

BEOWULF

So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son
105 Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom
Or strength could break it: that agony hung
On king and people alike, harsh
And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.

In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's
110 Follower and the strongest of the Geats—greater
And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—
Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror
And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,
Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king,
115 Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,
Now when help was needed. None
Of the wise ones regretted his going, much
As he was loved by the Geats: the omens were good,
And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf
120 Chose the mightiest men he could find,
The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen
In all, and led them down to their boat;
He knew the sea, would point the prow
Straight to that distant Danish shore.

104 Healfdane's son: Hrothgar.

109–110 Higlac's follower: warrior
loyal to Higlac (hīg'lāk'), king of
the Geats (and Beowulf's uncle).

Beowulf and his men sail over the sea to the land of the Danes to offer help to Hrothgar. They are escorted by a Danish guard to Herot, where Wulfgar, one of Hrothgar's soldiers, tells the king of their arrival. Hrothgar knows of Beowulf and is ready to welcome the young prince and his men.

125 Then Wulfgar went to the door and addressed
The waiting seafarers with soldier's words:
“My lord, the great king of the Danes, commands me
To tell you that he knows of your noble birth
And that having come to him from over the open
130 Sea you have come bravely and are welcome.

Now go to him as you are, in your armor and helmets,
But leave your battle-shields here, and your spears,
Let them lie waiting for the promises your words
May make.”

Beowulf arose, with his men
135 Around him, ordering a few to remain
With their weapons, leading the others quickly

Along under Herot's steep roof into Hrothgar's
Presence. Standing on that prince's own hearth,
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt
140 Gleaming with a smith's high art, he greeted
The Danes' great lord:

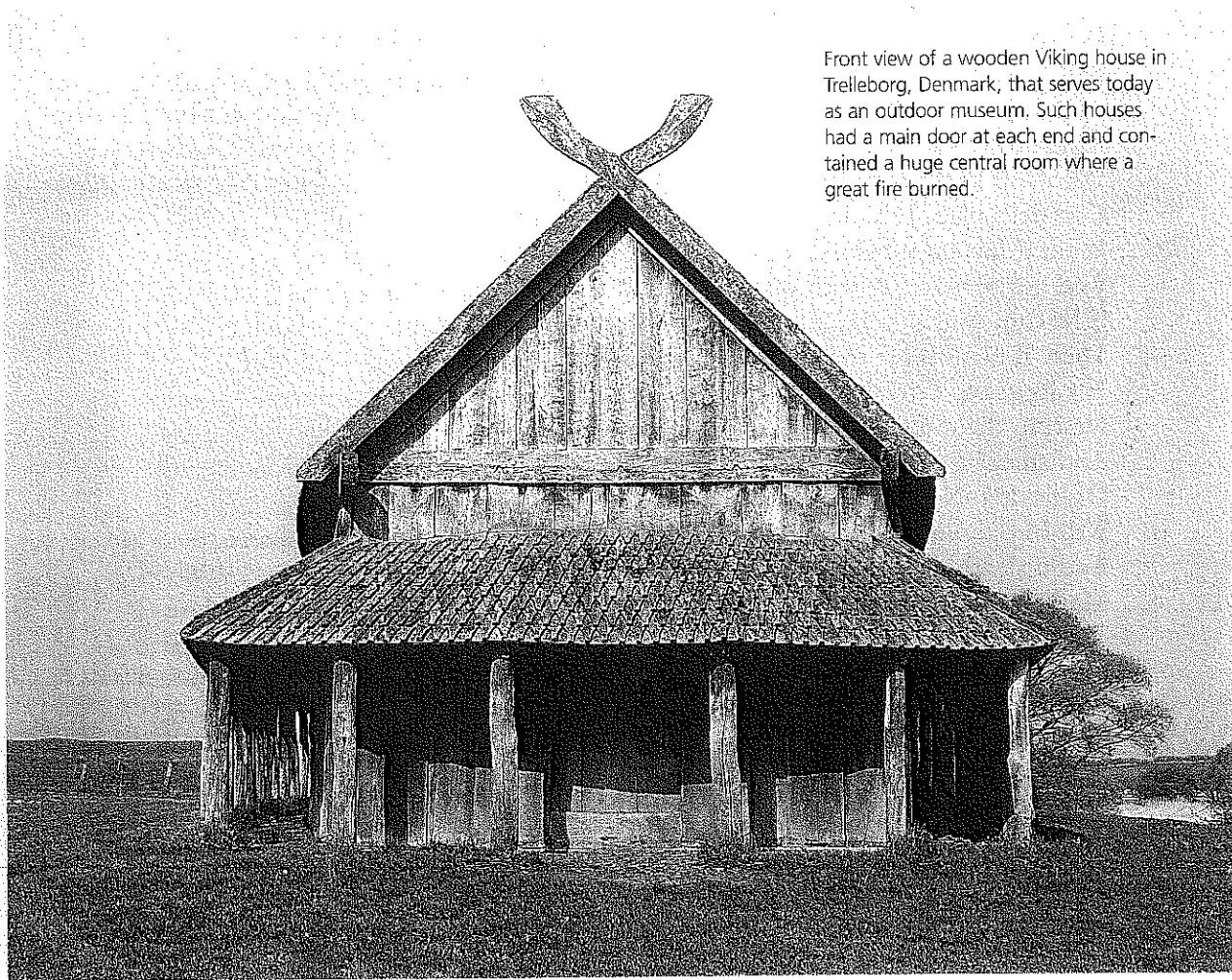
"Hail, Hrothgar!

