

*With Grendel's mother destroyed, peace is restored to the land of the Danes, and Beowulf, laden with Hrothgar's gifts, returns to the land of his own people, the Geats. After his uncle and cousin die, Beowulf becomes king of the Geats and rules in peace and prosperity for 50 years. One day, however, a fire-breathing dragon that has been guarding a treasure for hundreds of years is disturbed by a thief, who enters the treasure tower and steals a cup. The dragon begins terrorizing the Geats, and Beowulf, now an old man, takes on the challenge of fighting it.*



Viking cup, silver and gilt

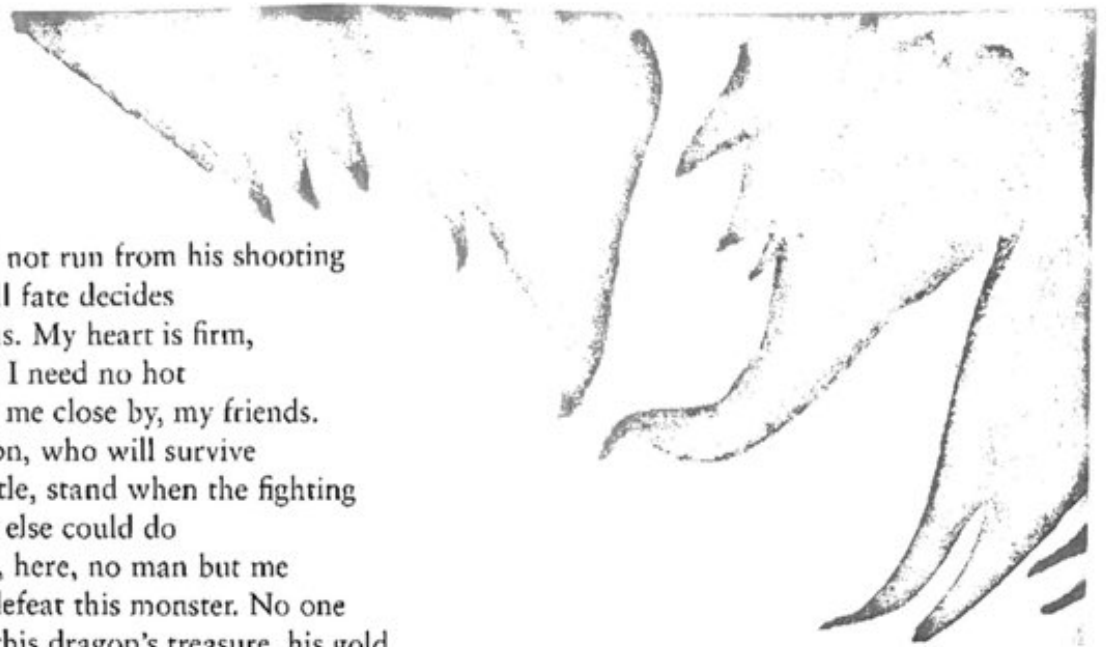
## BEOWULF'S LAST BATTLE

And Beowulf uttered his final boast:

“I've never known fear, as a youth I fought  
In endless battles. I am old, now,  
But I will fight again, seek fame still,  
610 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:

“I'd use no sword, no weapon, if this beast  
Could be killed without it, crushed to death  
615 Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn  
Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning  
Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.  
I feel no shame, with shield and sword  
And armor, against this monster: when he comes to me



620 I mean to stand, not run from his shooting  
Flames, stand till fate decides  
Which of us wins. My heart is firm,  
My hands calm: I need no hot  
Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.  
625 We shall see, soon, who will survive  
This bloody battle, stand when the fighting  
Is done. No one else could do  
What I mean to, here, no man but me  
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one  
630 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!"

Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,  
And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on his breast,  
635 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  
Battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and shields  
Clashed, the best of kings, saw  
640 Huge stone arches and felt the heat  
Of the dragon's breath, flooding down  
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone  
To stand, a streaming current of fire  
And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'  
645 Lord and leader, angry, lowered  
His sword and roared out a battle cry,  
A call so loud and clear that it reached through  
The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's  
Ear. The beast rose, angry,  
650 Knowing a man had come—and then nothing  
But war could have followed. Its breath came first,  
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,  
Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf  
Swung his shield into place, held it  
655 In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon  
Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it  
Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword  
Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming  
Blade. The beast came closer; both of them  
660 Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'  
Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared

648 hoary (hōr'ê): gray with age.

Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining  
Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,  
Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying  
665 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,  
And for the first time in his life that famous prince  
Fought with fate against him, with glory  
670 Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword  
And struck at the dragon's scaly hide.  
The ancient blade broke, bit into  
The monster's skin, drew blood, but cracked  
And failed him before it went deep enough, helped him  
675 Less than he needed. The dragon leaped  
With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting  
Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.  
And the Geats' ring-giver did not boast of glorious  
Victories in other wars: his weapon  
680 Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it  
Most, that excellent sword. Edgetho's  
Famous son stared at death,  
Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it  
For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey  
685 Into darkness that all men must make, as death  
Ends their few brief hours on earth.

Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged  
As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,  
And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling  
690 Flames—a king, before, but now  
A beaten warrior. None of his comrades  
Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble  
Followers; they ran for their lives, fled  
Deep in a wood. And only one of them  
695 Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,  
As a good man must, what kinship should mean.

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan's son  
And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,  
Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see  
700 How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering  
Everything his lord and cousin had given him,  
Armor and gold and the great estates  
Wexstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's

**670–671** Why do you think Beowulf keeps fighting?

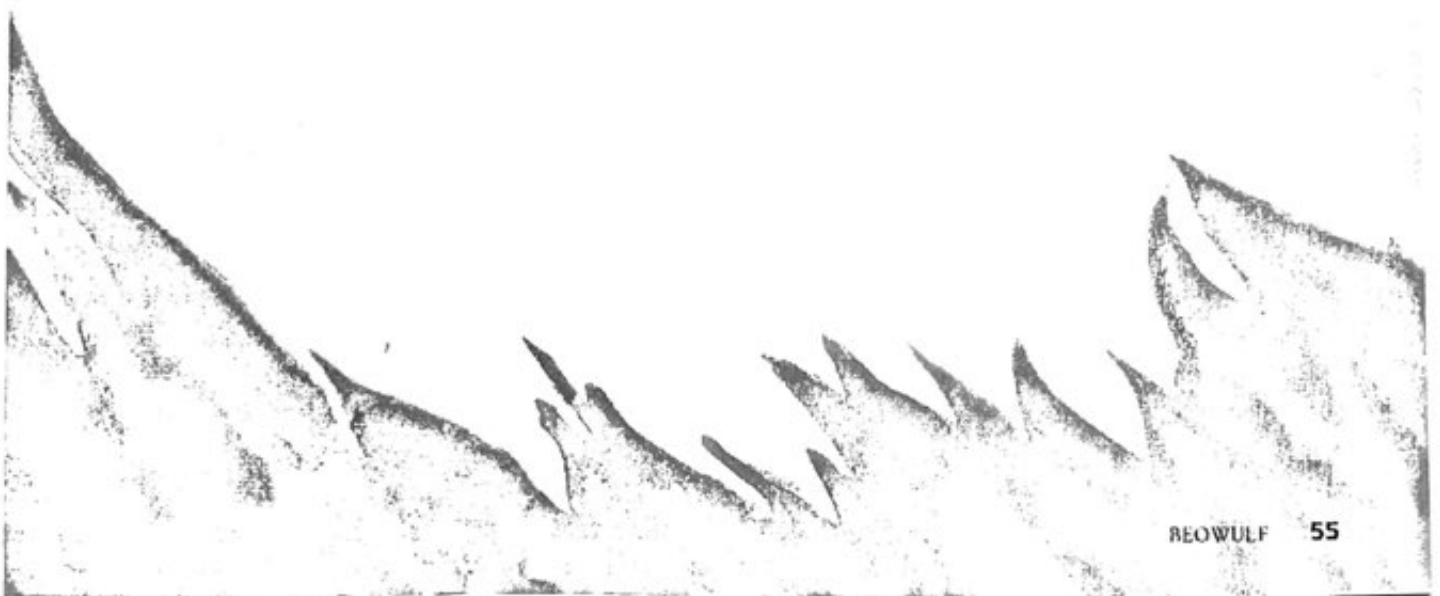
**678 ring-giver:** king; lord. When a man swore allegiance to a Germanic lord in return for his protection, the lord typically bestowed a ring on his follower to symbolize the bond.



