

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.

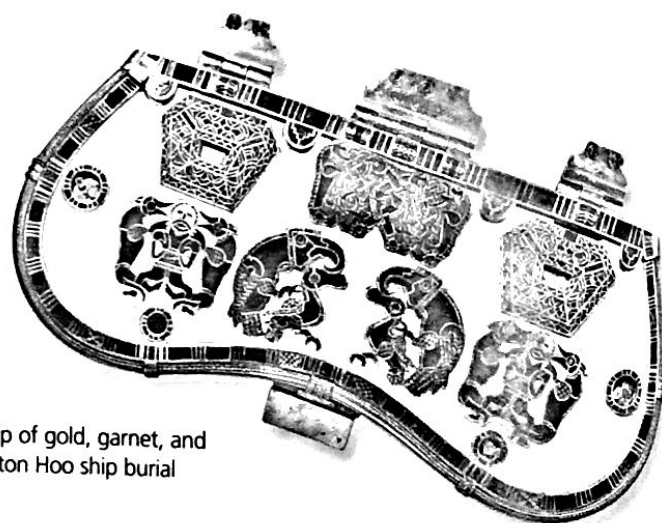
THE DEATH OF BEOWULF

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?

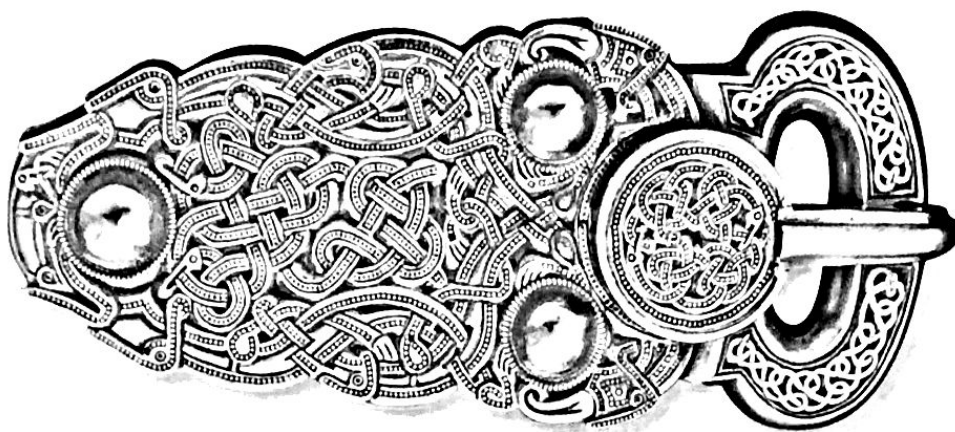
741-763 What values are reflected in Beowulf's speech?



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

WORDS
 TO
 KNOW

livid (lĭv'ĭd) *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!" . . .

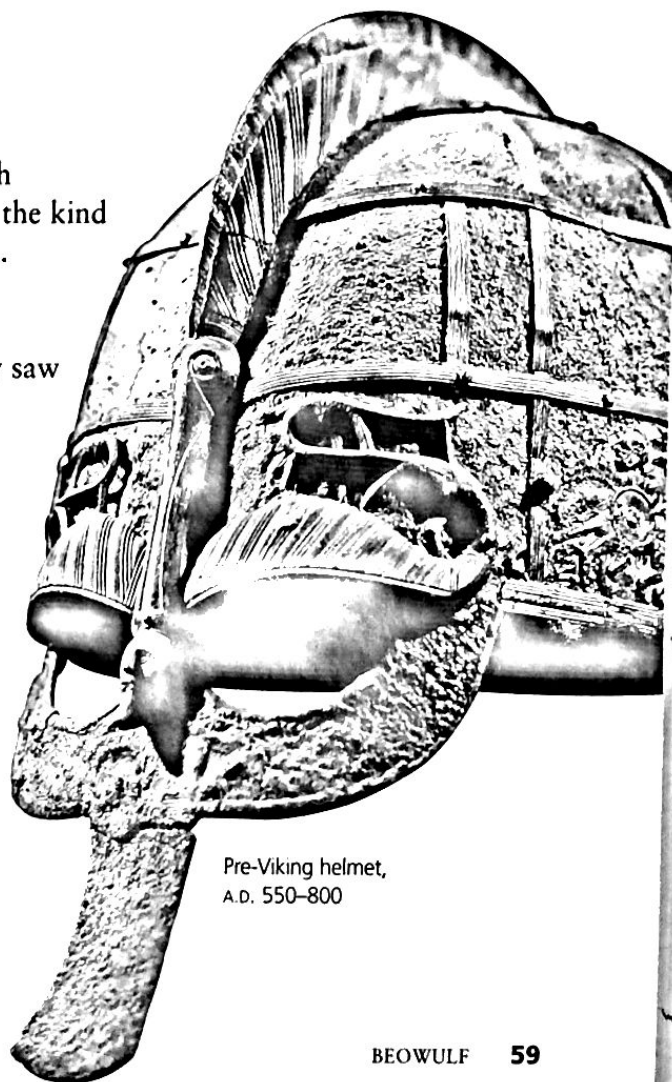
Then the warriors rose,
Walked slowly down from the cliff, stared

