



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	Department 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	Elective

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): –

Number of ECTS credits allocated	Student's workload (total)	Contact hours	Individual work
5 ECTS	130 hours	32	98

Purpose of the course unit
<i>Beowulf</i> is the oldest surviving epic in the English language and one of the foundational works of European literature. Blending myth, history, and heroic legend, it captures the early medieval imagination in a world situated between pagan heroism and Christian morality. This course provides an in-depth reading of the Anglo-Saxon poem, widely regarded as the finest example of Old English literature. To appreciate the poem's archaic character and closely follow its intricate composition, <i>Beowulf</i> will be read in its original Old English. The course introduces students to its elaborate poetic language, complex history, and the broad socio-cultural context of the early Germanic world that produced it. 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</i>'s enduring influence on modern literature, from its profound impact on J. R. R. Tolkien's mythopoeia to the bleak philosophical world of John Gardner's novel <i>Grendel</i>. To develop their philological and interpretative skills, students will write a detailed commentary on a selected

passage from *Beowulf*, focusing on its poetic diction, thematic motifs, and the passage's significance within the poem's overall structure.

More broadly, the course aims to foster students' analytical, critical, and creative thinking, with a focus on academic precision and intellectual depth.

Learning outcomes of the course unit	Teaching and learning methods	Assessment methods
Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to: 1) Read and analyse <i>Beowulf</i> in the original Old English, applying appropriate philological and literary methods with attention to diction, alliteration, variation, and formulaic style. 2) Contextualise the poem within medieval English literature and compare it with related works from other early Germanic and Celtic traditions. 3) Engage critically with major scholarly debates concerning oral-formulaic composition, the interaction of pagan and Christian elements, gender roles, and the broader socio-cultural milieu of the poem. 4) Discuss the modern reception of <i>Beowulf</i> in literature and media. 5) Conduct independent research in linguistic, literary, or interdisciplinary contexts, producing a detailed commentary on a selected passage. 6) Use digital and scholarly resources (e.g., <i>e-Beowulf</i>, <i>Bosworth-Toller's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary</i>, <i>OED</i>, <i>Historical Thesaurus of the OED</i>) to support analysis and presentation. 7) Recognise the significance of Old English as a field of scientific inquiry contributing to the synchronic and diachronic study of the English language.	The course combines close reading and translation of <i>Beowulf</i> from Old English with seminar-style discussion and student-led analysis. Teaching methods include guided translation exercises, oral presentations, and preparatory reading for in-class debate and interpretation. Students will also undertake individual research projects on selected aspects of the poem's language, structure, and meaning.	Student performance will be assessed through cumulative evaluation based on the following components: 1) Attendance and active participation – 10% of the final grade 2) Article presentation and discussion facilitation – 30% of the final grade 3) Course paper – 60% of the final grade The <i>course paper</i> will take the form of a detailed commentary on a selected passage from <i>Beowulf</i>, demonstrating the student's ability to engage in close philological analysis, interpret poetic language, and situate the passage within the broader structure and themes of the poem.

Content: breakdown of the topics	Contact hours							Individual work: time and assignments	
	Lectures	Tutorials	Seminars	Exercises	Laboratory work	Internship/work placement	Contact hours	Self-study hours	Tasks for individual work
1. Introduction. Old English (OE) orthography and pronunciation.			2				2	4	Students are expected to: • Read the assigned materials (reading lists will be provided before the course) and prepare for seminar discussions; • Prepare for an oral presentation on a selected text or discussion topic; • Engage in independent research on themes and problems discussed in the course. • Reflect on seminar themes through short written notes or creative tasks.
2. The historical context of <i>Beowulf</i> . History of the manuscript. Palaeographic 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. Hutcheson, 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	Duration: 40–45 minutes Content: 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. Assessment criteria: • 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 in June	Course paper: detailed commentary on a selected passage from <i>Beowulf</i> Length and format • Word count: 1,500–2,000 words (approximately 4–6 pages) • Font: Times New Roman, size 12 • Spacing: 1.5 lines • Submission: Upload the final paper in PDF format to VMA Moodle Passage selection • Choose a passage of 20–50 lines from <i>Beowulf</i> for detailed analysis.

			Content requirements 1. Introduction – Briefly explain the significance of the selected passage within the poem. 2. Poetic diction – Analyse 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 <i>style sheet</i> for source citation and formatting. Assessment criteria • 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 Academic integrity • 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	Requirements • 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 • 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.
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	Publishing place and house or web link
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.
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
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
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/
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> 101, no. 3 (September): 439–454.	https://doi.org/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 Earliest Germanic Languages</i>	Stanford: Stanford University Press
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> 74, no. 1 (January): 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.

Last updated: 30 October 2025