Mind was made up; he raised his yellow  
705 Shield and drew his sword. . . .  
    And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered  
The kind of words his comrades deserved:  
    "I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking  
And boasting of how brave we'd be when Beowulf  
710 Needed us, he who gave us these swords  
And armor: all of us swore to repay him,  
When the time came, kindness for kindness  
—With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us to join him,  
Chose us from all his great army, thinking  
715 Our boasting words had some weight, believing  
Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us  
For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill  
This monster himself, our mighty king,  
Fight this battle alone and unaided,  
720 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  
Arms. And we must go to him, while angry  
Flames burn at his flesh, help  
725 Our glorious king! By almighty God,  
I'd rather burn myself than see  
Flames swirling around my lord.  
And who are we to carry home  
Our shields before we've slain his enemy  
730 And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf  
So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing  
He ever did deserved an end  
Like this, dying miserably and alone,  
Butchered by this savage beast: we swore  
735 That these swords and armor were each for us all!"

**694–705** How is Wiglaf unlike Beowulf's other subjects?

**717–723** What does Wiglaf suggest is the reason Beowulf has failed to defeat the dragon?



Wiglaf joins Beowulf, who again attacks the dragon single-handed; but the remnant of his sword shatters, and the monster wounds him in the neck. Wiglaf then strikes the dragon, and he and Beowulf together finally succeed in killing the beast. Their triumph is short-lived, however, because Beowulf's wound proves to be mortal.

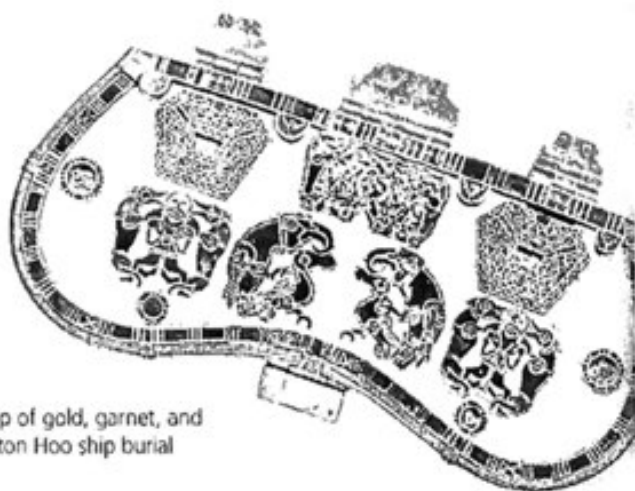
## THE DEATH OF BEOWULF

Beowulf spoke, in spite of the swollen,  
Livid wound, knowing he'd unwound  
 His string of days on earth, seen  
 As much as God would grant him; all worldly  
 740 Pleasure was gone, as life would go,  
 Soon:

"I'd leave my armor to my son,  
 Now, if God had given me an heir,  
 A child born of my body, his life  
 Created from mine. I've worn this crown  
 745 For fifty winters: no neighboring people  
 Have tried to threaten the Geats, sent soldiers  
 Against us or talked of terror. My days  
 Have gone by as fate willed, waiting  
 For its word to be spoken, ruling as well  
 750 As I knew how, swearing no unholy oaths,  
 Seeking no lying wars. I can leave  
 This life happy; I can die, here,  
 Knowing the Lord of all life has never  
 Watched me wash my sword in blood  
 755 Born of my own family. Belovèd  
 Wiglaf, go, quickly, find  
 The dragon's treasure: we've taken its life,  
 But its gold is ours, too. Hurry,  
 Bring me ancient silver, precious  
 760 Jewels, shining armor and gems,  
 Before I die. Death will be softer,  
 Leaving life and this people I've ruled  
 So long, if I look at this last of all prizes."

