

B E O W U L F

A Verse Translation with Treasures of the Ancient North

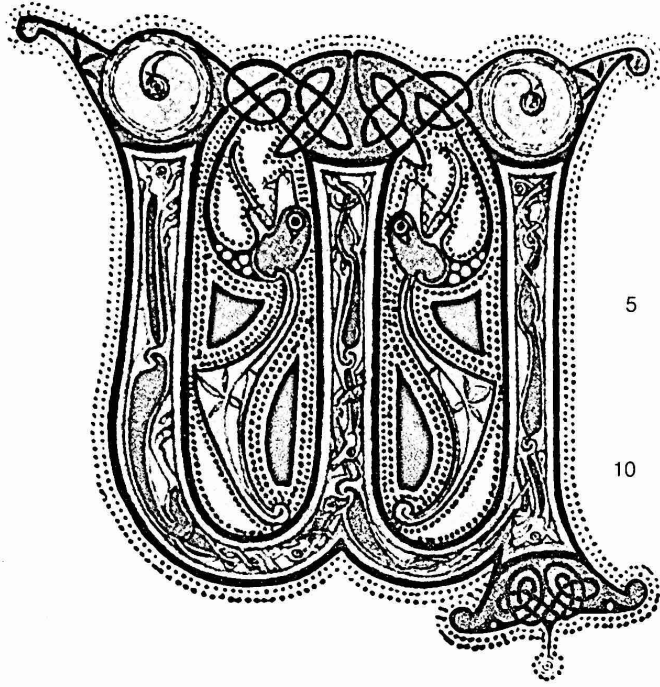
by
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with an introduction by
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HAT

of the Spear-Danes in days of yore?
We have heard of the glory of the great folk-leaders,
how those athelings* did arduous deeds!

1

5 Often Shield Shefing shattered the courage
of troops of marauders by taking their mead-seats.
He terrified those nobles—long after the time
he appeared as a foundling. Comfort for that fate
came when he grew and prospered in glory
10 until those who lived in the neighboring lands
over the whale's road had to obey him,
yield him tribute. Yes—a good king!

15 Later a boy was born to Shield,
a young lad in his house, the hope of the Danes,
whom God had sent them, perceiving their need,
how they had suffered with no king to sustain them
for far too long. The Lord of Life,
the Wielder of Glory, gave worldly honor
to Shield's son among the South-Danes.
Beowulf** was famous—his glory spread far.
20 Thus a young warrior should strive to be worthy:
giving freely, while still in his father's care.
In later days, then, friends will leap
to stand beside him when strife comes—
companions will serve him. By praiseworthy deeds
25 a man shall prosper among people everywhere.

