

from **BEOWULF**

Translated by Burton Raffel



**GRENDEL ATTACKS
THE DANES**

A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
As day after day the music rang
Loud in that hall,° the harp's rejoicing
5 Call and the poet's clear songs, sung
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling
The Almighty making the earth, shaping
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,
Then proudly setting the sun and moon
10 To glow across the land and light it;
The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees
And leaves, made quick with life, with each
Of the nations who now move on its face. And then
As now warriors sang of their pleasure:

A helmet made of iron, bronze, and silver from the Sutton Hoo Burial Ship.

4 hall: the Danish King Hrothgar's mead hall, Herot.

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15 So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not hell but earth. He was spawned° in that slime,
20 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born
Of Cain,° murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel's death. The Almighty drove
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,
25 Shut away from men; they split
Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,
A brood forever opposing the Lord's
Will, and again and again defeated.

30 Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.
He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting
Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster's
35 Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:
He slipped through the door and there in the silence
Snatched up thirty men, smashed them
Unknowing in their beds and ran out with their bodies,
The blood dripping behind him, back
40 To his lair,° delighted with his night's slaughter.

At daybreak, with the sun's first light, they saw
How well he had worked, and in that gray morning
Broke their long feast with tears and laments
For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless
45 In Herot, a mighty prince mourning
The fate of his lost friends and companions,
Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn
His followers apart. He wept, fearing
The beginning might not be the end. And that night
50 Grendel came again, so set
On murder that no crime could ever be enough,
No savage assault quench his lust
For evil. Then each warrior tried
To escape him, searched for rest in different

19 spawned: born. Usually, *spawned* refers to the production of young by fish, amphibians, or other water-dwelling creatures.

21 Cain: According to the Bible (Genesis 4:8), *Cain*, the eldest son of Adam and Eve, murdered his brother Abel.

40 lair: den of a wild animal.

Viewing the art: What impression does this image give you of sea travel during the time of Beowulf?

Ship of Viking Warriors, c. 900. Viking picture stone. Gotland (now part of Sweden).



Vocabulary

lament (lə ment') *n.* expression of sorrow; song or literary composition that mourns a loss or death

from **BEOWULF**

- 55 Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,
Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept.
Distance was safety; the only survivors
Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.
60 So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous,
One against many, and won; so Herot
Stood empty, and stayed deserted for years,
Twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king
Of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door
By hell-forged hands. His misery leaped
65 The seas, was told and sung in all
Men's ears: how Grendel's hatred began,
How the monster relished his savage war
On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud
Alive, seeking no peace, offering
70 No truce, accepting no settlement, no price
In gold or land, and paying the living
For one crime only with another. No one
Waited for reparation^o from his plundering claws:
That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,
75 Stalked Hrothgar's warriors, old
And young, lying in waiting, hidden
In mist, invisibly following them from the edge
Of the marsh, always there, unseen.
So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,

Vocabulary

forged (fôrjd) *adj.* formed or shaped, often with blows or pressure after heating

Exterior of reproduction of a Viking
Age Hall at Trelleborg, Denmark.

73 reparation
to make amends

80 Killing as often as he could, coming
Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived
In Herot, when the night hid him, he never
Dared to touch king Hrothgar's glorious
Throne, protected by God.



THE COMING OF BEOWULF

85 So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son°
Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom
Or strength could break it: that agony hung
On king and people alike, harsh
And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.