Higlac is my cousin and my king; the days
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's
Name has echoed in our land: sailors
145 Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
150 And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,

139 mail shirt: flexible body armor made of metal links or overlapping metal scales.

140 smith's high art: the skilled craft of a blacksmith (a person who fashions objects from iron).

142 cousin: here, a general term for a relative. Beowulf is actually Higlac's nephew.



Front view of a wooden Viking house in Trelleborg, Denmark, that serves today as an outdoor museum. Such houses had a main door at each end and contained a huge central room where a great fire burned.

Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
 Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove
 Five great giants into chains, chased
 155 All of that race from the earth. I swam
 In the blackness of night, hunting monsters
 Out of the ocean, and killing them one
 By one; death was my errand and the fate
 They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called
 160 Together, and I've come. Grant me, then,
 Lord and protector of this noble place,
 A single request! I have come so far,
 Oh shelterer of warriors and your people's loved friend,
 That this one favor you should not refuse me—
 165 That I, alone and with the help of my men,
 May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
 Too, that the monster's scorn of men
 Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
 Nor will I. My lord Higlac
 170 Might think less of me if I let my sword
 Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
 Behind some broad linden shield: my hands
 Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
 Against the monster. God must decide
 175 Who will be given to death's cold grip.
 Grendel's plan, I think, will be
 What it has been before, to invade this hall
 And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,
 If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,
 180 There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare
 For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody
 Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones
 And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls
 Of his den. No, I expect no Danes
 185 Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.
 And if death does take me, send the hammered
 Mail of my armor to Higlac, return
 The inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he
 From Wayland. Fate will unwind as it must!"
 190 Hrothgar replied, protector of the Danes:
 "Beowulf, you've come to us in friendship,
 and because

172 linden shield: shield made from the wood of a linden tree.

172–174 Beowulf insists on fighting Grendel without weapons. Why do you think this is so important to him?

185 shrouds: cloths in which dead bodies are wrapped.

188 Hrethel (hrēth'el): a former king of the Geats—Higlac's father and Beowulf's grandfather.

189 Wayland: a famous blacksmith and magician.

WORDS
 TO
 KNOW

purge (pūrj) v. to cleanse or purify
gorge (gôrj) v. to stuff with food

Of the reception your father found at our court.
 Edgetho had begun a bitter feud,
 Killing Hathlaf, a Wulfing warrior:
 195 Your father's countrymen were afraid of war,
 If he returned to his home, and they turned him away.
 Then he traveled across the curving waves
 To the land of the Danes. I was new to the throne,
 Then, a young man ruling this wide
 200 Kingdom and its golden city: Hergar,
 My older brother, a far better man
 Than I, had died and dying made me,
 Second among Healfdane's sons, first
 In this nation. I bought the end of Edgetho's
 205 Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's
 Furrows to the Wulfings; your father swore
 He'd keep that peace. My tongue grows heavy,
 And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel
 Has brought us, the damage he's done, here
 210 In this hall. You see for yourself how much smaller
 Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've lost
 To his terror. Surely the Lord Almighty
 Could stop his madness, smother his lust!
 How many times have my men, glowing
 215 With courage drawn from too many cups
 Of ale, sworn to stay after dark
 And stem that horror with a sweep of their swords.
 And then, in the morning, this mead-hall glittering
 With new light would be drenched with blood, the benches
 220 Stained red, the floors, all wet from that fiend's
 Savage assault—and my soldiers would be fewer
 Still, death taking more and more.
 But to table, Beowulf, a banquet in your honor:
 Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future."
 225 Then Hrothgar's men gave places to the Geats,
 Yielded benches to the brave visitors
 And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead
 Came carrying out the carved flasks,
 And poured that bright sweetness. A poet
 230 Sang, from time to time, in a clear
 Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats
 Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.

193 Edgetho (ěj'thō): Beowulf's father.

194 Wulfing: a member of another Germanic tribe.

191–206 What service did Hrothgar perform for Beowulf's father?

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blacksmith