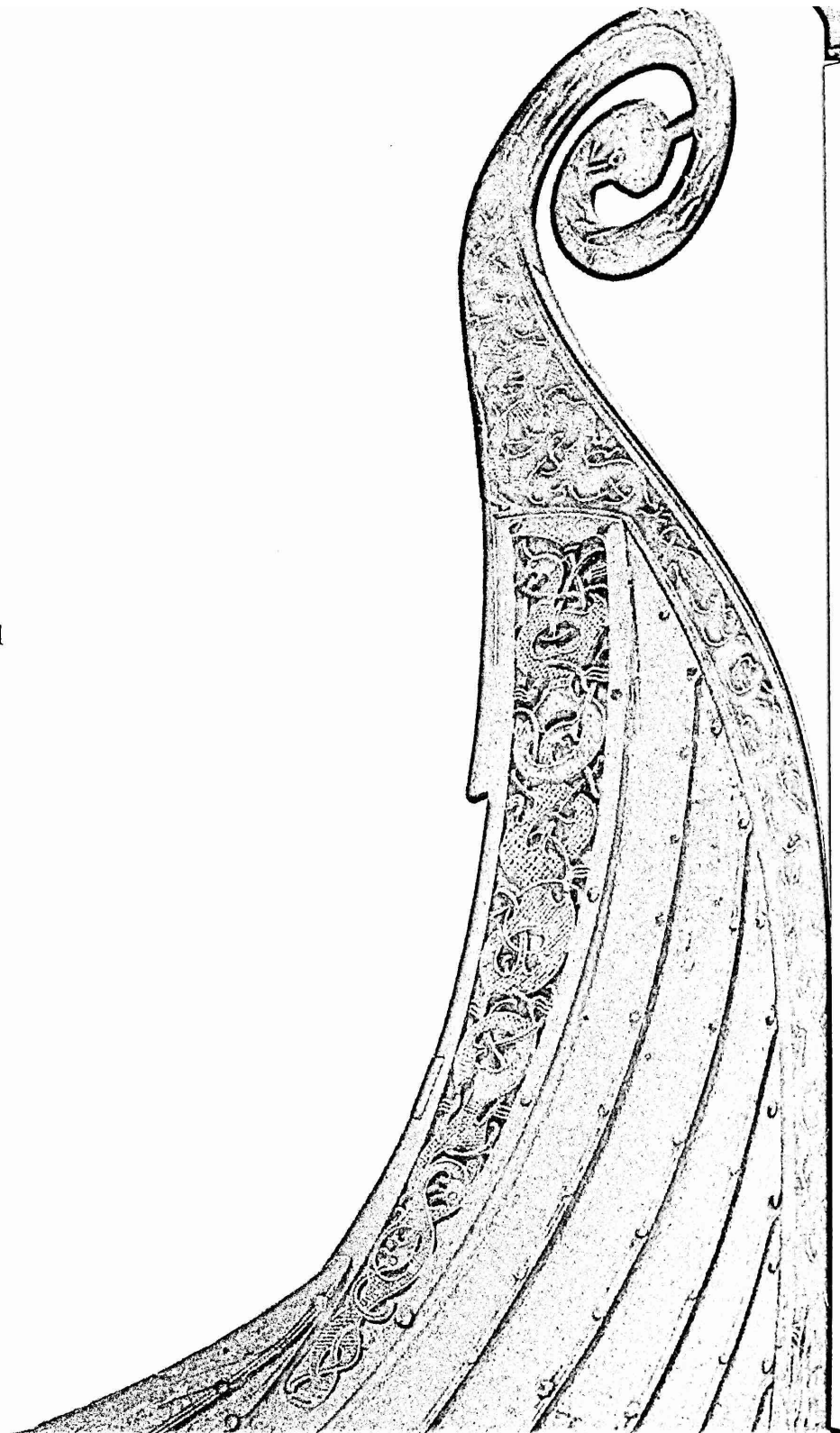
* *athelings*: noblemen

** Not the hero of the poem, who is introduced at line 194.

Shield, when old and his hour had come,
turned away into the Lord's protection.
His loving companions carried him out
to the ocean's edge as he had ordered
30 when still he could speak as the Shielding's lord;
long had that dear prince ruled in the land.
Shining in the harbor, a ring-prowed ship
stood icy and eager, the atheling's vessel.
There they laid their beloved lord,
35 their giver of rings, that glorious man,
on the deck by the mast among many treasures,
fine things from foreign lands.

Never was ship more nobly adorned
with battle weapons and garments of war,
40 with blades and with byrnies! * On his breast they laid
many a gift that would go with him
in his far wanderings over the waves.
They girded him round with ancient gold
more generously on that final journey
45 than those folk did who set him adrift
alone on chill seas when only a child.
At the last they set up a golden standard
high over his head, then let the waves have him—
gave him to the sea. Their hearts were sad
50 and mournful their minds, for men cannot know,
neither hall-councillors nor heroes under Heaven,
how to say what hands received that cargo.

* *byrnies*: mail coats



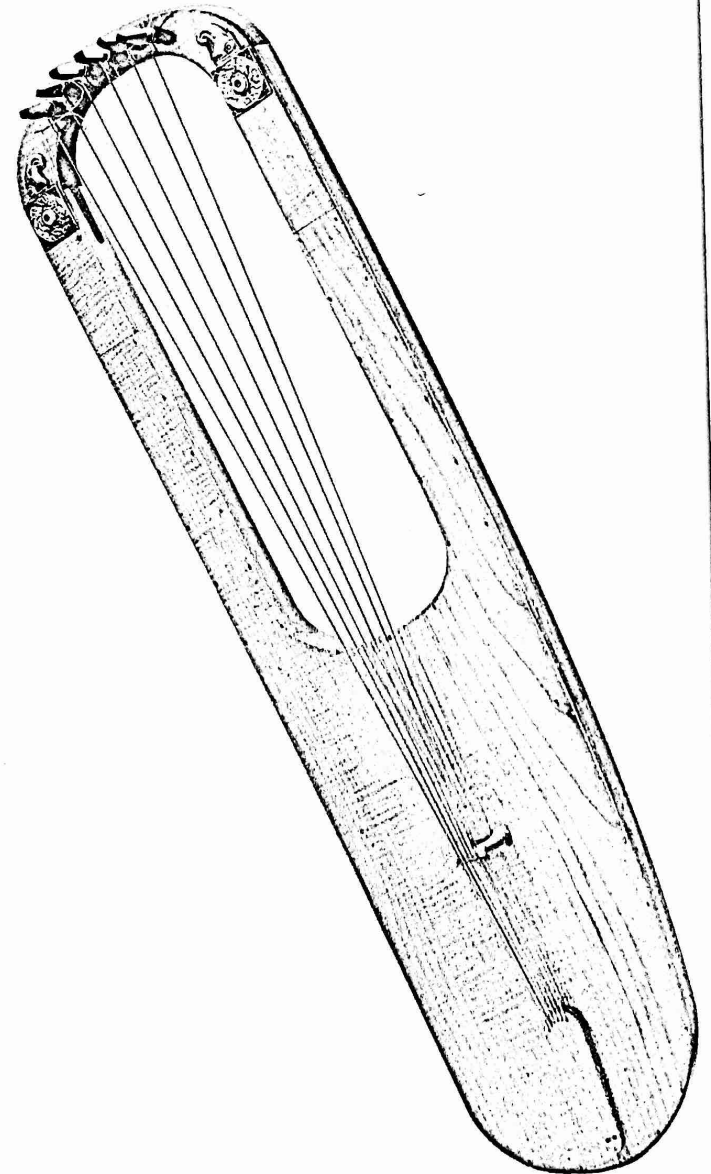
Then in the strongholds the son of Shield,
Beowulf the Dane, grew dear to his people
55 as a famous king when his father, in dying,
had gone from the land. Late in life
he sired Halfdane, who held the proud Shieldings
until gray with age, a grim old warrior.
Four sons and daughters he fathered all told,
60 and brought them up to be great rulers:
Heorogar and Hrothgar and Halga the Good,
and an excellent daughter, who was Onla's queen,
beloved wife of the Swedish war-king.

