

Exam Specifications

(Revision of November 12, 2025)

The exam for **B.Eng.602** runs 60 minutes and takes place on **18 February at 10am sharp** in our regular classroom, Theologicum 0.136.

It will comprise two elements: a close commentary and open questions. Count ca. 20–25 minutes for your commentary and ca. 35–40 minutes for the open questions.

Close Commentary

For your close commentary, you will be presented with an Old English passage from *Beowulf* or *The Fight at Finnsburg* 15 to 25 lines in length, selected from the passages set for translation on the **syllabus** and discussed in class. **A narrower selection of these readings will be singled out as possible exam material towards the end of term.** Your task will be to supply a commentary on the excerpt. The format of your commentary may resemble **that of B.Eng.601**, but there are differences. Most importantly, you should not introduce the text as a whole but instead limit yourself to (1) information contained within the printed excerpt and (2) any aspects of the text(s) relevant to the themes and information touched on in the excerpt. In your commentary you should not translate the passage, but instead discuss the themes it addresses and any points of scholarly analysis of which you are aware (no need to identify the scholars who have raised them unless you happen to remember their names), as well as any formal features or literary devices you consider worth pointing out (along with your best stab at their functions). To prepare for this task, familiarize yourself with the language of the passages set for translation well enough to be able to identify and translate words and phrases within your excerpt that contribute to a theme or tone you have identified, but also study your notes on the content both from in-class discussion and from our set weekly readings of scholarship where they concern the passage set for translation. The commentary made available on Stud.IP likewise makes for good revision material, but so does anything you can glean from existing *Beowulf* commentaries, such as that by Fulk, Bjork, and Niles! See the commentary overleaf for a model.

Open Questions

This section covers everything discussed in class, as well as the scholarship set for weekly reading. Rather than expect gotcha questions on obscure references in the scholarship, focus your energy in the first instance on ideas reinforced by their introduction into class discussion and their mention in class slides. Here too, the running commentary uploaded to Stud.IP makes for useful revision material. These questions may print passages from the poem(s) for your reference, but if so those passages will be given with text and translation side by side so you can make reference to the original without having to decipher it.

Mock Exam

A mock exam may or may not be provided on [Stud.IP](#) (under “Learning Modules”) in due time to help you gain an insight into the sorts of question to expect.

Example Commentary

- 80 Hē bēot ne ālēh, bēagas dælde,
 sinc æt symle. Sele hlifade,
 hēah ond horngēap, heaðowylma bād,
 lāðan liges; ne wæs hit lenge þā gēn
 þæt se ecghete āpumswēorum
 85 æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde.
 Ðā se ellengæst earfoðlice
 þrāge geþolode, sē þe in þýstrum bād,
 þæt hē dogora gehwām drēam gehýrde
 hlūdne in healle; þær wæs hearpan swēg,
 90 swutol sang scopes. Sægde sē þe cūþe
 frumsceaft fira feorran reccan,
 cwæð þæt se ælmihtiga eorðan worhte,
 wlitebeorhtne wang, swā wæter bebūgeð,
 gesette sigehrēþig sunnan ond mōnan,
 95 lēoman to lēohte landbūendum,
 ond gefrætwide foldan sceatas
 leomum ond lēafum, lif eac gescēop
 cynna gehwylcum þāra ðe cwide hwyrfaþ.
 Swā ðā drihtguman drēamum lifdon
 100 ēadiglice, oððæt ān ongan
 fyrene fremman fēond on helle.

The passage 89b–98 is sometimes referred to as the Song of Creation; it is set just after the completion of Heorot, the royal hall of the Danish Scylding dynasty, by order of King Hrothgar. The creation of the hall itself resembles creation, but scholars have often compared Heorot to a church as well. In the excerpt, we learn that a *scop* or court poet sings of creation in the newly completed hall in a poem resembling *Cædmon's Hymn* as well as the biblical creation account in Genesis 1. At the end of the excerpt there is a momentary and surely intentional ambiguity of reference: lines 99–101 probably refer to Heorot, its inhabitants, and Grendel, but coming as they do at the end of the scop's account of creation, they may at first be taken to apply to Eden, Adam and Eve, and Satan within the scop's poem.

Lines 81–85 employ a type of foreshadowing characteristic of *Beowulf*, hinting that Heorot will be burnt down in a conflict between a father-in-law and a son-in-law. It is suggested elsewhere in the poem that

this will be Hrothgar and his son-in-law Ingeld. In both the literature and the history of the early Middle Ages, elite marriages often served diplomatic functions (the women in these marriages are referred to in the scholarship as “peace-weavers”), and Hrothgar repeatedly shows diplomatic intentions, but the poet here signals that his attempts at peace will not work. The conflict here foreshadowed is not in fact told within the confines of *Beowulf*, and so it is a typical example of the poet seemingly expecting his or her audience to be familiar with the material.

Lines 80–81a refer to the heroic economy, in which it is a warlord’s duty to shower his warriors with prestige objects, in return for which they must risk their lives for him. The word *bēot* “vow, boast” is here (l. 80) used of Hrothgar’s vow to build a hall (and/or to be generous with his prestige objects), but it is also the word used for vows spoken by warriors in just such a hall, typically over mead, to the effect that they will be brave in battle. Towards the end of the poem, Wiglaf appeals to just such vows when he addresses his fellow warriors as they drag their feet coming to Beowulf’s aid in his fight against the dragon.

The excerpt also contains the only explanation given for Grendel’s hostility towards the Danish court: he cannot stand the sound of merrymaking in the hall (86–89). This is sometimes interpreted as envy, but scholars often make a connection with the religious content of the scop’s song, suggesting that Grendel, elsewhere said to be a descendant of Cain, the first murderer according to the Book of Genesis, is by his wicked nature opposed to all that is good and Christian.