

PART III

Hygelac's kinsman kept thinking about his name and fame: he never lost heart. Then, in a fury, he flung his sword away. The keen, inlaid, worm-loop-patterned steel was hurled to the ground: he would have to rely on the might of his arm. So must a man do who intends to gain enduring glory in a combat. Life doesn't cost him a thought. Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to this fight with Grendel's mother, gripped her shoulder and laid about him in a battle frenzy: he pitched his killer opponent to the floor but she rose quickly and retaliated, grappled him tightly in her grim embrace. The sure-footed fighter felt daunted, the strongest of warriors stumbled and fell. So she pounced upon him and pulled out a broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail on Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life, turned the edge and tip of the blade. The son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth had the strong links and locks of his war-gear not helped to save him: holy God decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord, the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance once Beowulf got back up on his feet. Then he saw a blade that boded well, a sword in her armoury, an ancient heirloom from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon, one that any warrior would envy.

He fights back with his bare hands

1570

but so huge and heavy of itself only Beowulf could wield it in a battle. So the Shieldings' hero, hard-pressed and enraged, took a firm hold of the hilt and swung the blade in an arc, a resolute blow that bit deep into her neck-bone and severed it entirely, toppling the doomed house of her flesh; she fell to the floor. The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated.

He presents in helmet Grendel's corpse

A light appeared and the place brightened the way the sky does when heaven's candle is shining clearly. He inspected the vault: with sword held high, its hilt raised to guard and threaten, Hygelac's thane scouted by the wall in Grendel's wake. Now the weapon was to prove its worth. The warrior determined to take revenge for every gross act Grendel had committed—and not only for that one occasion when he'd come to slaughter the sleeping troops, fifteen of Hirothgar's house-guards surprised on their benches and ruthlessly devoured, and as many again carried away, a brutal plunder. Beowulf in his fury now settled that score: he saw the monster in his resting place, war-weary and wrecked, a lifeless corpse, a casualty of the battle in Heorot. The body gaped at the stroke dealt to it after death: Beowulf cut the corpse's head off.

1580

Beowulf discerns a mighty sword and slays his opponent

1590

Immediately the counsellors keeping a lookout

with Hrothgar, watching the lake water,
saw a heave-up and surge of waves
and blood in the backwash. They bowed grey heads,
spoke in their sage, experienced way
about the good warrior, how they never again
expected to see that prince returning
in triumph to their king. It was clear to many
that the wolf of the deep had destroyed him forever.

The ninth hour of the day arrived.

The brave Shieldings abandoned the cliff-top
and the king went home; but sick at heart,
staring at the mere, the strangers held on.
They wished, without hope, to behold their lord,
Beowulf himself.

Meanwhile, the sword
began to wilt into gory icicles,
to slather and thaw. It was a wonderful thing,
the way it all melted as ice melts
when the Father eases the fetters off the frost
and unravels the water-ropes. He who wields power
over time and tide: He is the true Lord.

The Geat captain saw treasure in abundance
but carried no spoils from those quarters
except for the head and the inlaid hilt
embossed with jewels; its blade had melted
and the scrollwork on it burnt, so scalding was the blood
of the poisonous fiend who had perished there.
Then away he swam, the one who had survived
the fall of his enemies, flailing to the surface.
The wide water, the waves and pools
were no longer infested once the wandering fiend

*Furchadings of Hrothgar
on the shore*

1630

let go of her life and this unreliable world.
The seafarers' leader made for land,
resolutely swimming, delighted with his prize,
the mighty load he was lugging to the surface.
His thanes advanced in a troop to meet him,
thanking God and taking great delight
in seeing their prince back safe and sound.
Quickly the hero's helmet and mail-shirt
were loosed and unlaced. The lake settled,
clouds darkened above the bloodshot depths.

With high hearts they headed away
along footpaths and trails through the fields,
roads that they knew, each of them wrestling
with the head they were carrying from the lakeside cliff,
men kingly in their courage and capable
of difficult work. It was a task for four
to hoist Grendel's head on a spear
and bear it under strain to the bright hall.
But soon enough they neared the place,
fourteen Geats in fine fettle,
striding across the outlying ground
in a delighted throng around their leader.

In he came then, the thane's commander,
the arch-warrior, to address Hrothgar:
his courage was proven, his glory was secure.
Grendel's head was hauled by the hair,
dragged across the floor where the people were drinking,
a horror for both queen and company to behold.
They stared in awe. It was an astonishing sight.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

*The sword blade
melts*

1640

*Beowulf returns
with the sword's hilt
and Grendel's head*

*He displays
Grendel's head
in Hroam*

1650

"So, son of Halfdane, prince of the Shieldings, we are glad to bring this booty from the lake. It is a token of triumph and we tender it to you. I barely survived the battle under water. It was hard-fought, a desperate affair that could have gone badly; if God had not helped me, the outcome would have been quick and fatal. Although Hrunting is hard-edged, I could never bring it to bear in battle. But the Lord of Men allowed me to behold—for He often helps the unbefriended—an ancient sword shining on the wall, a weapon made for giants, there for the wielding. Then my moment came in the combat and I struck the dwellers in that den. Next thing the damascened sword blade melted; it bloated and it burned in their rushing blood. I have wrested the hilt from the enemies' hand, avenged the evil done to the Danes; it is what was due. And this I pledge, O prince of the Shieldings: you can sleep secure with your company of troops in Heorot Hall. Never need you fear for a single thane of your sept or nation, young warriors or old, that laying waste of life that you and your people endured of yore."

Then the gold hilt was handed over to the old lord, a relic from long ago for the venerable ruler. That rare smithwork was passed on to the prince of the Danes when those devils perished; once death removed that murdering, guilt-steeped, God-cursed fiend, eliminating his unholy life

1690

and his mother's as well, it was willed to that king who of all the lavish gift-lords of the north was the best regarded between the two seas.

Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt, that relic of old times. It was engraved all over and showed how war first came into the world and the flood destroyed the tribe of giants. They suffered a terrible severance from the Lord; the Almighty made the waters rise, drowned them in the deluge for retribution. In pure gold inlay on the sword-guards there were rune-markings correctly incised, stating and recording for whom the sword had been first made and ornamented with its scrollworked hilt. Then everyone hushed as the son of Halfdane spoke this wisdom. "A protector of his people, pledged to uphold truth and justice and to respect tradition, is entitled to affirm that this man was born to distinction. Beowulf, my friend, your fame has gone far and wide, you are known everywhere. In all things you are even-tempered, prudent and resolute. So I stand firm by the promise of friendship we exchanged before. Forever you will be your people's mainstay and your own warriors' helping hand.

Heremod was different, the way he behaved to Ecgwala's sons. His rise in the world brought little joy to the Danish people, only death and destruction.

1700

1710

He vented his rage on men he caroused with,
killed his own comrades, a pariah king
who cut himself off from his own kind,
even though Almighty God had made him
eminent and powerful and marked him from the start
for a happy life. But a change happened,
he grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings
to honour the Danes. He suffered in the end
for having plagued his people for so long:
his life lost happiness.

So learn from this
and understand true values. I who tell you
have wintered into wisdom.

It is a great wonder
how Almighty God in His magnificence
favours our race with rank and scope
and the gift of wisdom; His sway is wide.
Sometimes He allows the mind of a man
of distinguished birth to follow its bent,
grants him fulfilment and felicity on earth
and forts to command in his own country.
He permits him to lord it in many lands
until the man in his unthinkingness
forgets that it will ever end for him.

