

Page from the Beowulf manuscript (c.1000), Cotton MS Vitellius AXV, f.133.
The British Library, London.

from Beowulf

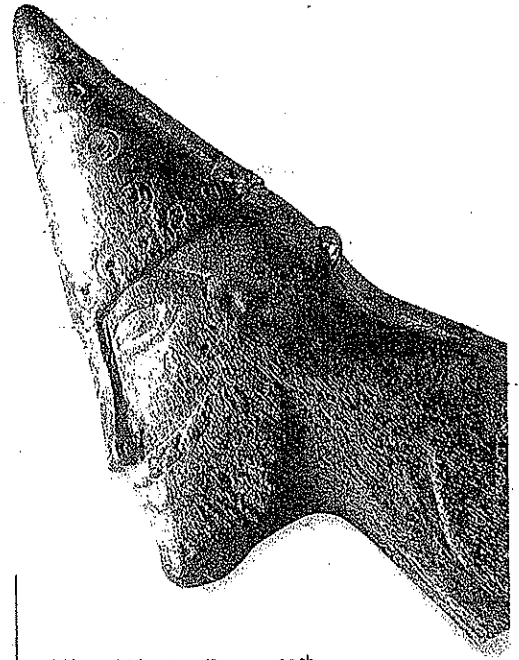
(Part One), translated by Burton Raffel

THE MONSTER GRENDEL

1

A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
As day after day the music rang
Loud in that hall,° the harp's rejoicing
5 Call and the poet's clear songs, sung
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling
The Almighty making the earth, shaping
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,
Then proudly setting the sun and moon
10 To glow across the land and light it;
The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees
And leaves, made quick with life, with each
Of the nations who now move on its face. And then
As now warriors sang of their pleasure:
15 So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,
20 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born
Of Cain,° murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel's death. The Almighty drove
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,
25 Shut away from men; they split
Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,
A brood forever opposing the Lord's
Will, and again and again defeated.

Lines have been renumbered and do not correspond to the New American Library edition or the Farrar, Straus, and Giroux edition.

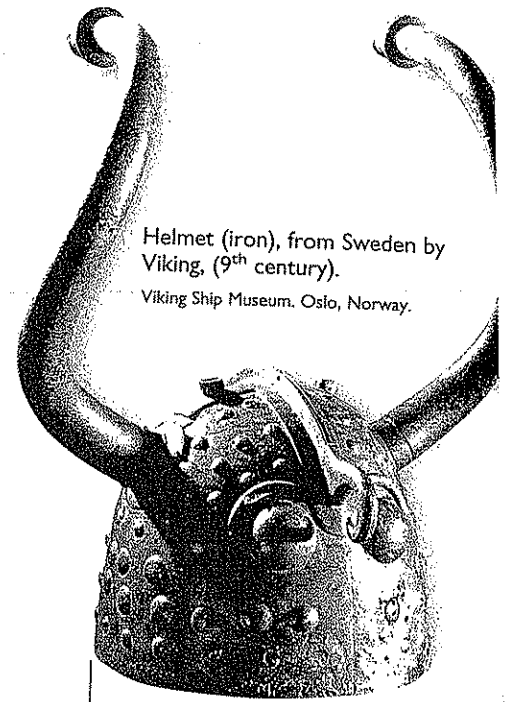


Viking Warrior Figure, 12th century, Sweden, animal horn.
The Granger Collection, New York.

4. **hall:** guest-hall or mead-hall. (Mead is a fermented drink made from honey, water, yeast, and malt.) The hall was a central gathering place where Anglo-Saxon warriors could feast, listen to a bard's stories, and sleep in safety.

21. **Cain:** Grendel is the offspring of one of the descendants of Cain, a son of Adam and Eve. Cain killed his brother, Abel, and became the first murderer. He was eternally cursed by God and, according to legend, fathered all the evil beings that plague humankind: monsters, demons, and evil spirits.

30 Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel
 Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors
 Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.
 He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting
 Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster's
 35 Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:
 He slipped through the door and there in the silence
 Snatched up thirty men, smashed them
 Unknowing in their beds, and ran out with their bodies,
 The blood dripping behind him, back
 40 To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter.
 At daybreak, with the sun's first light, they saw
 How well he had worked, and in that gray morning
 Broke their long feast with tears and laments
 For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless
 45 In Herot, a mighty prince mourning
 The fate of his lost friends and companions,
 Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn
 His followers apart. He wept, fearing
 The beginning might not be the end. And that night
 50 Grendel came again, so set
 On murder that no crime could ever be enough,
 No savage assault quench his lust
 For evil. Then each warrior tried
 To escape him, searched for rest in different
 55 Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,
 Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept.
 Distance was safety; the only survivors
 Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.
 So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous,
 60 One against many, and won; so Herot
 Stood empty, and stayed deserted for years,
 Twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king
 Of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door
 By hell-forged hands. His misery leaped
 65 The seas, was told and sung in all
 Men's ears: how Grendel's hatred began,
 How the monster relished his savage war
 On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud
 Alive, seeking no peace, offering
 70 No truce, accepting no settlement, no price
 In gold or land, and paying the living
 For one crime only with another. No one
 Waited for reparation^o from his plundering claws:
 That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,



Helmet (iron), from Sweden by
 Viking, (9th century).
 Viking Ship Museum, Oslo, Norway.

53–58. Why do none of
 Hrothgar's men challenge
 Grendel?

59–64. How long has
 Grendel's reign of terror
 lasted?

73. reparation (rep'ə-rā'shən)
n.: payment to compensate for
 wrongdoing.

75 Stalked Hrothgar's warriors, old
 And young, lying in waiting, hidden
 In mist, invisibly following them from the edge
 Of the marsh, always there, unseen.
 So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,
 80 Killing as often as he could, coming
 Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived
 In Herot, when the night hid him, he never
 Dared to touch king Hrothgar's glorious
 Throne, protected by God—God,
 85 Whose love Grendel could not know. But Hrothgar's
 Heart was bent. The best and most noble
 Of his council debated remedies, sat
 In secret sessions, talking of terror
 And wondering what the bravest of warriors could do.
 90 And sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods,
 Made heathen vows, hoping for Hell's
 Support, the Devil's guidance in driving
 Their affliction off. That was their way,
 And the heathen's only hope, Hell
 95 Always in their hearts, knowing neither God
 Nor His passing as He walks through our world, the Lord
 Of Heaven and earth; their ears could not hear
 His praise nor know His glory. Let them
 Beware, those who are thrust into danger,
 100 Clutched at by trouble, yet can carry no solace^o
 In their hearts, cannot hope to be better! Hail
 To those who will rise to God, drop off
 Their dead bodies, and seek our Father's peace!

3

So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son^o
 105 Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom
 Or strength could break it: That agony hung
 On king and people alike, harsh
 And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.
 In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's
 110 Follower^o and the strongest of the Geats—greater
 And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—
 Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror
 And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,
 Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king,
 115 Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,
 Now when help was needed. None
 Of the wise ones regretted his going, much

? 79–89. Why is this background information about Grendel and Hrothgar in the poem?

100. solace (səl'is) *n.*: peace.

104. Healfdane's son:
 Hrothgar.

110. Higlac's follower: Higlac
 is Beowulf's uncle and feudal
 lord.

? 109–116. What qualities of the epic hero are conveyed by these lines?

As he was loved by the Geats: The omens were good,
And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf
120 Chose the mightiest men he could find,
The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen
In all, and led them down to their boat;
He knew the sea, would point the prow^o
Straight to that distant Danish shore. . . .

