



COURSE UNIT (MODULE) DESCRIPTION

Course unit (module) title	Code
Beyond <i>Beowulf</i>: Wisdom Literature in Old English and Old Norse <i>Beowulf</i> perskaičius: Išminties literatūra sen. anglų ir sen. skandinavų kalbomis	

Lecturer(s)	Department(s) where the course unit (module) is delivered
Rūta Šileikytė Zukienė	Institute for the Languages and Cultures of the Baltic Centre for Scandinavian Studies

Study cycle	Type of the course unit (module)
BA programme	Optional

Mode of delivery	Period when the course unit (module) is delivered	Language(s) of instruction
Seminars	Autumn semester	English

Requirements for students	
Prerequisites: C1—C2 level of English	Additional requirements (if any): –

Course (module) volume in credits	Total student's workload	Contact hours	Self-study hours
5 ECTS	130 hours	32	98

Purpose of the course unit (module): programme competences to be developed
<p>This course provides an in-depth exploration of Old English and Old Norse wisdom literature, moving beyond the heroic ethos of <i>Beowulf</i> to examine texts that reflect on fate, exile, leadership, and ethical conduct in medieval England and Scandinavia. The course aims to introduce students to the poetic and philosophical dimensions of wisdom literature, its intricate language and structure, and the socio-cultural contexts in which it emerged.</p> <p>To appreciate the literary and intellectual richness of these texts, we will read selections from <i>Maxims II</i>, <i>The Wanderer</i>, <i>The Seafarer</i>, <i>Hávamál</i>, <i>Konungs skuggsjá</i>, and other key works in translation, while also engaging with the original Old English and Old Norse where possible. We will analyse the interplay between pre-Christian and Christian worldviews, the role of proverbial wisdom, and the ways in which these texts shaped medieval thought.</p> <p>In addition to close readings of primary texts, we will discuss selected scholarly works that highlight contemporary debates on the interpretation, transmission, and reception of medieval wisdom literature. The course will also explore the afterlife of these traditions, from their influence on medieval political philosophy to their modern reinterpretations.</p> <p>To develop their analytical and research skills, students will write a detailed commentary on a selected passage, examining its poetic and thematic significance as well as its broader intellectual and historical context within wisdom literature.</p>

More broadly, the course aims to develop students' skills in analytical, critical, and creative thinking, with a focus on maintaining accuracy and high-quality results.

Learning outcomes of the course unit (module)	Teaching and learning methods	Assessment methods
<p>Having completed the course, students will be able:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – to analyse and interpret Old English and Old Norse wisdom literature in its historical and intellectual contexts, using appropriate terminology and methods, with particular attention to poetic structure, rhetorical devices, and the interplay between oral and written traditions; – to situate key wisdom texts in terms of their origins, transmission, and cultural significance within early medieval England and Scandinavia, comparing their themes and motifs with analogous traditions in other medieval literatures; – to discuss central issues in contemporary scholarly debates, including the relationship between pagan and Christian wisdom traditions, the role of fate and free will, the function of proverbs and maxims, and the socio-political dimensions of wisdom literature (e.g., leadership, ethics, gender roles, and moral instruction); – to conduct independent linguistic, literary, or interdisciplinary research, applying philological and analytical skills to the study of Old English and Old Norse texts; to write a detailed commentary on a selected passage, considering its poetic, thematic, and intellectual significance; – to utilize modern research tools and digital resources for the linguistic and literary analysis of medieval texts (e.g., electronic dictionaries, manuscript databases, and academic repositories), and to present findings in a structured and scholarly manner; – on a broader level, to recognize wisdom literature as an essential part of medieval intellectual history, offering insights into the moral and philosophical concerns of early Germanic societies, and to appreciate its enduring relevance in contemporary discussions of ethics and leadership. 	<p>The course employs a combination of close reading, interactive discussions, and independent research to deepen students' engagement with Old English and Old Norse wisdom literature.</p> <p>Students will actively participate in seminars, present and facilitate discussions on scholarly articles, and develop their analytical skills through a detailed commentary on a selected passage.</p>	<p>Cumulative evaluation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attendance and participation: 10 % of the final grade • article presentation and discussion facilitation, 30 % of the final grade; • course paper: a detailed commentary on a selected passage from the texts read during the course, 60 % of the final grade.

