

440 And storms, waves splash toward the sky,  
 As dark as the air, as black as the rain  
 That the heavens weep. Our only help,  
 Again, lies with you. Grendel's mother  
 Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place  
 445 You've not seen. Seek it, if you dare! Save us,  
 Once more, and again twisted gold,  
 Heaped-up ancient treasure, will reward you  
 For the battle you win!"

### The Battle with Grendel's Mother

*Beowulf resolves to kill the "lady monster." Arriving at the lake under which she lives, Beowulf and his companions see serpents in the water and sea beasts on the rocks. The young hero kills one of the beasts with an arrow and then prepares to fight with Grendel's mother.*

Then Edgetho's brave son<sup>1</sup> spoke:

450 Hrothgar, Oh knowing king, now  
 When my danger is near, the warm words we uttered,  
 And if your enemy should end my life  
 Then be, oh generous prince, forever  
 The father and protector of all whom I leave  
 455 Behind me, here in your hands, my beloved  
 Comrades left with no leader, their leader  
 Dead. And the precious gifts you gave me,  
 My friend, send them to Higlac. May he see  
 In their golden brightness, the Geats' great lord  
 460 Gazing at your treasure, that here in Denmark  
 I found a noble protector, a giver  
 Of rings whose rewards I won and briefly  
 Relished. And you, Unferth,<sup>2</sup> let  
 My famous old sword stay in your hands:  
 465 I shall shape glory with Hrunting, or death  
 Will hurry me from this earth!"

"Remember,

As his words ended

He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone's  
 Answer; the heaving water covered him  
 Over. For hours he sank through the waves;  
 470 At last he saw the mud of the bottom.  
 And all at once the greedy she-wolf  
 Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred  
 Years discovered him, saw that a creature  
 From above had come to explore the bottom  
 475 Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,  
 Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,

**1. Edgetho's brave son:**  
 Beowulf. Elsewhere he is identified by such phrases as "the Geats' proud prince" and "the Geats' brave prince." These different designations add variety and interest to the poem.

**2. Unferth:** A Danish warrior who had questioned Beowulf's bravery before the battle with Grendel.

Tried to work her fingers through the tight  
Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore  
And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor  
480 And sword and all, to her home; he struggled  
To free his weapon, and failed. The fight  
Brought other monsters swimming to see  
Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at  
His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth  
485 As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,  
That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall.  
And there the water's heat could not hurt him,  
Nor anything in the lake attack him through  
The building's high-arching roof. A brilliant  
490 Light burned all around him, the lake  
Itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw  
The mighty water witch and swung his sword,  
His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;  
The iron sang its fierce song,  
495 Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest  
Discovered that no sword could slice her evil  
Skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless  
Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped  
And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet,  
500 And that too failed him; for the first time in years  
Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;  
It was the last time anyone would wear it. But

Beowulf  
Longed only for fame, leaped back  
Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,  
505 Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where  
He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use  
His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame  
Comes to the men who mean to win it  
And care about nothing else! He raised  
510 His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger  
Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.  
She fell, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats'  
Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose  
At once and repaid him with her clutching claws,  
515 Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best  
And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled  
And in an instant she had him down, held helpless.  
Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew  
A dagger, brown with dried blood, and prepared  
520 To avenge her only son. But he was stretched  
On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted  
By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.



SLAYING OF A BULL ON THE BASE OF A  
CAULDRON (CELTIC ARTIFACT, 100 B.C.)  
National Museum, Copenhagen

The hammered links held; the point  
Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom  
of the earth,

525 Edgeth's son, and died there, if that shining  
Woven metal had not helped—and Holy  
God, who sent him victory, gave judgment  
For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,  
Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

530 Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy  
Sword, hammered by giants, strong  
And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons  
But so massive that no ordinary man could lift  
Its carved and decorated length. He drew it  
535 From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,  
And then, savage, now, angry  
And desperate, lifted it high over his head  
And struck with all the strength he had left,  
Caught her in the neck and cut it through,  
540 Broke bones and all. Her body fell  
To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet  
With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.