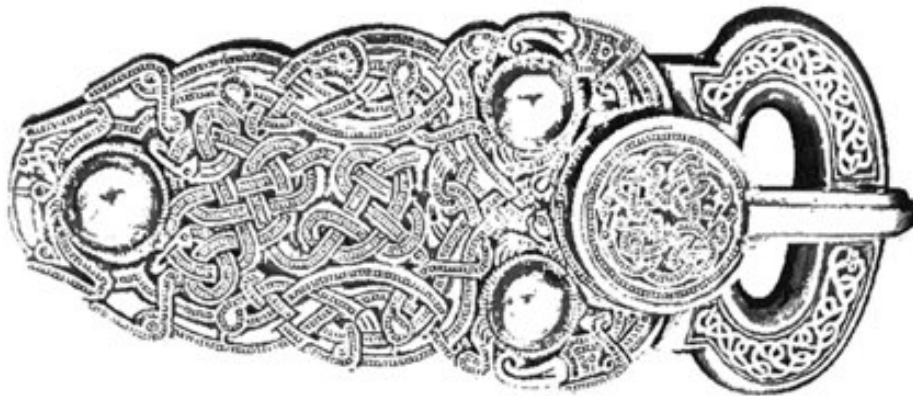
**737-738** What view of fate does the image of the unwinding string convey?

**741-763** What values are reflected in Beowulf's speech?



Viking purse clip of gold, garnet, and glass, from Sutton Hoo ship burial

WORDS  
 TO KNOW  
 livid (lĪV'Īd) adj. discolored; black and blue



Gold buckle from Sutton Hoo ship burial, showing animals, snakes, and birds

Then Wexstan's son went in, as quickly  
765 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,  
A brave young warrior, and suddenly saw  
770 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  
And polish them. They lay where the dragon left them;  
775 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,  
Hanging high above, a golden  
780 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  
Moved, no other monsters appeared;  
785 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.  
Beowulf's dagger, his iron blade,  
790 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  
Forever.

Then Wiglaf went back, anxious  
 795 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.  
 Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found  
 800 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.  
 Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:  
 805 "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  
 Still came to my lips. I sold my life  
 810 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,  
 When the funeral flames have burned me, and build it  
 815 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  
 And mist, crossing the sea, will know it."  
 820 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:  
 "You're the last of all our far-flung family.  
 825 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  
 No more, had said as much as it could;  
 830 He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul  
 Left his flesh, flew to glory. . . .  
 And when the battle was over Beowulf's followers  
 Came out of the wood, cowards and traitors,  
 Knowing the dragon was dead. Afraid,  
 835 While it spit its fires, to fight in their lord's

**816 spit:** a narrow point of land extending into a body of water.

**805–819** How will Beowulf continue to aid his people after his death?

**833** In what sense are Beowulf's followers traitors? Whom or what have they betrayed?

Defense, to throw their javelins and spears,  
They came like shamefaced jackals, their shields  
In their hands, to the place where the prince lay dead,  
And waited for Wiglaf to speak. He was sitting

840 Near Beowulf's body, wearily sprinkling  
Water in the dead man's face, trying  
To stir him. He could not. No one could have kept  
Life in their lord's body, or turned  
Aside the Lord's will: world  
845 And men and all move as He orders,  
And always have, and always will.

Then Wiglaf turned and angrily told them  
What men without courage must hear.

Wexstan's brave son stared at the traitors,  
850 His heart sorrowful, and said what he had to:

"I say what anyone who speaks the truth  
Must say. . . .