He indulges his desires; illness and old age
mean nothing to him; his mind is untroubled
by envy or malice or the thought of enemies
with their hate-honed swords. The whole world
conforms to his will, he is kept from the worst
until an element of overweening
enters him and takes hold
while the soul's guard, its sentry, drowns,
grown too distracted. A killer stalks him,

1750

an archer who draws a deadly bow.
And then the man is hit in the heart,
the arrow flies beneath his defences,
the devious promptings of the demon start.
His old possessions seem paltry to him now.
He covets and resents; dishonours custom
and bestows no gold; and because of good things
that the Heavenly Powers gave him in the past
he ignores the shape of things to come.
Then finally the end arrives
when the body he was lent collapses and falls
prey to its death; ancestral possessions
and the goods he hoarded are inherited by another
who lets them go with a liberal hand.

"O flower of warriors, beware of that trap.
Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,
eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride.
For a brief while your strength is in bloom
but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow
illness or the sword to lay you low,
or a sudden fire or surge of water
or jabbing blade or javelin from the air
or repellent age. Your piercing eye
will dim and darken; and death will arrive,
dear warrior, to sweep you away.

"Just so I ruled the Ring-Danes' country
for fifty years, defended them in wartime
with spear and sword against constant assaults
by many tribes: I came to believe
my enemies had faded from the face of the earth.
Still, what happened was a hard reversal

*Hrothgar's discourse
on the dangers of
power*

1760

*Beowulf is exhorted
to be mindful of the
fragility of life*

1770

*No life is immune
danger; Hrothgar's
experience proves it*

from bliss to grief. Grendel struck after lying in wait. He laid waste to the land and from that moment my mind was in dread of his depredations. So I praise God in His heavenly glory that I lived to behold this head dripping blood and that after such harrowing I can look upon it in triumph at last. Take your place, then, with pride and pleasure and move to the feast. To-morrow morning our treasure will be shared and showered upon you."

The Geat was elated and gladly obeyed the old man's bidding; he sat on the bench. And soon all was restored, the same as before. Happiness came back, the hall was thronged, and a banquet set forth; black night fell and covered them in darkness.

Then the company rose for the old campaigner: the grey-haired prince was ready for bed. And a need for rest came over the brave shield-bearing Geat. He was a weary seafarer, far from home, so immediately a house-guard guided him out, one whose office entailed looking after whatever a thane on the road in those days might need or require. It was noble courtesy.

That great heart rested. The hall towered, gold-shingled and gabled, and the guest slept in it until the black raven with raucous glee announced heaven's joy, and a hurry of brightness overran the shadows. Warriors rose quickly, impatient to be off: their own country

was beckoning the nobles; and the bold voyager longed to be aboard his distant boat. Then that stalwart fighter ordered Hrunting to be brought to Unferth, and bade Unferth take the sword and thanked him for lending it. He said he had found it a friend in battle and a powerful help; he put no blame on the blade's cutting edge. He was a considerate man.

And there the warriors stood in their war-gear, eager to go, while their honoured lord approached the platform where the other sat. The undaunted hero addressed Hrothgar.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"Now we who crossed the wide sea have to inform you that we feel a desire to return to Hygelac. Here we have been welcomed and thoroughly entertained. You have treated us well. If there is any favour on earth I can perform beyond deeds of arms I have done already, anything that would merit your affections more, I shall act, my lord, with alacrity.

If ever I hear from across the ocean that people on your borders are threatening battle as attackers have done from time to time, I shall land with a thousand thanes at my back to help your cause. Hygelac may be young to rule a nation, but this much I know about the king of the Geats: he will come to my aid and want to support me by word and action in your hour of need, when honour dictates that I raise a hedge of spears around you. Then if Hrethric should think about travelling

1810

A feast. The warriors rest

1820

1830

Beowulf and his band prepare to depart

as a king's son to the court of the Geats,
he will find many friends. Foreign places
yield more to one who is himself worth meeting."

Hrothgar spoke and answered him:

"The Lord in His wisdom sent you those words
and they came from the heart. I have never heard
so young a man make truer observations.
You are strong in body and mature in mind,
impressive in speech. If it should come to pass
that Hrethel's descendant dies beneath a spear,
if deadly battle or the sword blade or disease
fells the prince who guards your people
and you are still alive, then I firmly believe
the seafaring Geats won't find a man
worthier of acclaim as their king and defender
than you, if only you would undertake
the lordship of your homeland. My liking for you
deepens with time, dear Beowulf.

What you have done is to draw two peoples,
the Geat nation and us neighbouring Danes,
into shared peace and a pact of friendship
in spite of hatreds we have harboured in the past.
For as long as I rule this far-flung land
treasures will change hands and each side will treat
the other with gifts; across the gannet's bath,
over the broad sea, whorled prows will bring
presents and tokens. I know your people
are beyond reproach in every respect,
steadfast in the old way with friend or foe."

Then the earls' defender furnished the hero
with twelve treasures and told him to set out,

sail with those gifts safely home
to the people he loved, but to return promptly.
And so the good and grey-haired Dane,
that high-born king, kissed Beowulf
and embraced his neck, then broke down
in sudden tears. Two forebodings
disturbed him in his wisdom, but one was stronger:
nevermore would they meet each other
face to face. And such was his affection
that he could not help being overcome:
his fondness for the man was so deep-founded,
it warmed his heart and wound the heartstrings
tight in his breast.

The embrace ended
and Beowulf, glorious in his gold regalia,
stepped the green earth. Straining at anchor
and ready for boarding, his boat awaited him.
So they went on their journey, and Hrothgar's generosity
was praised repeatedly. He was a peerless king
until old age sapped his strength and did him
mortal harm, as it has done so many.

Down to the waves then, dressed in the web
of their chain-mail and warshirts the young men marched
in high spirits. The coast-guard spied them,
thanes setting forth, the same as before.
His salute this time from the top of the cliff
was far from unmannerly; he galloped to meet them
and as they took ship in their shining gear,
he said how welcome they would be in Geatland.
Then the broad hull was beached on the sand
to be cargoed with treasure, horses and war-gear.
The curved prow motioned; the mast stood high

1870

*Hrothgar declares
that Beowulf is fit to
be king of the Geats*

1880

1890

*Gifts presented,
farewells taken*

*The Geats march
back to their shore*

above Hirothgar's riches in the loaded hold.

The guard who had watched the boat was given a sword with gold fittings and in future days that present would make him a respected man at his place on the mead-bench.

Then the keel plunged and shook in the sea; and they sailed from Denmark.

Right away the mast was rigged with its sea-shawl; sail-ropes were tightened, timbers drummed and stiff winds kept the wave-crosser skimming ahead; as she heaved forward, her foamy neck was fleet and buoyant, a lapped prow loping over currents, until finally the Geats caught sight of coastline and familiar cliffs. The keel reared up, wind lifted it home, it hit on the land.

The harbour guard came hurrying out to the rolling water; he had watched the offing long and hard, on the lookout for those friends. With the anchor cables, he moored their craft right where it had beached, in case a backwash might catch the hull and carry it away.

Then he ordered the prince's treasure-trove to be carried ashore. It was a short step from there to where Hrethel's son and heir, Hygelac the gold-giver, makes his home on a secure cliff, in the company of retainers.

