



BEOWULF

a translation by

**Thomas
Meyer**

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BEOWULF: A TRANSLATION

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Front flyleaf drawing by Heather Masciandaro. The drawing on the frontispiece of *Part II: Homelands* is a plan of a large building at Hofsthahir, Iceland, most likely a farmhouse, although the element *hof* suggests it may have once been a pagan temple.

OVERSEA is a translation of lines
1 through 1887, following Fr. Klaeber,
Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg,
3rd edition (1950). The second section,
HOMELANDS, completes that text
up to line 3182.

FOREFIT

HEY now hear

what spears of Danes
in days of years gone
by did, what deeds made
their power their glory —

their kings & princes:

SCYLD SCEFING,

wretched foundling,

grew under open skies & in him glory thrived
& all who threatened his meadhall ran in terror
& all neighboring nations brought him gold
following whaleroads.

BEOWULF,

this good king's son

grew glorious in the heart of all Scandinavia,
born to keep his fathers' rule & answer
his people's need & his gifts brought trust,

men to stand by him in war, in old age —

the tribe thrives with each man's rewarded deed.

Scyld's hour came,
his strength went unto his God's keeping

His beloved men carried out his last request,
they bore their king to the shores of the land he long ruled,

to the sea's surge & harbor where
a ringprowed, kingly vessel tossed,
icecrusted, keen to set off.

They laid his glorious, beloved frame amidship,
against the mast & covered it with treasure, trappings

from the realm's farthest reaches,
weapons of war, armor, sword & byrne
set upon his breast.

The seas have never possessed a better geared keel than that.
The riches his people bestowed matched those cast off with him

as a child
in his beginnings
alone upon waves.

They flew a flag woven with golden threads high above his head
& then let the waters bear him unto Ocean's arms away from their

grief & sad hearts. No counselor
nor warrior can say for sure where
that cargo will arrive.

 FIT ONE 

& THEN

Beowulf
of the Scyldings

succeeded his departed
father & lord to rule that
country many years

well known, well loved

& his son, grim, gray

HEALFDENE
lifelong light
of the Scyldings

bore two sons & two daughters
by all counts:

HEOROGAR & HROTHGAR
& good Helga

& Yrse (was it?)

. . . Onela the Swede's
queenconsort?)

Luck in battle
brought Hrothgar
friends,
kinsmen ready to serve him,
young blood flocked to join his band,
swell his ranks.

Then it came to him
to command to be built a great lodge
& men undertook this work erecting
a meadhall larger than any they had
ever seen or heard of

under whose beams
all gifts God gave him
(all but
the landshare & lifebreath
He provides for men)
would be dealt out
to young & old alike.

& tribe upon tribe arrived from all
throughout Midgarth to girt, to decorate
this meetingplace
& despite its size
their work went quickly.

That greatest hall
stood ready for Hrothgar's lips & hands
to shape its name, fulfill its promise:

He called it Heorot
& there bestowed rings & riches upon
his warriors as they feasted under
towering, cliffhigh
gablehorns.

One day not long off

fire
will burn those walls
flames

will temper hatred's blade,
cleave
son & father-in-law —
but this has yet to be.

The dark rang.
The new hall's
noise fell
upon tortured ears. In

the dark dwelt
a beast who ached as he heard

loud sweet

harp notes

cast song's sharp shape, craft

unfold the airs

& fill the ears

with all origins —

*Where water rings the world's bright fields
sun & moon lend their glory's light
as lamps for men on land
 & tree leaf &
limb deck out earth's every fold
 as breath quickens
each creaturekind.*

Hrothgar's men
enjoyed happy lives
at Heorot & then

the Hellfiend's raids began . . .

That grim ghostbeast called Grendel
dwelled on doomed ground in demonrealms &
made swamp & moor his stronghold. He stalked
those borderlands one of the banished kin of
outcast Cain, Abel's killer, Almighty God
condemned to live beyond mankind.

Cain's crime fathered an evil brood:

ents & orcs & elves
& giants who
 long ago
waged war on God
& won themselves
His reward.

••• ••• FIT TWO ••• •••

NIGHT came. He went
to check out those Danes
boozing at home in their
big house & pay them a call.

He found
them snoozing like fat, well
fed babies safe from boogies.

BANG! like a flash
that hard hearted, grim, greedy,
sick thing snatched 30 sleeping
Danes &
jiggetyjig ran home again,
fists full of blood candy.

& then

dawn's	first
light	lit
what	Grendel
did	

none	hid
	of it

& then

last	night's
cups	brimmed
with	morning
wept	
	tears

An old, renowned king's grief.
An evil ghost's ugly foot print.

Too much pain too soon, too long.
Murder's fearless pattern set

in less than a night.

Feud			Sin		
certain	sign	clear	token		
			Sin		Feud
			out of season		no let up

Men sought digs
outside the hall,
got as far from
hate's haunt
as they could.

One took them all on.
That greatest of houses
stood idle.

12 bitter winters
taught the Scyldings'
king each sorrow
under the sun.

Tongues wagged, lips
clacked: Grendel's
attacks, Hrothgar's
pain common knowledge.

No truce, no ransom,
no glory possible for men,
seasoned or green,
at the hands of that
horrible beast.

Death's dark shadow
hovered over moors,
plot thickened mist
& never ending night.