90 In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's
Follower° and the strongest of the Geats—greater
And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—
Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror
And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,

95 Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king,
Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,
Now when help was needed. None
Of the wise ones regretted his going, much
As he was loved by the Geats: the omens were good,

100 And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf
Chose the mightiest men he could find,
The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen
In all, and led them down to their boat;
He knew the sea, would point the prow°

105 Straight to that distant Danish shore.
Then they sailed, set their ship
Out on the waves, under the cliffs.
Ready for what came they wound through the currents,
The seas beating at the sand, and were borne

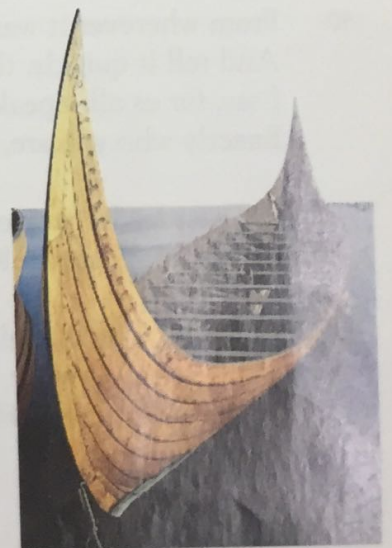
110 In the lap of their shining ship, lined
With gleaming armor, going safely
In that oak-hard boat to where their hearts took them.
The wind hurried them over the waves,
The ship foamed through the sea like a bird

115 Until, in the time they had known it would take,
Standing in the round-curved prow they could see
Sparkling hills, high and green,
Jutting up over the shore, and rejoicing
In those rock-steep cliffs they quietly ended

85 Healfdane's son: Hrothgar.

90–91 Higlac's Follower: Higlac, king of the Geats, is Beowulf's uncle. Higlac's follower, then, refers to Beowulf.

104 prow: the bow, or forwardmost part of a ship.



from **BEOWULF**

120 Their voyage. Jumping to the ground, the Geats
 Pushed their boat to the sand and tied it
 In place, mail shirts° and armor rattling
 As they swiftly moored their ship. And then
 They gave thanks to God for their easy crossing.

125 High on a wall a Danish watcher
 Patrolling along the cliffs saw
 The travelers crossing to the shore, their shields
 Raised and shining; he came riding down,
 Hrothgar's lieutenant, spurring his horse,

130 Needing to know why they'd landed, these men
 In armor. Shaking his heavy spear
 In their faces he spoke:
 "Whose soldiers are you,
 You who've been carried in your deep-keeled ship°
 135 Across the sea-road to this country of mine?
 Listen! I've stood on these cliffs longer
 Than you know, keeping our coast free
 Of pirates, raiders sneaking ashore
 From their ships, seeking our lives and our gold.

140 None have ever come more openly—
 And yet you've offered no password, no sign
 From my prince, no permission from my people for your
 landing
 Here. Nor have I ever seen,
 Out of all the men on earth, one greater

145 Than has come with you; no commoner carries
 Such weapons, unless his appearance, and his beauty,
 Are both lies. You! Tell me your name,
 And your father's; no spies go further onto Danish
 Soil than you've come already. Strangers,

150 From wherever it was you sailed, tell it,
 And tell it quickly, the quicker the better,
 I say, for us all. Speak, say
 Exactly who you are, and from where, and why."

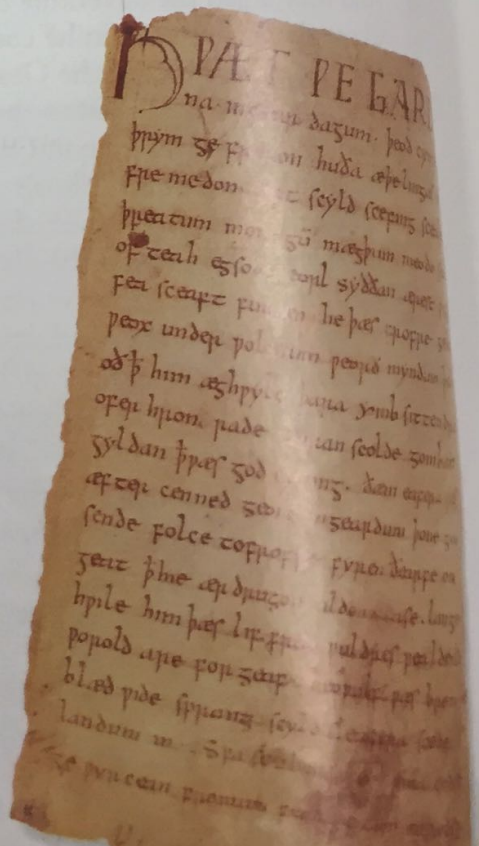
155 Their leader answered him, Beowulf unlocking
 Words from deep in his breast:

"We are Geats,
 Men who follow Higlac. My father
 Was a famous soldier, known far and wide
 As a leader of men. His name was Edgetho.

