

BEOWULF

AN ILLUSTRATED EDITION

TRANSLATED BY

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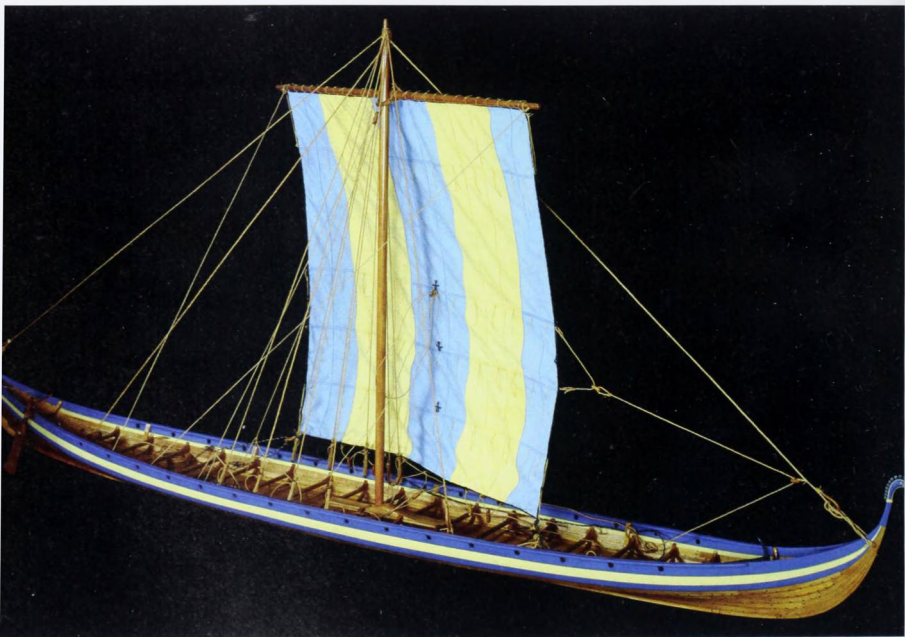
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B E O W U L F



So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

The Danes have legends about their warrior kings. The most famous was 'Shield Sheafson, who founded the ruling house

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,
a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on
as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts
10 beyond the whale-road had to yield to him
and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.

Afterwards a boy-child was born to Shield,
a cub in the yard, a comfort sent
by God to that nation. He knew what they had toiled,
the long times and troubles they'd come through
without a leader; so the Lord of Life,
the glorious Almighty, made this man renowned.
Shield had fathered a famous son:
Beow's name was known through the north.
20 And a young prince must be prudent like that,
giving freely while his father lives
so that afterwards in age when fighting starts

Model of Viking Age warship whose buried timbers were partially recovered at Ladby, on the island of Funen, Denmark. Despite some anachronism involved in this idea, the poet may have thought in terms of ships like this when speaking of tribute having been brought to Shield from "beyond the whale-road." Ninth or early tenth century.



steadfast companions will stand by him
and hold the line. Behaviour that's admired
is the path to power among people everywhere.

Shield's funeral

Shield was still thriving when his time came
and he crossed over into the Lord's keeping.
His warrior band did what he bade them
when he laid down the law among the Danes:
30 they shouldered him out to the sea's flood,
the chief they revered who had long ruled them.
A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbour,
ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.
They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,
laid out by the mast, amidships,
the great ring-giver. Far-fetched treasures
were piled upon him, and precious gear.
I never heard before of a ship so well furbished
with battle tackle, bladed weapons
40 and coats of mail. The massed treasure
was loaded on top of him: it would travel far
on out into the ocean's sway.
They decked his body no less bountifully
with offerings than those first ones did
who cast him away when he was a child
and launched him alone out over the waves.
And they set a gold standard up
high above his head and let him drift
to wind and tide, bewailing him
50 and mourning their loss. No man can tell,
no wise man in hall or weathered veteran
knows for certain who salvaged that load.

Then it fell to Beow to keep the forts.

In 1986–1988, at Gammel Lejre near Roskilde on the island of Zealand, Denmark, were discovered the post-holes of a great hall built ca. A.D. 890. Further excavations in 2004–2005 revealed this to be the third of three halls built in succession at Lejre, which was famed during the Middle Ages as the former seat of power of the Shielding (or Skjöldung) kings. The earliest hall was built ca. 550.



