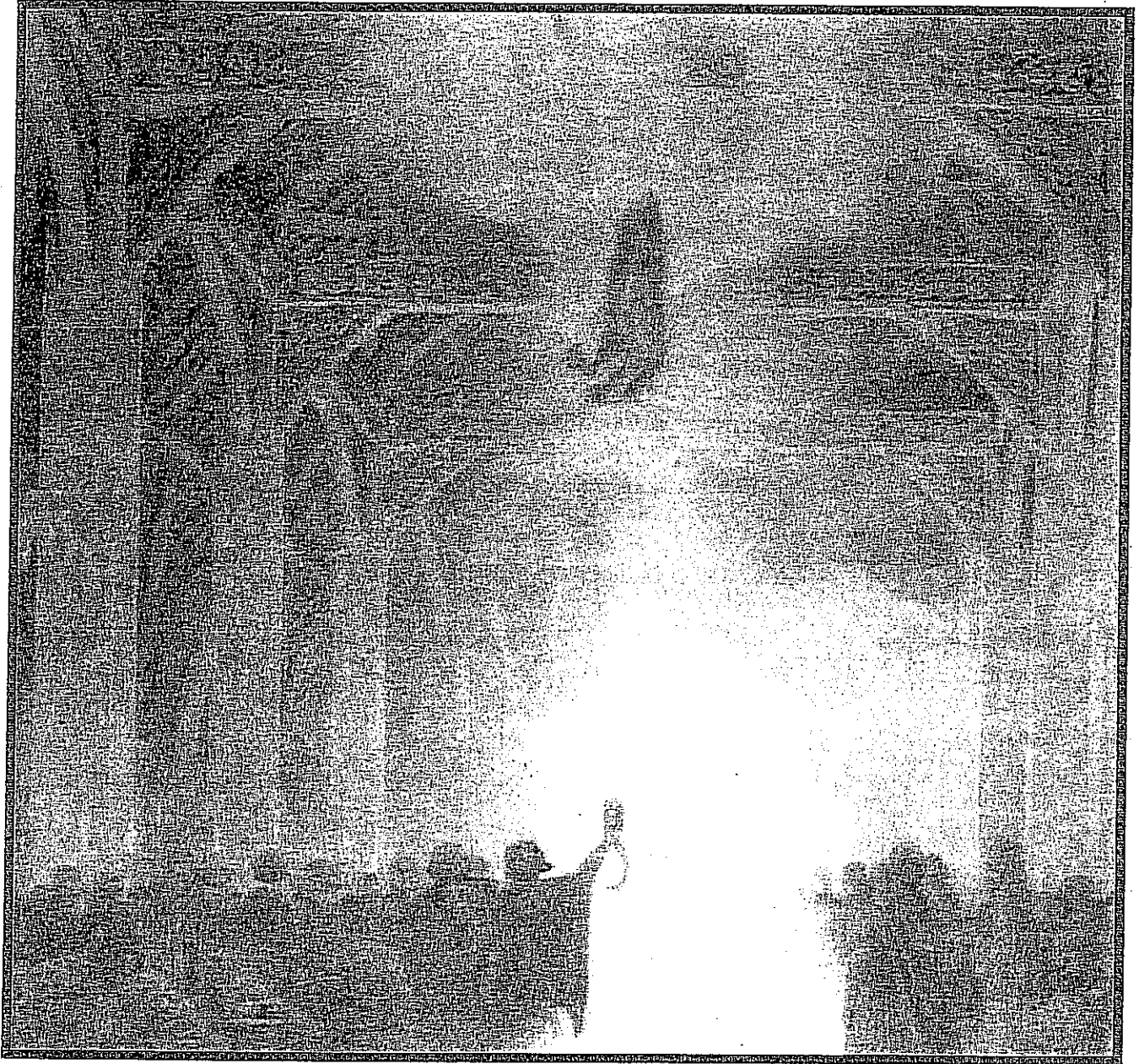
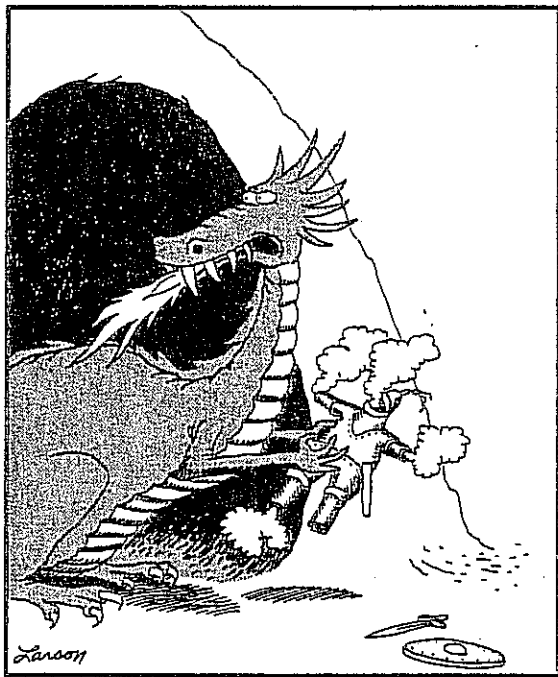


