



COURSE UNIT (MODULE) DESCRIPTION

Course unit (module) title	Code
<i>Beowulf</i>: Reading the Anglo-Saxon Heroic Literature <i>Beowulf</i>: Anglų-saksų herojinės literatūros skaitymai	

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	Spring semester	English

Requirements for students	
Prerequisites: C1—C2 level of English	Additional requirements (if any): None

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 reading of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem <i>Beowulf</i>, a key text in the European Middle Ages and widely regarded as the finest example of Old English literature. The course aims to introduce students to the embellished and elaborate language of <i>Beowulf</i>, its complex history, intricate composition, and the broad socio-cultural context of the early Germanic world that produced it.</p> <p>To appreciate the poem's archaic character and closely follow its intricate composition, the epic will be read in its original Old English. We will also read and discuss selected scholarly works on <i>Beowulf</i> that highlight contemporary debates on its form, meaning, and connections with other medieval literary traditions, such as Old Icelandic sagas, Old and Middle Irish legends and myths, and Old Saxon Christian literature. The course will additionally explore <i>Beowulf's</i> influence on modern literature, from its profound impact on J.R.R. Tolkien's mythopoeia, to the bleak world of J. Gardner's philosophical novel <i>Grendel</i>. To develop their philological analysis and research skills, the students will be asked to write a detailed commentary on a selected passage from <i>Beowulf</i>, focusing on its poetic diction, thematic motifs, and offering their interpretation on the passage's significance within the overall structure of the poem.</p> <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.</p>

Learning outcomes of the course unit (module)	Teaching and learning methods	Assessment methods
<p>Having completed the course, the students will be able:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – to read <i>Beowulf</i> in the original Old English language and to analyse, interpret and evaluate it in the wider context of world literature, using appropriate terminology and methods, and paying special attention to its poetic diction, alliteration, variation and the formulaic character of its language; – to situate <i>Beowulf</i> in terms of its date, provenance, and authorship within a wider context of medieval English literature; to compare the poem with its sources and analogues in other early Germanic and Celtic cultures; – to discuss the main issues pertinent to the contemporary scholarly debates on the oral-formulaic composition of the poem, the interplay between pagan and Christian elements in <i>Beowulf</i>, the issues related to gender roles as well as the socio-cultural context depicted in the story (aspects of geography, history, public policy, art, mentality and self-awareness, customs and traditions, everyday communication conventions, etc.); – to discuss the reception of <i>Beowulf</i> in modern literature and media; – to conduct independently linguistic, literary and/or interdisciplinary research applying the acquired philological knowledge and skills in practice; to write a commentary on a specific passage from the poem in English, taking into account the communication intention, addressee, etc. – to use modern information technologies, data resources and research resources to conduct linguistic and literary analysis of the Anglo-Saxon literary text and present the results of analysis and/or interpretation to the public in order to contribute to the practical applicability of English philology studies (e-Beowulf, Bosworth-Toller's Anglo-Saxon dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary, Historical thesaurus of the OED); – on a more general level, to perceive the Old English language, and the Anglo-Saxon poetic language in particular, as a phenomenon relevant for scientific investigation that offers data for both the synchronic and diachronic study of the English language at various levels (phonetic, morphological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, language development, etc.). 	<p>Reading and translating from Old English; oral presentations; preparatory reading for in-class discussions; individual research on chosen aspects of the language and the interpretation of the poem.</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 <i>Beowulf</i>, 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. Old English (OE) orthography and pronunciation.			2				2	4	1. Close reading of <i>Beowulf</i> in the original; translating the text into modern English. <i>Suggested readings:</i> Fulk et al. (2008) Robinson (1992) Ch. 6: Old English 2. Reading and discussing the assigned material. <i>Suggested readings:*</i> Orchard (2013) O'Brien O'Keeffe (1997) Magoun (1968) Neidorf (2017) Tolkien (1968) Scowcroft (1999) <i>*A 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 of the poem.
2. The historical context of <i>Beowulf</i> . History of the manuscript. Paleographic observations. The debate over the dating of <i>Beowulf</i> .			2				2	4	
3. OE grammar review: noun, pronoun and adjective declensions, strong and weak verb conjugations. Ways of word formation. Poetic synonymy and the use of poetic compounds in <i>Beowulf</i> .			4				4	8	
4. OE alliterative verse. Eduard Sievers' system of OE metrical patterns. Metrical theories of A. J. Bliss, B. R. Huthcheson, D. L. Hoover, and G. Russom.			2				2	4	
5. The oral-formulaic character of OE poetry. Milman Parry's, Albert Bates Lord's and Francis P. Magoun's works on the oral-formulaic nature of narrative poetry.			2				2	4	
6. Early Germanic parallels and analogues to <i>Beowulf</i> . The influence of Christian learning: use of biblical language and imagery in the poem.			4				4	8	
7. The reception of <i>Beowulf</i> in modern literature: J. R. R. Tolkien's trilogy <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> , John Gardner's <i>Grendel</i> .			4				4	8	
8. Close reading of the poem in the original.			12				12	26	
9. Preparation for the presentation.								8	
10. Writing the course paper (a detailed commentary on a chosen passage from the poem).								24	
Total: 130			32				32	98	