He was well regarded and ruled the Danes
for a long time after his father took leave
of his life on earth. And then his heir,
the great Halfdane, held sway
for as long as he lived, their elder and warlord.
He was four times a father, this fighter prince:

*Shield's heirs: his son
Beow succeeded by
Halfdane, Halfdane by
Hrothgar*

60 one by one they entered the world,
Heorogar, Hrothgar, the good Halga
and a daughter, I have heard, who was Onela's queen,
a balm in bed to the battle-scarred Swede.

The fortunes of war favoured Hrothgar.
Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,
young followers, a force that grew
to be a mighty army. So his mind turned
to hall-building: he handed down orders
for men to work on a great mead-hall
70 meant to be a wonder of the world forever;
it would be his throne-room and there he would dispense
his God-given goods to young and old—
but not the common land or people's lives.
Far and wide through the world, I have heard,
orders for work to adorn that wallstead
were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there,
finished and ready, in full view,
the hall of halls. Heorot was the name
he had settled on it, whose utterance was law.

*King Hrothgar builds
Heorot Hall*

80 Nor did he renege, but doled out rings
and torques at the table. The hall towered,
its gables wide and high and awaiting
a barbarous burning. That doom abided,
but in time it would come: the killer instinct
unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.

Replica of lyre from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk. Lyres have occasionally been found in high-status pagan graves of the late Germanic Iron Age. People of this era clearly enjoyed music and song, as they are shown doing at the beginning of Beowulf when a court singer celebrates the Creation. This lyre had six strings and was made of beech wood. Seventh century.



Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him
to hear the din of the loud banquet
every day in the hall, the harp being struck
90 and the clear song of a skilled poet
telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
how the Almighty had made the earth
a gleaming plain girdled with waters;
in His splendour He set the sun and the moon
to be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men,
and filled the broad lap of the world
with branches and leaves; and quickened life
in every other thing that moved.

Heorot is threatened

So times were pleasant for the people there
100 until finally one, a fiend out of hell,
began to work his evil in the world.
Grendel was the name of this grim demon
haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
in misery among the banished monsters,
Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel
the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
Cain got no good from committing that murder
110 because the Almighty made him anathema
and out of the curse of his exile there sprang
ogres and elves and evil phantoms
and the giants too who strove with God
time and again until He gave them their reward.

*Grendel, a monster
descended from
"Cain's clan," begins
to prowl*

So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
for the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes

Grendel attacks Heorot

Portrait of a cannibalistic giant, from an Anglo-Saxon illustrated version of Wonders of the East (London, British Library Cotton Tiberius B.v, fol. 81b detail). While no traveler would want to meet up with this creature, the satanic malice that the Beowulf poet ascribes to Grendel is absent here. Compare, however, a different illustration from the same manuscript reproduced on page 46. Late eleventh century.



were settling into it after their drink,
and there he came upon them, a company of the best
asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain
and human sorrow. Suddenly then
120 the God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
from their resting places and rushed to his lair,
flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
blundering back with the butchered corpses.

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke
Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:
their wassail was over, they wept to heaven
and mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,
130 the storied leader, sat stricken and helpless,
humiliated by the loss of his guard,
bewildered and stunned, staring aghast
at the demon's trail, in deep distress.
He was numb with grief, but got no respite
for one night later merciless Grendel
struck again with more gruesome murders.
Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.
It was easy then to meet with a man
shifting himself to a safer distance
140 to bed in the bothies, for who could be blind
to the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness
of that hall-watcher's hate? Whoever escaped
kept a weather-eye open and moved away.

So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,
one against all, until the greatest house
in the world stood empty, a deserted wallstead.
For twelve winters, seasons of woe,

*King Hrothgar's
distress and
helplessness*

One uncanny element in the Danish episodes of Beowulf is that Grendel cannot approach Hrothgar's throne, which is apparently protected by God (lines 168–69). Thrones of this period were probably small, portable seats rather than towering structures. This carved stool, recovered from a boat burial at Feddersen Wierde, northern Germany, may be an example. Fifth century.