BEOWULF



Enjoy



The
Far Side®
LAST IMPRESSIONS
— 2002 —

December

Thursday 19

"Ooo! Ow! Blast it, Phyllis! ...
Hurry up with them hot pads!"

Names and Character Identification for *Beowulf*

Seamus Heaney <i>Beowulf</i> poet	Translator of <i>Beowulf</i> Anonymous Christian scribe who wrote down the oral <i>Beowulf</i> narrative
Grendel	Rapacious man-eating monster
Grendel's mother	Devious and vengeful man-eating monster
Geats	
Hygelac	Beowulf's overlord and uncle
Hygd	Hygelac's queen
Hrethel	Hygelac's father
Ecgtheow	Beowulf's father, brother-in-law of Hygelac
Handscio	Geat killed by Grendel (line 2076)
Haethcyn	A king of the Geats, Hrethel's second son, who takes the throne after accidentally killing his older brother, Herebeald. He is eventually killed by Ongentheow, king of the Swedes, in a war in which Ongentheow is killed by a second band of Geats, led by Hygelac.
Heardred	A king of the Geats, son of Hygelac and later killed by Onela of the Swedes.
Eofor	A Geat warrior who kills the Swedish king named Ongentheow, and is given Hygelac's daughter as a reward.
Geatland	Tribal territory of the Geats in southern Sweden

Danes, aka Shieldings aka Shield-Danes

Shield Sheafson	Famous Danish king described in the opening
Heorot	Hrothgar's mead-hall
Beow	Hrothgar's grandfather
Halfdane	Hrothgar's father
Hrothgar	King of the Danes
Wealtheow	Hrothgar's queen
Hildeburh	Danish princess married to a Frisian King, described in the minstrel's song
Freawaru	Hrothgar's daughter. Married Ingeld, a Heathobard (line 202)
Hrethric	Hrothgar's son
Heorogar	Hrothgar's older brother
Unferth	Thane in Hrothgar's court. Name means "mar-peace." Killed his own brother.
Aeschere	Hrothgar's good friend, killed by Grendel's mother
Hnaef	Danish king, Hildeburh's brother, killed by the Frisians

Swedes

- Ongentheow** A king of the Swedes, a famous warrior and father of Onela. He killed Hathcyn and was later killed by a group of Geats led by Hygelac.
- Onela (Onla)** A king of the Swedes and the youngest son of Ongentheow. He is married to the Danish king's (Halfdane's) daughter and assumes the Swedish throne after the death of his older brother. He later invaded Geatland after his two nephews fled to join Heardred, the king of the Geats. Onela then killed the oldest nephew but the younger lived. Later, Beowulf ruled the Geats, and invaded Sweden with Onela's younger nephew, who then killed Onela and ruled Sweden.