Assessment strategy	Weight, %	Deadline	Assessment criteria
Article presentation and discussion facilitation	30 %	Agreed individually	<p>Duration: 40–45 minutes</p> <p>Content:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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). 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. 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. 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
Course paper	60 %	Exam days	<p>Course paper: Detailed Commentary on a Selected Passage from <i>Beowulf</i></p> <p>Length and format</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word count: 1,500–2,000 words (approximately 4–6 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> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose a passage of 20–50 lines from <i>Beowulf</i> for detailed analysis. <p>Content requirements</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction – Briefly explain the significance of the selected passage within the poem. 2. Poetic diction – Analyze the language and stylistic features of the passage, including poetic synonyms, compounds, formulas, kennings, and other key elements. 3. Names and references – Comment on the names of places, tribes, and characters appearing in the passage. 4. Historical, social, and cultural context – Discuss important historical, social, or cultural aspects referenced or described in the passage. 5. 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, patchwriting, etc.) will result in a zero (0) grade for the entire course.
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.

			Evaluation <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.
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.			
<p style="text-align: center;">ATTENTION: Course requirements for passing</p> <p>To receive a passing grade for the course, students must complete all three components:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attendance and participation 2. Article presentation and discussion facilitation 3. Course paper <p>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.</p>			

Course literature

Author	Year of publication	Title	Issue of a periodical or volume of a publication	Publishing place and house or web link
Primary source				
Fulk, R. D.; Bjork, Robert E.; Niles, John D., eds.	2008	<i>Klaeber's Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg.</i> Foreword by Helen Damico.		Toronto; Buffalo, NY; London: Toronto UP
Secondary literature				
Bjork, Robert E. and John D. Niles, eds.	1997	<i>A Beowulf Handbook</i>		Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press
Donoghue, Daniel	2004	<i>Old English Literature: A Short Introduction</i>		Malden (Mass.): Blackwell
Fry, Donald K., ed.	1968	<i>The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays</i>		Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
Godden, Malcolm and Michael Lapidge, eds.	2013	<i>The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature</i>		Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Heaney, Seamus, tr.	2000	<i>Beowulf</i>		London: Faber and Faber
Magoun, Francis P.	1968	“Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry” in <i>The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays</i> , edited by Donald K. Fry, pp. 83–113		Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
Neidorf, Leonard	2017	“Unferth’s Ambiguity and the Trivialization of Germanic Legend”	<i>Neophilologus</i> (2017) 101, pp. 439–454. DOI 10.1007/s11061-017-9523-y	
O’Brien O’Keeffe, Katherine	2017	“Diction, Variation, the Formula” in <i>A Beowulf Handbook</i> , edited by Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, pp. 85–104		Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press
O’Donoghue, Heather, ed.	1999	<i>Beowulf : the fight at Finnsburh</i> / translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland		Oxford: Oxford University Press
Orchard, Andy	2013	“Beowulf” in <i>The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature</i> , edited by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, pp. 137–158		Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Robinson, Orrin W.	1992	<i>Old English and Its Closest Relatives: A Survey of the</i>		Stanford: Stanford University Press

		<i>Earliest Germanic Languages</i>		
Russom, Geoffrey	1987	<i>Old English Meter and Linguistic Theory</i>		Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press
Scowcroft, Mark R.	1999	“The Irish Analogues to <i>Beowulf</i> ”	<i>Speculum</i> , Vol. 74, No. 1 (Jan., 1999), pp. 22–64.	
Tolkien, John R.R.	1968	“ <i>Beowulf</i> : The Monsters and the Critics” in <i>The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays</i> , edited by Donald K. Fry, pp. 8–56.		Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
Online resources				
Kiernan, Kevin, ed.		<i>Electronic Beowulf 4.0</i>		ebeowulf.uky.edu
Kiernan, Kevin		<i>Beowulf Bibliography, 1990–2012</i>		www.uky.edu/~kiernan/Bib10/
		<i>Bosworth-Toller’s Anglo-Saxon dictionary</i>		https://bosworthtoller.com/
		<i>OED</i>		Electronic resource at VU library.
		<i>Historical Thesaurus of the OED</i>		Electronic resource at VU library.

Last updated: 30 January 2025