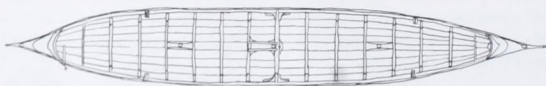
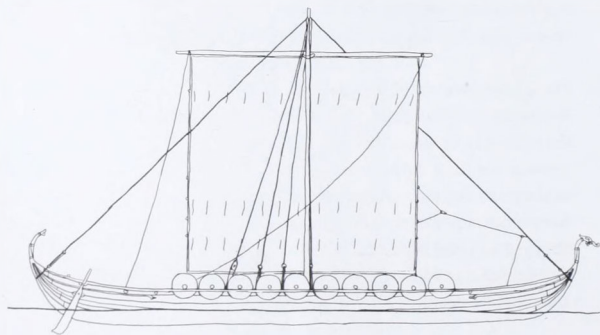
the lord of the Shieldings suffered under
his load of sorrow; and so, before long,
150 the news was known over the whole world.
Sad lays were sung about the beset king,
the vicious raids and ravages of Grendel,
his long and unrelenting feud,
nothing but war; how he would never
parley or make peace with any Dane
nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price.
No counsellor could ever expect
fair reparation from those rabid hands.
All were endangered; young and old
160 were hunted down by that dark death-shadow
who lurked and swooped in the long nights
on the misty moors; nobody knows
where these reavers from hell roam on their errands.

So Grendel waged his lonely war,
inflicting constant cruelties on the people,
atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot,
haunted the glittering hall after dark,
but the throne itself, the treasure-seat,
he was kept from approaching; he was the Lord's outcast.

170 These were hard times, heart-breaking
for the prince of the Shieldings; powerful counsellors,
the highest in the land, would lend advice,
plotting how best the bold defenders
might resist and beat off sudden attacks.
Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
offerings to idols, swore oaths
that the killer of souls might come to their aid
and save the people. That was their way,

The Danes, hard-pressed, turn for help to heathen gods

In their desperation, the Danes offer sacrifices at pagan shrines, a practice the poet sternly condemns. This small gold figurine from Slipshavn Skov, on the island of Funen, Denmark, is thought to have been a pagan idol. A figure that may represent a deity is depicted as naked except for a neck ring. The original is 6.7 cm (2 7/8 inches) in height. Ca. fifth century.



180 their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge
of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he
who in time of trouble has to thrust his soul
in the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;
he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
who after death can approach the Lord
and find friendship in the Father's embrace.

190 So that troubled time continued, woe
that never stopped, steady affliction
for Halfdane's son, too hard an ordeal.
There was panic after dark, people endured
raids in the night, riven by the terror.

When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac's thane
was on home ground, over in Geatland.
There was no one else like him alive.
In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,
high-born and powerful. He ordered a boat
that would ply the waves. He announced his plan:
200 to sail the swan's road and search out that king,
the famous prince who needed defenders.
Nobody tried to keep him from going,
no elder denied him, dear as he was to them.
Instead, they inspected omens and spurred
his ambition to go, whilst he moved about
like the leader he was, enlisting men,
the best he could find; with fourteen others
the warrior boarded the boat as captain,
a canny pilot along coast and currents.

*At the court of King
Hygelac, a Geat
warrior prepares to
help Hrothgar*

Top: Artist's representation of Skuldelev 5, a light warship of the Viking Age (ca. A.D. 1040). This was one of six ships scuttled in Roskilde Fjord that were partially recovered by underwater archaeologists in 1962. Bottom: Schematic drawings showing the architecture of a replica of Skuldelev 5 (see page 128). The ship was 17.5 meters (or just over 57 feet) long and carried a crew of up to thirty men.



210 Time went by, the boat was on water,
in close under the cliffs.
Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,
sand churned in surf, warriors loaded
a cargo of weapons, shining war-gear
in the vessel's hold, then heaved out,
away with a will in their wood-wreathed ship.
Over the waves, with the wind behind her
and foam at her neck, she flew like a bird
until her curved prow had covered the distance
220 and on the following day, at the due hour,
those seafarers sighted land,
sunlit cliffs, sheer crags
and looming headlands, the landfall they sought.
It was the end of their voyage and the Geats vaulted
over the side, out on to the sand,
and moored their ship. There was a clash of mail
and a thresh of gear. They thanked God
for that easy crossing on a calm sea.

