

---

# Beowulf

---

[Prologue: *The Earlier History of the Danes*]

Yes, we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes' kings in the old days—how the princes of that people did brave deeds.

Often Scyld Scefing<sup>1</sup> took mead-benches away from enemy bands, from many tribes, terrified their nobles—after the time that he was first found helpless.<sup>2</sup> He lived to find comfort for that, became great under the skies, prospered in honors until every one of those who lived about him, across the whale-road,<sup>3</sup> had to obey him, pay him tribute. That was a good king.

Afterwards a son was born to him, a young boy in his house, whom God sent to comfort the people: He had seen the sore need they had suffered during the long time they lacked a king. Therefore the Lord of Life, the Ruler of Heaven, gave him honor in the world: Beow<sup>4</sup> was famous, the glory of the son of Scyld spread widely in the Northlands. In this way a young man ought by his good deeds, by giving splendid gifts while still in his father's house, to make sure that later in life beloved companions will stand by him, that people will serve him when war comes. Through deeds that bring praise, a man shall prosper in every country.

Then at the fated time Scyld the courageous went away into the protection of the Lord. His dear companions carried him down to the sea-currents, just as he himself had bidden them do when, as protector of the Scyldings,<sup>5</sup> he had ruled them with his words—long had the beloved prince governed the land. There in the harbor stood the ring-prowed ship, ice-covered and ready to sail, a prince's vessel. Then they laid down the ruler they had loved, the ring-giver,<sup>6</sup> in the hollow of the ship, the glorious man beside the mast. There was brought great store of treasure, wealth from lands far away. I have not heard of a ship more splendidly

1. The meaning is probably "son of Scaef," although Scyld's origins are mysterious.
2. As is made clear shortly below, Scyld arrived in Denmark as a child alone in a ship loaded with treasures.
3. A kenning, or metaphoric epithet, for the sea.
4. Although the manuscript reads "Beowulf," most scholars now agree that it should read "Beow." Beow was the grandfather of the Danish king Hrothgar.
5. I.e., the Danes ("descendants of Scyld").
6. A traditional epithet for a generous king or lord in Old English poetry.

furnished with war-weapons and battle-dress, swords and mail-shirts. On his breast lay a great many treasures that should voyage with him far out into the sea's possession. They provided him with no lesser gifts, treasure of the people, than those had done who at his beginning first sent him forth on the waves, a child alone. Then also they set a golden standard high over his head, let the water take him, gave him to the sea. Sad was their spirit, mournful their mind. Men cannot truthfully say who received that cargo, neither counselors in the hall nor warriors under the skies.

(I.)<sup>7</sup> Then in the cities was Beow of the Scyldings, beloved king of the people, long famous among nations (his father had gone elsewhere, the king from his land), until later great Healfdene was born to him. As long as he lived, old and fierce in battle, he upheld the glorious Scyldings. To him all told were four children born into the world, to the leader of the armies: Heorogar and Hrothgar and the good Halga. I have heard tell that [ . . . was On]ela's queen,<sup>8</sup> beloved bed-companion of the Battle-Scylfing.

[*Beowulf and Grendel*]

[The Hall Heorot is Attacked by Grendel]

Then Hrothgar was given success in warfare, glory in battle, so that his retainers gladly obeyed him and their company grew into a great band of warriors. It came to his mind that he would command men to construct a hall, a mead-building large[r] than the children of men had ever heard of, and therein he would give to young and old all that God had given him, except for common land and men's bodies.<sup>9</sup> Then I have heard that the work was laid upon many nations, wide through this middle-earth,<sup>1</sup> that they should adorn the folk-hall. In time it came to pass—quickly, as men count it—that it was finished, the largest of hall-dwellings. He gave it the name of Heorot,<sup>2</sup> he who ruled wide with his words. He did not forget his promise: at the feast he gave out rings, treasure. The hall stood tall, high and wide-gabled: it would wait for the fierce flames of vengeful fire;<sup>3</sup> the time was not yet at hand for

7. The numbering of sections is that of the manuscript, which makes, however, no provision for Section XXX.

8. The text is faulty, so that the name of Healfdene's daughter has been lost; her husband, Onela, was a Swedish (Scylfing) king.

9. Or "men's lives." Apparently slaves, along with public land, were not in the king's power to give away.

1. In traditional Germanic cosmology, "middle-earth" is the region inhabited by human beings.

2. I.e., "Hart."

3. The destruction by fire of Heorot occurred at a later time than that of the poem's action, probably during the otherwise unsuccessful attack of the Heatho-Bard Ingeld on his father-in-law, Hrothgar, mentioned in the next clause.