The brilliant light shone, suddenly,  
As though burning in that hall, and as bright as  
Heaven's

545 Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked  
At her home, then following along the wall  
Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,  
His heart still angry. He was hunting another  
Dead monster, and took his weapon with him  
550 For final revenge against Grendel's vicious  
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over  
And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's  
Men slept, killing them in their beds,  
Eating some on the spot, fifteen  
555 Or more, and running to his loathsome moor  
With another such sickening meal waiting  
In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,  
Found him lying dead in his corner,  
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter  
560 Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off  
His head with a single swift blow. The body  
Jerked for the last time, then lay still.

The wise old warriors who surrounded Hrothgar,  
Like him staring into the monsters' lake,  
565 Saw the waves surging and blood  
Spurting through. They spoke about Beowulf,  
All the graybeards, whispered together



CELTIC FIGURE FROM THE SIDE OF A  
BOWL FROM A BURIAL MOUND (NORWAY,  
9TH CENTURY)

And said that hope was gone, that the hero  
Had lost fame and his life at once, and would never  
570 Return to the living, come back as triumphant  
As he had left; almost all agreed that Grendel's  
Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.  
The sun slid over past noon, went further  
Down. The Danes gave up, left  
575 The lake and went home, Hrothgar with them.  
The Geats stayed, sat sadly, watching,  
Imagining they saw their lord but not believing  
They would ever see him again.

—Then the sword  
Melted, blood-soaked, dripping down  
580 Like water, disappearing like ice when the world's  
Eternal Lord loosens invisible  
Fetters and unwinds icicles and frost  
As only He can, He who rules  
Time and seasons, He who is truly  
585 God. The monsters' hall was full of  
Rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took  
Was Grendel's head and the hilt of the giants'  
Jeweled sword; the rest of that ring-marked  
Blade had dissolved in Grendel's steaming  
590 Blood, boiling even after his death.  
And then the battle's only survivor  
Swam up and away from those silent corpses;  
The water was calm and clean, the whole  
Huge lake peaceful once the demons who'd lived in it  
595 Were dead.

Then that noble protector of all seamen  
Swam to land, rejoicing in the heavy  
Burdens he was bringing with him. He  
And all his glorious band of Geats  
Thanked God that their leader had come back  
unharméd;  
600 They left the lake together. The Geats  
Carried Beowulf's helmet, and his mail shirt.  
Behind them the water slowly thickened  
As the monsters' blood came seeping up.  
They walked quickly, happily, across  
605 Roads all of them remembered, left  
The lake and the cliffs alongside it, brave men  
Staggering under the weight of Grendel's skull,  
Too heavy for fewer than four of them to handle—  
Two on each side of the spear jammed through it—  
610 Yet proud of their ugly load and determined  
That the Danes, seated in Herot, should see it.  
Soon, fourteen Geats arrived



DETAIL OF A DRAGON HEAD ON THE  
MAMMEN HORSE COLLAR (VIKING  
ARTIFACT, 10TH CENTURY)  
*National Museum, Denmark*

At the hall, bold and warlike, and with Beowulf,  
Their lord and leader, they walked on the mead-hall  
615 Green. Then the Geats' brave prince entered  
Herot, covered with glory for the daring  
Battles he had fought; he sought Hrothgar  
To salute him and show Grendel's head.  
He carried that terrible trophy by the hair,  
620 Brought it straight to where the Danes sat,  
Drinking, the queen among them. It was a weird  
And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared.

