# **Beowulf: Fiction or History?**

### **Ruth Beechick**

Beowulf had an unusual name. It means bee-wolf. Some old English people (Saxons) called the bear a bee-wolf. A bear's face was dog-like, or wolf-like, and it often nosed into beehives to eat honey. People thought it was eating bees, so they called it a bee-wolf. The man Beowulf became a powerfully strong fighter, so he gained that name too.

Beowulf was born in the Middle Ages, A.D. 495, in Denmark. At the age of seven, he was sent to southern Sweden where he lived with his grandfather, and later his uncle, who were kings in the tribe of Geats there. When his uncle died, Beowulf rejected the chance to become king. Instead, he agreed to be guardian for a ten-year-old prince while he was a child-king.

#### **Beowulf and the Monsters**

Beowulf liked adventure more than ruling the land. A band of warriors adventured with Beowulf. In those days warriors often vowed loyalty to their lord, or leader, and a group trusted and respected each other and risked their lives for each other. They shared the plunder they gained through victories. Beowulf with his band of warriors fought and killed monster animals.

One kind of monster was called "wormkind," large serpent creatures that lived in hidden lairs sometimes near a swampy lake. At high tide the lakes could be connected with the sea, so monsters could traverse from one environment to the other if they liked. The wormkind that lived deep in the sea were called sea dragons. A species of sea dragon was the wave-thrasher (ythgewinnes in Old English) that swam along the surface.1 Vikings carved these onto the prows of their ships to try to ward off real dragons. As if land and sea monsters weren't enough, villagers also were threatened with huge flying reptiles. Books today have dinosaur names for these various monsters. The flying kinds are called pterosaurs. Most dinosaurs are extinct now or almost so, but now and then some sightings show that a few survivors remain in the world.

The main monster in the story of Beowulf is Grendel. That is capitalized as though it is a proper name like Fido or Black Beauty. But it was a species of serpent. People spoke of grendels pond or grendels pit or grendels wood, naming them according to where they lived. Grendel in the story was a grendel mere because he lived in a large brackish pond full of coarse ferns. He probably had a loud, deep-throated growl. Hints about that are an ancient word grindill that means to bellow, and a Middle English word grindel that means angry.

Grendel lived in Denmark. He hunted at night, finding humans in the darkness and devouring them with his huge jaws full of teeth. Watchers were hired to guard at night, but sometimes they, too, were killed by the "mouth-bone." The Danes were so terrorized they thought Grendel was worse than an animal. He was the enemy of God; he belonged in the devil's hell.

For twelve years the Danes suffered from Grendel. Their swords and arrows and other weapons could not penetrate the monster's hide. Then Beowulf, at twenty years of age, and his band of warriors sailed to Denmark. The king there knew Beowulf from his early childhood. He received the band gladly. He had heard of their success in clearing the Baltic sea lanes of numerous monsters and making the lanes safe for navigation. He knew, also, how they killed land monsters in Geat.

They feasted and sang in the king's great hall. Then at dusk the Danes all went to their hiding places and the Geats, newly arrived from Sweden, slept in the hall—all except Beowulf. He lay awake watching. We know the story today because a poet of the times wrote it down in a powerful epic. He told in detail how Grendel broke the door and ate a man. Then he reached for Beowulf. Beowulf with his great strength grasped Grendel's forearm. He knew that was the most vulnerable part. The creature had powerful hind legs, but his forearms were thin and weak. The hall rang with the noise of their fight that bounded from wall to wall. Other warriors tried to help but their swords were useless. Beowulf tore the creature's arm from its shoulder. The sinews sprang apart and the bone joints broke. Grendel bellowed with pain and knew he would die. He fled home and bled to death in his joyless lair.

Later in the story Beowulf killed Grendel's mother also. He returned to Sweden and was king for fifty mostly peaceful years. He died while once again conquering a monster.

