

# **Monsters, Heroes, and Dangerous Women:**

## **Reading *Beowulf* in the context of its manuscript**

Dr. Simon Thomson

October 29<sup>th</sup> 18:00 (Bishkek Time)

Meeting ID: 916 6865 3983 (Password: 524874)

<https://zoom.us/j/91668653983?pwd=VXJwSjQ2QmEzdXRuMzlubktJVjR5QT09>

*Beowulf* is the longest and most sophisticated work of Old English poetry. Produced in England around 800 AD, it tells a relatively straightforward story about a hero who defeats three monsters and becomes a king, set in sixth-century Scandinavia. But its interests are dizzyingly complex, swooping backwards and forwards through different lives, exploring a range of interpersonal relationships, relentlessly reflecting on the nature of storytelling, and on the function of time. It showcases both the entirely stereotypical – warrior men drinking staggering amounts of ale as they celebrate the destruction of natural monsters. But it is also perpetually surprising – with a central section exploring different female experiences, and with profound sympathy for the very monsters whose defeats punctuate the text. The poem survives in only one manuscript: a late, eleventh-century production. There, it is placed alongside texts from profoundly different contexts: Old English prose translations of the *Life* of the dog-headed Saint Christopher, of the catalogue text *Wonders of the East*, and of Alexander the Great's *Letter* to his tutor Aristotle; and an Old English prose translation of the apocryphal scriptural text *Judith*. Collectively, these texts explore the questions of power, monstrosity, and gendered violence, with perhaps a particular interest in how threatening a dangerous woman can be. This presentation will present the texts – with a heavy focus on *Beowulf* – and explore some of the ideas they collectively consider, inviting us to think about the ways in which texts can shape one another's meanings, and to enjoy the literary sophistication of eleventh-century England.

*Dr. Simon Thomson is Senior Lecturer in Medieval English Language and Literature at the Heinrich-Heine Universität in Düsseldorf. He holds a PhD from University College London, and his research, predominantly focusing on early medieval (c. 600-1200) literary cultures of England and Northern Europe, investigates the adaptation of narratives for different contexts and different functions. His work combines historical and manuscript contexts, formalist elements (language and poetic metre), with theoretical approaches including gender studies, ecocriticism, queer theory, and post-colonialism. He is currently investigating how the story of Saint Christopher was used and adapted to think about communities, outsiders, monstrosity, femininity, kingship, and storytelling.*