

SYNOPSIS

The poem begins with the legendary coming of Scyld as a baby set adrift alone in a boat and arriving on the Danish coast with no possessions. But when he grows up he becomes a unifier, leader and king of the Danes. On his death he is again set adrift, but now the boat is piled high with treasure and the standard floats in the wind on the mast above him. He leaves a son, Beow, already famous as a king in South Sweden (the northern part of Denmark in the fifth century). Beow carries on the Scylding line as a good and able ruler and is succeeded by his son Halfdane. Halfdane in turn is a worthy king, and has three sons—Heregar, Hrothgar and Helga—and a daughter, Yrsa, who marries Onela of the royal line of Sweden. Eventually, Hrothgar becomes king and rules long and well.

With the kingdom stable, Hrothgar orders that a great banquet hall be built. Workmen from far and near are brought to build and decorate this royal building. Its fine workmanship and gilded gables are famous in Denmark and abroad. Hrothgar names the hall Heorot (Hart). [Tradition places it near Leare on Zealand, a few miles south of Roskilde]. The drinking and laughter of the warriors, and the harping and songs of the scop provoke a savage monster named Grendel [descendant of Cain], who cannot bear this human gaiety in his loneliness. Only gradually do we learn details of the creature: that it takes four men to carry his head on a spear, and that his hand has sharp claws like steel spikes. For weeks and months Grendel visits the hall nightly, devouring sleeping warriors and carrying off others to the moor to feed on later. At last, only drunken, boasting fools will linger in the hall after dark, until they too are slaughtered.

Years pass, and news of Hrothgar's assailant travels eventually to other lands. Beowulf, sister's son to Higelac, King of the Geats, hears of Hrothgar's distress, and with somewhat grudging consent from his uncle, sails with chosen companions from southwestern Sweden on the east coast of the Oslofjörd. When the Danish coastal watchman learns that they have come to Hrothgar's aid, he shows them the path to Heorot. The Geatish warriors march with their spears, swords, helmets, shields and chain-mail to the high-gabled hall. At Heorot Beowulf and his men enter with greetings and courtesies on both sides that show the observation of etiquette in the court. King Hrothgar had earlier given protection to Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, during a feud. Learning Beowulf's name, Hrothgar recalls hearing of the extraordinary strength and reputation of the Geatish hero.

The strangers are warmly received and Beowulf is seated on the bench with Hrothgar's young sons. No Dane has confronted Grendel and lived. But the enthusiastic welcome shown to the Geats provokes the jealousy of Unferth, a drunken courtier sitting at Hrothgar's feet, who taunts Beowulf for having been defeated in a legendary swimming contest with Breca. Beowulf sets the record straight by recounting the dangers—attacking sea-monsters, storms, vast distances—and claiming that they had merely arranged a boyish hunt for sea-beasts. Separated by the winter storm, they swam, carrying swords and wearing chain-mail, two different paths: Breca to Norway and Beowulf to the land of Finns. Beowulf ends his retort with a taunt that Unferth has slain his own brother, the ultimate crime, even though by accident. With such "heroes," it's no wonder the Danes can't deal with Grendel themselves! Beowulf boasts that he will defeat Grendel or die in the attempt.

At nightfall Hrothgar and all the Danes leave Heorot to sleep elsewhere, leaving Beowulf and his men to occupy the hall benches. As darkness descends Grendel comes gliding up from the misty marshes, and pushes open the great door, his eyes gleaming with evil. Immediately he grabs and eats a sleeping warrior. Beowulf has vowed to use no weapon in this fight, since Grendel uses none. [Later the Geats learn that Grendel has put a spell on all weapons so that none can harm him]. Next, the monster reaches for Beowulf, but the hero grasps his arm and rises to his feet. In the ferocious struggle that follows, the hero wrenches off Grendel's arm. The sounds of the combat terrify the Danes outside: Grendel howling with pain, benches torn up and overturned, the hall shaken to its foundations. Grendel, leaving a trail of blood, escapes without his arm and limps back to the fens where he dies. Beowulf fixes the arm high above the hall as a symbol of victory. Heorot is cleansed of the evil monster, and in the morning people come from far and near to inspect the sight, following Grendel's trail to a boiling pool of bloody dark water in the marshes....

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PROGRAM NOTES

Benjamin Bagby, Voice & Lyre

The Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* survives in a single manuscript source dating from the early eleventh century (British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. XV). Although scholars do not agree on the dating of the poem—theories range between the sixth century and the date of the manuscript—it is clear that the story has its roots in the art of the scop ("creator"), the bardic story-teller and reciter at formal and informal gatherings, whose services were essential to the fabric of tribal society in early medieval England. The scop would re-tell the story of *Beowulf*, in song and speech, perhaps accompanying himself on a six-stringed lyre (this we know from contemporary accounts, although musical notation was superfluous and only remnants of instruments have survived). His courtly audience was attuned to the finest details of sound and meaning, metre and rhyme, timing and mood. The "performance"—which, for the whole epic, might last between four and seven hours—would never be exactly the same twice, as the "singer of tales" subtly varied the use of poetic formulae to shape his unique version of the story. The fact is that the written source can only represent one version (and usually not the best version) of a text from a fluid oral tradition; it is the central dilemma of any attempt to re-vocalise a medieval text as living art. The impetus to make this attempt has come from many directions: from the power of those bardic traditions, mostly non-European, which still survive intact; from the work of instrument-makers who have made thoughtful renderings of seventh-century Germanic lyres; and from scholars such as Thomas Cable, Jess Bessinger, Albert B. Lord and Kemp Malone, who have shown an active interest in the problems of turning written words back into an oral poetry meant to be absorbed through the ear/spirit, rather than eye/brain. But the principal impetus comes from the language of the poem itself, which has a chilling, magical power that no modern translation—and there are dozens—can approximate.