### The Last Battle

*After being honored by Hrothgar, Beowulf and his fellow Geats return home. He is welcomed by the king, his uncle Higlac, and later becomes king himself when Higlac and his son have died. Beowulf rules Geatland for fifty years. Then a dragon menaces his kingdom. Although he is an old man, Beowulf determines to slay the beast. Before going into battle, he tells the men who have accompanied him about the history of the royal house and his exploits in its service.*

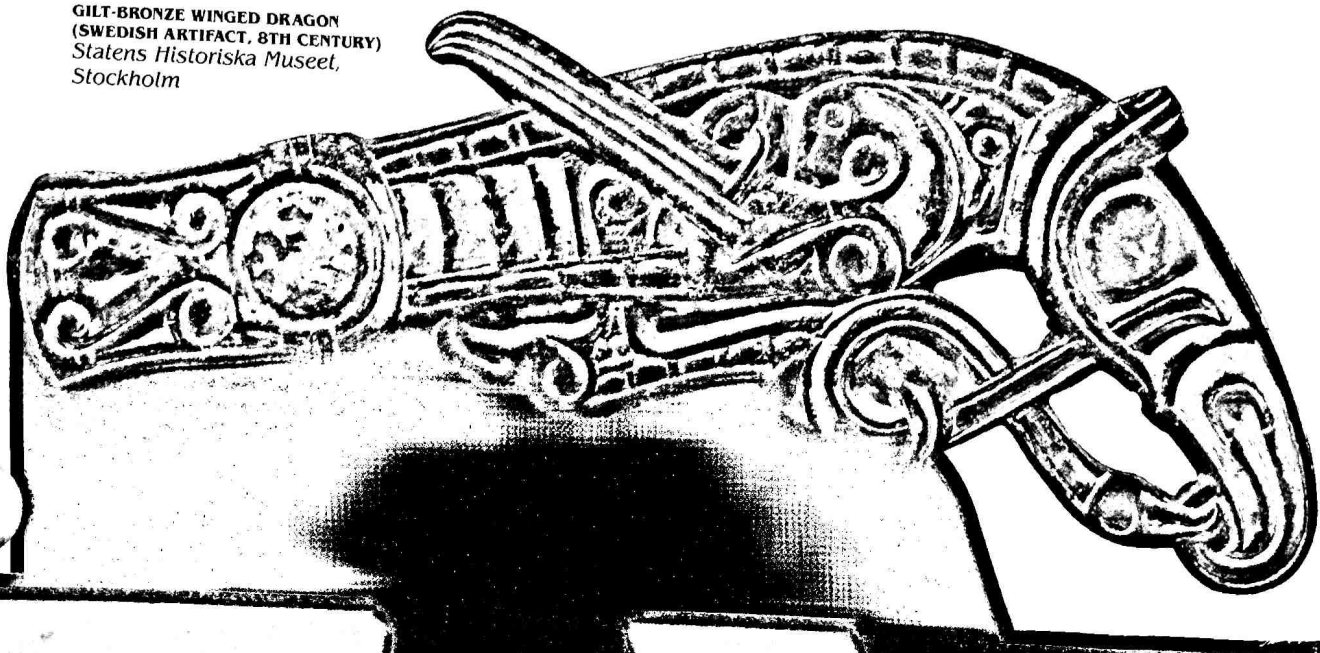
And Beowulf uttered his final boast:

"I've never known fear, as a youth I fought  
625 In endless battles. I am old, now,  
But I will fight again, seek fame still,  
If the dragon hiding in his tower dares  
To face me."

Then he said farewell to his followers,  
Each in his turn, for the last time:

630 "I'd use no sword, no weapon, if this beast  
Could be killed without it, crushed to death  
Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn

GILT-BRONZE WINGED DRAGON  
(SWEDISH ARTIFACT, 8TH CENTURY)  
Statens Historiska Museet,  
Stockholm



Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning  
Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.  
635 I feel no shame, with shield and sword  
And armor, against this monster: when he comes to  
me  
I mean to stand, not run from his shooting  
Flames, stand till fate decides  
Which of us wins. My heart is firm,  
640 My hands calm: I need no hot  
~~Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.~~  
~~We shall see, soon, who will survive~~  
This bloody battle, stand when the fighting  
Is done. No one else could do  
645 What I mean to, here, no man but me  
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one  
Could try. And this dragon's treasure, his gold  
And everything hidden in that tower, will be mine  
Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"  
650 Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,  
And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on  
his breast,  
Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under  
The rocky cliffs: no coward could have walked there!  
And then he who'd endured dozens of desperate  
655 Battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and shields  
Clashed, the best of kings, saw  
Huge stone arches and felt the heat  
Of the dragon's breath, flooding down  
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone  
660 To stand, a streaming current of fire  
And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'  
Lord and leader, angry, lowered  
His sword and roared out a battle cry,  
A call so loud and clear that it reached through  
665 The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's  
Ear. The beast rose, angry,  
Knowing a man had come—and then nothing  
But war could have followed. Its breath came first.  
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,  
670 Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf  
Swung his shield into place, held it  
In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon  
Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it  
Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword  
675 Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming  
Blade. The beast came closer; both of them  
Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'  
Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared

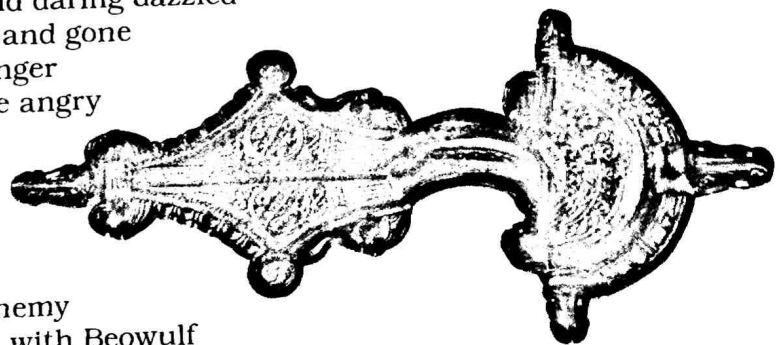
680 Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining  
Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,  
Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying  
To its fate. Flames beat at the iron  
Shield, and for a time it held, protected  
Beowulf as he'd planned; then it began to melt,  
685 And for the first time in his life that famous prince  
Fought with fate against him, with glory  
Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword  
And struck at the dragon's scaly hide.  
The ancient blade broke, bit into  
690 The monster's skin, drew blood, but cracked  
And failed him before it went deep enough, helped  
him  
Less than he needed. The dragon leaped  
With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting  
Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.  
695 And the Geats' ring-giver did not boast of glorious  
Victories in other wars: his weapon  
Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it  
Most, that excellent sword. Edgetho's  
Famous son stared at death,  
700 Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it  
For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey  
Into darkness that all men must make, as death  
Ends their few brief hours on earth.  
Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged  
705 As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,  
And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling  
Flames—a king, before, but now  
A beaten warrior. None of his comrades  
Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble  
710 Followers; they ran for their lives, fled  
Deep in a wood. And only one of them  
Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,  
As a good man must, what kinship should mean.

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan's son  
715 And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,  
Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see  
How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering  
Everything his lord and cousin had given him,  
Armor and gold and the great estates  
720 Wexstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's  
Mind was made up; he raised his yellow  
Shield and drew his sword—an ancient  
Weapon that had once belonged to Onela's  
Nephew, and that Wexstan had won, killing

