

MIGRATIONS FROM THE NORTHLAND We view all the beginnings of northern European literatures from much the same perspective. They lie in the mists of antiquity and oral folk tradition, far from any contact with any of the great ancient literatures of Greece, Rome, and the Orient. It remains for the specialist to fathom bits of information about them and pass these facts and theories on to us in modern English. For the first known writings to survive on the isles we know as British come from the northern mainland, there in those icy regions bordering on the North Sea and the Baltic. When the great Roman Empire was crumbling in the south (5th century), these northern peoples were passing through a Heroic Age of their own, comparable to that of ancient Greece about which Homer wrote. Like the Greeks, these warriors were seafaring peoples and lived their adventurous and primitive existence amid storm and strife, fearing neither elements nor man. Their fears came largely from their deeply ingrained superstitions, creating for them monsters and horrible shapes that could hardly be coped with by the strength and the weapons of mere mortals. The men among them who were able to meet these monsters and live became the epic heroes and the subjects for their outstanding literary efforts. It was during the long winter season of ice-locked harbors that these hardy mariners relived their battles and wanderings. There in the halls of the warriors, the scop (poet) shaped the adventures of the season into song and the gleemen (minstrels) recited them to the assembled tribesmen and carried them far and wide into the halls of other friendly groups.