The building was magnificent, the king majestic, ensconced in his hall; and although Hygd, his queen,

was young, a few short years at court, her mind was thoughtful and her manners sure. Haereth's daughter behaved generously and stinted nothing when she distributed bounty to the Geats.

Great Queen Modthryth perpetrated terrible wrongs.

If any retainer ever made bold to look her in the face, if an eye not her lord's stared at her directly during daylight, the outcome was sealed: he was kept bound in hand-tightened shackles, racked, tortured until doom was pronounced—death by the sword, slash of blade, blood-gush and death qualms in an evil display. Even a queen outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that. A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent with loss of life for imagined insults.

But Hemming's kinsman put a halt to her ways and drinkers round the table had another tale: she was less of a bane to people's lives, less cruel-minded, after she was married to the brave Offa, a bride arrayed in her gold finery, given away

by a caring father, ferried to her young prince over dim seas. In days to come she would grace the throne and grow famous for her good deeds and conduct of life, her high devotion to the hero king who was the best king, it has been said, between the two seas or anywhere else on the face of the earth. Offa was honoured far and wide for his generous ways,

Queen Hygd introduced. The story of Queen Modthryth, Hygd's opposite, is told by the poet

1930

*They sail from
Denmark*

1940

*They arrive at
Hygelac's stronghold*

1950

his fighting spirit and his far-seeing defence of his homeland; from him there sprang Eomer, Garmund's grandson, kinsman of Hemming, his warriors' mainstay and master of the field.

Heroic Beowulf and his band of men crossed the wide strand, striding along the sandy foreshore; the sun shone, the world's candle warmed them from the south as they hastened to where, as they had heard, the young king, Ongentheow's killer and his people's protector, was dispensing rings inside his bawn. Beowulf's return was reported to Hygelac as soon as possible, news that the captain was now in the enclosure, his battle-brother back from the fray alive and well, walking to the hall. Room was quickly made, on the king's orders, and the troops filed across the cleared floor.

After Hygelac had offered greetings to his loyal thane in lofty speech, he and his kinsman, that hale survivor, sat face to face. Haereþ's daughter moved about with the mead-jug in her hand, taking care of the company, filling the cups that warriors held out. Then Hygelac began to put courteous questions to his old comrade in the high hall. He hankered to know every tale the Sea-Geats had to tell.

"How did you fare on your foreign voyage, dear Beowulf, when you abruptly decided

to sail away across the salt water and fight at Heorot? Did you help Hrothgar much in the end? Could you ease the prince of his well-known troubles? Your undertaking cast my spirits down, I dreaded the outcome of your expedition and pleaded with you long and hard to leave the killer be, let the South-Danes settle their own blood-feud with Grendel. So God be thanked I am granted this sight of you, safe and sound."

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"What happened, Lord Hygelac, is hardly a secret any more among men in this world— myself and Grendel coming to grips on the very spot where he visited destruction on the Victory-Shieldings and violated life and limb, losses I avenged so no earthly offspring of Grendel's need ever boast of that bout before dawn, no matter how long the last of his evil family survives.

When I first landed I hastened to the ring-hall and saluted Hrothgar. Once he discovered why I had come the son of Halfdane sent me immediately to sit with his own sons on the bench. It was a happy gathering. In my whole life I have never seen mead enjoyed more in any hall on earth. Sometimes the queen herself appeared, peace-pledge between nations, to hearten the young ones and hand out a torque to a warrior, then take her place.

Beowulf and his
troop are welcomed
in Hygelac's hall

2000



2010

Hygelac questions
Beowulf

Beowulf tells what
happened in the land
of the Danes

Sometimes Hrothgar's daughter distributed ale to older ranks, in order on the benches:

I heard the company call her Freawaru as she made her rounds, presenting men with the gem-studded bowl, young bride-to-be to the gracious Ingeld, in her gold-trimmed attire. The friend of the Shieldings favours her betrothal: the guardian of the kingdom sees good in it and hopes this woman will heal old wounds and grievous feuds.

But generally the spear is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed, no matter how admirable the bride may be.

"Think how the Heathobards will be bound to feel, their lord, Ingeld, and his loyal thanes, when he walks in with that woman to the feast: Danes are at the table, being entertained, honoured guests in glittering regalia, burnished ring-mail that was their hosts' birthright, looted when the Heathobards could no longer wield their weapons in the shield-clash, when they went down with their beloved comrades and forfeited their lives. Then an old spearman will speak while they are drinking, having glimpsed some heirloom that brings alive memories of the massacre; his mood will darken and heart-stricken, in the stress of his emotion, he will begin to test a young man's temper and stir up trouble, starting like this: 'Now, my friend, don't you recognize your father's sword, his favourite weapon, the one he wore when he went out in his war-mask to face the Danes on that final day?

*He foresees the grim
consequence of a
proposed marriage.*

2060

*When the Danes
appear at Freawaru's
wedding, their hosts,
the Heathobards,
will be stirred to
avenge an old defeat*

2070

After Wethergeld died and his men were doomed the Shieldings quickly claimed the field, and now here's a son of one or other of those same killers coming through our hall overbearing us, mouthing boasts, and rigged in armour that by right is yours.' And so he keeps on, recalling and accusing, working things up with bitter words until one of the lady's retainers lies spattered in blood, split open on his father's account. The killer knows the lie of the land and escapes with his life. Then on both sides the oath-bound lords will break the peace, a passionate hate will build up in Ingeld and love for his bride will falter in him as the feud rankles. I therefore suspect the good faith of the Heathobards, the truth of their friendship and the trustworthiness of their alliance with the Danes.

But now, my lord, I shall carry on with my account of Grendel, the whole story of everything that happened in the hand-to-hand fight.

After heaven's gem had gone mildly to earth, that maddened spirit, the terror of those twilights, came to attack us where we stood guard, still safe inside the hall. There deadly violence came down on Handscio and he fell as fate ordained, the first to perish, rigged out for the combat. A comrade from our ranks had come to grief in Grendel's maw: he ate up the entire body.

There was blood on his teeth, he was bloated and furious,

*The tale of the fight
with Grendel
resumed*

2080

all roused up, yet still unready
to leave the hall empty-handed;
renowned for his might, he matched himself against me,
wildly reaching. He had this roomy pouch,
a strange accoutrement, intricately strung
and hung at the ready, a rare patchwork
of devilishly fitted dragon-skins.
I had done him no wrong, yet the raging demon
wanted to cram me and many another
into this bag—but it was not to be
once I got to my feet in a blind fury.
It would take too long to tell how I repaid
the terror of the land for every life he took
and so won credit for you, my king,
and for all your people. And although he got away
to enjoy life's sweetness for a while longer,
his right hand stayed behind him in Heorot,
evidence of his miserable overthrow
as he dived into murk on the mere bottom.

"I got lavish rewards from the lord of the Danes
for my part in the battle, beaten gold
and much else, once morning came
and we took our places at the banquet table.
There was singing and excitement: an old reciter,
a carrier of stories, recalled the early days.
At times some hero made the timbered harp
tremble with sweetness, or related true
and tragic happenings; at times the king
gave the proper turn to some fantastic tale,
or a battle-scarred veteran, bowed with age,
would begin to remember the martial deeds

*Beowulf recalls the
feast in Heorot*

of his youth and prime and be overcome
as the past welled up in his wintry heart.