725 The prince when he fled from Sweden, sought safety  
 With Herdred, and found death.<sup>3</sup> And Wiglaf's father  
 Had carried the dead man's armor, and his sword,  
 To Onela, and the king had said nothing, only  
 Given him armor and sword and all,  
 730 Everything his rebel nephew had owned  
 And lost when he left this life. And Wexstan  
 Had kept those shining gifts, held them  
 For years, waiting for his son to use them,  
 Wear them as honorably and well as once  
 735 His father had done; then Wexstan died  
 And Wiglaf was his heir, inherited treasures  
 And weapons and land. He'd never worn  
 That armor, fought with that sword, until Beowulf  
 Called him to his side, led him into war.  
 740 But his soul did not melt, his sword was strong;  
 The dragon discovered his courage, and his weapon,  
 When the rush of battle brought them together.  
 And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered  
 The kind of words his comrades deserved:  
 745 "I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking  
 And boasting of how brave we'd be when Beowulf  
 Needed us, he who gave us these swords  
 And armor: all of us swore to repay him,  
 When the time came, kindness for kindness  
 750 — With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us to  
 join him,  
 Chose us from all his great army, thinking  
 Our boasting words had some weight, believing  
 Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us  
 For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill  
 755 This monster himself, our mighty king,  
 Fight this battle alone and unaided,  
 As in the days when his strength and daring dazzled  
 Men's eyes. But those days are over and gone  
 And now our lord must lean on younger  
 760 Arms. And we must go to him, while angry  
 Flames burn at his flesh, help  
 Our glorious king! By almighty God,  
 I'd rather burn myself than see  
 Flames swirling around my lord.  
 765 And who are we to carry home  
 Our shields before we've slain his enemy  
 And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf  
 So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing  
 He ever did deserved an end  
 770 Like this, dying miserably and alone,  
 Butchered by this savage beast: we swore

**3. Onela's/Nephew . . .**

**found death:** When Onela seized the throne of Sweden, his two nephews sought shelter with the king of Geatland, Herdred, Wiglaf's father. Wexstan, killed the older nephew for Onela.



GILT-SILVER BROOCH FROM GOTLAND  
 (PRE-VIKING SCANDINAVIA)  
 Statens Historiska Museet,  
 Stockholm

That these swords and armor were each for us all!”

Then he ran to his king, crying encouragement  
As he dove through the dragon’s deadly fumes.

### The Spoils

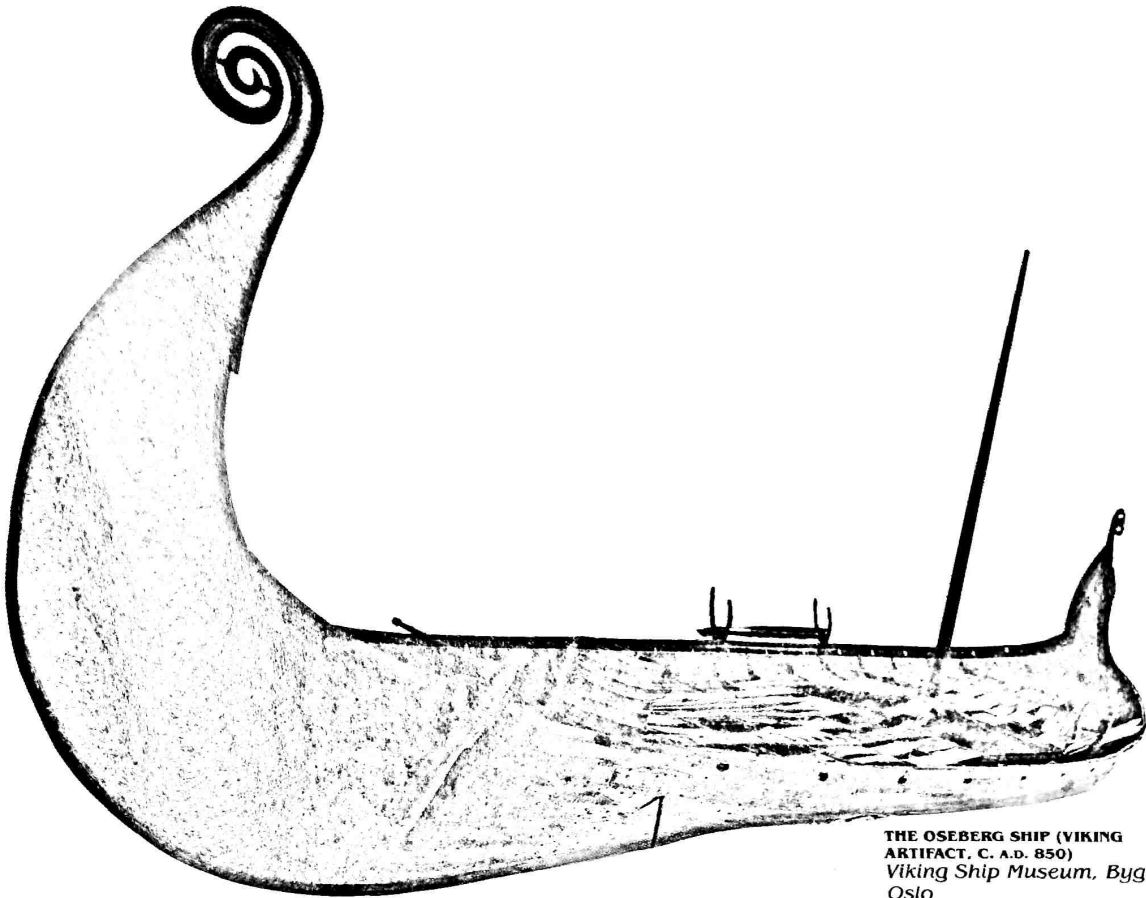
*Together, Wiglaf and Beowulf kill the dragon, but the old king is mortally wounded. As a last request, Beowulf asks Wiglaf to bring him the treasure that the dragon was guarding.*