Then Hrothgar was granted glory in battle,
65 success in the field, which ensured that his friends
obeyed him eagerly, until that band grew
to a mighty troop. It came to his mind then
that he would command that a huge mead building
be made for his warriors, a mighty hall
70 which the sons of men should hear of forever.
And he would apportion out to his people
all that God had given him,
except for shared lands and the lives of men.

75 I have heard that then through the whole world
craftsmen of many kinds were ordered
to make that place fair. In due course it befell
that Hrothgar's pride and joy was completed,
the greatest of halls. He named it Heorot—
his word was law throughout the land.
80 He kept his vow and gave rings of value
as banquet treasures. The building towered
high and wide-gabled—awaiting the hostile
leap of flames. But it was a long time yet
before the sword-hatred of a son-in-law
85 should wake to avenge a wicked slaughter.

In these days a spirit who dwelt in darkness
was growing more agonized in his anger
each time that he heard the joy in the hall
ring out anew. The round-harp hummed,
90 the clear song of the *shope*. * He sang who knew well
about the ancient beginnings of men.
He said the Almighty made the world,
the shining plain encircled by water,
exulting set out the sun and moon.
95 as lamps to give light to land dwellers,
and fairly adorned the fields of earth
with limbs and leaves. Then he made life
for every kind of creature that moves.
And so the lordly ones lived in delight
100 and happy ease, until One began
to perform evil deeds, a fiend from Hell—
that grim spirit was called Grendel!

**shope*: minstrel





105 Long he lived mournful in demon's lair
after the Creator had cast out Cain
and all his kindred for the killing of Abel—
the Lord everlasting avenged that blow!
No joy had Cain in that jealous feud
110 when the Maker had driven him far from mankind.
From his loins were born the uncanny beings,
giants and orcs and evil elves,
and also the titans who long contended
against God. He gave them their due!

5

2. The Coming of Grendel

115 The fall of night brought Grendel forth
to see how the Danes, with their drinking done,
had gone to rest in that gabled hall.
He found there, sleeping after the feast,
a band of warriors, quite unaware
120 of the woes of men—so the vengeful monster,
grim in his wrath, was ready at once
to rage upon them! From rest he plucked
thirty thanes, and, thrilled with his plunder,
darted away to his own den,
125 making for home with a sackful of murder.

When dawn came, the light of day
revealed Grendel's skill at slaughter;
and then festivity turned to woe—
sad songs in the morning. Mighty Hrothgar,
130 that famous ruler, wrapped in anguish,
wept at the death of his warrior-thanes.
Others found the monster's footprints,
a signature that foretold a strife
too long, too difficult. And without delay,

6 135 the next night, indeed, he began anew
with more killing, and had no qualms
about that feud—he was too fixed on it!
Then he who sought a sleeping place
somewhere else was easy to find—
140 in the women's bowers. For who would brave
the violence of that new hall-vassal
once he had seen it?

They kept themselves then
at a safer distance away from the demon,
and Grendel ruled and raged against mankind,
145 alone and evil, until empty stood
the best of houses. That was a hard time,
twelve long winters of bitter woe.
The king of the Danes had to endure
this cruel affliction, and it became
150 as familiar to the sons of men
as a well-known song, that Grendel waged
war against Hrothgar, with hateful attacks
and murderous forays for many a season,
a permanent feud. He wanted no peace.
155 To stop killing the Danish kindred
or settle with gold was no goal of his—
no hall-lord had any reason to hope
for bright compensation from that slayer's hand!
No, that demon, that dark death-shadow,
160 leapt out upon young and old alike,
a hideous ambush! In darkness he held
the misty moors. Men cannot know
whither such hell-wights bend their ways!