"We were happy there the whole day long
and enjoyed our time until another night
descended upon us. Then suddenly
the vehement mother avenged her son
and wreaked destruction. Death had robbed her,
Geats had slain Grendel, so his ghastly dam
struck back and with bare-faced defiance
laid a man low. Thus life departed
from the sage Aeschere, an elder wise in counsel.
But afterwards, on the morning following,
the Danes could not burn the dead body
nor lay the remains of the man they loved
on his funeral pyre. She had fled with the corpse
and taken refuge beneath torrents on the mountain.
It was a hard blow for Hirothgar to bear,
harder than any he had undergone before.
And so the heartsore king beseeched me
in your royal name to take my chances
underwater, to win glory
and prove my worth. He promised me rewards.
Hence, as is well known, I went to my encounter
with the terror-monger at the bottom of the tarn.
For a while it was hand-to-hand between us,
then blood went curling along the currents
and I beheld Grendel's mother in the hall
with a mighty sword. I barely managed
to escape with my life; my time had not yet come.
But Halfdane's heir, the shelter of those earls,
again endowed me with gifts in abundance.

*He tells about
Grendel's mother*

2120

2130

2140

"Thus the king acted with due custom. I was paid and recompensed completely, given full measure and the freedom to choose from Hirothgar's treasures by Hirothgar himself. These, King Hygelac, I am happy to present to you as gifts. It is still upon your grace that all favour depends. I have few kinsmen who are close, my king, except for your kind self." Then he ordered the boar-framed standard to be brought, the battle-topping helmet, the mail-shirt grey as hoar-frost and the precious war-sword; and proceeded with his speech.

"When Hirothgar presented this war-gear to me he instructed me, my lord, to give you some account of why it signifies his special favour. He said it had belonged to his older brother, King Heorogar, who had long kept it, but that Heorogar had never bequeathed it to his son Heoroweard, that worthy scion, loyal as he was.

Enjoy it well."

I heard four horses were handed over next. Beowulf bestowed four bay steeds to go with the armour, swift gallopers, all alike. So ought a kinsman act, instead of plotting and planning in secret to bring people to grief, or conspiring to arrange the death of comrades. The warrior king was uncle to Beowulf and honoured by his nephew; each was concerned for the other's good.

I heard he presented Hygd with a gorget,

the priceless torque that the prince's daughter, Wealthweow, had given him; and three horses, supple creatures, brilliantly saddled. The bright necklace would be luminous on Hygd's breast.

Thus Beowulf bore himself with valour; he was formidable in battle yet behaved with honour and took no advantage; never cut down a comrade who was drunk, kept his temper and, warrior that he was, watched and controlled his God-sent strength and his outstanding natural powers. He had been poorly regarded for a long time, was taken by the Geats for less than he was worth; and their lord too had never much esteemed him in the mead-hall. They firmly believed that he lacked force, that the prince was a weakling; but presently every affront to his deserving was reversed.

The battle-famed king, bulwark of his earls, ordered a gold-chased heirloom of Hrethel's to be brought in; it was the best example of a gem-studded sword in the Geat treasury. This he laid on Beowulf's lap and then rewarded him with land as well, seven thousand hides, and a hall and a throne. Both owned land by birth in that country, ancestral grounds; but the greater right and sway were inherited by the higher born.

A lot was to happen in later days in the fury of battle. Hygelac fell and the shelter of Heardred's shield proved useless

Beowulf's exemplary life is extolled

2180
Beowulf presents Hygelac with the treasures he has won.

2190

Hygelac presents Beowulf with a sword and gem-studded sword

2200
Four passes Beowulf rules the Geats for fifty years

against the fierce aggression of the Shylfings;
ruthless swordsmen, seasoned campaigners,
they came against him and his conquering nation,
and with cruel force cut him down
so that afterwards
the wide kingdom
reverted to Beowulf. He ruled it well
for fifty winters, grew old and wise
as warden of the land
until one began

to dominate the dark, a dragon on the prowl
from the steep vaults of a stone-roofed barrow
where he guarded a hoard; there was a hidden passage,
unknown to men, but someone managed
to enter by it and interfere
with the heathen trove. He had handled and removed
a gem-studded goblet; it gained him nothing,
though with a thief's wiles he had outwitted
the sleeping dragon; that drove him into rage,
as the people of that country would soon discover.

The intruder who broached the dragon's treasure
and moved him to wrath had never meant to.
It was desperation on the part of a slave
fleeing the heavy hand of some master,
guilt-ridden and on the run,
going to ground. But he soon began
to shake with terror; in shock
the wretch
. panicked and ran
away with the precious
metalwork. There were many other
heirlooms heaped inside the earth-house,

Long ago, a hoard
was hidden in the
earth-house by the
last survivor of a
forgotten race

because long ago, with deliberate care,
somebody now forgotten
had buried the riches of a high-born race
in this ancient cache. Death had come
and taken them all in times gone by
and the only one left to tell their tale,
the last of their line, could look forward to nothing
but the same fate for himself: he foresaw that his joy
in the treasure would be brief.

A newly constructed
barrow stood waiting, on a wide headland
close to the waves, its entryway secured.
Into it the keeper of the hoard had carried
all the goods and golden ware

worth preserving. His words were few:
"Now, earth, hold what earls once held
and heroes can no more; it was mined from you first
by honourable men. My own people
have been ruined in war; one by one
they went down to death, looked their last
on sweet life in the hall. I am left with nobody
to bear a sword or burnish plated goblets,
put a sheen on the cup. The companies have departed.

The hard-helmet, hasped with gold,
will be stripped of its hoops; and the helmet-shiner
who should polish the metal of the war-mask sleeps;
the coat of mail that came through all fights,
through shield-collapse and cut of sword,
decays with the warrior. Nor may webbed mail
range far and wide on the warlord's back
beside his mustered troops. No trembling harp,
no tuned timber, no tumbling hawk
swerving through the hall, no swift horse

2240

A dragon awakes.
An accidental thief
provokes his wrath

2250

2260

pawing the courtyard. Pillage and slaughter
have emptied the earth of entire peoples."
And so he mourned as he moved about the world,
deserted and alone, lamenting his unhappiness
day and night, until death's flood
brimmed up in his heart.

Then an old harrower of the dark
happened to find the hoard open,
the burning one who hunts out barrows,
the slick-skinned dragon, threatening the night sky
with streamers of fire. People on the farms
are in dread of him. He is driven to hunt out
hoards under ground, to guard heathen gold
through age-long vigils, though to little avail.
For three centuries, this scourge of the people
had stood guard on that stoutly protected
underground treasury, until the intruder
unleashed its fury; he hurried to his lord
with the gold-plated cup and made his plea
to be reinstated. Then the vault was rifled,
the ring-hoard robbed, and the wretched man
had his request granted. His master gazed
on that find from the past for the first time.

When the dragon awoke, trouble flared again.
He rippled down the rock, writhing with anger
when he saw the footprints of the prowler who had stolen
too close to his dreaming head.
So may a man not marked by fate
easily escape exile and woe
by the grace of God.

The hoard-guardian
scorched the ground as he scoured and hunted

for the trespasser who had troubled his sleep,
Hot and savage, he kept circling and circling
the outside of the mound. No man appeared
in that desert waste, but he worked himself up
by imagining battle; then back in he'd go
in search of the cup, only to discover
signs that someone had stumbled upon
the golden treasures. So the guardian of the mound,
the hoard-watcher, waited for the gloaming
with fierce impatience; his pent-up fury
at the loss of the vessel made him long to hit back
and lash out in flames. Then, to his delight,
the day waned and he could wait no longer
behind the wall, but hurtled forth
in a fiery blaze. The first to suffer
were the people on the land, but before long
it was their treasure-giver who would come to grief.