Content: breakdown of the topics	Contact hours						Self-study work: time and assignments		
	Lectures	Tutorials	Seminars	Exercises	Laboratory work	Internship/work placement	Contact hours	Self-study hours	Assignments
1. Introduction to wisdom literature. Definition and characteristics of wisdom literature. Overview of Old English and Old Norse textual traditions.			2				2	4	1. Close reading of the selected texts. 2. Reading and discussing the assigned secondary material. <i>Suggested readings:*</i> Godden & Irvine (2009); Godden & Lapidge (2013) Crawford (2019); Donoghue (2004); Larrington (1993; 2014); McKinnell et al. (2014) <i>*Full reading list will be provided at the beginning of the course.</i> 3. Writing a course paper: a detailed commentary on a selected passage.
2. The poetics of wisdom. Stylistic and structural features of wisdom texts. Oral tradition and mnemonic devices.			2				2	4	
3. <i>The Wanderer and The Seafarer.</i> Themes of exile, fate, and transience. Christian and pre-Christian elements.			4				4	8	
4. <i>Maxims I and Maxims II.</i> Proverbial wisdom and cultural values. The didactic function of maxims.			2				2	4	
5. <i>The Old English Boethius.</i> Philosophical reflections on fortune and wisdom. Adaptation of classical wisdom in medieval England.			4				4	8	
6. <i>Hávamál:</i> “The Sayings of the High One.” Odin as a wisdom figure. Ethics and social conduct in Norse society.			2				2	4	
7. Women and wisdom. The role of female voices in wisdom literature. <i>Sigrdrífumál</i> and the wisdom of the Valkyries.			2				2	4	
8. Kingship and counsel. The ideal ruler in <i>Konungs skuggsjá</i> (“The King’s Mirror”). Wise leadership in Anglo-Saxon England and Viking Scandinavia.			2				2	4	
9. Close reading of the selected texts.			12				12	26	
10. Preparation for the presentation.								8	
11. Writing the course paper (a detailed commentary on a chosen passage from the texts discussed in class).								24	
Total: 130			32				32	98	

Assessment strategy	Weight, %	Deadline	Assessment criteria
<p>Article presentation and discussion facilitation</p>	<p>30 %</p>	<p>Agreed individually</p>	<p>Duration: 40–45 minutes</p> <p>Content:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction of the topic and context: Introduce the central problem discussed in the article and briefly outline the broader scholarly debate surrounding it. Identify key scholars in the field and their major contributions (e.g., important studies or books). 2. Analysis of arguments and findings: Present the article’s main arguments and conclusions, emphasizing its most thought-provoking, memorable, or controversial claims and examples. Discuss how the article relates to other research in the field. 3. Critical engagement and discussion: Offer your own evaluation of the study’s arguments, methodology, and significance. Raise key questions and encourage your colleagues to engage with the material critically. 4. Facilitating group work and discussion: Design small-group activities or discussion tasks that help your peers explore the article’s themes and problems more deeply. Guide and encourage participation, ensuring an interactive and reflective seminar discussion. <p>Assessment criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to read the material critically and analytically • Effectiveness in presenting the article’s argument structure and flow • Thoughtful planning, timing, and logical structuring of the session • Ability to engage the class through discussion and group activities • Clear and precise language usage
<p>Course paper</p>	<p>60 %</p>	<p>Exam days</p>	<p>Course paper: <i>Detailed commentary on a selected passage from the texts discussed in the course</i></p> <p>Length and format</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word count: 750–1,200 words (approximately 3–4 pages) • Font: Times New Roman, size 12 • Spacing: 1.5 lines

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submission: Upload the final paper in PDF format to VMA Moodle <p>Passage selection</p> <p>Choose a passage of 20–50 lines from any of the texts discussed in the course for detailed analysis, ensuring it is rich in poetic, thematic, or philosophical significance.</p> <p>Content requirements</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction – Briefly explain the significance of the selected passage within the broader context of the text and its themes in wisdom literature. 2. Poetic and stylistic analysis – Examine the language and rhetorical features of the passage, including alliteration, parallelism, proverbs, kennings, and other key stylistic devices. 3. Concepts and themes – Analyse the core philosophical, ethical, or didactic ideas presented in the passage, considering their relevance within Old English and Old Norse wisdom traditions. 4. Historical, social, and cultural context – Discuss important historical, social, or cultural background reflected in the passage. 5. Comparative perspective – Where relevant, compare the passage with similar wisdom texts from Old English, Old Norse, or other medieval literary traditions. 6. Bibliography – Follow the provided style sheet for source citation and formatting. <p>Assessment criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to gather and effectively discuss topic-relevant material • Ability to synthesize and critically evaluate different sources • Adherence to the content, length, and format requirements • Correct application of academic referencing and bibliography standards • Clarity, coherence, and correct language usage <p>Academic integrity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plagiarism in any form (verbatim copying, patch writing, etc.) will result in a zero (0) grade for the entire course.
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Attendance and participation	10 %	During the course	<p>Requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance and active participation in seminars are mandatory. Students who miss more than 5 seminars (over 30% of the total) without a valid reason (e.g., illness documented by a doctor's note) will receive a 'No Pass' for the course. <p>Evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance and participation constitute 10% of the final grade. Active engagement in seminar discussions and activities will be assessed.
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Values of the ten-point grading scale

10 (Excellent) Excellent, exceptional knowledge and skills. The level of evaluation. 95–100 % of the set study goals have been achieved.