7

165 Thus mankind's foe carried on the feud.
That fiend in exile often performed
ghastly deeds; and he dwelt in Heorot,
the gold-decked hall, in the dead of night
(but close to that gift-throne he could not come,
draw nigh the lord's treasure, nor know his love).

170 To the lord of the Danes his dwelling there
was heart-breaking torment. Others took
more active council: they cast about
in secret to discover what could be done
to stem the tide of sudden attacks.

175 At times they vowed in idol-tents
to sacrifice, in ancient phrases
seeking aid from the slayer of souls
in their deep sorrow.

Such was their wont,

180 *the hope of the heathens; in their hearts they thought of
Hell below. They knew not the Lord,
the Judge of Deeds, or how to rejoice
in trusting God, the Protector in Heaven,
the Wielder of Glory. Woe be to him
who because of strife must shove his soul
185 to the heart of the fire! He cannot hope
for help or change, ever. Happy is he
who may seek out the Lord on his last day
and ask for peace in the Father's embrace!*

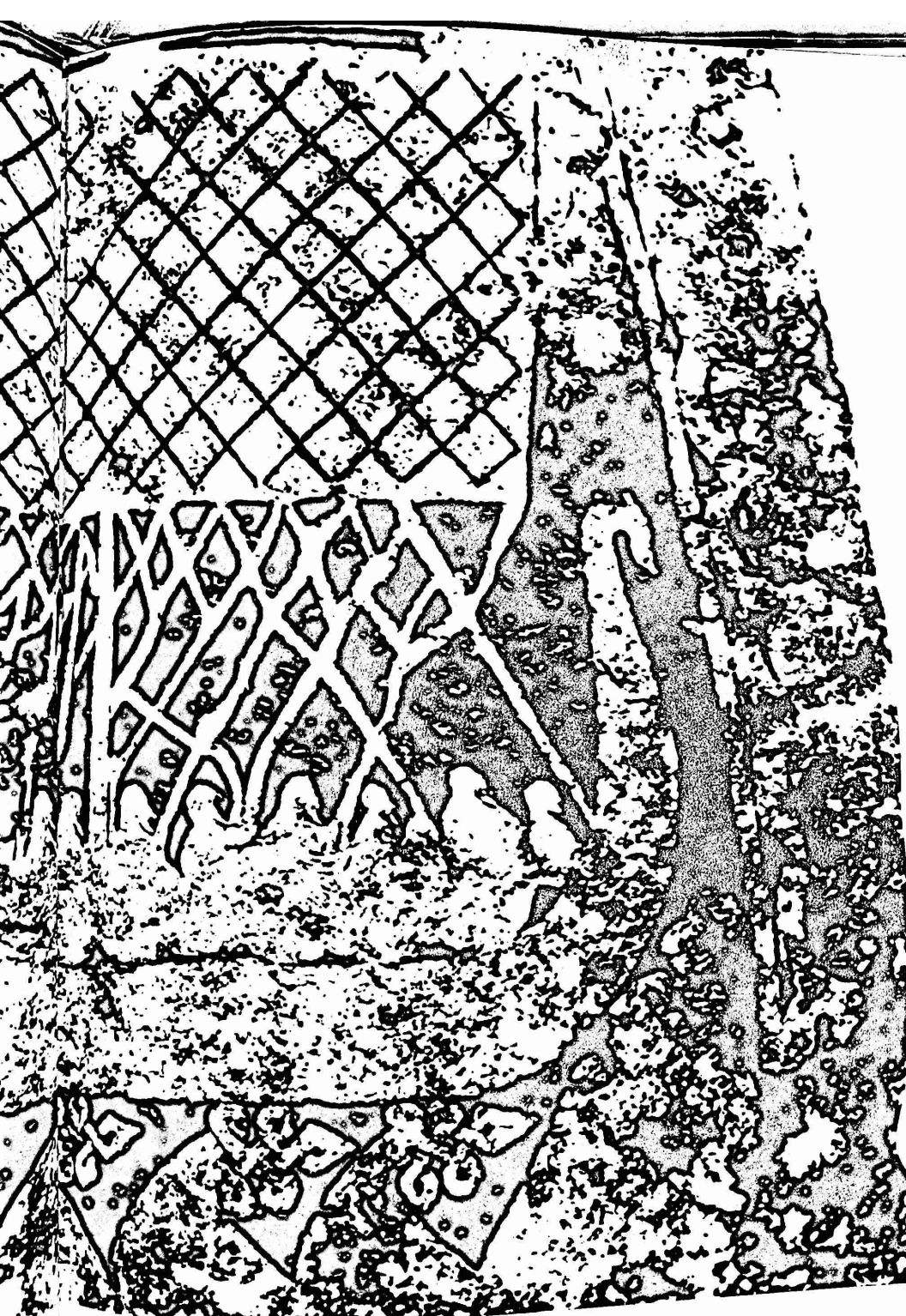
3. Beowulf Goes to the Land of the Danes