*The dragon wreaks
havoc on the Geats*

The dragon began to belch out flames
and burn bright homesteads; there was a hot glow
that scared everyone, for the vile sky-winger
would leave nothing alive in his wake.
Everywhere the havoc he wrought was in evidence.

Far and near, the Geat nation
bore the brunt of his brutal assaults
and virulent hate. Then back to the hoard
he would dart before daybreak, to hide in his den.
He had swirged the land, swathed it in flame,
in fire and burning, and now he felt secure
in the vaults of his barrow; but his trust was unavailing.

Then Beowulf was given bad news,
a hard truth: his own home,

*Beowulf's ominous
feelings about the
dragon*

2300

*The dragon nests in
the barrow and
guards the gold*

2310

*The dragon in
turmoil*

2320

the best of buildings, had been burnt to a cinder, the throne-room of the Geats. It threw the hero into deep anguish and darkened his mood: the wise man thought he must have thwarted ancient ordinance of the eternal Lord, broken His commandment. His mind was in turmoil, unaccustomed anxiety and gloom confused his brain; the fire-dragon had rased the coastal region and reduced forts and earthworks to dust and ashes, so the war-king planned and plotted his revenge. The warriors' protector, prince of the hall-troop, ordered a marvellous all-iron shield from his smithy works. He well knew that linden boards would let him down and timber burn. After many trials, he was destined to face the end of his days in this mortal world; as was the dragon, for all his long leasehold on the treasure.

Yet the prince of the rings was too proud to line up with a large army against the sky-plague. He had scant regard for the dragon as a threat, no dread at all of its courage or strength, for he had kept going often in the past, through perils and ordeals of every sort, after he had purged Frothgar's hall, triumphed in Heorot and beaten Grendel. He outgrappled the monster and his evil kin.

One of his cruellest hand-to-hand encounters had happened when Hygelac, king of the Geats, was killed

in Friesland: the people's friend and lord, Hrethel's son, slaked a sword blade's thirst for blood. But Beowulf's prodigious gifts as a swimmer guaranteed his safety: he arrived at the shore, shouldering thirty battle-dresses, the booty he had won. There was little for the Herware to be happy about as they shielded their faces and fighting on the ground began in earnest. With Beowulf against them, few could hope to return home.

Across the wide sea, desolate and alone, the son of Egtheow swam back to his people. There Hygd offered him throne and authority as lord of the ring-hoard: with Hygelac dead, she had no belief in her son's ability to defend their homeland against foreign invaders. Yet there was no way the weakened nation could get Beowulf to give in and agree to be elevated over Heardred as his lord or to undertake the office of kingship. But he did provide support for the prince, honoured and minded him until he matured as the ruler of Geatland.

Then over sea-roads exiles arrived, sons of Ohthere.

They had rebelled against the best of all the sea-kings in Sweden, the one who held sway in the Shyfling nation, their renowned prince, lord of the mead-hall. That marked the end for Hygelac's son: his hospitality was mortally rewarded with wounds from a sword. Heardred lay slaughtered and Onela returned

A flashback:
Hygelac's death,
Beowulf's vanguard
action and escape
across the sea

Beowulf acts as
counsellor to
Hygelac's heir,
Heardred

Heardred is
implicated in
Swedish feuds and
slain

Beowulf's pride and
prowess sustain him

to the land of Sweden, leaving Beowulf to ascend the throne, to sit in majesty and rule over the Geats. He was a good king.

In days to come, he contrived to avenge the fall of his prince; he befriended Eadgils when Eadgils was friendless, aiding his cause with weapons and warriors over the wide sea, sending him men. The feud was settled on a comfortless campaign when he killed Onela.

And so the son of Ecgtheow had survived every extreme, excelling himself in daring and in danger, until the day arrived when he had to come face to face with the dragon. The lord of the Geats took eleven comrades and went in a rage to reconnoitre. By then he had discovered the cause of the affliction being visited on the people. The precious cup had come to him from the hand of the finder, the one who had started all this strife and was now added as a thirteenth to their number. They press-ganged and compelled this poor creature to be their guide. Against his will he led them to the earth-vault he alone knew, an underground barrow near the sea-billows and heaving waves, heaped inside with exquisite metalwork. The one who stood guard was dangerous and watchful, warden of that trove buried under earth: no easy bargain would be made in that place by any man.

The veteran king sat down on the cliff-top.

2420

He wished good luck to the Geats who had shared his hearth and his gold. He was sad at heart, unsettled yet ready, sensing his death. His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain: it would soon claim his coffered soul, part life from limb. Before long the prince's spirit would spin free from his body.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

"Many a skirmish I survived when I was young and many times of war: I remember them well. At seven, I was fostered out by my father, left in the charge of my people's lord.

King Hrethel kept me and took care of me, was open-handed, behaved like a kinsman.

While I was his ward, he treated me no worse as a wean about the place than one of his own boys, Herebeald and Haethcyn, or my own Hygelac. For the eldest, Herebeald, an unexpected deathbed was laid out, through a brother's doing, when Haethcyn bent his horn-tipped bow and loosed the arrow that destroyed his life.

He shot wide and buried a shaft in the flesh and blood of his own brother. That offence was beyond redress, a wrongfooting of the heart's affections; for who could avenge the prince's life or pay his death-price? It was like the misery felt by an old man who has lived to see his son's body swing on the gallows. He begins to keen and weep for his boy, watching the raven gloat where he hangs: he can be of no help. The wisdom of age is worthless to him.

Beowulf inherits the kingship, settles the feud

2430

The day of reckoning: Beowulf and his troop reconnoitre

An accidental killing and its sad consequences for Hrethel

2440

Hrethel's loss reflected in "The Father's Lament"

R E C O R D

Morning after morning, he wakes to remember
that his child is gone; he has no interest
in living on until another heir
is born in the hall, now that his first-born
has entered death's dominion forever.
He gazes sorrowfully at his son's dwelling,
the banquet hall bereft of all delight,
the windswept hearthstone; the horsemen are sleeping,
the warriors under ground; what was is no more.
No tunes from the harp, no cheer raised in the yard,
Alone with his longing, he lies down on his bed
and sings a lament; everything seems too large,
the steadings and the fields.

Such was the feeling
of loss endured by the lord of the Geats
after Herebeald's death. He was helplessly placed
to set to rights the wrong committed,
could not punish the killer in accordance with the law
of the blood-feud, although he felt no love for him.
Heartsore, wearied, he turned away
from life's joys, chose God's light
and departed, leaving buildings and lands
to his sons, as a man of substance will.

"Then over the wide sea Swedes and Geats
battled and feuded and fought without quarter.
Hostilities broke out when Hirethel died.
Ongentheow's sons were unrelenting,
refusing to make peace, campaigning violently
from coast to coast, constantly setting up
terrible ambushes around Hreanahill.
My own kith and kin avenged
these evil events, as everybody knows,

Beowulf continues
his account of wars
between the Geats
and the Swedes

but the price was high: one of them paid
with his life. Haethcyn, lord of the Geats,
met his fate there and fell in the battle.
Then, as I have heard, Hygelac's sword
was raised in the morning against Ongentheow,
his brother's killer. When Eofor cleft
the old Swede's helmet, halved it open,
he fell, death-pale: his feud-calloused hand
could not stave off the fatal stroke.

