rhyme, but every line is divided into two halves, with two stresses each, connected by alliteration, which gives musicality to the verse. Alliteration is a poetic device that consists in the use of the same consonantal sounds at the beginning of two or more neighbouring words. An example is: “The fortunes of war favoured Hrothgar. Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks.”

Musicality was, in fact, very important, because poetry was originally sung by performers – called *scops* – in the halls of the kings and the nobles to entertain them. These *scops* sang while playing a harp or another instrument with strings. The regular use of stresses and alliteration, as well as the music, helped them to memorize long poems