Anglo-Saxon Background Information (449 C.E. – 1066 C.E.)

English 10 Honors

Directions: The story of Beowulf was passed down through generations during the Anglo-Saxon period. Read the background information below to help you understand the historical context of the epic.

Geographic and Political Information
- Anglo-Saxon civilization was established on the island of Britain in the early 400s C.E.
  - Germanic tribes from present-day Denmark, Sweden, Holland, and northern Germany settled on the island of Britain
    - Groups include: Angles, Saxons, Jutes
    - Each tribe/clan led by a war-chief who ruled their “kingdom” and led a small army
    - Warrior code: taught that a warrior must fight and die for his leader, if necessary
- Roman influence led to a switch from ancestral tribes to agricultural communities
  - Lived in family groups in villages
  - Often settled close to the sea and rivers – many were sailors too

Cultural Information
- Paganism in northern Germanic tribes
  - Warrior culture
  - Principal values: strength, courage, loyalty
- Mead halls
  - Large wooden buildings where men gathered to drink mead (alcoholic beverage), listen to songs and stories
    - Mostly told epic stories and verse narratives accompanied by music
    - Scops (pronounced “shope”) – poet-singers who chanted stories from memory and usually played stringed instruments
  - Center of community, culture & entertainment; offered safety against violence
- Language
  - Each tribe spoke its own language, but over time they formed a common language called “Englisc” or “Old English”
  - No written language initially → relied on oral tradition and storytelling to pass down history

Religious Information
- Strong belief in fate (wyrd) – thought that fate controlled everything
- Polytheistic religion – believed in many gods that were often related to natural elements
- Christianity arrived in 597 C.E. with Saint Augustine, a Catholic monk
  - Monasteries were built and Christianity spread quickly as missionaries spread the word

Literary Information
- “Old English” was a primarily an oral language; history spread through storytelling and songs
  - Runes – alphabet used by early Anglo-Saxons, letters believed to have special powers
- Poetry was the dominant genre and riddles were popular
- Christianity helped literacy spread and led to a written language (English)
- Old English poetry has a strong rhythm with each line divided into two parts by a pause (caesura)
  - Original text – space indicated caesura, modern translations - commas indicate caesura
- “Old English” doesn’t look or sound like modern English (you are reading a translation!)

Works Cited

"Anglo-Saxons." BBC Primary History. BBC, 3 Feb 2013.