

Department of English

Research Seminar

Beowulf and the Digital Humanities

ILP: 1 unit (AES)



10 April 2025, Thursday



4:30pm–5:30pm



LCH103, Lau Chung Him Building



Professor Leonard Neidorf

Leonard Neidorf is Distinguished Professor of English at Shenzhen University. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard University and his B.A. from New York University. He is the author of two monographs—*The Art and Thought of the Beowulf Poet* (Cornell University Press, 2022) and *The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior* (Cornell University Press, 2017)—as well as the editor of four books. In 2020, Neidorf was awarded the Beatrice White Prize by the English Association for his research on medieval literature. Neidorf has published more than 100 papers in A&HCI journals. His work has appeared in a wide range of journals including *ELH*, *Folklore*, *Neophilologus*, *Review of English Studies*, *Tolkien Studies*, *Journal of Germanic Linguistics*, and *Nature Human Behaviour*. Neidorf is an Associate Editor of *English Studies* (Taylor & Francis) and the Editor-in-Chief of *The Explicator* (Taylor & Francis).

Abstract

Beowulf is the oldest epic poem in the English language, but it was largely unknown until 1815, when its first modern edition was published. Appearing at a moment when Romantic nationalism was spreading throughout Europe, this mysterious poem rapidly attracted considerable debate about its authorship, date of composition, and transmission history. This lecture looks at how the disciplines broadly described as ‘the Digital Humanities’ can shed new light on these old debates. In particular, it discusses the arguments presented in “Large-Scale Quantitative Profiling of the Old English Verse Tradition,” a paper published in *Nature Human Behaviour* that Professor Neidorf coauthored with scholars from Harvard, MIT, and other universities. This paper received mainstream media coverage in venues such as *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *Smithsonian Magazine*. Neidorf considers why the paper received such coverage, and then offers a critical assessment of what the Digital Humanities *can and cannot* do, how such studies are best interpreted, and how the knowledge generated in the traditional humanities remains essential to them. Neidorf stresses the importance of collaboration and argues that the Digital Humanities should be viewed not as a competitor, but as a complement, to traditional humanities scholarship.

