

Beowulf as a picture of the ancient Teutonic life.

Beowulf, which has achieved the status of the national epic in England was composed in southwest Sweden probably before the eighth century, and taken to England, where it was worked over and Christianized by the Northumbrian poets. It is variously attributed to the fifth, seventh, and eighth centuries; but the seventh century appears to be most correct, since the Higelac of the poem has been identified with Chocilaicus of the "Gesta Regum Francorum," a Danish king who invaded Gaul in the days of Theuderic, son of Clovis, and died near the close of the sixth century. The only manuscript of the poem in existence is thought to be of the tenth century. It is preserved in the British Museum.

Since 1837 much interest has been manifested in the poem, and many editions of it have been published. *Beowulf* contains three thousand one hundred and eighty-four lines and is written in alliterative verse. The unknown writer of *Beowulf* cannot be praised for his skill in composition, but in spite of that, *Beowulf* retains its historical importance because of the pictures it gives of the ancient Teutonic life. Indeed *Beowulf* provides us with a faithful representation of the customs of the court, the relations of the rulers to their people, the position of women in society, the works of war and peace, the king's hall, the feast, the life of the rovers and the settled town.

Beowulf gives a very good picture of the primitive court life which was one of elaborate formalities. The court was held in a big hall. The king sat on a high seat at the east end of the hall. The king's seat was considered sacred, and no fiend or monster could approach it. