

BEOWULF

THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

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Beowulf: The Graphic Novel created by Stephen L. Stern & Christopher Steinger,
based on the translation of the classic poem by Francis Gummere

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Beowulf: The Graphic Novel

An Introduction by Stephen L. Stern

Writing *Beowulf: The Graphic Novel* has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my career. I was captivated by the poem when I first read it decades ago. The translation was by Francis Gummere, and it was a truly masterful work, retaining all of the spirit that the anonymous author (or authors) invested in it while making it accessible to modern readers. "Modern" is, of course, a relative term. The Gummere translation was published in 1910. Yet it held up wonderfully, and over 60 years later, when I came upon it, my imagination was captivated by its powerful descriptions of life in a distant place and time. To be sure, there were other translations over the years, but it wasn't until 1999, and the landmark "interpretation" by Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, that I was once again reminded of just how timeless and epic a poem *Beowulf* was. Heaney's work was, indeed, the inspiration for this Graphic Novel.

What many readers encountering *Beowulf* for the first time are surprised to learn is that, although a work of fiction, the poem incorporates a number of historic events and figures. Many of the characters are also mentioned in early Scandinavian sources, and events such as King Hygelac's raid into Frisia are referenced. As a result of careful study, including that of archeological excavations, scholars have concluded that much of the story is based in the factual history of Denmark and southern Sweden, during the period between 450 and 600 AD. The manuscript itself is believed to have been written by one or more authors, probably around the year 1000. The latest scholarship theorizes that a Christian scribe probably was the last to copy the text, influencing this bloody tale of paganism, monsters and vengeance with his own sensibilities.

Which brings us to no less an Old English scholar than J.R.R. Tolkien whose 1936 lecture entitled "Beowulf: the monsters and the critics" has arguably done more for establishing *Beowulf* as a literary masterwork than all of the criticism that has come before or since. Before Tolkien, the work was looked upon as an interesting, but certainly incidental, vestige of early literature; after Tolkien, it had earned its place alongside the greatest of the Latin and Greek heroic epics.

Tolkien paid perhaps his greatest tribute to *Beowulf* by setting his own heroic tales that have captured the imagination of countless millions in the land known as Middle Earth. For it is indeed in *Beowulf* that Middle Earth makes its first appearance in all of literature. To quote Tolkien: "Middle Earth came from Midgard which was the common English transliteration of Old Norse Miogzror... Middangeard (Old English), and Mittilgart

(Old High German)...and as a result, is an old Germanic name for our world, the places inhabited by men, with the literal meaning 'middle enclosure.'"

Simply put, Midgard—the realm of the humans in Norse mythology—is mentioned no less than six times in the epic poem that Tolkien so assiduously studied and was so obviously influenced by, not only in terms of his settings, but in terms of the archetypes he would employ. It can confidently be said that, without *Beowulf*, there would be no *Lord of the Rings*. And it is just as true to say that *Beowulf* was the first true champion of Middle Earth.

In creating this adaptation, artist Christopher Steininger and I have attempted to remain as faithful as possible to the original as the graphic novel form allows. But as in any retelling of an old myth, the key is to be rewarded with the discovery that its meaning is still very much alive today. If you are encountering *Beowulf* here in these pages for the first time, I hope it will inspire you, as it did me.

—Stephen L. Stern
London, September 2007

PROLOGUE

The Sixth Century

The Land of the Danes