Other

- Wiglaf** A young Waegmunding kinsman and retainer of Beowulf who helps him in the fight against the dragon while all of the other warriors run away. Wiglaf adheres to the heroic code better than Beowulf's other retainers, thereby proving himself a suitable successor to Beowulf.
- Wulfgar** Thane of Hrothgar, also a Wendel chief
- Breca** Beowulf's opponent in swimming match, line 506
- Modthryth** Beautiful queen who behaved badly
- Sigemund** Dragon-killing hero who helped King Heremod, described in a minstrel's song after Beowulf kills Grendel
- Hrunting** Famous sword that Unferth gives to Beowulf

Anglo Saxon Chronology

- from c. 400 Germanic peoples settle in Britain
- c. 540 Gildas in *De excidio Britanniae* laments the effects of the Germanic settlements on the supine Britons
- 597 St Augustine arrives in Kent to convert the English
- 616 death of Æthelberht, king of Kent
- c. 625 ship-burial at Sutton Hoo (mound 1)
- 633 death of Edwin, king of Northumbria
- 635 Bishop Aidan established in Lindisfarne
- 642 death of Oswald, king of Northumbria
- 664 Synod of Whitby
- 669 Archbishop Theodore and Abbot Hadrian arrive in Canterbury
- 674 monastery of Monkwearmouth founded
- 682 monastery of Jarrow founded
- 687 death of Cuthbert
- 689 death of Cædwalla, king of Wessex
- 690 death of Archbishop Theodore
- c. 700 'Lindisfarne Gospels' written and decorated
- 709 deaths of Bishops Wilfrid and Aldhelm
- 716-57 Æthelbald king of Mercia
- 731 Bede completes his *Ecclesiastical History*



The Fury of the Northmen

When the fearsome Vikings began raiding England at the end of the eighth century, the church added a new prayer: "God, deliver us from the fury of the Northmen." Were these Scandinavian warriors—descended from the peoples of *Beowulf*—really such berserk destroyers? The fiercest ones were, indicated by the word berserk itself: In Old Norse, a berserk was a "frenzied Norse warrior," so wild and fearless even his comrades kept clear.

Bear or bare? Berserk literally means either "bear shirt" or "bare shirt," suggesting that these warriors wore bearskins or perhaps fought "bare"—without armor. Some say the berserkers were religious madmen, followers of Odin, god of death and war. Some say they ate mind-altering plants. Both may be true, because the berserker entered battle in a kind of fit, biting his shield, taunting death, and, like *Beowulf*, "if weapons were useless he'd use / His hands. . . . So fame / Comes to the men who mean to win it / And care about nothing else" (lines 609–612).

Dragons from the sea. The Viking Age spanned the ninth through eleventh centuries, the European continent, and the Atlantic Ocean. Pushed by overpopulation, Vikings from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark struck out for new land. They

were farmers at home, but they were a warrior culture too, and they devastated England with nightmarish hit-and-run attacks. Even the name "Viking" comes from a telling phrase: For the Scandinavians, to go *a-viking* meant "to fight as a warrior or pirate."

The Vikings' extraordinary seafaring and shipbuilding skills, honed in their watery land of fjords, or narrow ocean inlets, gave them the advantage of making surprise attacks. The unique Viking warships were long (up to ninety-five feet, manned by thirty rowers), light and swift (to go farther on their provisions), and steady (built with a keel). Shallow-drafted, these dragon-prowed ships could be pulled onto a river shore, swifly disgorging warriors wielding swords.

Unafraid of the unknown. But though the Vikings conquered peoples as far away as Spain and Russia (*Rus* was the Slavic word for Swedes), their motive was pure wanderlust as much as bloodlust. Expert in navigating by sun, stars, landmarks, and bird flights, the Vikings settled Iceland and Greenland and even explored North America—five hundred years before Columbus. That's why the United States once named a spacecraft *Viking*, to honor the human spirit that dared uncharted seas in the ninth century, and dares uncharted Mars in the twentieth.