"The treasures that Hygelac lavished on me
I paid for when I fought, as fortune allowed me,
with my glittering sword. He gave me land
and the security land brings, so he had no call
to go looking for some lesser champion,
some mercenary from among the Gifthas
or the Spear-Danes or the men of Sweden.
I marched ahead of him, always there
at the front of the line; and I shall fight like that
for as long as I live, as long as this sword
shall last, which has stood me in good stead
late and soon, ever since I killed
Dayraven the Frank in front of the two armies.
He brought back no looted breastplate
to the Frisian king, but fell in battle,
their standard-bearer, high-born and brave.
No sword blade sent him to his death,
my bare hands stilled his heartbeats
and wrecked the bone-house. Now blade and hand,
sword and sword-stroke, will assay the hoard."

Beowulf spoke, made a formal boast
for the last time: "I risked my life

The Swedish king,
Ongentheow, dies at
the hands of Eofor,
one of Hygelac's
thanes

Beowulf recalls his
proud days in
Hygelac's retinue

Beowulf's last boast

2490

2500

2510

often when I was young. Now I am old,
but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight
for the glory of winning, if the evil one will only
abandon his earth-fort and face me in the open."

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
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
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.

"Men at arms, remain here on the barrow,
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
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
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,
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.
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
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
lifted his shield: the outlandish thing
writhed and convulsed and viciously
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.
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

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 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 of a glorious victory. The glittering sword, 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 in a place beyond; so every man must yield the leasehold of his days.

Before long the fierce contenders clashed again. The hoard-guard took heart, inhaled and swelled up and got a new wind; he who had once ruled was furling 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 sorrow welled up: in a man of worth the claims of kinship cannot be denied.

His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan's, a well-regarded Shyfling warrior related to Aelfhere. When he saw his lord

*Beowulf's sword
fails him*

*All but one of
Beowulf's band
withdraw to safety*

*Wiglaf stands by /
lord*

2610

2620

2630

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 he inherited from his father before him. He could not hold back: one hand brandished the yellow-timbered shield, the other drew his sword—an ancient blade that was said to have belonged to Eanmund, the son of Othhere, the one Weohstan had slain when he was an exile without friends. He carried the arms to the victim's kinfolk, the burnished helmet, the webbed chain-mail and that relic of the giants. But Onela returned the weapons to him, rewarded Weohstan with Eanmund's war-gear. He ignored the blood-feud, the fact that Eanmund was his brother's son.

Weohstan kept that war-gear for a lifetime, the sword and the mail-shirt, until it was the son's turn to follow his father and perform his part. Then, in old age, at the end of his days among the Weather-Geats, he bequeathed to Wiglaf innumerable weapons.

And now the youth was to enter the line of battle with his lord, his first time to be tested as a fighter. His spirit did not break and the ancestral blade would keep its edge, as the dragon discovered as soon as they came together in the combat.

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,

*The deeds of
Wiglaf's father,
Weohstan, recalled*

*Wiglaf's speech to
the strikers*

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
fit for this action, made me these lavish gifts—
and all because he considered us the best
of his arms-bearing thanes. And now, although
he wanted this challenge to be one he'd face
by himself alone—the shepherd of our land,
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
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
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,
shield and helmet, mail-shirt and sword.”
Then he waded the dangerous reek and went
under arms to his lord, saying only:
“Go on, dear Beowulf, do everything
you said you would when you were still young
and vowed you would never let your name and fame
be dimmed while you lived. Your deeds are famous,
so stay resolute, my lord, defend your life now

2670

with the whole of your strength. I shall stand by you.”

After those words, a wildness rose
in the dragon again and drove it to attack,
heaving up fire, hunting for enemies,
the humans it loathed. Flames lapped the shield,
charred it to the boss, and the body armour
on the young warrior was useless to him.
But Wiglaf did well under the wide rim
Beowulf shared with him once his own had shattered
in sparks and ashes.

Inspired again
by the thought of glory, the war-king threw
his whole strength behind a sword-stroke
and connected with the skull. And Naegling snapped,
Beowulf's ancient iron-grey sword
let him down in the fight. It was never his fortune
to be helped in combat by the cutting edge
of weapons made of iron. When he wielded a sword,
no matter how blooded and hard-edged the blade
his hand was too strong, the stroke he dealt
(I have heard) would ruin it. He could reap no advantage.

2680

Then the bane of that people, the fire-breathing dragon,
was mad to attack for a third time.

When a chance came, he caught the hero
in a rush of flame and clamped sharp fangs
into his neck. Beowulf's body
ran wet with his life-blood: it came welling out.

Next thing, they say, the noble son of Weohstan
saw the king in danger at his side
and displayed his inborn bravery and strength.

The dragon attacks again

Another setback

The dragon's third onslaught. He drains blood

Wiglaf gets past the flames and strikes

2690

Wiglaf goes to Beowulf's aid

Wiglaf goes to Beowulf's aid

He left the head alone, but his fighting hand was burned when he came to his kinsman's aid. He lunged at the enemy lower down so that his decorated sword sank into its belly and the flames grew weaker.

Once again the king gathered his strength and drew a stabbing knife he carried on his belt, sharpened for battle. He stuck it deep into the dragon's flank. Beowulf dealt it a deadly wound. They had killed the enemy, courage quelled his life; that pair of kinsmen, partners in nobility, had destroyed the foe. So every man should act, be at hand when needed; but now, for the king, this would be the last of his many labours and triumphs in the world.

Then the wound dealt by the ground-burner earlier began to scald and swell; Beowulf discovered deadly poison suppurating inside him, surges of nausea, and so, in his wisdom, the prince realized his state and struggled towards a seat on the rampart. He steadied his gaze on those gigantic stones, saw how the earthwork was braced with arches built over columns. And now thatthane unequalled for goodness with his own hands washed his lord's wounds, swabbed the weary prince with water, bathed him clean, unbuckled his helmet.

Beowulf spoke: in spite of his wounds, mortal wounds, he still spoke for he well knew his days in the world

Beowulf senses that he is near death

Beowulf delivers the fatal wound

had been lived out to the end: his allotted time was drawing to a close, death was very near.

"Now is the time when I would have wanted to bestow this armour on my own son, had it been my fortune to have fathered an heir and live on in his flesh. For fifty years I ruled this nation. No king of any neighbouring clan would dare face me with troops, none had the power to intimidate me. I took what came, cared for and stood by things in my keeping, never fomented quarrels, never swore to a lie. All this consoles me, doomed as I am and sickening for death; because of my right ways, the Ruler of mankind need never blame me when the breath leaves my body for murder of kinsmen. Go now quickly, dearest Wiglaf, under the grey stone where the dragon is laid out, lost to his treasure; hurry to feast your eyes on the hoard. Away you go: I want to examine that ancient gold, gaze my fill on those garnered jewels; my going will be easier for having seen the treasure, a less troubled letting-go of the life and lordship I have long maintained."

