

Anglo-Saxon Heroic Poetry

Heroic poetry is a narrative verse that is elevated in mood and uses a dignified, dramatic and formal style to describe the deeds of aristocratic warriors and rulers. It is usually composed without the aid of writing and is chanted or recited with the accompaniment of a stringed instrument. It is transmitted orally from bard to bard over generations. The heroic poetry can be considered to be the mirror of the contemporary conventions and ideas of a society as well as temperament of a particular community. So, Anglo-Saxon literature frequently took up the theme of fights and hostilities in which the nobility of a character was brought out through the display of courage, valour, loyalty to the lord and the community and a thirst for glory. The heroic poems of the Anglo-Saxon period are Beowulf, The Fight at Finsburgh, The Battle of Brunanburh, The Battle of Maldon and Waldere.

Beowulf: It is one of the earliest sagas of the world and probably the only extant epic poem written in an ancient Germanic language. Structurally the poem is divided into two parts. In the first part we have Beowulf's fight with the monster Grendel which is followed by another combat with Grendel's mother. In both these struggles Beowulf emerges victorious. The second part however takes place fifty years later, when Beowulf is the ruler of the Geats. He fights a fierce fire dragon, slays it, but he himself is mortally wounded in the struggle. The poem ends with an account of Beowulf's funeral amid the lamentations of his warriors. The poem lacks larger epic conception of the Odyssey or even the finer polish of Aeneid. But the poem throws a splendid light on the way of living in those days. It carries us successfully into the heroic world where the men of rank were received and dismissed with great courtesy, the rulers were generous in handing out gifts and the retainers were loyal. He also came to know that, Heorot, the large hall of King Hrothgar was the center of singing and merriment, ceremonial feasts and elaborate

rituals. The underlying message of the poem is the sense of shortness of life and the passing away of all the things except the game that a man leaves behind.

The Fight at Finnsburgh - It is a fragment of fifty lines. Its manuscript was discovered by W. George Hicks and was published by him in 1905. The fragment opens with the speech of a young King (Hnag), the King of the Danes) reusing his followers (who are sitting in numbers) to defend the hill where they were sleeping. The followers take their appointed places in anticipation of an attack by the Frisians. Then follows a short battle which goes on for five days and many Frisians are killed. The Danes hold the door of the hall for five days without any loss of themselves. Then a wounded warrior who is not named brings the news to his King and at this point the fragment ends.

Waldere - It is a fragment of two leaves from which we get a glimpse of the story of Waldere (Waldere of Aquitaine) and his betrothed bride, Hildegund, who were hostages at the court of Attila. They escaped with a great treasure, and in crossing the mountains were attacked by Gunter and his warriors among whom was Waltere's former comrade, Hagen. Waltere fought them all and escapes. The same story was written in Latin in the tenth century, and is also part of the old German Nibelungenlied. Though the saga did not originate with the Anglo-Saxons, their version of it is the oldest that has come down to us. The chief significance of these Waldere fragments lies in the fact that ~~as~~ evidence they afford regarding the fact that British forefathers were familiar with the legends and poetry of other Germanic people.

Battle of Brunanburh - The poem appears in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. It celebrates the great victory which Aethelstan, the King of Wessex and Mercia, and his brother Edmund won at Brunanburh in 937 A.D. over the combined forces of Olaf

the Norseman and Constantine, the King of Scots. There is nothing here of Christian gentleness, the Vikings here have the old heathen ring of exultation over the fallen foe, of rejoicing over the broken invaders. There is more of fierce heroism in this short poem than the whole of Beowulf. (Legends) The poet delights to show us the sun rising on the blood-soaked field covered with the dead bodies of the broken Scottish soldiers, how which fought the dark feathered fowl, the black raven, the white-tailed eagle and the grey stall hawk, the wail of the wood.

The Battle of Brunanburh (Whom strong patriotic sentiment). The victory is regarded as a victory of the English forces against Norse, Scots and Welsh enemies. Though the heroism of Aethelstan and Edmund is celebrated, the two princes appear as the champions of their nation.

The Battle of Maldon - It appears in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle.

It has come down to us 'incomplete', i.e. without a beginning and an end. It deals with one of the many clashes between the English and the Danes that resulted from the latter's attack on England. The Battle of Maldon tells the story of the disastrous defeat of the English at the hands of Danes in the battle fought in 991 at the Estuary of the Black water in the Essex heath. Maldon. In this battle Byrhtnoth, the chief of the East Saxons died fighting to the last in an attempt to drive back the Danes who were coming to attack England. After the death of Byrhtnoth, the English warriors did not flee to their heels (like cowards), but fought bravely and died. In this poem emphasis is laid on the valor and heroism of the individual hero rather than on the national or patriotic sentiments. It chants the reckless valor of the hero Byrhtnoth, the sacrifice of himself for his followers and above all his love of battle.

Anglo Saxon heroic poetry is the nearest one can get to the oral Pagan literature of the heroic age of Britain. The heroic poems of the Anglo-Saxon period indeed reflect a few moments as well as the general temperament of the age and confer on them the immortality of art.