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 (jāv'līnz): light spears
used as weapons.

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

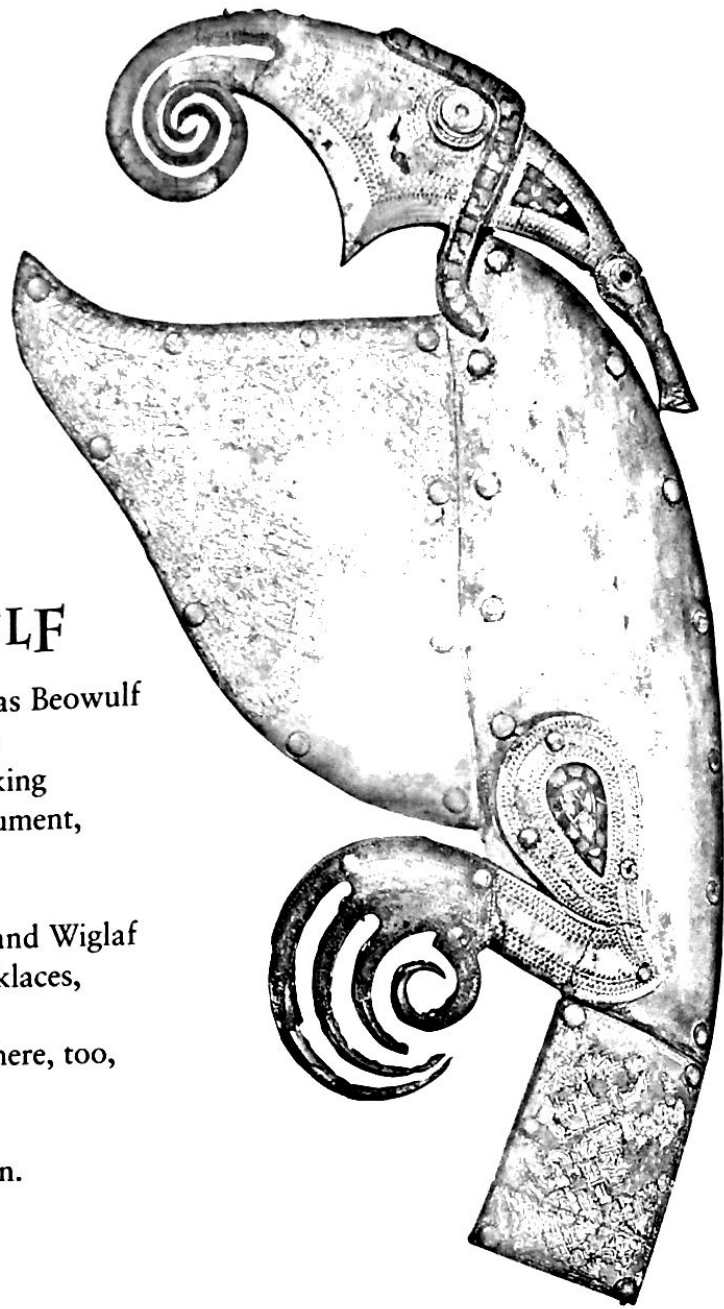
859 bolted: ran away; fled.



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?