Too few of his warriors remembered  
To come, when our lord faced death, alone.

855 And now the giving of swords, of golden  
Rings and rich estates, is over,  
Ended for you and everyone who shares  
Your blood: when the brave Geats hear  
How you bolted and ran none of your race  
860 Will have anything left but their lives. And death  
Would be better for them all, and for you, than the kind  
Of life you can lead, branded with disgrace!" . . .

Then the warriors rose,  
Walked slowly down from the cliff, stared  
865 At those wonderful sights, stood weeping as they saw  
Beowulf dead on the sand, their bold  
Ring-giver resting in his last bed;  
He'd reached the end of his days, their mighty  
War-king, the great lord of the Geats,

870 Gone to a glorious death. . . .

836 javelins (jäv'lŏnz): light spears  
used as weapons.

837 jackals (jæk'olz): doglike  
animals that sometimes feed on  
the flesh of dead beasts.

859 bolted: ran away; fled.

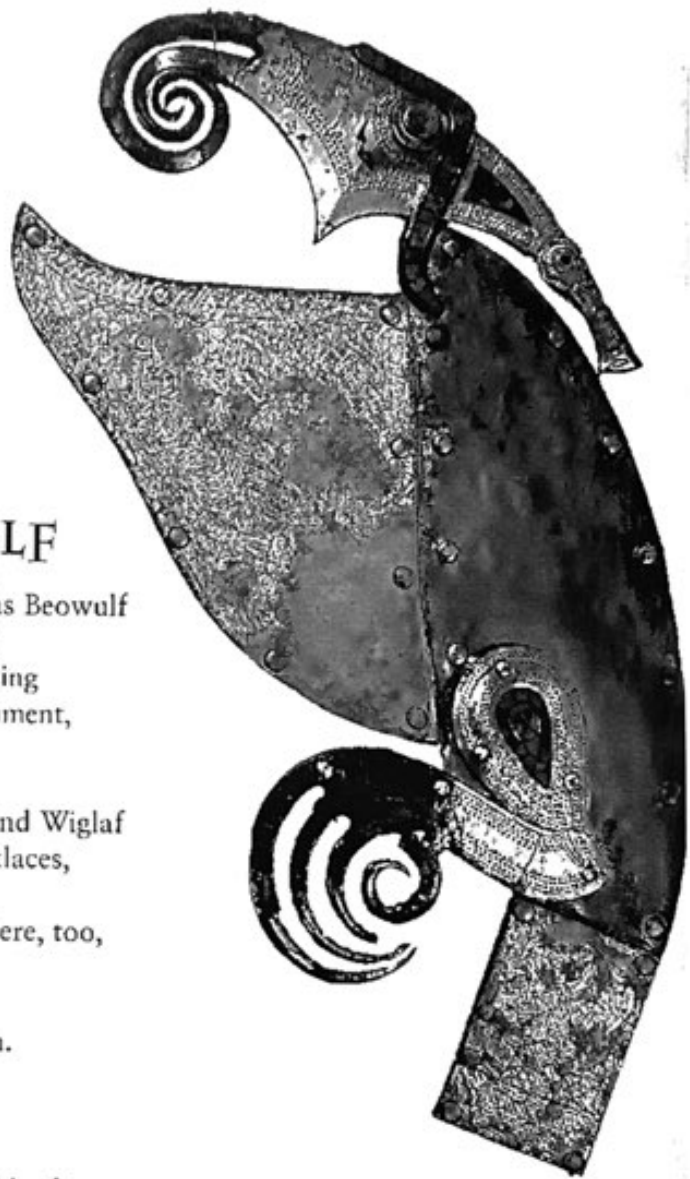


Pre-Viking helmet,  
A.D. 550-800



## MOURNING BEOWULF

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



Ornamental bird used as decoration on a shield, from the Sutton Hoo ship burial

896 **mild**: gentle or kindly. Do you agree that Beowulf was a mild ruler? Why or why not?