*The hero and his troop
sail from the land of
the Geats*

230 When the watchman on the wall, the Shieldings' lookout
whose job it was to guard the sea-cliffs,
saw shields glittering on the gangplank
and battle-equipment being unloaded
he had to find out who and what
the arrivals were. So he rode to the shore,
this horseman of Hrothgar's, and challenged them
in formal terms, flourishing his spear:
"What kind of men are you who arrive
rigged out for combat in coats of mail,
sailing here over the sea-lanes
240 in your steep-hulled boat? I have been stationed

*The Danish coast-
guard challenges the
outsiders*

As a gesture asserting his authority, the watchman who guards the Danish coast shakes his spear overhead when addressing the strangers who have landed. Spears were the basic weapon of war for men of this era. This silver-inlaid spearhead, recovered from a bog at Vimose, on the island of Funen, Denmark, must have belonged to a person of high rank. Early third century.



as lookout on this coast for a long time.
My job is to watch the waves for raiders,
any danger to the Danish shore.
Never before has a force under arms
disembarked so openly—not bothering to ask
if the sentries allowed them safe passage
or the clan had consented. Nor have I seen
a mightier man-at-arms on this earth
than the one standing here: unless I am mistaken,
250 he is truly noble. This is no mere
hanger-on in a hero's armour.
So now, before you fare inland
as interlopers, I have to be informed
about who you are and where you hail from.
Outsiders from across the water,
I say it again: the sooner you tell
where you come from and why, the better.”

The leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard;
the distinguished one delivered this answer:
260 “We belong by birth to the Geat people
and owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac.
In his day, my father was a famous man,
a noble warrior-lord named Ecgtheow.
He outlasted many a long winter
and went on his way. All over the world
men wise in counsel continue to remember him.
We come in good faith to find your lord
and nation's shield, the son of Halfdane.
Give us the right advice and direction.
270 We have arrived here on a great errand
to the lord of the Danes, and I believe therefore
there should be nothing hidden or withheld between us.

*The Geat hero
announces himself and
explains his mission*

Fine horses were signs of wealth and status during the Germanic Iron Age, just as they are today. They are sometimes depicted in stylized form in the metalwork of this period, as in this example from Veggerslev, Jutland, Denmark. The Danish coast-guard in Beowulf is mounted, and his horse lends him prestige as well as the ability to respond quickly to danger. Ca. eighth century.



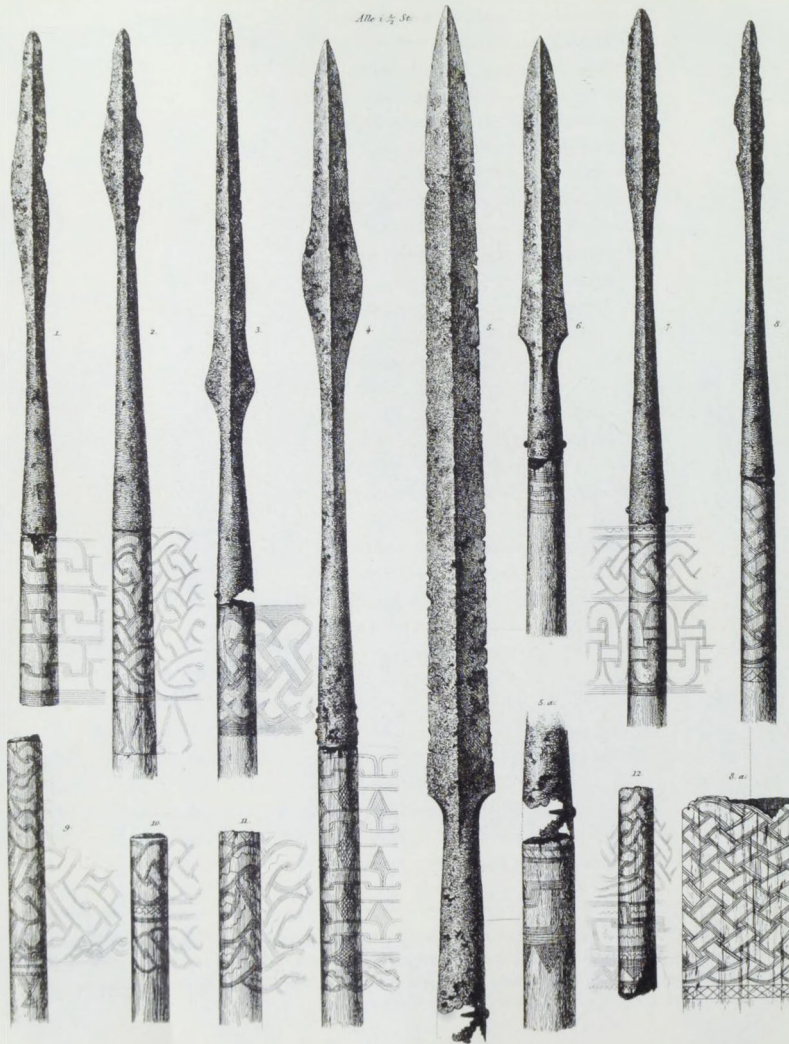
So tell us if what we have heard is true
about this threat, whatever it is,
this danger abroad in the dark nights,
this corpse-maker mongering death
in the Shieldings' country. I come to proffer
my wholehearted help and counsel.
I can show the wise Hrothgar a way
280 to defeat his enemy and find respite—
if any respite is to reach him, ever.
I can calm the turmoil and terror in his mind.
Otherwise, he must endure woes
and live with grief for as long as his hall
stands at the horizon, on its high ground."