Beowulf: Feud Between the Geats and the Swedes

The history of the relationship between the Geats and Swedes covers a period extending from Beowulf's childhood to the probable continuation of the feud after his death. When Beowulf is seven, King Hrethel (his grandfather) adopts him and rears him as a son (ll. 2425-34). A family tragedy occurs when Hrethel's son Hathcyn accidentally kills his brother Herebald. The impact of the tragedy is doubled because Hrethel cannot exact revenge or wergild from his own son. Hrethel dies of sorrow, leaving the throne to Hathcyn (ll. 2435-71). Sweden apparently initiates the feud with the Geats (ll. 2472-78). In a battle near Ravenswood, the Swedish king Ongentheow kills Hathcyn, and the Geatish warrior Eofor kills Ongentheow. Hygelac becomes king of the Geats and gives his daughter in marriage to Eofor (ll. 2472-89, 2922-98).

Hygelac initiates a raid on the Frisians (in northern Germany). The Geats are driven back, and Hygelac is killed. Beowulf heroically escapes back to Weathermark. The four references to this raid are lines 1197-1215, 2354-79, 2490-2509, and 2910-21. Hygelac's queen, Hygd, offers Beowulf the throne, but he rejects the offer. Instead, he counsels Hygelac's young son Heardred until Heardred can assume the kingship (ll. 2354-79).

In the meantime, conflict breaks out in the Swedish royal family. Ongentheow is succeeded by his older son, Ohtere, who dies and is succeeded by his brother Onla. Details in *Beowulf* are sketchy, but Onla apparently usurps the throne. Ohtere's sons Eanmund and Eadgils flee Sweden and take refuge in the Geatish court. In retaliation, Onla attacks the Geats and kills Heardred. During the same raid, Weohstan (serving with the Swedes) kills Eanmund. Onla withdraws, leaving Beowulf as king of the Geats (ll. 2379-90, 2602-25).

There are three principle accounts of the Geatish-Swedish wars: the narrator's (ll. 2379-96), Beowulf's (ll. 2472-2509), and the messenger's (ll. 2922-3007). A fourth, very brief account is the narrator's story of Wiglaf's father's career (ll. 2602-19).

As king, Beowulf establishes peace through strength in battle. He attacks the Swedes, kills Onla, and places Eadgils on the Swedish throne (ll. 2391-96). He attacks the Frisians and avenges Hygelac's death (ll. 2490-2509). After this, Beowulf seeks no further feuds.

Beowulf: Feud Between the Geats and the Swedes

and no neighboring tribes dare attack him (ll. 2729-39). Peace reigns for fifty years until the dragon ravages Geatish villages (ll. 2200-11). Wiglaf joins Beowulf to fight the dragon. Wiglaf's father Weohstan fought with the Swedes against the Geats (he killed Eanmund and was rewarded by Onla), but later switched loyalties to the Geats (ll. 2602-25). Weohstan and Wiglaf, it turns out, are members of Beowulf's family, the Wagnundings (ll. 2813-16). After Beowulf's death, the messenger speculates that the Frisians and the Swedes will renew their feuds with the Geats (ll. 2910-3007).

-- end transcription from Marijane Osborn --

This is transcribed from the Marijane Osborn translation, published in "Narrative Fiction: An Introduction and Anthology" edited by Kelley Griffith, page 162. This book by Kelley Griffith is a very good one, and Marijane Osborn says that it is a shame that it is not better known. Marijane Osborn's email address is MJOsborn@ucdavis.edu.

