

## Model Essay: "The Anglo-Saxon Mead Hall"

*Beowulf's* heroic world is centered on the mead hall. Here the warriors pledge their loyalty to Hrothgar, their lord, and he in turn honors them with lavish gifts and elaborate feasts, washed down with mead, a drink made of fermented honey. Under the hall's gilded gables, the Danish warrior society knits itself tightly together, until Grendel threatens to destroy this world by taking possession of Heorot, their hall.

Thus *Beowulf* gives us a glimpse of the importance of the hall in Germanic society. Archeology can help us understand how mead halls may have appeared in Anglo-Saxon times.

The architect and builders of the mead hall were respected members of Anglo-Saxon society. Though one or two halls were built of stone, this material was generally reserved for churches. A lord's hall was commonly built of wood and was thus prone to destruction by fire. Very few traces of Anglo-Saxon halls have survived to this day.

A mead hall was one or two stories high with a few outbuildings for the lord's private use nearby. The main hall was rectangular and a long fire burned in its center to provide light and heat. Around the walls, benches and boards were placed and also arranged as dining tables. At the end of the hall, opposite the door, the lord's throne stood so that anyone entering would be immediately visible to him.

The lord and his warriors considered the hall their most important building. Here warriors pledged their loyalty to the king, and he in turn presented them with gifts, food, and mead. The hall was also the venue for much of the warriors' entertainment. Drinking bouts, boasting, and the recitation of poetry by a scop filled the evenings.

After a great feast, the warriors cleared away the benches and boards and lay down on the floor to sleep. Only the lord and the women had separate quarters, sometimes in the second floor, sometimes in a separate building. The warriors shared the hall, which they viewed as the outward symbol of their camaraderie, stability, wealth, and happiness in this life.

Centuries before *Beowulf* was composed, a Roman historian named Tacitus observed the Germanic warrior-lord relationship, which he described with the Latin term *communitatus*. Tacitus noted the importance loyalty, bravery, generosity in Germanic society. He also carefully described the Germanic customs of feasting and hospitality. For each of these central elements of the pagan Germanic world, the hall was indispensable. The qualities of clan life captured by the term *communitatus* are well illustrated in the folk epic *Beowulf*. The hero pledges his loyalty and sacrifices his life to help Hrothgar, and Hrothgar's people honor Beowulf in turn when he becomes their savior from the terrors of monsters.



## **Reading the Folk Epic Beowulf, QL #542**

**Permalink:** <http://www.sascurriculumpathways.com/portal/Launch?id=54>