Hell's runes
hid all trails.

Singlehanded
Hell's fiend held Heorot,
made its cold hearth his home.
Night's dark. Scylding's grief.
That beast knelt before no Lord's
throne.
His deeds went unrewarded.

Men of rank met, asked:

“What runes, what sacrifice
will answer our people’s need?”

Priests & chiefs prayed:

“Troll Killer, our god &
single aid, deliver us!”

Hell dwelled in their hearts, heathen rites
darkened their minds. They knew nothing of



God Almighty, Heaven’s Helm, Judge of Deeds.
Pagans deaf to Glory’s praises know no solace,

shove their souls
into terrorrealms
unto fires’ arms,

remain unborn.

Death’s day brings
joy to men
if they seek peace,

the Father’s arms.

·  FIT THREE  ·

NIGHT & day
 care's tides
rose & fell,
 drowned Healfdene's
son. No runes
 stilled storm's
rage. Damned
 wrack, grim doom,
nightfear.

Too much pain too soon, too long.

 Hygelac's thane,
noble, mighty, brave Geat, his
manhood, then ripe, got wind of
Grendel's rampage & decked out
a ship fit to fare waves, said
"I'll track swans' path to seek
that good king in need of men."

Friends & counselors
 unable to turn him from
his journey
 urged him on,
drew his sorts, checked omens
for the brave, beloved prince.

He picked a company from the best men he could find.

15 sought seawood,
led to land's edge
by seawise warrior,

set keel to breakers,

left
 shore's ledge,
leapt
 churned sand.

Sea surge bore forth
 bright cargo:

weapons, trappings,
hearts keen to man
 timberbound,
wavelapped,
 windwhipped,
foamthroated bird.

Ship floated. Sail filled.
A day & a day prow plowed
& crew saw bright cliffs,
steep hills, wide beaches.

Sea crossed. Land at last.
Boat moored. Byrnes shook.

Weder men thanked God for an easy voyage over waves.

Glint of shieldbosses
 across gangplanks
caught in coastguard's eye
 on seawall at seawatch
flashed upon his mind,
 pricked his brain.

“Who goes there? Why? What are they up to?”

Hrothgar's thane rode his horse down to the beach.

 Spear's great wood quaked in his hand.

He drew his quick breath, steadied himself & said:

“Who are you in your armor & your mail,
brought by tall keel along the sea’s road
upon wide waves? For years at land’s end
I’ve watched the shore for enemy armies
come by ship to invade & raid us Danes
& never seen shielded men arrive so openly.

Yet I’ve had no warning, no news of you,
no orders from my kinsmen to let you pass.

& I’ve seen no greater earl on earth than
one of you appears to be,
 no mere hallman
glamorized by dazzling armor, strengthened
by weapons alone,
 unless his looks weave lies,
he has no equal.

But now before you take
another step on Danish soil I must be told
where you sailed from & why. For all I know
you foreigners & seafarers may be spies, so
answer my simple question, haste is best:

Where have you come from?”

FIT FOUR

“WE are Geats!”

Crew’s captain & chief
unlocked his wordhoard,
his answer rolled from
his tongue:

“Ecgtheow,

my father,
all folk knew well,
the flower of his kinship
survived many winters
before it faded
ripened by many years

leaving his memory
to thrive in the minds
of all wisemen
throughout wide earth.”

We come with warm hearts to seek Healfdene's son.
Show us goodwill, give us godspeed on our guest errand
unto your illustrious Danish lord.
Our journey's rime will soon be no secret, I think.

You know — if rumors we've heard hold true —
that some scourge among Scyldings
shapes its hate's deeds by dead of night,
twisting its terror's strange, violent designs
from living men's humiliation & dead men's blood.

I bring buried in the wide ground of my heart
seeds of an answer for brave, old Hrothgar: how
he might overcome this fiend, untwist the tight net
its evil weaves & cast good fortune's change,
stilling care's swelling tides —

if it is any longer possible —

for otherwise forever after suffering & sorrow
shall be every day's necessity at good Heorot,
best of halls, for as long as it endures upon
its lofty heights.”

Coastguard on horseback
cleared his throat,
unfaltering officer spoke:

“As any clever
shieldbearer in his right mind would, I’ve
weighed your words & deeds & now think you
a troop loyal to Scyldings’ lord. Bear forth
your weapons in battledress, I’ll be your guide
& leave my men to guard your freshtarred boat
from enemies, keeping its curved wood keel
safe on sand until it’s ready to bear
its beloved band

whom fate allows to weather
war’s storm whole
back across sea’s streams
to Wederland.”

They set off, their widehulled boat at rest,
rope & anchor held it fast.

Gold swine emblems
gleamed above cheekguards —
inlaid, firehard
tusk & snout,
twisted tail.

Bristled boar:
warhearts’ blazon, lifebreaths’ protector.

Together men marched.
Their quick pace brought them
in sight of
 gilt, glint,
splendor,
 timbered hall,
mighty king's seat,
 house
most prime
 under heaven
in earthdwellers' minds
whose fires' light lit
 many lands.

Coastguard pointed out
the direct route to that
bright lodge, lighthearted men's home,
turned his horse & said:

“It is time now for me to get back. May
the allruling Father's mercy keep you
& your mission sound.
 I go to the sea
to resume my watch against our enemies.”