<http://www.jagular.com/beowulf/feud.shtml>

About the Work

A Brief Synopsis

Beowulf is the longest and greatest surviving Anglo-Saxon poem. The setting of the epic is the sixth century in what is now known as Denmark and southwestern Sweden. The poem opens with a brief genealogy of the Scylding (Dane) royal dynasty, named after a mythic hero, Scyld Scefing, who reached the tribe's shores as a castaway babe on a ship loaded with treasure. Scyld's funeral is a memorable early ritual in the work, but focus soon shifts to the reign of his great-grandson, Hrothgar, whose successful rule is symbolized by a magnificent central mead-hall called Heorot. For 12 years, a huge man-like ogre named Grendel, a descendant of the biblical murderer Cain, has menaced the aging Hrothgar, raiding Heorot and killing the king's thanes (warriors). Grendel rules the mead-hall nightly.

Beowulf, a young warrior in Geatland (southwestern Sweden), comes to the Scyldings' aid, bringing with him 14 of his finest men. Hrothgar once sheltered Beowulf's father during a deadly feud, and the mighty Geat hopes to return the favor while enhancing his own reputation and gaining treasure for his king, Hygelac. At a feast before nightfall of the first day of the visit, an obnoxious, drunken Scylding named Unferth insults Beowulf and claims that the Geat visitor once embarrassingly lost a swimming contest to a boyhood acquaintance named Breca and is no match for Grendel. Beowulf responds with dignity while putting Unferth in his place. In fact, the two swimmers were separated by a storm on the fifth night of the contest, and Beowulf had slain nine sea monsters before finally returning to shore.

While the Danes retire to safer sleeping quarters, Beowulf and the Geats bed down in Heorot, fully aware that Grendel will visit them. He does. Angered by the joy of the men in the mead-hall, the ogre furiously bursts in on the Geats, killing one and then reaching for Beowulf. With the strength of 30 men in his hand-grip, Beowulf seizes the ogre's claw and does not let go. The ensuing battle nearly destroys the great hall, but Beowulf emerges victorious as he rips Grendel's claw from its shoulder socket, sending the mortally wounded beast fleeing to his mere (pool). The claw trophy hangs high under the roof of Heorot.

The Danes celebrate the next day with a huge feast featuring entertainment by Hrothgar's *scop* (pronounced "shop"), a professional bard who accompanies himself on a harp and sings or chants traditional lays such as an account of the Danes' victory at Finnsburh. This bard also improvises a song about Beowulf's victory. Hrothgar's wife, Queen Wealhtheow, proves to be a perfect hostess, offering Beowulf a gold collar and her gratitude. Filled with mead, wine, and great food, the entire party retires for what they expect to be the first peaceful night in years.

But Grendel's mother—not quite as powerful as her son but highly motivated—climbs to Heorot that night, retrieves her son's claw, and murderously abducts one of the Scyldings (Aeschere) while Beowulf sleeps elsewhere. The next morning, Hrothgar, Beowulf, and a retinue of Scyldings and Geats follow the mother's tracks into a dark, forbidding swamp and to the edge of her mere. The slaughtered Aeschere's head sits on a cliff by the lake, which hides the ogres' underground cave. Carrying a sword called *Hrunting*, a gift from the chastised Unferth, Beowulf dives into the mere to seek the mother.

Near the bottom of the lake, Grendel's mother attacks and hauls the Geat warrior to her dimly lit cave. Beowulf fights back once inside the dry cavern, but the gift sword, *Hrunting*, strong as it is, fails to penetrate the ogre's hide. The mother moves to kill Beowulf with her knife, but his armor, made by the legendary blacksmith Weland, protects him. Suddenly Beowulf spots a magical, giant sword and uses it to cut through the mother's spine at the neck, killing her. A blessed light unexplainably illuminates the cavern, disclosing Grendel's corpse and a great deal of treasure. Beowulf decapitates the corpse. The magic sword melts to its hilt. Beowulf returns to the lake's surface carrying the head and hilt but leaving the treasure.

After more celebration and gifts and a sermon by Hrothgar warning of the dangers of pride and the mutability of time, Beowulf and his men return to Geatland. There he serves his king well until Hygelac is killed in battle and his son dies in a feud. Beowulf is then named king and rules successfully for 50 years. Like Hrothgar, however, his peace is shattered in his declining years. Beowulf must battle one more demon.