Beowulf arrives in Denmark and is directed to Herot, the mead-hall of King Hrothgar. The king sends Wulfgar, one of his thanes (or feudal lords), to greet the visitors.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE HERO

4

125 . . . Then Wulfgar went to the door and addressed
The waiting seafarers with soldier's words:
"My lord, the great king of the Danes, commands me
To tell you that he knows of your noble birth
And that having come to him from over the open
130 Sea you have come bravely and are welcome.
Now go to him as you are, in your armor and helmets,
But leave your battle-shields here, and your spears,
Let them lie waiting for the promises your words
May make."

Beowulf arose, with his men
135 Around him, ordering a few to remain
With their weapons, leading the others quickly
Along under Herot's steep roof into Hrothgar's
Presence. Standing on that prince's own hearth,
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt^o
140 Gleaming with a smith's^o high art, he greeted
The Danes' great lord:
"Hail, Hrothgar!
Higlac is my cousin^o and my king; the days
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's
Name has echoed in our land: Sailors
145 Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
150 And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove

123. **prow** (prou): front part of a boat.

139. **mail shirt**: armored garment made of interlocking metal rings.


140. **smith's**: metalworker's.

142. **cousin**: any relative.


155 Five great giants into chains, chased
 All of that race from the earth. I swam
 In the blackness of night, hunting monsters
 Out of the ocean, and killing them one
 By one; death was my errand and the fate
 They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called
 160 Together, and I've come. Grant me, then,
 Lord and protector of this noble place,
 A single request! I have come so far,
 Oh shelterer of warriors and your people's loved friend,
 That this one favor you should not refuse me—
 165 That I, alone and with the help of my men,
 May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
 Too, that the monster's scorn of men
 Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
 Nor will I. My lord Higlac
 170 Might think less of me if I let my sword
 Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
 Behind some broad linden shield.^o My hands
 Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
 Against the monster. God must decide
 175 Who will be given to death's cold grip.
 Grendel's plan, I think, will be
 What it has been before, to invade this hall
 And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,
 If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,
 180 There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare
 For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody
 Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones,
 And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls
 Of his den. No, I expect no Danes
 185 Will fret about sewing our shrouds,^o if he wins.
 And if death does take me, send the hammered
 Mail of my armor to Higlac, return
 The inheritance I had from Hrethel,^o and he
 From Wayland.^o Fate will unwind as it must!"

5

190 Hrothgar replied, protector of the Danes:
 "Beowulf, you've come to us in friendship, and because
 Of the reception your father found at our court.
 Edgetho had begun a bitter feud,
 Killing Hathlaf, a Wulfing warrior.^o
 195 Your father's countrymen were afraid of war,
 If he returned to his home, and they turned him away.

 **151-160.** Beowulf says
 that he has come to kill
 Grendel. What proof does he
 offer that he is up to the task?

172. **linden shield:** shield
 made from wood of the linden
 tree.

 **180-185.** Why will
 Hrothgar not have to hold
 a funeral if Beowulf dies?

185. **shrouds:** cloths used to
 wrap a body for burial.

188. **Hrethel:** Beowulf's
 grandfather, former king of
 the Geats.

189. **Wayland:** a smith cele-
 brated for his skill in making
 swords and mail shirts.

194. **Wulfing warrior:** The
 Wulfings were a Germanic
 tribe. Hrothgar's queen might
 have been a Wulfing.

Then he traveled across the curving waves
 To the land of the Danes. I was new to the throne,
 Then, a young man ruling this wide
 200 Kingdom and its golden city: Hergar,
 My older brother, a far better man
 Than I, had died and dying made me,
 Second among Healfdane's sons, first
 In this nation. I bought the end of Edgeth's
 205 Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's
 Furrows to the Wulfings; your father swore
 He'd keep that peace. My tongue grows heavy,
 And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel
 Has brought us, the damage he's done, here
 210 In this hall. You see for yourself how much smaller
 Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've lost
 To his terror. Surely the Lord Almighty
 Could stop his madness, smother his lust!
 How many times have my men, glowing
 215 With courage drawn from too many cups
 Of ale, sworn to stay after dark
 And stem that horror with a sweep of their swords.
 And then, in the morning, this mead-hall glittering
 With new light would be drenched with blood, the benches
 220 Stained red, the floors, all wet from that fiend's
 Savage assault—and my soldiers would be fewer
 Still, death taking more and more.
 But to table, Beowulf, a banquet in your honor:
 Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future."
 225 Then Hrothgar's men gave places to the Geats,
 Yielded benches to the brave visitors,
 And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead
 Came carrying out the carved flasks,
 And poured that bright sweetness. A poet
 230 Sang, from time to time, in a clear
 Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats
 Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.

UNFERTH'S CHALLENGE

6

Unferth spoke, Ecglaf's son,
 Who sat at Hrothgar's feet, spoke harshly
 235 And sharp (vexed° by Beowulf's adventure,
 By their visitor's courage, and angry that anyone
 In Denmark or anywhere on earth had ever

? 191–207. What do you think causes Hrothgar to make this speech, reminding Beowulf of the time he helped Beowulf's father? What is the probable effect of these words on Beowulf?



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235. vexed (vekst): highly annoyed.

Acquired glory and fame greater
Than his own):

- 240 “You’re Beowulf, are you—the same
Boastful fool who fought a swimming
Match with Brecca, both of you daring
And young and proud, exploring the deepest
Seas, risking your lives for no reason
But the danger? All older and wiser heads warned you
245 Not to, but no one could check such pride.
With Brecca at your side you swam along
The sea-paths, your swift-moving hands pulling you
Over the ocean’s face. Then winter
Churned through the water, the waves ran you
250 As they willed, and you struggled seven long nights
To survive. And at the end victory was his,
Not yours. The sea carried him close
To his home, to southern Norway, near
The land of the Brondings, where he ruled and was loved,
255 Where his treasure was piled and his strength protected
His towns and his people. He’d promised to outswim you:
Bonstan’s son^o made that boast ring true.
You’ve been lucky in your battles, Beowulf, but I think
Your luck may change if you challenge Grendel,
260 Staying a whole night through in this hall,
Waiting where that fiercest of demons can find you.”
Beowulf answered, Edgeth’s great son:
“Ah! Unferth, my friend, your face
Is hot with ale, and your tongue has tried
265 To tell us about Brecca’s doings. But the truth
Is simple: No man swims in the sea
As I can, no strength is a match for mine.
As boys, Brecca and I had boasted—
We were both too young to know better—that we’d risk
270 Our lives far out at sea, and so
We did. Each of us carried a naked
Sword, prepared for whales or the swift
Sharp teeth and beaks of needlefish.
He could never leave me behind, swim faster
275 Across the waves than I could, and I
Had chosen to remain close to his side.
I remained near him for five long nights,
Until a flood swept us apart;
The frozen sea surged around me,
280 It grew dark, the wind turned bitter, blowing
From the north, and the waves were savage. Creatures
Who sleep deep in the sea were stirred
Into life—and the iron hammered links

? 239–252. Why might
Unferth think that Beowulf
is ashamed of having taken
part in the swimming race?