And so, I have heard, the son of Weohstan quickly obeyed the command of his languishing war-weary lord; he went in his chain-mail under the rock-piled roof of the barrow, exulting in his triumph, and saw beyond the seat a treasure-trove of astonishing richness,

Wiglaf enters the dragon's barrow

He bids Wiglaf to inspect the hoard and return with a portion of the treasure

He thinks back on his life

2730

2740

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60 wall-hangings that were a wonder to behold, glittering gold spread across the ground, the old dawn-scorching serpent's den packed with goblets and vessels from the past, tarnished and corroding. Rusty helmets all eaten away. Armbands everywhere, artfully wrought. How easily treasure buried in the ground, gold hidden however skillfully, can escape from any man!

70 And he saw too a standard, entirely of gold, hanging high over the hoard, a masterpiece of filigree; it glowed with light so he could make out the ground at his feet and inspect the valuables. Of the dragon there was no remaining sign: the sword had despatched him. Then, the story goes, a certain man plundered the hoard in that immemorial howe, filled his arms with flagons and plates, anything he wanted; and took the standard also, most brilliant of banners.

80 Already the blade of the old king's sharp killing-sword had done its worst; the one who had for long minded the hoard, hovering over gold, unleashing fire, surging forth midnight after midnight, had been mown down.

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 helpless, earlier, on the open ground.

He returns with treasure

2790 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 broke out from the king's breast-cage. The old lord gazed sadly at the gold.

2800 "To the everlasting Lord of All, to the King of Glory, I give thanks that I behold this treasure here in front of me, that I have been 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. 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 Hironessness and be a reminder among my people—so that in coming times crews under sail will call it Beowulf's Barrow, as they steer ships across the wide and shrouded waters."

2810 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 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, sent my whole brave high-born clan to their final doom. Now I must follow them." That was the warrior's last word.

Beowulf gives the and orders the construction of a barrow to commemorate his

Beowulf'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.

It was hard then on the young hero, having to watch the one he held so dear there on the ground, going through his death agony. The dragon from underearth, his nightmarish destroyer, lay destroyed as well, utterly without life. No longer would his snakefolds ply themselves to safeguard hidden gold. Hard-edged blades, hammered out and keenly filed, had finished him so that the sky-roamer lay there rigid, brought low beside the treasure-lodge.

Never again would he glitter and glide and show himself off in midnight air, exulting in his riches; he fell to earth through the battle-strength in Beowulf's arm. There were few, indeed, as far as I have heard, big and brave as they may have been, few who would have held out if they had had to face the outpourings of that poison-breather or gone foraging on the ring-hall floor and found the deep barrow-dweller on guard and awake.

The treasure had been won, bought and paid for by Beowulf's death. Both had reached the end of the road through the life they had been lent.

Before long

*The dragon too has
been destroyed*

2850

the battle-dodgers abandoned the wood, the ones who had let down their lord earlier, the tail-turners, ten of them together.

When he needed them most, they had made off. Now they were ashamed and came behind shields, in their battle-outfits, to where the old man lay. They watched Wiglaf, sitting worn out, a comrade shoulder to shoulder with his lord, trying in vain to bring him round with water. Much as he wanted to, there was no way he could preserve his lord's life on earth or alter in the least the Almighty's will.

What God judged right would rule what happened to every man, as it does to this day.

Then a stern rebuke was bound to come from the young warrior to the ones who had been cowards.

Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke disdainfully and in disappointment:

"Anyone ready to admit the truth will surely realize that the lord of men who showered you with gifts and gave you the armour you are standing in—when he would distribute helmets and mail-shirts to men on the mead-benches, a prince treating his thanes in hall to the best he could find, far or near—was throwing weapons uselessly away.

It would be a sad waste when the war broke out. Beowulf had little cause to brag about his armed guard; yet God who ordains who wins or loses allowed him to strike with his own blade when bravery was needed.

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There was little I could do to protect his life in the heat of the fray, yet I found new strength welling up when I went to help him. Then my sword connected and the deadly assaults of our foe grew weaker, the fire coursed less strongly from his head. But when the worst happened too few rallied around the prince.

"So it is goodbye now to all you know and love on your home ground, the open-handedness, the giving of war-swords. Every one of you with freeholds of land, our whole nation, will be dispossessed, once princes from beyond get tidings of how you turned and fled and disgraced yourselves. A warrior will sooner die than live a life of shame."

Then he ordered the outcome of the fight to be reported to those camped on the ridge, that crowd of retainers who had sat all morning, sad at heart, shield-bearers wondering about the man they loved: would this day be his last or would he return? He told the truth and did not balk, the rider who bore news to the cliff-top. He addressed them all: "Now the people's pride and love, the lord of the Geats, is laid on his deathbed, brought down by the dragon's attack. Beside him lies the bane of his life, dead from knife-wounds. There was no way Beowulf could manage to get the better of the monster with his sword. Wiglaf sits at Beowulf's side, the son of Weohstan,

2910

the living warrior watching by the dead, keeping weary vigil, holding a wake for the loved and the loathed.

Now war is looming over our nation, soon it will be known to Franks and Frisians, far and wide, that the king is gone. Hostility has been great among the Franks since Hygelac sailed forth at the head of a war-fleet into Friesland: there the Hetware harried and attacked and overwhelmed him with great odds. The leader in his war-gear was laid low, fell amongst followers; that lord did not favour his company with spoils. The Merovingian king has been an enemy to us ever since.

2920

He predicts that enemies will now attack the Geats

"Nor do I expect peace or pact-keeping of any sort from the Swedes. Remember: at Ravenswood, Ongentheow slaughtered Haethcyn, Hrethel's son, when the Geat people in their arrogance first attacked the fierce Shyflings.

The return blow was quickly struck by Ohthere's father. Old and terrible, he felled the sea-king and saved his own aged wife, the mother of Onela and of Ohthere, bereft of her gold rings. Then he kept hard on the heels of the foe and drove them, leaderless, lucky to get away, in a desperate rout into Ravenswood. His army surrounded the weary remnant where they nursed their wounds; all through the night he howled threats at those huddled survivors,

He foresees wars with the Franks and the Frisians

The Swedes too will strike to avenge the slaughter of Ongentheow

2930

A messenger tells the people that Beowulf is dead

Ongentheow's last engagement at Ravenswood: he covered a Gallicish force

promised to axe their bodies open when dawn broke, dangle them from gallows to feed the birds. But at first light when their spirits were lowest, relief arrived. They heard the sound of Hygelac's horn, his trumpet calling as he came to find them, the hero in pursuit, at hand with troops.

"The bloody swathe that Swedes and Geats cut through each other was everywhere. No one could miss their murderous feuding. Then the old man made his move, pulled back, barred his people in: Ongentheow withdrew to higher ground. Hygelac's pride and prowess as a fighter were known to the earl; he had no confidence that he could hold out against that horde of seamen, defend wife and the ones he loved from the shock of the attack. He retreated for shelter behind the earthwall. Then Hygelac swooped on the Swedes at bay, his banners swarmed into their refuge, his Geat forces drove forward to destroy the camp. There in his grey hairs, Ongentheow was cornered, ringed around with swords. And it came to pass that the king's fate was in Eofor's hands, and in his alone. Wulf, son of Wonred, went for him in anger, split him open so that blood came spurting from under his hair. The old hero still did not flinch, but parried fast, hit back with a harder stroke: the king turned and took him on.

