

“When it comes to fighting, I count myself  
as dangerous any day as Grendel.  
So it won’t be a cutting edge I’ll wield  
680 to mow him down, easily as I might.  
He has no idea of the arts of war,  
of shield or sword-play, although he does possess  
a wild strength. No weapons, therefore,  
for either this night: unarmed he shall face me  
if face me he dares. And may the Divine Lord  
in His wisdom grant the glory of victory  
to whichever side He sees fit.”

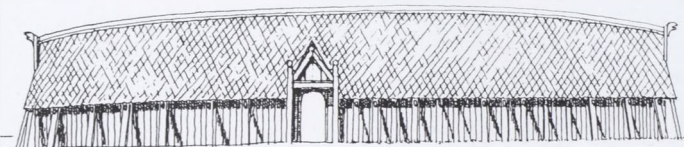
Then down the brave man lay with his bolster  
under his head and his whole company  
690 of sea-rovers at rest beside him.  
None of them expected he would ever see  
his homeland again or get back  
to his native place and the people who reared him.  
They knew too well the way it was before,  
how often the Danes had fallen prey  
to death in the mead-hall. But the Lord was weaving  
a victory on His war-loom for the Weather-Geats.  
Through the strength of one they all prevailed;  
they would crush their enemy and come through  
700 in triumph and gladness. The truth is clear:  
Almighty God rules over mankind  
and always has.

Then out of the night  
came the shadow-stalker, stealthy and swift;  
the hall-guards were slack, asleep at their posts,  
all except one; it was widely understood  
that as long as God disallowed it,  
the fiend could not bear them to his shadow-bourne.

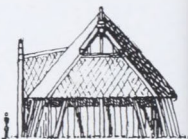
*The Geats await  
Grendel's attack*

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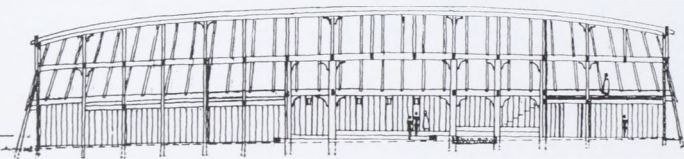
*Portrait of a demon at hell mouth, from an Anglo-Saxon illuminated manuscript of Wonders of the East. The demon's eyes are painted a brilliant red as if giving off flames. Similarly, Grendel represents evil incarnate, and "a baleful light, / flame more than light, flared from his eyes" (lines 726–27). London, British Library Cotton Tiberius B.v, fol. 87b. Late eleventh century.*



FACADE MOD NORD



VESTGAVL



LANGDEBNIT

One man, however, was in fighting mood,  
awake and on edge, spoiling for action.

710 In off the moors, down through the mist bands  
God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping,  
The bane of the race of men roamed forth,  
hunting for a prey in the high hall.  
Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it  
until it shone above him, a sheer keep  
of fortified gold. Nor was that the first time  
he had scouted the grounds of Hrothgar's dwelling—  
although never in his life, before or since,  
did he find harder fortune or hall-defenders.

*Grendel strikes*

720 Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead  
and arrived at the bawn. The iron-braced door  
turned on its hinge when his hands touched it.  
Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open  
the mouth of the building, maddening for blood,  
pacing the length of the patterned floor  
with his loathsome tread, while a baleful light,  
flame more than light, flared from his eyes.  
He saw many men in the mansion, sleeping,  
a ranked company of kinsmen and warriors  
730 quartered together. And his glee was demonic,  
picturing the mayhem: before morning  
he would rip life from limb and devour them,  
feed on their flesh; but his fate that night  
was due to change, his days of ravening  
had come to an end.

Mighty and canny,  
Hygelac's kinsman was keenly watching  
for the first move the monster would make.  
Nor did the creature keep him waiting

*A Goet warrior  
perishes*

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*The Viking Age hall at Lejre measured 48.3 meters (or about 158 feet) in length and 11.5 meters (or about 38 feet) in breadth at its midpoint. Its height can only be estimated, but with stout posts and strong beams, the hall could have boasted a very large interior space. The Beowulf poet and his audience may have visualized Heorot in terms like these.*