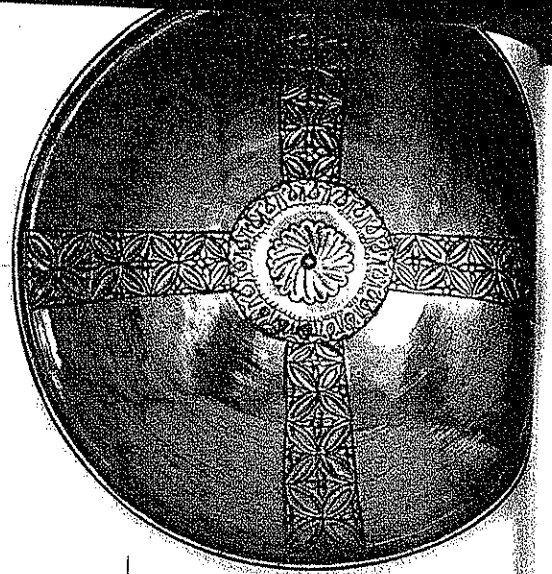
257. Bonstan’s son: Brecca.

? 274–276. What is
Beowulf’s explanation for
not leaving Brecca far behind?

Of my mail shirt, these shining bits of metal
285 Woven across my breast, saved me
From death. A monster seized me, drew me
Swiftly toward the bottom, swimming with its claws
Tight in my flesh. But fate let me
Find its heart with my sword, hack myself
290 Free; I fought that beast's last battle,
Left it floating lifeless in the sea.

7

"Other monsters crowded around me,
Continually attacking. I treated them politely,
Offering the edge of my razor-sharp sword.
295 But the feast, I think, did not please them, filled
Their evil bellies with no banquet-rich food,
Thrashing there at the bottom of the sea;
By morning they'd decided to sleep on the shore,
Lying on their backs, their blood spilled out
300 On the sand. Afterwards, sailors could cross
That sea-road and feel no fear; nothing
Would stop their passing. Then God's bright beacon
Appeared in the east, the water lay still,
And at last I could see the land, wind-swept
305 Cliff-walls at the edge of the coast. Fate saves
The living when they drive away death by themselves!
Lucky or not, nine was the number
Of sea-huge monsters I killed. What man,
Anywhere under Heaven's high arch, has fought
310 In such darkness, endured more misery, or been harder
Pressed? Yet I survived the sea, smashed
The monsters' hot jaws, swam home from my journey.
The swift-flowing waters swept me along
And I landed on Finnish soil. I've heard
315 No tales of you, Unferth, telling
Of such clashing terror, such contests in the night!
Brecca's battles were never so bold;
Neither he nor you can match me—and I mean
No boast, have announced no more than I know
320 To be true. And there's more: You murdered your brothers,
Your own close kin. Words and bright wit
Won't help your soul; you'll suffer hell's fires,
Unferth, forever tormented. Ecglaf's
Proud son, if your hands were as hard, your heart
325 As fierce as you think it, no fool would dare
To raid your hall, ruin Herot



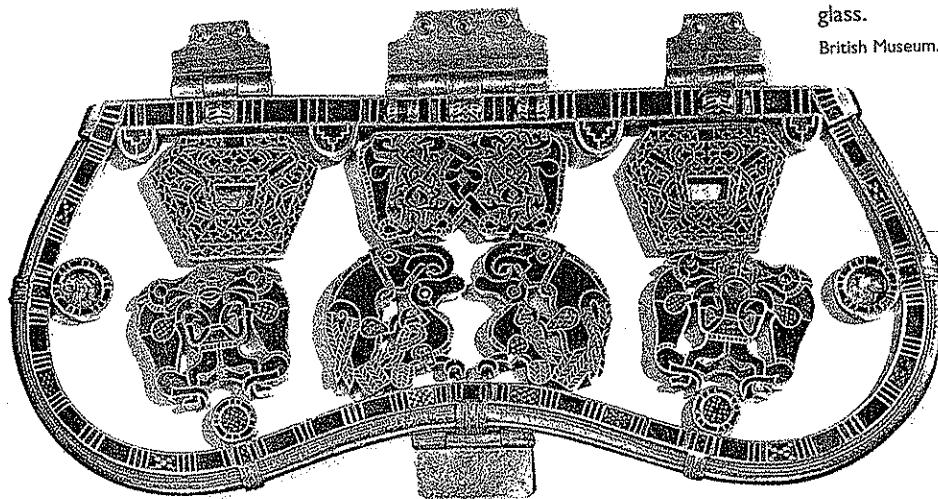
Sutton Hoo Bowl (7th century).
Sutton Hoo ship burial.
Byzantine silver bowl.
The Granger Collection, New York.

323–334. What is
Beowulf's final response to
Unferth's challenge?

And oppress its prince, as Grendel has done.
 But he's learned that terror is his alone,
 Discovered he can come for your people with no fear
 330 Of reprisal;^o he's found no fighting, here,
 But only food, only delight.
 He murders as he likes, with no mercy, gorges
 And feasts on your flesh, and expects no trouble,
 No quarrel from the quiet Danes. Now
 335 The Geats will show him courage, soon
 He can test his strength in battle. And when the sun
 Comes up again, opening another
 Bright day from the south, anyone in Denmark
 May enter this hall: That evil will be gone!"
 340 Hrothgar, gray-haired and brave, sat happily
 Listening, the famous ring-giver sure,
 At last, that Grendel could be killed; he believed
 In Beowulf's bold strength and the firmness of his spirit.
 There was the sound of laughter, and the cheerful clanking
 345 Of cups, and pleasant words. Then Welthow,
 Hrothgar's gold-ringed queen, greeted
 The warriors; a noble woman who knew
 What was right, she raised a flowing cup
 To Hrothgar first, holding it high
 350 For the lord of the Danes to drink, wishing him
 Joy in that feast. The famous king
 Drank with pleasure and blessed their banquet.
 Then Welthow went from warrior to warrior,
 Pouring a portion from the jeweled cup
 355 For each, till the bracelet-wearing queen
 Had carried the mead-cup among them and it was Beowulf's

330. *reprisal* (ri·pri'zəl) *n.*:
 punishment in return for an
 injury.

Purse lid, from the Sutton Hoo
 Ship Burial (c.625–30 A.D.).
 Gold, garnets and millefiori
 glass.
 British Museum, London, UK.



Turn to be served. She saluted the Geats'
Great prince, thanked God for answering her prayers,
For allowing her hands the happy duty
360 Of offering mead to a hero who would help
Her afflicted people. He drank what she poured,
Edgeth's brave son, then assured the Danish
Queen that his heart was firm and his hands
Ready:

 "When we crossed the sea, my comrades
365 And I, I already knew that all
My purpose was this: to win the good will
Of your people or die in battle, pressed
In Grendel's fierce grip. Let me live in greatness
And courage, or here in this hall welcome
My death!"

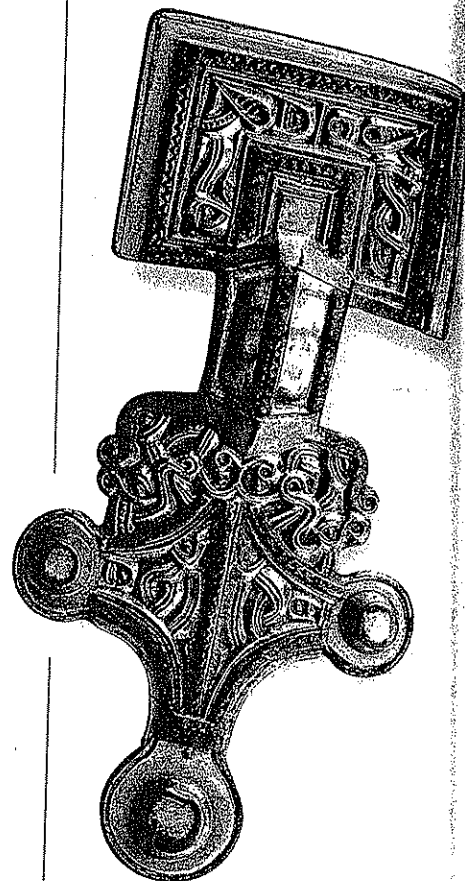
370 Welthow was pleased with his words,
His bright-tongued boasts; she carried them back
To her lord, walked nobly across to his side.