Undaunted, sitting astride his horse,
the coast-guard answered, "Anyone with gumption
and a sharp mind will take the measure
of two things: what's said and what's done.
290 I believe what you have told me: that you are a troop
loyal to our king. So come ahead
with your arms and your gear, and I will guide you.
What's more, I'll order my own comrades
on their word of honour to watch your boat
down there on the strand—keep her safe
in her fresh tar, until the time comes
for her curved prow to preen on the waves
and bear this hero back to Geatland.
May one so valiant and venturesome
300 come unharmed through the clash of battle."

*The coast-guard allows
the Geats to pass*

So they went on their way. The ship rode the water,
broad-beamed, bound by its hawser
and anchored fast. Boar-shapes flashed

The arms worn by Beowulf's men identify them as members of the aristocratic warrior class. "Boar-shapes flashed" on their helmets, the poet states. This image of a boar from Bentley Grange, Derbyshire, surmounted a helmet as an emblem of ferocity in war. Though modeled in part on Roman parade helmets, Germanic helmets had a distinctive style. Late seventh or early eighth century.



above their cheek-guards, the brightly forged
work of goldsmiths, watching over
those stern-faced men. They marched in step,
hurrying on till the timbered hall
rose before them, radiant with gold.
Nobody on earth knew of another
310 building like it. Majesty lodged there,
its light shone over many lands.
So their gallant escort guided them
to that dazzling stronghold and indicated
the shortest way to it; then the noble warrior
wheeled on his horse and spoke these words:
“It is time for me to go. May the Almighty
Father keep you and in His kindness
watch over your exploits. I’m away to the sea,
back on alert against enemy raiders.”

320 It was a paved track, a path that kept them
in marching order. Their mail-shirts glinted,
hard and hand-linked; the high-gloss iron
of their armour rang. So they duly arrived
in their grim war-graith and gear at the hall,
and, weary from the sea, stacked wide shields
of the toughest hardwood against the wall,
then collapsed on the benches; battle-dress
and weapons clashed. They collected their spears
in a seafarers’ stook, a stand of greyish
330 tapering ash. And the troops themselves
were as good as their weapons.

*They arrive at
Heorot*

Then a proud warrior
questioned the men concerning their origins:
“Where do you come from, carrying these
decorated shields and shirts of mail,

The Geatish warriors visiting Heorot are not permitted to carry their ordinary weapons into the hall, which was a sanctuary. Instead, they stack their shields and spears outside the door. These spears with decorated shafts were recovered from Kragehul bog, Funen, Denmark, where they were deposited as a votive offering. Third century.