



Bronze matrix for pressed foil, cast with carved details. Björnhovda, Torslunda, Öland. 7th century A.D.

Beowulf accepts Hrothgar's challenge, and the king and his men accompany the hero to the dreadful lair of Grendel's mother. Fearlessly, Beowulf prepares to battle the terrible creature.

THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL'S MOTHER

450 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;
At last he saw the mud of the bottom.
And all at once the greedy she-wolf
455 Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred
Years discovered him, saw that a creature
From above had come to explore the bottom
Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,
Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,
460 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
And sword and all, to her home; he struggled
To free his weapon, and failed. The fight
465 Brought other monsters swimming to see
Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at
His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth
As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,
That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,
470 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
Light burned all around him, the lake
Itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw

- 475 The mighty water witch, and swung his sword,
His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;
The iron sang its fierce song,
Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest
Discovered that no sword could slice her evil
480 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,
And that too failed him; for the first time in years
Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;
485 It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf
Longed only for fame, leaped back
Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,
Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where
He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use
490 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
His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger
Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.
495 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,
Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best
And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled
500 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
To avenge her only son. But he was stretched
On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted
505 By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.
The hammered links held; the point
Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom of the earth,
Edgeth's son, and died there, if that shining
Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
510 God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

476 his ring-marked blade: For the battle with Grendel's mother, Beowulf has been given an heirloom sword with an intricately etched blade.

480 Hrunting (hrūn'tǣng): the name of Beowulf's sword. (Germanic warriors' swords were possessions of such value that they were often given names.)

490–492 How important is fame to Beowulf?

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
Sword, hammered by giants, strong
515 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
From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,
And then, savage, now, angry
520 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,
Broke bones and all. Her body fell
To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
525 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
Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
At her home, then following along the wall
530 Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,
His heart still angry. He was hunting another
Dead monster, and took his weapon with him
For final revenge against Grendel's vicious
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
535 And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's
Men slept, killing them in their beds,
Eating some on the spot, fifteen
Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
With another such sickening meal waiting
540 In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,
Found him lying dead in his corner,
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter
Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
His head with a single swift blow. The body
545 Jerked for the last time, then lay still.

The wise old warriors who surrounded Hrothgar,
Like him staring into the monsters' lake,
Saw the waves surging and blood
Spurting through. They spoke about Beowulf,
550 All the graybeards, whispered together
And said that hope was gone, that the hero
Had lost fame and his life at once, and would never
Return to the living, come back as triumphant
As he had left; almost all agreed that Grendel's
555 Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.



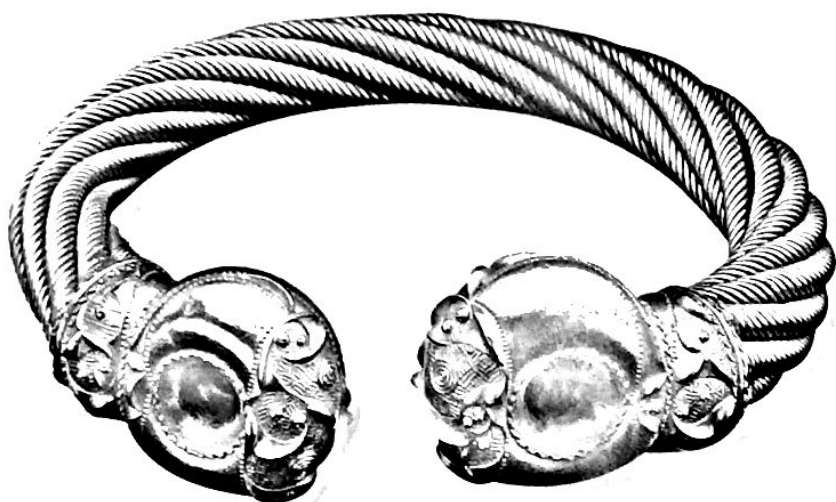
Viking sword

550 graybeards: old men.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

loathsome (lōth'səm) *adj.* disgusting; hateful

Gold torque (a collar or necklace) from Snettisham in Norfolk in eastern England, made sometime in the middle of the first century B.C.



The sun slid over past noon, went further
Down. The Danes gave up, left
The lake and went home, Hrothgar with them.
The Geats stayed, sat sadly, watching,
560 Imagining they saw their lord but not believing
They would ever see him again.

—Then the sword
Melted, blood-soaked, dripping down
Like water, disappearing like ice when the world's
Eternal Lord loosens invisible
565 Fetters and unwinds icicles and frost
As only He can, He who rules
Time and seasons, He who is truly
God. The monsters' hall was full of
Rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took
570 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
Blood, boiling even after his death.
And then the battle's only survivor
575 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
Were dead.

Then that noble protector of all seamen
Swam to land, rejoicing in the heavy
580 Burdens he was bringing with him. He

578 that noble protector of all seamen: Beowulf, who will be buried in a tower that will serve as a navigational aid to sailors.

WORDS
TO
KNOW
fetter (fēt'ər) *n.* a shackle or chain; restraint

And all his glorious band of Geats
 Thanked God that their leader had come back unharmed;
 They left the lake together. The Geats
 Carried Beowulf's helmet, and his mail shirt.
 585 Behind them the water slowly thickened
 As the monsters' blood came seeping up.
 They walked quickly, happily, across
 Roads all of them remembered, left
 The lake and the cliffs alongside it, brave men
 590 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—
 Yet proud of their ugly load and determined
 That the Danes, seated in Herot, should see it.
 595 Soon, fourteen Geats arrived
 At the hall, bold and warlike, and with Beowulf,
 Their lord and leader, they walked on the mead-hall
 Green. Then the Geats' brave prince entered
 Herot, covered with glory for the daring
 600 Battles he had fought; he sought Hrothgar
 To salute him and show Grendel's head.
 He carried that terrible trophy by the hair,
 Brought it straight to where the Danes sat,
 Drinking, the queen among them. It was a weird
 605 And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared.

593–594 Why do you think the Geats want the Danes to see the monster's skull?

604 queen: Welthow, wife of Hrothgar.

Thinking Through the Literature

1. **Comprehension Check** What heroic action does Beowulf perform in this part of the poem?
2. Do you think you would have enjoyed living among the Danes of Beowulf's day? Why or why not?
3. What qualities does Beowulf display in this second battle?

THINK ABOUT	{	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the description of Grendel's mother and her actions • the details describing her lair • Beowulf's motives and actions
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4. Are Beowulf's words and deeds those of a traditional **epic hero**? Support your opinion with evidence from the poem.
5. Does the behavior of Grendel's mother seem as wicked or unreasonable as Grendel's behavior? Explain your answer.