Hygelac relieved the besieged Geats

2980

Ongentheow withdrew

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The Swedish king fought for his life. He survived a blow from Wulf, hit back, but was killed by Wulf's brother, Eofor

3000

Then Wonred's son, the brave Wulf, could land no blow against the aged lord. Ongentheow divided his helmet so that he buckled and bowed his bloodied head and dropped to the ground. But his doom held off. Though he was cut deep, he recovered again.

"With his brother down, the undaunted Eofor, Hygelac's thane, hefted his sword and smashed murderously at the massive helmet past the lifted shield. And the king collapsed, The shepherd of people was sheared of life.

"Many then hurried to help Wulf, bandaged and lifted him, now that they were left masters of the blood-soaked battleground. One warrior stripped the other, looted Ongentheow's iron mail-coat, his hard sword-hilt, his helmet too, and carried the graith to King Hygelac; he accepted the prize, promised fairly that reward would come, and kept his word. For their bravery in action, when they arrived home Eofor and Wulf were overloADED by Hrethel's son, Hygelac the Geat, with gifts of land and linked rings that were worth a fortune. They had won glory, so there was no gainsaying his generosity. And he gave Eofor his only daughter to bide at home with him, an honour and a bond.

"So this bad blood between us and the Swedes, this vicious feud, I am convinced,

is bound to revive; they will cross our borders and attack in force when they find out that Beowulf is dead. In days gone by when our warriors fell and we were undefended he kept our coffers and our kingdom safe. He worked for the people, but as well as that he behaved like a hero.

We must hurry now to take a last look at the king and launch him, lord and lavisher of rings, on the funeral road. His royal pyre will melt no small amount of gold: heaped there in a hoard, it was bought at heavy cost, and that pile of rings he paid for at the end with his own life will go up with the flame, be furl'd in fire: treasure no follower will wear in his memory, nor lovely woman link and attach as a torque around her neck—but often, repeatedly, in the path of exile they shall walk bereft, bowed under woe, now that their leader's laugh is silenced, high spirits quenched. Many a spear dawn-cold to the touch will be taken down and waved on high; the swept harp won't waken warriors, but the raven winging darkly over the doomed will have news, tidings for the eagle of how he hoked and ate, how the wolf and he made short work of the dead."

Such was the drift of the dire report that gallant man delivered. He got little wrong in what he told and predicted.

The whole troop

rose in tears, then took their way to the uncanny scene under Earnaness. There, on the sand, where his soul had left him, they found him at rest, their ring-giver from days gone by. The great man had breathed his last. Beowulf the king had indeed met with a marvellous death.

But what they saw first was far stranger: the serpent on the ground, gruesome and vile, lying facing him. The fire-dragon was scarcely burnt, scorched all colours. From head to tail, his entire length was fifty feet. He had shimmered forth on the night air once, then winged back down to his den; but death owned him now, he would never enter his earth-gallery again. Beside him stood pitchers and piled-up dishes, silent flagons, precious swords eaten through with rust, ranged as they had been while they waited their thousand winters under ground. That huge cache, gold inherited from an ancient race, was under a spell—which meant no one was ever permitted to enter the ring-hall unless God Himself, mankind's Keeper, True King of Triumphs, allowed some person pleasing to Him—and in His eyes worthy—to open the hoard.

What came about brought to nothing the hopes of the one who had wrongly hidden riches under the rock-face. First the dragon slew that man among men, who in turn made fierce amends

and settled the feud. Famous for his deeds
a warrior may be, but it remains a mystery
where his life will end, when he may no longer
dwell in the mead-hall among his own.
So it was with Beowulf, when he faced the cruelty
and cunning of the mound-guard. He himself was ignorant
of how his departure from the world would happen.
The high-born chiefs who had buried the treasure
declared it until doomsday so accursed
that whoever robbed it would be guilty of wrong
and grimly punished for their transgression,
hasped in hell-bonds in heathen shrines.
Yet Beowulf's gaze at the gold treasure
when he first saw it had not been selfish.

Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke:

"Often when one man follows his own will
many are hurt. This happened to us.

Nothing we advised could ever convince
the prince we loved, our land's guardian,
not to vex the custodian of the gold,
let him lie where he was long accustomed,
lurk there under earth until the end of the world.
He held to his high destiny. The hoard is laid bare,
but at a grave cost; it was too cruel a fate
that forced the king to that encounter.

I have been inside and seen everything
amassed in the vault. I managed to enter
although no great welcome awaited me
under the earthwall. I quickly gathered up
a huge pile of the priceless treasures
handpicked from the hoard and carried them here
where the king could see them. He was still himself,

*Wiglaf ponders
Beowulf's fate*

alive, aware, and in spite of his weakness
he had many requests. He wanted me to greet you
and order the building of a barrow that would crown
the site of his pyre, serve as his memorial,
in a commanding position, since of all men
to have lived and thrived and lorded it on earth
his worth and due as a warrior were the greatest.

Now let us again go quickly
and feast our eyes on that amazing fortune
heaped under the wall. I will show the way
and take you close to those coffers packed with rings
and bars of gold. Let a bier be made
and got ready quickly when we come out
and then let us bring the body of our lord,
the man we loved, to where he will lodge
for a long time in the care of the Almighty."

Then Weohstan's son, stalwart to the end,
had orders given to owners of dwellings,
many people of importance in the land,
to fetch wood from far and wide
for the good man's pyre.

"Now shall flame consume
our leader in battle, the blaze darken
round him who stood his ground in the steel-hail,
when the arrow-storm shot from bowstrings
pelted the shield-wall. The shaft hit home.
Feather-fledged, it fanned the barb in flight."

Next the wise son of Weohstan
called from among the king's thanes
a group of seven: he selected the best
and entered with them, the eighth of their number,

*He reports Beowulf
last wishes*

*Wiglaf gives order
for the building of
funeral pyre*

*He goes with seven
thanes to remove
treasure from the
hoard*

3100

3110

3120

under the God-cursed roof; one raised
a lighted torch and led the way.
No lots were cast for who should loot the hoard
for it was obvious to them that every bit of it
lay unprotected within the vault,
there for the taking. It was no trouble
to hurry to work and haul out
the priceless store. They pitched the dragon
over the cliff-top, let tide's flow
and backwash take the treasure-minder.
Then coiled gold was loaded on a cart
in great abundance, and the grey-haired leader,
the prince on his bier, borne to Hronesness.

The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf,
stacked and decked it until it stood four-square,
hung with helmets, heavy war-shields
and shining armour, just as he had ordered.
Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it,
mourning a lord far-famed and beloved.
On a height they kindled the hugest of all
funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke
billowed darkly up, the blaze roared
and drowned out their weeping, wind died down
and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,
burning it to the core. They were disconsolate
and wailed aloud for their lord's decease.
A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
of her worst fears, a wild litany
of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

*A Geat woman's
dread*

Beowulf's funeral

3170

Then the Geat people began to construct
a mound on a headland, high and imposing,
a marker that sailors could see from far away,
and in ten days they had done the work.
It was their hero's memorial; what remained from the fire
they housed inside it, behind a wall
as worthy of him as their workmanship could make it.
And they buried torques in the barrow, and jewels
and a trove of such things as trespassing men
had once dared to drag from the hoard.
They let the ground keep that ancestral treasure,
gold under gravel, gone to earth,
as useless to men now as it ever was.
Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,
chieftain's 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,
for a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear
and cherish his memory when that moment comes
when he has to be conveyed from his bodily home.
So the Geat people, his hearth companions,
sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
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.

3180

His people lament

Beowulf's barrow