9 (Very good) Sound, good knowledge and skills. The level of synthesis. 85–94 % of the set study goals have been achieved.

8 (Good) Better than average knowledge and skills. The level of analysis. 75–84 % of the set study goals have been achieved.

7 (Average) Average knowledge and skills, there are minor mistakes. The level of knowledge application. 65–74 % of the set study goals have been achieved.

6 (Satisfactory) Knowledge and skills are worse than average. The level of knowledge and comprehension. 55–64 % of the set study goals have been achieved.

5 (Weak) Knowledge and skills meet the minimum requirements. The level of knowledge and comprehension. 51–54 % of the set study goals have been achieved.

4 (Insufficient) The minimum requirements are not met. 39–50 % of the set study goals have been achieved.

3 (Insufficient) The minimum requirements are not met. 26–38 % of the set study goals have been achieved.

2 (Insufficient) The minimum requirements are not met. 13–25 % of the set study goals have been achieved.

1 (Insufficient) The minimum requirements are not met. 1–12 % of the set study goals have been achieved.

ATTENTION: Course requirements for passing

To receive a passing grade for the course, students must complete **all three components**:

- Attendance and participation**
- Article presentation and discussion facilitation**
- Course paper**

Failure to complete **any of these components** (e.g., missing the article presentation) will result in a **'No Pass'** for the entire course, regardless of performance in other areas.

Course literature

Author	Year of publication	Title	Issue of a periodical or volume of a publication	Publishing place and house or web link
Primary sources				
Godden, Malcolm and Susan Irvine, with Mark Griffith and Rohini Jayatilaka, eds.	2009	<i>The Old English Boethius: An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's "De Consolatione Philosophiae"</i>		Oxford: Oxford University Press
Crawford, Jackson, ed. and transl.	2019	<i>The Wanderer's Hávamál</i>		Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing
Holm-Olsen, Ludvig, ed.	1983	<i>Konungs skuggsjá</i>		Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-institutt
Krapp, George Philip and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, eds.	1936	<i>The Exeter Book</i>		New York: Columbia University Press
Kristjánsson, Jónas and Vésteinn Ólason, eds.	2014	<i>Eddukvæði</i>		Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntaféla
Larrington, Carolyne, ed.	2014	<i>The Poetic Edda</i>		Oxford: Oxford University Press
Liuzza, R. M.	2014	<i>Old English Poetry: An Anthology</i>		Broadview Press, Peterborough, ON
Shippey, T. A.	1976	<i>Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English</i>		D. S. Brewer, Cambridge
Van Kirk Dobbie, Elliott	1942	<i>The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems</i>		New York: Columbia University Press
Secondary literature				
Bampi, Massimiliano, Carolyne Larrington and Sif Rikhardsdóttir, eds.	2020	<i>A Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre</i>		Boydell & Brewer, D. S. Brewer
Benson, Larry Dean, and Siegfried Wenzel, eds.	1982	<i>The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield</i>		Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University
Clunies Ross, Margaret	1998	<i>Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society</i>		Odense: Odense University Press
Donoghue, Daniel	2004	<i>Old English Literature: A Short Introduction</i>		Malden (Mass.): Blackwell

Fulk, Robert D. and Christopher M. Cain	2008	<i>A History of Old English Literature</i>		John Wiley & Sons
Godden, Malcolm and Michael Lapidge, eds.	2013	<i>The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature</i>		Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Harris, Joseph; edited by Susan E. Deskins and Thomas D. Hill.	2008	<i>“Speak useful words or say nothing”: Old Norse studies</i>		Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Library
Larrington, Carolyne	1993	<i>A Store of Common Sense: Gnostic Theme and Wisdom in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry</i>		Oxford: Clarendon Press
McKinnell, John, John Shafer, Donata Kick, eds.	2014	<i>Essays on Eddic Poetry</i>		University of Toronto Press
Pulsiano, Phillip and Elaine Treharne, eds.	2008	<i>A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature</i>		Wiley-Blackwell
Robinson, Orrin W.	1992	<i>Old English and Its Closest Relatives: A Survey of the Earliest Germanic Languages</i>		Stanford: Stanford University Press
Schjødt, Jens Peter	2008	<i>Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion</i>		University Press of Southern Denmark

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