775 Then Wexstan’s son went in, as quickly  
As he could, did as the dying Beowulf  
Asked, entered the inner darkness  
Of the tower, went with his mail shirt and his sword.  
Flushed with victory he groped his way,  
780 A brave young warrior, and suddenly saw  
Piles of gleaming gold, precious  
Gems, scattered on the floor, cups  
And bracelets, rusty old helmets, beautifully  
Made but rotting with no hands to rub  
785 And polish them. They lay where the dragon left  
them;  
It had flown in the darkness, once, before fighting  
Its final battle. (So gold can easily  
Triumph, defeat the strongest of men,  
No matter how deep it is hidden!) And he saw,  
790 Hanging high above, a golden  
Banner, woven by the best of weavers  
And beautiful. And over everything he saw  
A strange light, shining everywhere,  
On walls and floor and treasure. Nothing  
795 Moved, no other monsters appeared;  
He took what he wanted, all the treasures  
That pleased his eye, heavy plates  
And golden cups and the glorious banner,  
Loaded his arms with all they could hold.  
800 Beowulf’s dagger, his iron blade,  
Had finished the fire-spitting terror  
That once protected tower and treasures  
Alike; the gray-bearded lord of the Geats  
Had ended those flying, burning raids  
805 Forever.

Then Wiglaf went back, anxious  
To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him  
Treasure they’d won together. He ran,  
Hoping his wounded king, weak  
And dying, had not left the world too soon.



SILVER PENDANT SHOWING THE HELMET  
OF THE VENDEL (EARLY VIKING PERIOD,  
10TH CENTURY)  
Statens Historiska Museet,  
Stockholm



THE OSEBERG SHIP (VIKING  
ARTIFACT, C. A.D. 850)  
Viking Ship Museum, Bygdoy,  
Oslo

- 810 Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found  
His famous king bloody, gasping  
For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water  
Over his lord, until the words  
Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.
- 815 Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:  
"For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank  
Our Father in Heaven, Ruler of the Earth—  
For all of this, that His grace has given me,  
Allowed me to bring to my people while breath
- 820 Still came to my lips. I sold my life  
For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take  
What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,  
Help them; my time is gone. Have  
The brave Geats build me a tomb,
- 825 When the funeral flames have burned me, and build  
it  
Here, at the water's edge, high  
On this spit of land, so sailors can see  
This tower, and remember my name, and call it  
Beowulf's tower, and boats in the darkness

830 And mist, crossing the sea, will know it."  
Then that brave king gave the golden  
Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,  
Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,  
And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them well:  
835 "You're the last of all our far-flung family.  
Fate has swept our race away,  
Taken warriors in their strength and led them  
To the death that was waiting. And now I follow  
them."  
The old man's mouth was silent, spoke  
840 No more, had said as much as it could;  
He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul  
Left his flesh, flew to glory.