 The feast went on, laughter and music
And the brave words of warriors celebrating
375 Their delight. Then Hrothgar rose, Healfdane's
Son, heavy with sleep; as soon
As the sun had gone, he knew that Grendel
Would come to Herot, would visit that hall
When night had covered the earth with its net
380 And the shapes of darkness moved black and silent
Through the world. Hrothgar's warriors rose with him.

 He went to Beowulf, embraced the Geats'
Brave prince, wished him well, and hoped
That Herot would be his to command. And then
He declared:

385 "No one strange to this land
Has ever been granted what I've given you,
No one in all the years of my rule.
Make this best of all mead-halls yours, and then
Keep it free of evil, fight
390 With glory in your heart! Purge Herot
And your ship will sail home with its treasure-holds full." . . .

? 364–369. What does
Beowulf's speech here
reveal about his *character*?



Saxon brooch discovered at
Mitcham, South London (early
6th century). Gold leaf on
wood. English School.

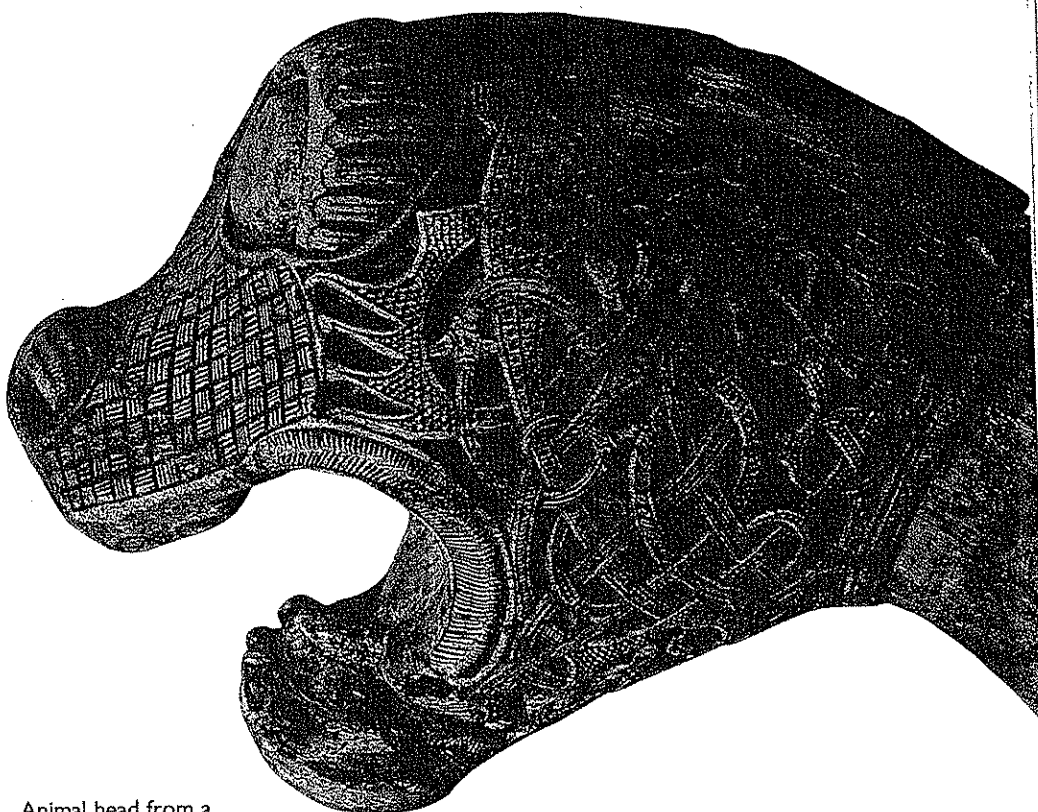
© Museum of London, UK.

The feast ends. Beowulf and his men take the place of Hrothgar's followers and lie down to sleep in Herot. Beowulf, however, is wakeful, eager to meet his enemy.

THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL

8

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
Grendel came, hoping to kill
395 Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
Up from his swampland, sliding silently
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
Home before, knew the way—



Animal head from a
Viking ship (c. 800).

© Museum of Cultural History-
University of Oslo, Norway.
Photo: Eirek Irgens Johnsen.

400 But never, before nor after that night,
 Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception
 So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
 Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
 Tore its iron fasteners with a touch,
 405 And rushed angrily over the threshold.
 He strode quickly across the inlaid
 Floor, snarling and fierce: His eyes
 Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome
 Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall
 410 Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed
 With rows of young soldiers resting together.
 And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,
 Intended to tear the life from those bodies
 By morning; the monster's mind was hot
 415 With the thought of food and the feasting his belly
 Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
 Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
 Of his last human supper. Human
 Eyes were watching his evil steps,
 420 Waiting to see his swift hard claws.
 Grendel snatched at the first Geat
 He came to, ripped him apart, cut
 His body to bits with powerful jaws,
 Drank the blood from his veins, and bolted
 425 Him down, hands and feet; death
 And Grendel's great teeth came together,
 Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
 Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
 Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper
 430 —And was instantly seized himself, claws
 Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
 That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
 Knew at once that nowhere on earth
 Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
 435 His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing
 Could take his talons and himself from that tight
 Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
 From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
 This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.
 440 But Higlac's follower remembered his final
 Boast and, standing erect, stopped
 The monster's flight, fastened those claws
 In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
 Closer. The infamous killer fought
 445 For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
 Desiring nothing but escape; his claws



Dragonhead from a Viking horse collar (detail) (10th century). Denmark. National Museum, Copenhagen.

416–418. These lines foreshadow, or hint at, the outcome of the battle between Grendel and Beowulf.

? Grendel has been attacking Herot successfully for years. What will be different about this visit to Herot?

435–447. “Higlac’s follower” is Beowulf. He had earlier sworn to kill Grendel with his bare hands.

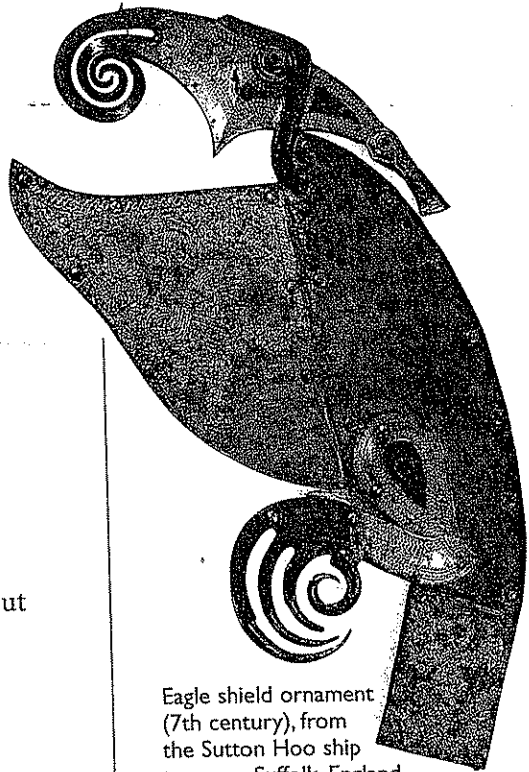
? What details in these lines demonstrate Beowulf’s superhuman strength?

Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!

450 The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,
And Danes shook with terror. Down
The aisles the battle swept, angry
And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully
Built to withstand the blows, the struggling
Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;
455 Shaped and fastened with iron, inside
And out, artfully worked, the building
Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell
To the floor, gold-covered boards grating
As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.
460 Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot
To stand forever; only fire,
They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put
Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor
Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly
465 The sounds changed, the Danes started
In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible
Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang
In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's
470 Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms
Of him who of all the men on earth
Was the strongest.

9

That mighty protector of men
Meant to hold the monster till its life
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
475 To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's
Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
Swords raised and ready, determined
To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
Was great but all wasted: They could hack at Grendel
480 From every side, trying to open
A path for his evil soul, but their points
Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron
Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon
Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells
485 That blunted every mortal man's blade.
And yet his time had come, his days
Were over, his death near; down
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.



Eagle shield ornament
(7th century), from
the Sutton Hoo ship
treasure, Suffolk, England.
British Museum, London.

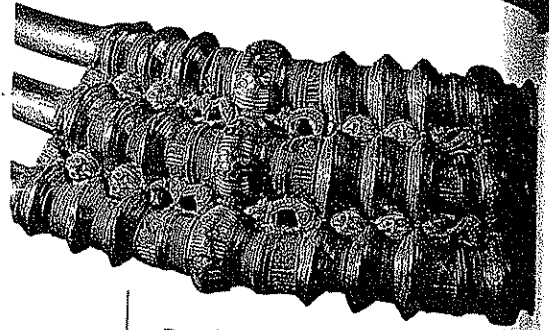
? 467–472. Earlier in the epic it was explained that Grendel is a descendant of Cain, who was cursed by God. In what ways is this battle between Grendel and Beowulf really a battle between good and evil? What details in the description of the battle make this clear?

? 479–485. According to these lines, why can't Beowulf's men harm Grendel?

490 Now he discovered—once the afflictor
 Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
 To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
 Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
 Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at
 495 His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,
 But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
 And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder
 Snapped, muscle and bone split
 And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
 500 Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
 But wounded as he was could flee to his den,
 His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,
 Only to die, to wait for the end
 Of all his days. And after that bloody
 505 Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
 He who had come to them from across the sea,
 Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
 Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,
 Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes
 510 Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them; Beowulf,
 A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
 Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
 Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people
 By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted
 515 The victory, for the proof, hanging high
 From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster's
 Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

10

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
 Herot, warriors coming to that hall
 520 From faraway lands, princes and leaders
 Of men hurrying to behold the monster's
 Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense
 Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,
 Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
 525 And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake
 Where he'd dragged his corpselike way, doomed
 And already weary of his vanishing life.
 The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
 In horrible pounding waves, heat
 530 Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling
 Surf had covered his death, hidden
 Deep in murky darkness his miserable
 End, as hell opened to receive him.



Detail of three-ringed gold collar
 (6th century).

Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm.

? 490–499. How does
 Beowulf defeat Grendel?

? 514–517. How does
 Beowulf prove his victory
 over Grendel? Why might he
 do this?

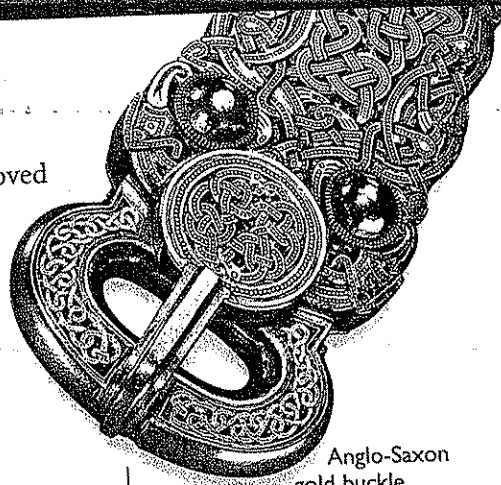
? 522–533. What has
 happened to Grendel?

535 Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
 From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved
 Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them
 Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
 Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.
 540 And over and over they swore that nowhere
 On earth or under the spreading sky
 Or between the seas, neither south nor north,
 Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.
 (But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle
 Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!) . . .

Grendel's monstrous mother, in grief for her son, next attacks Herot, and in her dripping claws she carries off one man—Hrothgar's closest friend. The monster also carries off Grendel's arm, which Beowulf had hung high from the rafters. Beowulf is awakened and called for again. In one of the most famous verses in the epic, the old king describes where Grendel and his mother live.

11

545 . . . "They live in secret places, windy
 Cliffs, wolf-dens where water pours
 From the rocks, then runs underground, where mist
 Steams like black clouds, and the groves of trees
 Growing out over their lake are all covered
 550 With frozen spray, and wind down snakelike
 Roots that reach as far as the water
 And help keep it dark. At night that lake
 Burns like a torch. No one knows its bottom,
 No wisdom reaches such depths. A deer,
 555 Hunted through the woods by packs of hounds,
 A stag with great horns, though driven through the forest
 From faraway places, prefers to die
 On those shores, refuses to save its life
 In that water. It isn't far, nor is it
 560 A pleasant spot! When the wind stirs
 And storms, waves splash toward the sky,
 As dark as the air, as black as the rain
 That the heavens weep. Our only help,
 Again, lies with you. Grendel's mother
 565 Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place
 You've not seen. Seek it, if you dare! Save us,
 Once more, and again twisted gold,
 Heaped-up ancient treasure, will reward you
 For the battle you win!"



Anglo-Saxon
 gold buckle
 (7th century), from the
 Sutton Hoo ship treasure,
 Suffolk, England.
 British Museum, London.


? 563–569. What is Hrothgar asking Beowulf to do?

Carrying the sword Hrunting, Beowulf goes to the lake where Grendel's mother has her underwater lair. Then, fully armed, he dives to the depths of this watery hell.

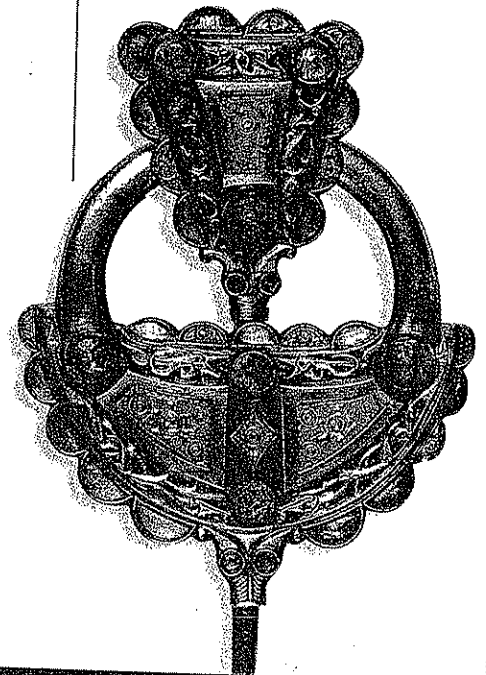
THE MONSTER'S MOTHER

12

- 570 ... He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone's
Answer; the heaving water covered him
Over. For hours he sank through the waves;
At last he saw the mud of the bottom.
And all at once the greedy she-wolf
- 575 Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred
Years discovered him, saw that a creature
From above had come to explore the bottom
Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,
Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,
- 580 Tried to work her fingers through the tight
Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore
And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor
And sword and all, to her home; he struggled
To free his weapon, and failed. The fight
- 585 Brought other monsters swimming to see
Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at
His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth
As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,
That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,
- 590 And there the water's heat could not hurt him,
Nor anything in the lake attack him through
The building's high-arching roof. A brilliant
Light burned all around him, the lake
Itself like a fiery flame.
- Then he saw
- 595 The mighty water witch, and swung his sword,
His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;
The iron sang its fierce song,
Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest
Discovered that no sword could slice her evil
- 600 Skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless
Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped
And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet,
And that too failed him; for the first time in years
Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;
- 605 It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf
Longed only for fame, leaped back

 **570–594.** Describe how Beowulf comes to the lair of Grendel's mother. What details remind you that Beowulf is not an ordinary man?

Silver and gold brooch with
amber ornaments (9th century).
Roscrea, County Tipperary.
National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

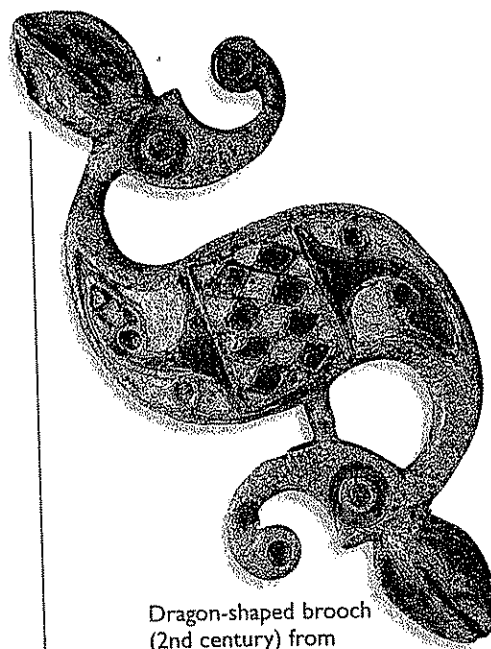


Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,
 Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where
 He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use
 610 His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame
 Comes to the men who mean to win it
 And care about nothing else! He raised
 His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger
 Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.
 615 She fell, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats'
 Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose
 At once and repaid him with her clutching claws,
 Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best
 And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled
 620 And in an instant she had him down, held helpless.
 Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew
 A dagger, brown with dried blood and prepared
 To avenge her only son. But he was stretched
 On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted
 625 By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.
 The hammered links held; the point
 Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom of
 the earth,
 Edgeth's son, and died there, if that shining
 Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
 630 God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
 For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
 Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

13

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
 Sword, hammered by giants, strong
 635 And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons
 But so massive that no ordinary man could lift
 Its carved and decorated length. He drew it
 From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,^o
 And then, savage, now, angry
 640 And desperate, lifted it high over his head
 And struck with all the strength he had left,
 Caught her in the neck and cut it through,
 Broke bones and all. Her body fell
 To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
 645 With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.
 The brilliant light shone, suddenly,
 As though burning in that hall, and as bright as Heaven's

? 607–632. What details
 in this description of the
 battle between Grendel's
 mother and Beowulf add to
 your suspense about the out-
 come? At what point do you
 think Beowulf may not be
 successful? What saves him?



Dragon-shaped brooch
 (2nd century) from
 the Romano-British
 period.

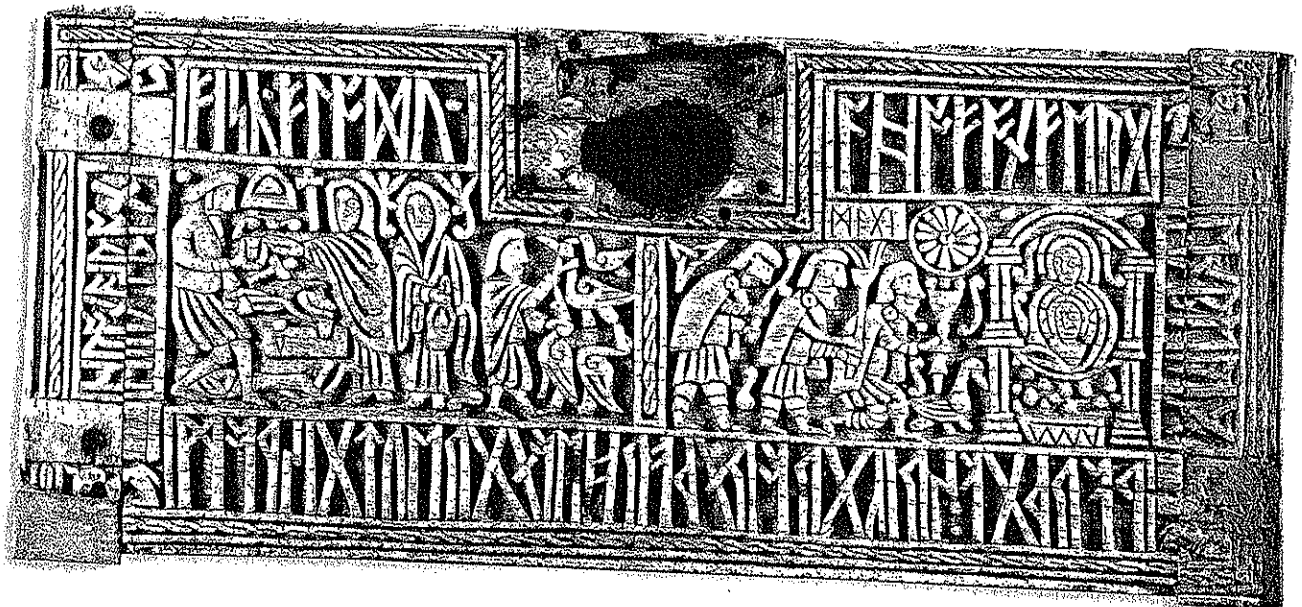
© British Museum, London.

638. scabbard ... hilt: A
 scabbard is a case that holds
 the blade of a sword; a hilt is a
 sword's handle.

? 633–645. How does
 Beowulf kill Grendel's
 mother?

Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
 At her home, then following along the wall
 650 Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,
 His heart still angry. He was hunting another
 Dead monster, and took his weapon with him
 For final revenge against Grendel's vicious
 Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
 655 And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's
 Men slept, killing them in their beds,
 Eating some on the spot, fifteen
 Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
 With another such sickening meal waiting
 660 In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,
 Found him lying dead in his corner,
 Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter
 Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
 His head with a single swift blow. The body
 Jerked for the last time, then lay still. . . .

? **648–665.** What is Beowulf's final revenge against Grendel? What action of Beowulf's provides a **resolution**, or wrapping up, of the episode?



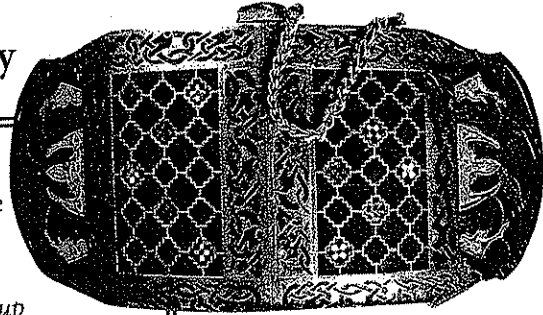
(Left) the Germanic hero Weland at his forge and (right) the adoration of the Magi (8th century), from the Franks casket. Whalebone.

British Museum. © Michael Holford.

from Beowulf

Part Two, translated by Seamus Heaney

Beowulf carries Grendel's head to King Hrothgar and then returns gift-laden to the land of the Geats, where he succeeds to the throne. After fifty winters pass, Beowulf, now an old man, faces his final task: He must fight a dragon who, angry because a thief has stolen a jeweled cup from the dragon's hoard of gold, is laying waste to the Geats' land. Beowulf and eleven warriors are guided to the dragon's lair by the thief who stole the cup. For Beowulf the price of this last victory will be great.



Shoulder clasp
(7th century),
from the Sutton Hoo
ship treasure,
Suffolk, England.

British Museum, London/
Photograph © Michael Holford.

THE FINAL BATTLE

14

Then he addressed each dear companion
one final time, those fighters in their helmets,
resolute and high-born: "I would rather not
use a weapon if I knew another way
670 to grapple with the dragon and make good my boast
as I did against Grendel in days gone by.
But I shall be meeting molten venom
in the fire he breathes, so I go forth
in mail-shirt and shield. I won't shift a foot
675 when I meet the cave-guard: what occurs on the wall
between the two of us will turn out as fate,
overseer of men, decides. I am resolved.
I scorn further words against this sky-borne foe.

680 "Men at arms, remain here on the barrow,^o
safe in your armour, to see which one of us
is better in the end at bearing wounds
in a deadly fray. This fight is not yours,
nor is it up to any man except me

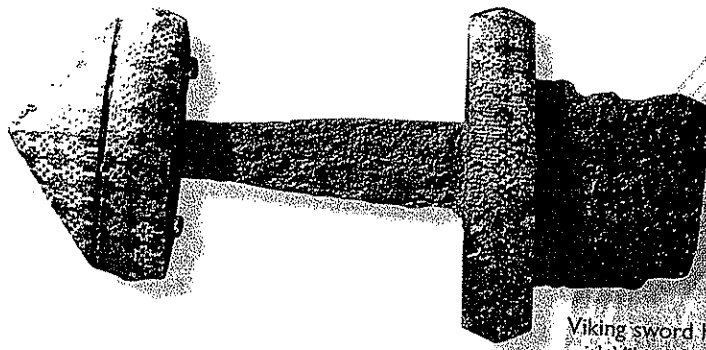
666–678. Throughout *Beowulf*, there are many references to the pagan notion of fate (see line 676) as an impersonal force that predetermines the outcome of events in a person's life. This concept, known as *wyrd*, was central to Anglo-Saxon beliefs.

? How is this older Beowulf different from the Beowulf who slew Grendel and his mother?

679. *barrow* *n.*: a hill.

Vocabulary

resolute (rez'ə • lōōt') *adj.*: determined.



Viking sword handles, embellished
with Viking Age motifs
Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm

685 to measure his strength against the monster
or to prove his worth. I shall win the gold
by my courage, or else mortal combat,
doom of battle, will bear your lord away.”

Then he drew himself up beside his shield.
The fabled warrior in his warshirt and helmet
690 trusted in his own strength entirely
and went under the crag. No coward path.
Hard by the rock-face that hale° veteran,
a good man who had gone repeatedly
into combat and danger and come through,
695 saw a stone arch and a gushing stream
that burst from the barrow, blazing and wafting
a deadly heat. It would be hard to survive
unscathed near the hoard, to hold firm
against the dragon in those flaming depths.
700 Then he gave a shout. The lord of the Geats
unburdened his breast and broke out
in a storm of anger. Under grey stone
his voice challenged and resounded clearly.
Hate was ignited. The hoard-guard recognized
705 a human voice, the time was over
for peace and parleying.° Pouring forth
in a hot battle-fume, the breath of the monster
burst from the rock. There was a rumble under ground.
Down there in the barrow, Beowulf the warrior
710 lifted his shield: the outlandish thing
writhed and convulsed and vehemently

? 679–687. How does
Beowulf’s acceptance of
fate show his deep sense of re-
sponsibility to his people?

692. **hale** *adj.*: healthy and
energetic.

706. **parleying** *v.* used as *n.*:
discussing.

Vocabulary

vehemently (vē'ə • mənt • lē) *adv.*: violently.

715 turned on the king, whose keen-edged sword,
 an heirloom inherited by ancient right,
 was already in his hand. Roused to a fury,
 each antagonist struck terror in the other.
 Unyielding, the lord of his people loomed
 by his tall shield, sure of his ground,
 while the serpent looped and unleashed itself.
 720 Swaddled in flames, it came gliding and flexing
 and racing towards its fate. Yet his shield defended
 the renowned leader's life and limb
 for a shorter time than he meant it to:
 that final day was the first time
 when Beowulf fought and fate denied him
 725 glory in battle. So the king of the Geats
 raised his hand and struck hard
 at the enamelled scales, but scarcely cut through:
 the blade flashed and slashed yet the blow
 was far less powerful than the hard-pressed king
 730 had need of at that moment. The mound-keeper
 went into a spasm and spouted deadly flames:
 when he felt the stroke, battle-fire
 billowed and spewed. Beowulf was foiled^o
 of a glorious victory. The glittering sword,
 735 infallible before that day,
 failed when he unsheathed it, as it never should have.
 For the son of Ecgtheow, it was no easy thing
 to have to give ground like that and go
 unwillingly to inhabit another home
 740 in a place beyond; so every man must yield
 the leasehold of his days.

It was not long
 until the fierce contenders clashed again.
 The hoard-guard took heart, inhaled and swelled up
 and got a new wind; he who had once ruled
 745 was furred in fire and had to face the worst.
 No help or backing was to be had then
 from his high-born comrades; that hand-picked troop
 broke ranks and ran for their lives
 to the safety of the wood. But within one heart
 750 sorrow welled up: in a man of worth
 the claims of kinship cannot be denied.

Vocabulary

infallible (in·fal'ə·bəl) *adj.*: unable to fail or be wrong.
 furred (furd) *v.*: rolled up.

709–720. The image of a lone hero standing up to a fire-breathing dragon or other giant monster is one of the most **archetypal** images in Western heroic literature.

? How does the dragon compare with Grendel and Grendel's mother?

? **720–741.** In lines 720–736, what goes wrong during Beowulf's battle with the dragon? In lines 737–741, what are you led to believe about Beowulf's ultimate fate?

733. foiled *v.*: prevented from.

? **746–749.** How do Beowulf's men react to the sight of the dragon gaining victory over Beowulf?

His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan's,
 a well-regarded Shyfling warrior
 related to Aelfhere. When he saw his lord
 755 tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet,
 he remembered the bountiful gifts bestowed on him,
 how well he lived among the Waegmundings,
 the freehold^o he inherited from his father before him.
 He could not hold back: one hand brandished
 760 the yellow-timbered shield, the other drew his sword—...

Sad at heart, addressing his companions,
 Wiglaf spoke wise and fluent words:
 "I remember that time when mead was flowing,
 how we pledged loyalty to our lord in the hall,
 765 promised our ring-giver we would be worth our price,
 make good the gift of the war-gear,
 those swords and helmets, as and when
 his need required it. He picked us out
 from the army deliberately, honoured us and judged us
 770 fit for this action, made me these lavish gifts—
 and all because he considered us the best
 of his arms-bearing thanes.^o And now, although
 he wanted this challenge to be one he'd face
 by himself alone—the shepherd of our land,
 775 a man unequalled in the quest for glory
 and a name for daring—now the day has come
 when this lord we serve needs sound men
 to give him their support. Let us go to him,
 help our leader through the hot flame
 780 and dread of the fire. As God is my witness,
 I would rather my body were robbed in the same
 burning blaze as my gold-giver's body
 than go back home bearing arms.
 That is unthinkable, unless we have first
 785 slain the foe and defended the life
 of the prince of the Weather-Geats. I well know
 the things he has done for us deserve better.
 Should he alone be left exposed
 to fall in battle? We must bond together,
 790 shield and helmet, mail-shirt and sword."

Vocabulary

lavish (lav'ish) *adj.*: extravagant.

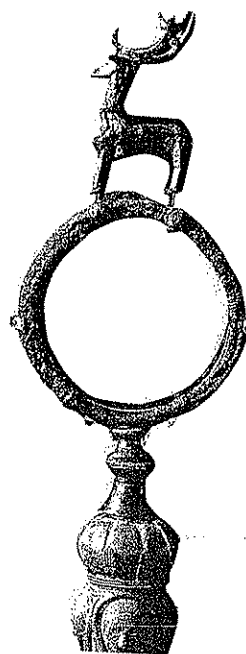
758. **freehold** *n.*: estate.

? **761–790.** What arguments does Wiglaf use to convince the men that they must fight with Beowulf?

772. **thanes** *n. pl.*: in Anglo-Saxon England, group of men who held land of the king in exchange for military service.

Bronze stag atop ceremonial scepter (detail) (7th century), from the Sutton Hoo ship treasure, Suffolk, England.

© British Museum, London.



Together Beowulf and the young Wiglaf kill the dragon, but the old king is fatally wounded. Beowulf, thinking of his people, asks to see the monster's treasure. Wiglaf enters the dragon's cave and finds a priceless hoard of jewels and gold.

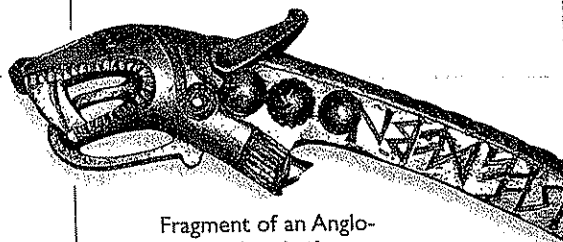
16

... Wiglaf went quickly, keen to get back,
excited by the treasure; anxiety weighed
on his brave heart, he was hoping he would find
the leader of the Geats alive where he had left him
795 helpless, earlier, on the open ground.
So he came to the place, carrying the treasure,
and found his lord bleeding profusely,
his life at an end; again he began
to swab his body. The beginnings of an utterance
800 broke out from the king's breast-cage.
The old lord gazed sadly at the gold.

"To the everlasting Lord of All,
to the King of Glory, I give thanks
that I behold this treasure here in front of me,
805 that I have been thus allowed to leave my people
so well endowed on the day I die.
Now that I have bartered my last breath
to own this fortune, it is up to you
to look after their needs. I can hold out no longer.
810 Order my troop to construct a barrow
on a headland on the coast, after my pyre has cooled.
It will loom on the horizon at Hronesness
and be a reminder among my people—
so that in coming times crews under sail
815 will call it Beowulf's Barrow, as they steer
ships across the wide and shrouded waters."

Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped
the collar of gold from his neck and gave it
to the young thane, telling him to use
820 it and the warshirt and the gilded helmet well.

"You are the last of us, the only one left
of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,



Fragment of an Anglo-Saxon silver knife mount with runic inscriptions (late 8th century).

C. M. Dixon.

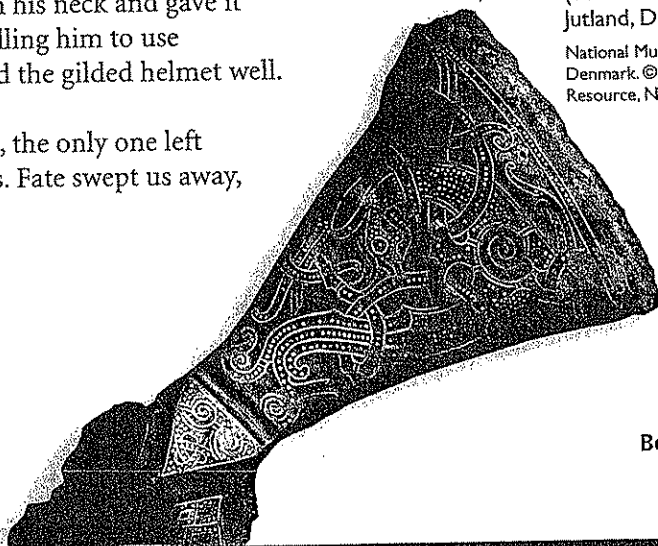
802–809. The ultimate purpose of the **epic hero** is to leave something of lasting value to his culture.

? What has Beowulf left to his people?

? 810–816. What are Beowulf's final wishes?

The great ax, with depiction of bird-animal (10th century), from Jutland, Denmark.

National Museum of Copenhagen, Denmark. © Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.



sent my whole brave high-born clan
to their final doom. Now I must follow them.”
825 That was the warrior’s last word.
He had no more to confide. The furious heat
of the pyre would assail him. His soul fled from his breast
to its destined place among the steadfast ones.

Wiglaf berates the faithless warriors who did not go to the aid of their king. With sorrow the Geats cremate the corpse of their greatest king. They place his ashes, along with all of the dragon’s treasure, in a huge burial tower by the sea, where it can be seen by voyagers.

17

Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,
830 chieftains’ sons, champions in battle,
all of them distraught, chanting in dirges,
mourning his loss as a man and a king.
They extolled his heroic nature and exploits
and gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,
835 for a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear
and cherish his memory when that moment comes
when he has to be convoyed from his bodily home.
So the Geat people, his hearth companions,
sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
840 They said that of all the kings upon the earth
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

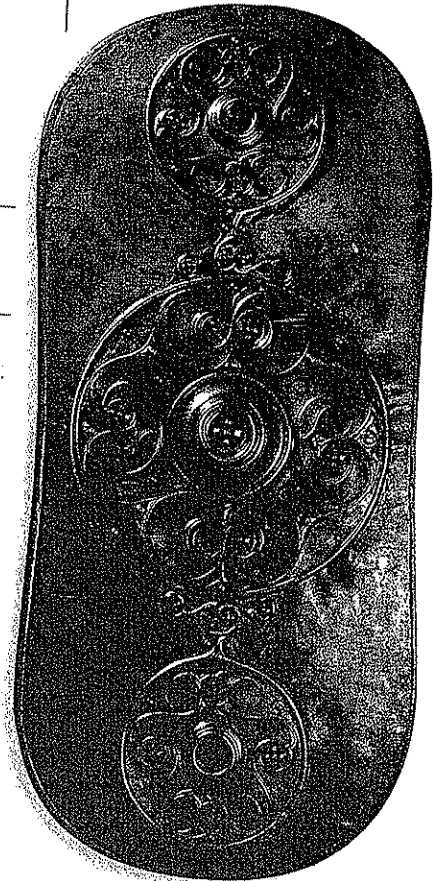
Vocabulary

assail (ə·sāl') v.: attack.

extolled (ek·stōld') v.: praised.

829–842. The closing lines of *Beowulf* serve as a kind of **elegy**—a poem that mourns the death of a person or laments something lost.

? According to these elegiac final lines of the epic, what qualities made *Beowulf* a great hero?



A Celtic shield, found in Battersea, near the Thames River, perhaps thrown in the river as an offering to the river god.
Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.