122 mail shirts: a type of flexible
 armor usually made of linked metal rings

134 deep-keeled ship: a ship that pos-
 sesses a deep bottom—the keel being the
 main piece of timber that runs the length
 of the bottom of a boat to support the
 ship's frame.

First folio of original text of Beowulf
 manuscript. Cotton Vitellius, A.XV. By
 permission of the British Library,
 London.



flexible body
ed metal loops.

160 His life lasted many winters;
Wise men all over the earth surely
Remember him still. And we have come seeking
Your prince, Healfdane's son, protector
Of this people, only in friendship: instruct us,
165 Watchman, help us with your words! Our errand
Is a great one, our business with the glorious king
Of the Danes no secret; there's nothing dark
Or hidden in our coming. You know (if we've heard
The truth, and been told honestly) that your country
170 Is cursed with some strange, vicious creature
That hunts only at night and that no one
Has seen. It's said, watchman, that he has slaughtered
Your people, brought terror to the darkness. Perhaps
Hrothgar can hunt, here in my heart,
175 For some way to drive this devil out—
If anything will ever end the evils
Afflicting your wise and famous lord.
Here he can cool his burning sorrow.
Or else he may see his suffering go on
180 Forever, for as long as Herot towers
High on your hills."

The mounted officer
Answered him bluntly, the brave watchman:

185 "A soldier should know the difference between words
And deeds, and keep that knowledge clear
In his brain. I believe your words, I trust in
Your friendship. Go forward, weapons and armor
And all, on into Denmark. I'll guide you
Myself—and my men will guard your ship,
190 Keep it safe here on our shores,
Your fresh-tarred boat, watch it well,
Until that curving prow carries
Across the sea to Geatland a chosen
Warrior who bravely does battle with the creature
195 Haunting our people, who survives that horror
Unhurt, and goes home bearing our love."

Then they moved on. Their boat lay moored,
Tied tight to its anchor. Glittering at the top
Of their golden helmets wild boar heads gleamed,
200 Shining decorations, swinging as they marched,
Erect like guards, like sentinels, as though ready
To fight. They marched, Beowulf and his men