### The Farewell

*Wiglaf denounces the soldiers who deserted Beowulf in his combat with the dragon. The Geats burn their king's body on a great funeral pyre and bitterly lament his death.*

Then the Geats built the tower, as Beowulf  
Had asked, strong and tall, so sailors  
845 Could find it from far and wide; working  
For ten long days they made his monument,  
Sealed his ashes in walls as straight  
And high as wise and willing hands  
Could raise them. And the riches he and Wiglaf  
850 Had won from the dragon, rings, necklaces,  
Ancient, hammered armor—all  
The treasures they'd taken were left there, too,  
Silver and jewels buried in the sandy  
Ground, back in the earth, again  
855 And forever hidden and useless to men.  
And then twelve of the bravest Geats  
Rode their horses around the tower,  
Telling their sorrow, telling stories  
Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,  
860 Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life  
As noble as his name. So should all men  
Raise up words for their lords, warm  
With love, when their shield and protector leaves  
His body behind, sends his soul  
865 On high. And so Beowulf's followers  
Rode, mourning their beloved leader,  
Crying that no better king had ever  
Lived, no prince so mild, no man  
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.

## RESPONDING TO THE SELECTION

### Your Response

1. Do you think that Beowulf grows in stature as a hero? Explain.

### Recalling

2. Briefly summarize the battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother.
3. Describe what happens when Beowulf attempts to fight the dragon alone.

### Interpreting

4. Critics have praised the *Beowulf* poet's skill at describing various settings. (a) Find a passage in which the poet displays this skill. (b) Explain what makes the description so effective.
5. (a) Compare and contrast the three battles described in these excerpts. (b) In what ways are all three battles different versions of the poem's main conflict?
6. (a) Identify the figure of speech that the poet uses in lines 578–583. (b) Explain how the figure of speech adds to the meaning of the poem.

### Applying

7. Many critics claim that *Beowulf* contains themes that are relevant to modern life. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

## ANALYZING LITERATURE

### Tracing Pagan and Christian Elements

In *Beowulf* we can see evidence of the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture, with its stress on heroism, and Christianity's emphasis on brotherly love and God's compassion. For example, in the combat with the dragon, Beowulf seeks "fame" like any self-respecting warrior. As he is dying, however, he thanks "Our Father in Heaven" for the opportunity to give his people the treasure.

1. Reread the tribute to Beowulf in the last eight lines of the poem. Identify pagan and Christian influences in the qualities for which the king

- is praised. Give reasons for your conclusions.
2. A prominent Germanic pagan belief is that fame is the only thing that will survive a human's death. (a) What evidence do you find in this poem of the importance placed on public esteem or reputation? (b) What value do you feel contemporary society places on fame?
3. The poem contains many references to the blind and mysterious power of *Wyrd*, or Fate, as in line 836. Do such references suggest pagan or Christian influence? Explain.

## THINKING AND WRITING

### Responding to Criticism

Burton Raffel, who wrote this translation, remarked that, "of all the many-sided excellences of *Beowulf*," one of the most satisfying "is the poet's insight into people." Respond to this observation, expressing your agreement or disagreement. First, gather evidence. Identify instances in which the poet does or does not show insight into human nature. Then, write a thesis statement setting forth your point of view. Support this statement with references to specific passages in the poem. As you revise your essay, see whether you can find other passages that support your thesis. Remember that descriptions of action can reveal character as effectively as direct statements.

## LEARNING OPTION

**Art.** Sculpt a model of Grendel's mother or the dragon. First, review the details the poet uses to describe the monster. Then, choose materials (such as clay, papier-mâché, or plaster) that you think would be appropriate. Create some sketches of how your monster will look. Finally, construct your monster. Ask your classmates to compare your model with their mental images of the monster. How similar are they? In what ways do they differ?