but struck suddenly and started in;  
740 he grabbed and mauled a man on his bench,  
bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood  
and gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body  
utterly lifeless, eaten up  
hand and foot. Venturing closer,  
his talon was raised to attack Beowulf  
where he lay on the bed; he was bearing in  
with open claw when the alert hero's  
comeback and armlock forestalled him utterly.  
The captain of evil discovered himself  
750 in a handgrip harder than anything  
he had ever encountered in any man  
on the face of the earth. Every bone in his body  
quailed and recoiled, but he could not escape.  
He was desperate to flee to his den and hide  
with the devil's litter, for in all his days  
he had never been clamped or cornered like this.  
Then Hygelac's trusty retainer recalled  
his bedtime speech, sprang to his feet  
and got a firm hold. Fingers were bursting,  
760 the monster back-tracking, the man overpowering.  
The dread of the land was desperate to escape,  
to take a roundabout road and flee  
to his lair in the fens. The latching power  
in his fingers weakened; it was the worst trip  
the terror-monger had taken to Heorot.  
And now the timbers trembled and sang,  
a hall-session that harrowed every Dane  
inside the stockade: stumbling in fury,  
the two contenders crashed through the building.  
770 The hall clattered and hammered, but somehow  
survived the onslaught and kept standing:

*Beowulf's fight with  
Grendel*

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*Although the timbers of Heorot "trembled and sang" as Beowulf grappled with Grendel, the hall stood firm. The great buildings of this period, like the great ships, were constructed of sturdy timbers joined by carpenters who were masters of their craft. This photo shows a late Viking Age smith's tool chest from Mästermyr, Gotland, together with associated tools and other objects. Eleventh century.*



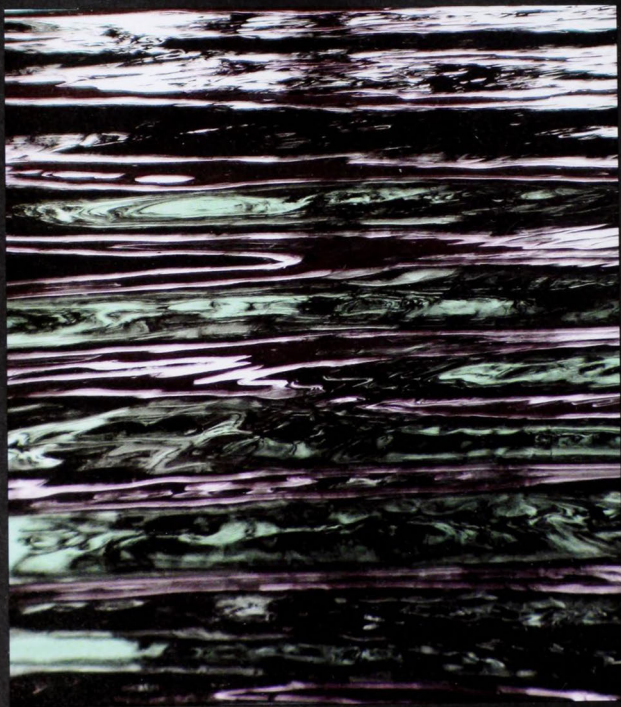
it was handsomely structured, a sturdy frame  
braced with the best of blacksmith's work  
inside and out. The story goes  
that as the pair struggled, mead-benches were smashed  
and sprung off the floor, gold fittings and all.  
Before then, no Shielding elder would believe  
there was any power or person upon earth  
capable of wrecking their horn-rigged hall  
780 unless the burning embrace of a fire  
engulf it in flame. Then an extraordinary  
wail arose, and bewildering fear  
came over the Danes. Everyone felt it  
who heard that cry as it echoed off the wall,  
a God-cursed scream and strain of catastrophe,  
the howl of the loser, the lament of the hell-serf  
keening his wound. He was overwhelmed,  
manacled tight by the man who of all men  
was foremost and strongest in the days of this life.

790 But the earl-troop's leader was not inclined  
to allow his caller to depart alive:  
he did not consider that life of much account  
to anyone anywhere. Time and again,  
Beowulf's warriors worked to defend  
their lord's life, laying about them  
as best they could with their ancestral blades.  
Stalwart in action, they kept striking out  
on every side, seeking to cut  
straight to the soul. When they joined the struggle  
800 there was something they could not have known at the time,  
that no blade on earth, no blacksmith's art  
could ever damage their demon opponent.

*Beowulf's thanes  
defend him*

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*Heorot, we are told, was "braced with the best of blacksmith's work / inside and out." The poet's description is probably based on reality. This collection of bolts, nails, and other hardware was recovered during excavations at the Viking Age settlement at Lejre, Denmark, where a great hall once towered. The remains of a smithy were discovered close by the hall.*





He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge  
of every weapon. But his going away  
out of this world and the days of his life  
would be agony to him, and his alien spirit  
would travel far into fiends' keeping.