190 Despite his wisdom, Hafdane's son
could not stop turning over his troubles
in that painful time, or suppress his worry—
the strife was too cruel that had stricken his people,
a grim persecution, the greatest night-terror.
But Grendel's deeds were told to a Geat
195 in his far homeland, to Hygelac's thane. *

He was the mightiest man in the world
in those long ago days of this fleeting life,
and noble of purpose. He ordered prepared
a goodly ship, and said he would go
200 over the swan's road to seek out Hrothgar,
knowing that prince had need of men.
His wise friends did not find fault
with him for that daring, though he was dear to them;
indeed, they encouraged him, casting lots
205 for his coming venture, and the valiant fighter
chose from among the Geatish champions
the bravest he could find. Then Beowulf went forth
as one of fifteen, a sea-crafty warrior
who showed them, by landmarks, the way to his ship.

* *thane*: sworn follower





210 The moments passed; the men waited.
When the vessel was well afloat on the waves
they clambered aboard beside the cliff
where the currents whirled, carrying treasures
into that hold, handsome weapons
215 and splendid armor. Then they cast off
on a willing journey in their ship of wood.

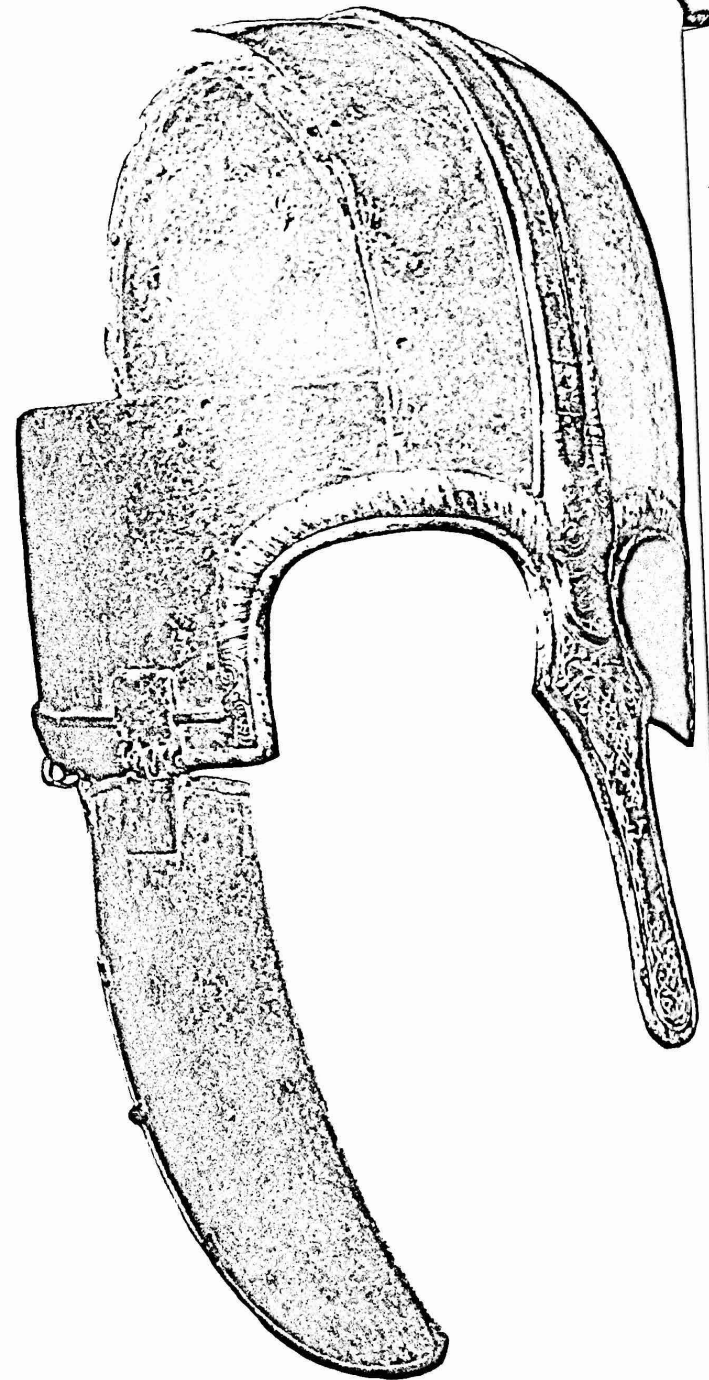
Thrust by the wind over billowing waves,
it flew through the foam as free as a bird,
and sailed so far by the following day
220 that sailors perched in that twisted prow
could make out the shining shapes of land:
bright seacliffs, broad headlands,
then sharp rocky crags. They had crossed the ocean;
the voyage was over. Eagerly now,
225 they leapt ashore to anchor their ship,
their ring-mail singing as they moved around.
But they paused to give their thanks to God
for an easy passage on the perilous sea.