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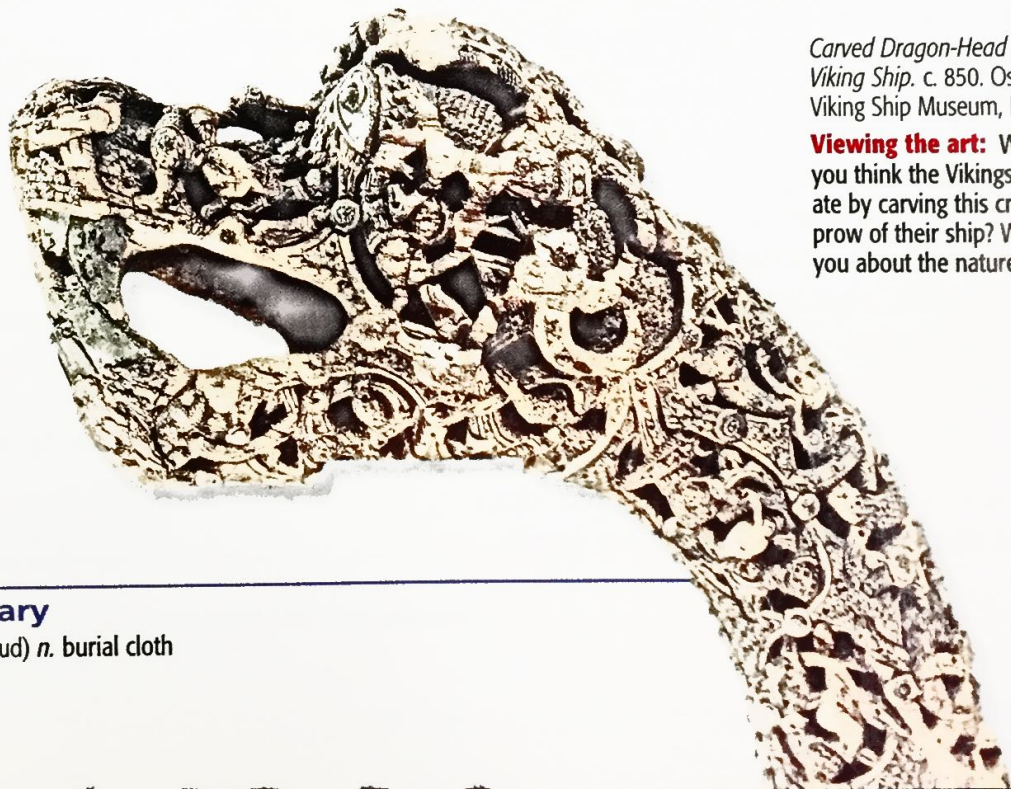
205 And their guide, until they could see the gables
Of Herot, covered with hammered gold
And glowing in the sun—that most famous of all dwellings,
Towering majestic, its glittering roofs
Visible far across the land.
Their guide reined in his horse, pointing
210 To that hall, built by Hrothgar for the best
And bravest of his men; the path was plain,
They could see their way.



Beowulf arose, with his men
Around him, ordering a few to remain
215 With their weapons, leading the others quickly
Along under Herot's steep roof into Hrothgar's
Presence. Standing on that prince's own hearth,
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt
Gleaming with a smith's high art, he greeted
The Danes' great lord:
220 "Hail, Hrothgar!
Higlac is my cousin^o and my king; the days
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's
Name has echoed in our land: sailors
Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
225 Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'
230 Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove
Five great giants into chains, chased
All of that race from the earth. I swam
235 In the blackness of night, hunting monsters
Out of the ocean, and killing them one
By one; death was my errand and the fate
They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called
Together, and I've come. Grant me, then,
240 Lord and protector of this noble place,
A single request! I have come so far,
Oh shelterer of warriors and your people's loved friend,
That this one favor you should not refuse me—
That I, alone and with the help of my men,

221 **cousin**: in this case, used broadly to mean any relative.

245 May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
Too, that the monster's scorn of men
Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
Nor will I. My lord Higlac
Might think less of me if I let my sword
250 Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
Behind some broad linden° shield: my hands
Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
Against the monster. God must decide
Who will be given to death's cold grip.
255 Grendel's plan, I think, will be
What it has been before, to invade this hall
And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,
If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,
There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare
260 For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody
Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones
And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls
Of his den. No, I expect no Danes
Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.
265 And if death does take me, send the hammered
Mail of my armor to Higlac, return
The inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he
From Wayland.° Fate will unwind as it must!"



251 linden: wooden.

267–268 inheritance . . . Wayland:
The inheritance is the armor that
Wayland, a blacksmith of Germanic leg-
end, forged for Hrethel, Beowulf's grand-
father and former king of the Geats.

*Carved Dragon-Head Post from a
Viking Ship. c. 850. Oseberg, Norway.
Viking Ship Museum, Bygdoy, Norway.*

Viewing the art: What reaction do
you think the Vikings wanted to cre-
ate by carving this creature on the
prow of their ship? What does this tell
you about the nature of the times?

Vocabulary

shroud (shroud) *n.* burial cloth