Then he who had harrowed the hearts of men  
with pain and affliction in former times  
810 and had given offence also to God  
found that his bodily powers failed him.  
Hygelac's kinsman kept him helplessly  
locked in a handgrip. As long as either lived,  
he was hateful to the other. The monster's whole  
body was in pain, a tremendous wound  
appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split  
and the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted  
the glory of winning; Grendel was driven  
under the fen-banks, fatally hurt,  
820 to his desolate lair. His days were numbered,  
the end of his life was coming over him,  
he knew it for certain; and one bloody clash  
had fulfilled the dearest wishes of the Danes.  
The man who had lately landed among them,  
proud and sure, had purged the hall,  
kept it from harm; he was happy with his nightwork  
and the courage he had shown. The Geat captain  
had boldly fulfilled his boast to the Danes:  
he had healed and relieved a huge distress,  
830 unremitting humiliations,  
the hard fate they'd been forced to undergo,  
no small affliction. Clear proof of this  
could be seen in the hand the hero displayed  
high up near the roof: the whole of Grendel's

*Grendel is defeated.  
Beowulf fulfils his  
boast*

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*The morning after Grendel's defeat, the monster's footprints are tracked across the moors as far as a pool "of bloodshot water [that] wallowed and surged" (line 846). Perhaps no illustration can do justice to this scene, but this photo is meant to be suggestive of it. The picture was actually taken at a serene spot in Ireland; its colors were subsequently distorted.*



shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp.

Then morning came and many a warrior  
gathered, as I've heard, around the gift-hall,  
clan-chiefs flocking from far and near  
down wide-ranging roads, wondering greatly  
840 at the monster's footprints. His fatal departure  
was regretted by no-one who witnessed his trail,  
the ignominious marks of his flight  
where he'd skulked away, exhausted in spirit  
and beaten in battle, bloodying the path,  
hauling his doom to the demons' mere.  
The bloodshot water wallowed and surged,  
there were loathsome upthrows and overturnings  
of waves and gore and wound-slurry.  
With his death upon him, he had dived deep  
850 into his marsh-den, drowned out his life  
and his heathen soul: hell claimed him there.

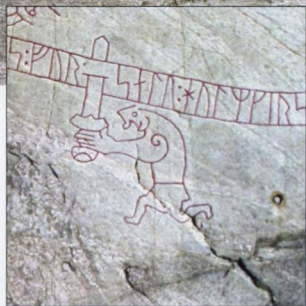
Then away they rode, the old retainers  
with many a young man following after,  
a troop on horseback, in high spirits  
on their bay steeds. Beowulf's doings  
were praised over and over again.  
Nowhere, they said, north or south  
between the two seas or under the tall sky  
on the broad earth was there anyone better  
860 to raise a shield or to rule a kingdom.  
Yet there was no laying of blame on their lord,  
the noble Hrothgar; he was a good king.

At times the war-band broke into a gallop,  
letting their chestnut horses race

*The morning after  
rebet and repentings*

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*On their way back from Grendel's mere, the men race their horses. Scandinavian horses of the Germanic and Viking eras were smaller than their modern counterparts. Horses of this older type are bred and maintained at the Historical-Archaeological Research Centre located at Lejre, Denmark, where on occasion they are ridden by "Iron Age" riders.*



wherever they found the going good  
on those well-known tracks. Meanwhile, a thane  
of the king's household, a carrier of tales,  
a traditional singer deeply schooled  
in the lore of the past, linked a new theme  
870 to a strict metre. The man started  
to recite with skill, rehearsing Beowulf's  
triumphs and feats in well-fashioned lines,  
entwining his words.

*Hrothgar's minstrel  
sings about Beowulf*

He told what he'd heard  
repeated in songs about Sigemund's exploits,  
all of those many feats and marvels,  
the struggles and wanderings of Waels's son,  
things unknown to anyone  
except to Fitela, feuds and foul doings  
confided by uncle to nephew when he felt  
880 the urge to speak of them: always they had been  
partners in the fight, friends in need.  
They killed giants, their conquering swords  
had brought them down.

*The tale of Sigemund,  
the dragon-slayer.  
Appropriate for  
Beowulf, who has  
defeated Grendel*

*After his death*

*Sigemund's glory grew and grew  
because of his courage when he killed the dragon,  
the guardian of the hoard. Under grey stone  
he had dared to enter all by himself  
to face the worst without Fitela.  
But it came to pass that his sword plunged  
890 right through those radiant scales  
and drove into the wall. The dragon died of it.  
His daring had given him total possession  
of the treasure hoard, his to dispose of  
however he liked. He loaded a boat:*

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*After his victory over Grendel, Beowulf is compared implicitly to the legendary hero Sigemund, who in turn corresponds to Sigurd, the famous dragon-slayer of Old Norse heroic tradition. Carved into a large stone at Ramsund, in Södermanland, southern Sweden, are scenes from the life of Sigurd, who is shown impaling a dragon on his sword. The dragon's body is a ribbon of runes.*