From the high sea wall someone was watching;
230 the Shielding whose task was to guard that shore
saw them lift their shields from the side of the ship,
ready for battle. Bursting with curiosity,
wondering what kind of men these were,
Hrothgar's sentinel leapt to his saddle,
235 rode down to the shore, and shook his spear
in a mighty fist, though his words were formal:
"Who are you, coming here in armor,
a band of men in byrnies, steering
your high-keeled ship down the ocean streets,
240 across the water? Look, I have watched here

at this land's end for a long time
 to make certain that no sea-invader
 would disembark on the Danish shore,
 and never have warriors borne weapons here
 245 more openly! Nor do you offer
 any sign of the elders' consent.
 And never in the world have I seen a more noble
 man in armor tower above others
 than him in your midst; that is no mere hall-thane
 250 made proud with weapons—may his appearance
 never prove false! But now, inform me
 of your kindred before you come any farther
 on Danish soil—you might be spies!
 Listen to me, sea-faring men
 255 far from your homes, I have one thought,
 and here it is: you had better hurry
 and tell me clearly where you have come from!"

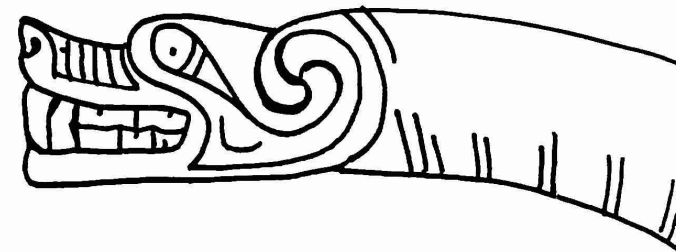
4. His Reply to the Sentinel's Challenge

The leader among them made his reply,
 wisely unlocked his hoard of words:
 260 "You are looking at men from the land of the Geats;
 we are Hygelac's hearth companions.
 My father, familiar to men everywhere,
 was a noble prince whose name was Edgetheow.
 He lived many winters before passing away,
 265 aged and honored; the elders who offer
 advice to kings recall him well.
 With friendly intent we have come very far
 to seek your lord, the son of Halfdane,
 guide of his people. Give us advice!
 270 How shall we approach your proud leader
 to make known our mission? There can be nothing



secret about it, for surely you know
whether it is true, as we have been told,
that among the Danes some dire being
275 shows hatred by his deeds in the dead of night;
uncannily hostile, he causes terror
with a grim corpse-hunger! I have come to Hrothgar
to offer help with an open heart,
to aid that good king in overcoming
280 the fiend—if change from this evil affliction
can ever grant him relief again—
and then his burning cares will be cooler;
or else he will have to endure forever
a life of distress, so long as there stands
285 the best of houses in its high place!”

The sentinel spoke where he sat before them,
brave on his warhorse: “Words and deeds
are two things that an intelligent man
must learn to assess if he means to succeed.
290 I hear you tell me that you intend
loyal service to the Shielding’s lord.
Come then, with your weapons; I will show you the way.
Moreover, my thanes will be ordered to guard
your freshly tarred ship, to shield it well
295 against all marauders while it rests by the shore—
until the time comes that its coiled prow
is launched on the currents to carry you back
across the waves to Weathermark,
along with those brave men you have brought
300 who have the luck to survive with their lives!”
Then he turned his horse. Behind them remained
the roomy vessel bound by a rope,
lying at anchor.