## Who Wrote Beowulf?

Only one manuscript of the original poem exists. People found it, partly burned, in England about five hundred years after Beowulf lived. No one knows who originally wrote it. Many literature books say that it is fiction, one of the earliest examples we have of an English novel. But if someone were writing fiction, he would not name so many real people; he would invent characters as novelists do. And if someone wrote it long after the events, he would not know all those real people who lived in Beowulf's time. It must have been first written at or near the time that Beowulf lived. All parts of the story hold together as though one person wrote it. It does not show evidence that bards sang it and added and changed as the years moved along.

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Details are embellished to make the battles more intense, the animals more scary, and the heroes more heroic. But the basic story is historically true, and the animals are zoologically real. They are not called trolls or other fantasy names. They are described by their big jaws, their sea-cave dwellings and other scientifically accurate depictions.

Why, then, do so many literature critics say that Beowulf is fiction? It is because they do not believe that dinosaur creatures lived at the same time men lived. Their evolutionary worldview says that dinosaurs lived long ages before men evolved on the earth. Therefore, in their minds, this all must be fiction. But with a Biblical worldview, we can see that dinosaurs entered the ark with Noah—land species at least—and they lived on the earth again after the Flood. But the post-Flood earth was not so hospitable to large creatures and they eventually became almost extinct.

The unknown poet was a remarkable writer. He wrote with power and vivid descriptions. He wrote in pagan times, before missionaries reached the people. God and the devil are mentioned, and Adam and Cain. These pagans knew some of that ancient history, but they knew nothing of Christ or of New Testament teachings. Pagans valued human strength, vengeance, boasting, and treasure gained by plunder. The poem extols all of these and not Christian virtues.

No English kings or events are mentioned. This shows that the poem was written before the Saxons, Geats, and other tribes migrated to England. It also helps to show that the poem was not rewritten or tampered with after it reached England. Thus we have a genuine historical look into the Middle Ages in the lands by the Baltic Sea.

The one surviving manuscript was written in Old English, a language used in the time of Beowulf. They did not call it Old English, of course; that is a name we give it in our modern English days. Here are some lines of the poem in Old English. Some letters are modernized but the old words and spelling are retained. The last survivor of the warrior band is lamenting the loss of all.

Næs hearpan wyn gomen gleo-beames, ne god hafoc, geond sæl swingeð...

The harp is silent, No glad music sounds, nor any good hawk Sweeps through the hall...

#### **How To Read Beowulf**

The original story, being in Old English and being in poem form, is not accessible to most modern readers. And it does not work well when poets translate and try to make a poem form, because the alliteration and stress patterns do not carry over into modern English. The new poems sound strained. Translators who use prose form can remain more true to the original meanings, and their versions retain much of the interest and power of the story.

Among prose translations, are complete versions that try to be as true to the original as possible and shortened versions that appear in literature books and children's books. Every child above age ten or so can find a version to enjoy.

If the poet had not written the Beowulf story it would have been lost to history; we would know nothing about it. In your family history are there things you know because somebody kept it in a scrapbook or letter?

In your lifetime or your parents' lifetime is there a story that should be passed on to descendants? When you think of a good one, write it down (Do you want to make a poem?), take pictures or draw pictures, and save it all for the future. Be sure to write the author's name so you won't be called an "unknown author" someday. Tell who you are, where you live, how you learned of the story, and the dates of the story and of your writing it. Then family descendants will not have to guess.

Copyright, 2004. The Old Schoolhouse Magazine. www.TheHomeschoolMagazine.com. Piece owned by Ruth Beechick. Long ago in history class a professor said, "History is for old people." Ruth Beechick says she now qualifies. She especially likes showing that the Bible is true even though traditional history books disagree with it. She wrote a chapter on teaching history in You Can Teach Your Child Successfully.

<sup>1</sup> A remarkable book, *After the Flood* by Bill Cooper, gives the history of Beowulf and of other European genealogy, tracing king lines all the way back to Noah.

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