A fiery dragon has become enraged because a lone fugitive has inadvertently discovered the dragon's treasure-trove and stolen a valuable cup. The dragon terrorizes the countryside at night, burning several homes, including Beowulf's. Led by the fugitive, Beowulf and eleven of his men seek out the dragon's barrow. Beowulf insists on taking on the dragon alone, but his own sword, *Naegling*, is no match for the monster. Seeing his king in trouble, one thane, Wiglaf, goes to his assistance. The others flee to the woods. Together, Wiglaf and Beowulf kill the dragon, but the mighty king is mortally wounded. Dying, Beowulf leaves his kingdom to Wiglaf and requests that his body be cremated in a funeral pyre and buried high on a seaside cliff where passing sailors might see the barrow. The dragon's treasure-hoard is buried with him. It is said that they lie there still.

Beowulf Resources on the Web

Beowulf in hypertext, Old text and modern text, trans. F.B. Gummere. (Harvard Classics version). Includes character list, history, and glossary.

<http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~beowulf/main.html>

Click on "Links" in the site above to find Electronic Beowulf, a guide to digital images of the Beowulf Manuscript.

University of Nevada, Reno's "Resources for the Study of Beowulf" is both scholarly and accessible to students.

<http://www.library.unr.edu/subjects/guides/beowulf.html>

Beowulf Journal Assignments

<http://homepage.mac.com/mseffie/assignments/beowulf/beowulfjournals.html>

Sid Allen's comment on Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*. Browse this great site which has a plethora of useful links.

<http://www.beowulftranslations.net/heaney.shtml>

Christianity in *Beowulf*

<http://csis.pace.edu/grendel/proisld/CHRIST.html>

The British Library's site on "Changing Language" has this useful timeline on the history of the English language.

<http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/changlang/across/language/timeline.html>

Al Drake of UC Irvine has rigorous study questions on this site.

http://www.ajdrake.com/teachers/teaching/questions/beowulf_drake.htm

Bill Ramey's "The Unity of *Beowulf*: Tolkien and the Critics." How Tolkien reinstated *Beowulf* in the academic canon.

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/billramey/beowulf.htm>

Visible Knowledge Project assignment on *Beowulf*--"Hypertext Monsters: Student Web Pages and Associative Thinking"

<http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.georgetown.edu/irvinemj/english016/beowulf/dragon.gif&imgrefurl=http://www.georgetown.edu/irvinemj/english016/beowulf/beowulf.html&ch=200&w=320&sz=17&tbnid=s3CIaOsaS9-Y3M:&tbnh=70&tbnw=113&hl=en&start=4&prev=/images%3Fq%3DBeowulf%26svnu m%3D10%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D%26newwindow%3D1%26sa%3DN>

Illustrations for *Beowulf*

http://www.thecomix.com/thecomix/beo2_samples2.htm

The Beowulf Home Page with Resources for Studying Beowulf, the text with hypertext footnotes, and links to the Electronic Beowulf Project

http://www.gpc.edu/~shale/humanities/literature/world_literature/beowulf.html

Read/Write/Think's "An Introduction to *Beowulf*: Language and Poetics" Lesson Plan

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=813

Beowulf Blog: a very interesting and knowledgeable set of comments and references

<http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.siue.edu/~ejoy/Bosch%2520Stone%2520of%2520Madness.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.siue.edu/~ejoy/eng505BeowulfBlog.htm&h=1093&w=757&sz=202&hl=en&start=69&tbnid=vukKUrhhJYIqWM:&tbnh=150&tbnw=104&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dgeat%26start%3D60%26imgsz%3Dxxlarge%26gbv%3D2%26ndsp%3D20%26svnum%3D10%26hl%3Den%26newwindow%3D1%26sa%3DN>

And there was a *Beowulf* movie...

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120604/>