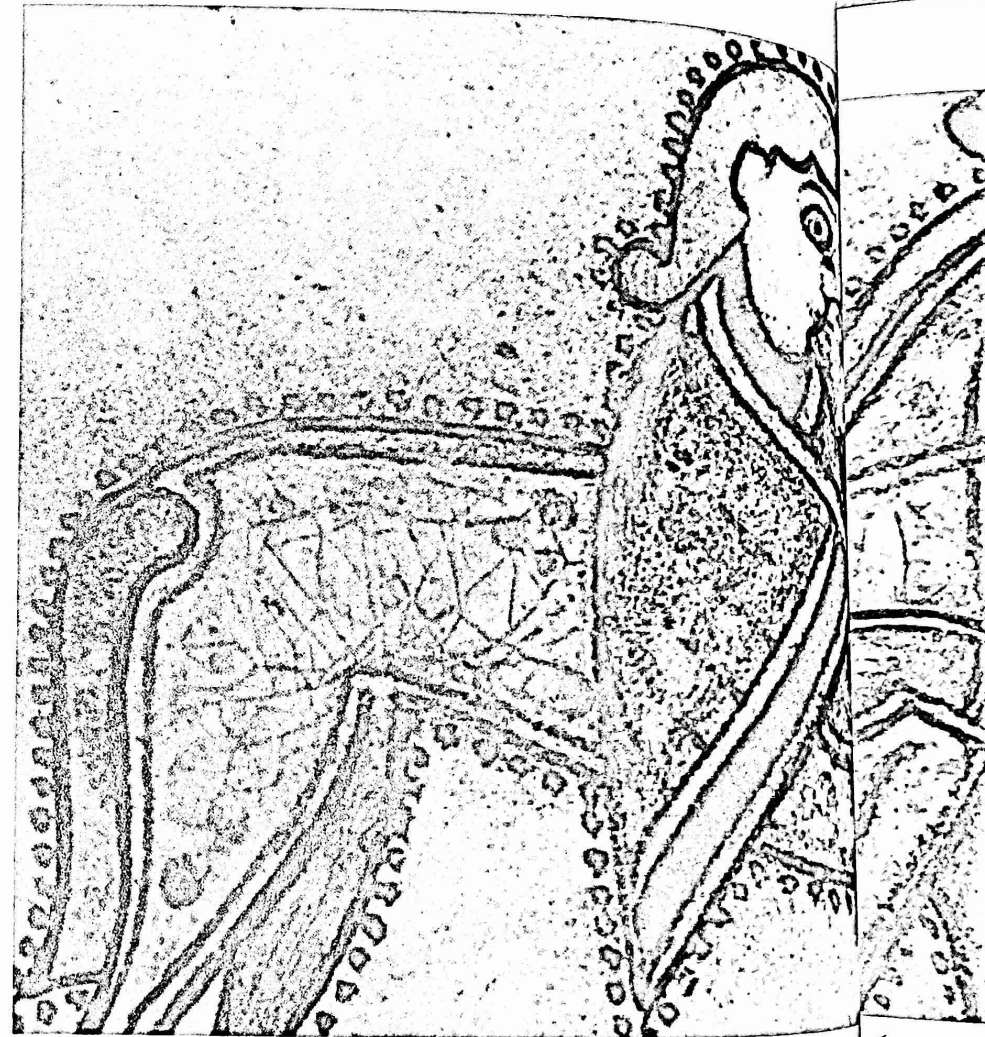


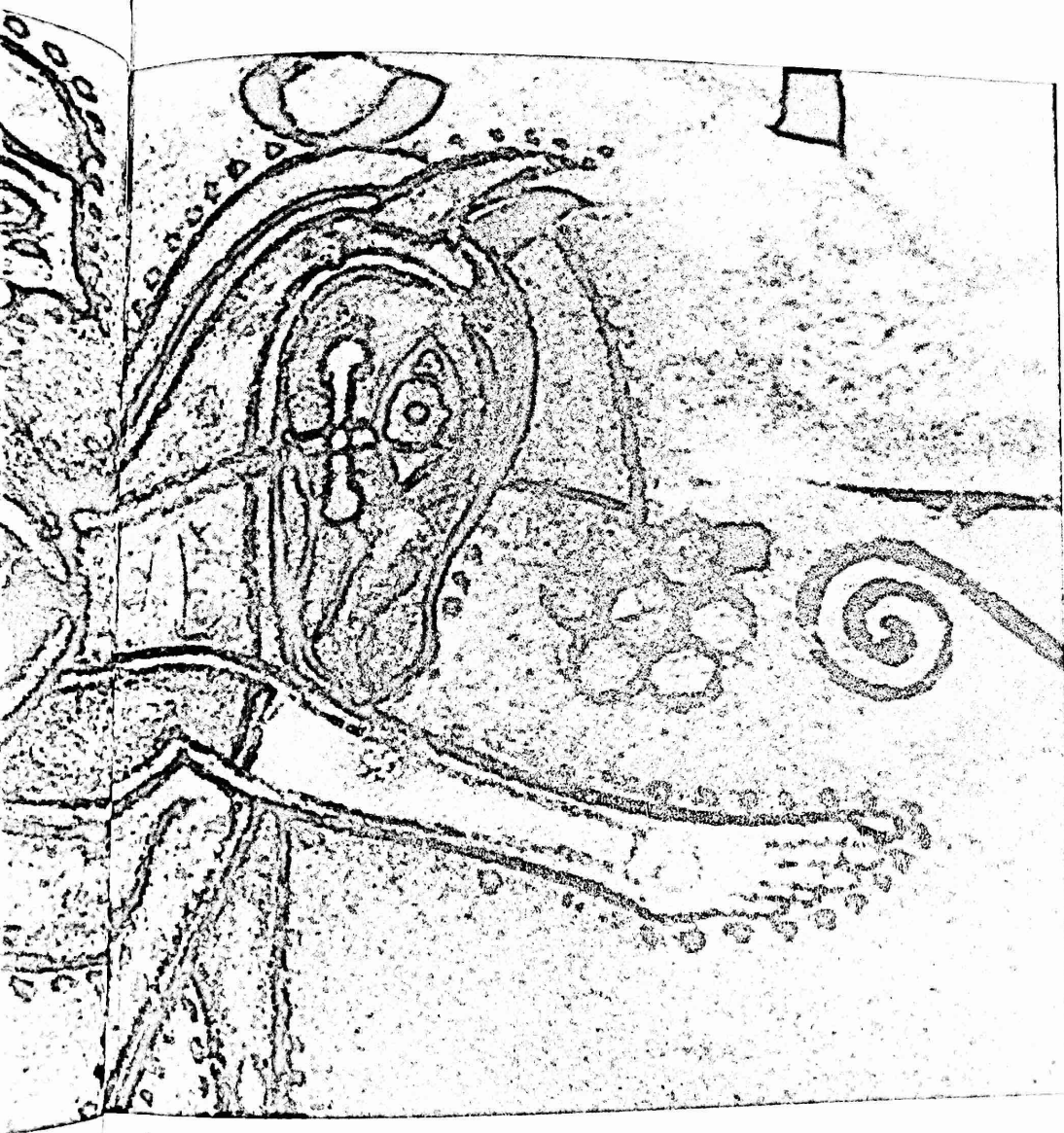
Likenesses of boars
 above their cheekplates, bright with gold,
 305 shone wondrously, warlike shapes
 keeping guard over life. The Geats hurried,
 marching together until they could glimpse
 that great timbered hall with its golden roof.
 No building there was in all the world
 310 more famous than this ruler's fortress—
 its light shone out over many lands!

Pointing the way to that warriors' hall,
 the sentinel instructed them
 how to approach it, then turning his horse,
 315 bade them farewell in a few words:
 "Now I must go. May God almighty
 hold you with honor and keep you unharmed
 in your brave venture. Back to the sea
 I must go to keep watch against invaders."

5. The Road to Heorot

320 Down the wide path paved with stone
 the men walked together. Their byrnies gleamed;
 the hand-locked rings in that hardy armor
 sang as the warriors went along
 the road to the the hall. When they arrived there,
 325 tired from seafaring, they set down their shields,
 wondrously strong, against the wall,
 then sank to the bench. Again their byrnies
 rang out in song, and the spears stood
 all together where the Geats had placed them,
 330 an ash-grove with iron-gray leaves. Those athelings
 had worthy weapons!





Then a warrior came out
to inquire of the strangers what their kindred was.
"Whence do you bring those brilliant shields,
gray sarks * and grim masked helmets,
335 and all those iron spears? I am Hrothgar's
official spokesman, and may I say
that I've never seen a troop more bravely attired?
I suspect neither exile nor piracy
will have prompted your coming, but courage and pride
340 have led you to Hrothgar."

Their leader answered,
selecting his words in a lordly manner,
strong under his helmet: "We are Hygelac's
boon companions. Beowulf is my name.
I wish to tell Halfdane's son himself,
345 that noble ruler, the nature of
the cause that brings me, if he will accord us
the honor of approaching such a princely man."

Wulfgar spoke; a high-ranking Wendel,
his clever mind was known to many,
350 along with his prowess in war, and his wisdom:
"I shall inquire of our king,
the friend and lord of the Danish folk
and their giver of rings, about granting you
leave to approach him, our famous leader,
355 and I shall return at once to tell you
whatever it pleases him to reply."

* sarks: mail coats

Quickly he strode to where the king
sat inside, with his silver hair
shining among friends; before his shoulder
360 Wulfgar, according to noble custom,
stood, and spoke freely to his friendly lord:
"We have visitors who have voyaged far
to come here, sir, seafaring Geats.
The leader of these athelings
365 is called Beowulf, and they request
permission to enter, that they might hold speech
with my noble lord. Do not deny them
a kindly answer, O gracious king!
In war equipment they appear worthy
370 of our esteem. Indeed, that earl
did well who guided these warriors hither."

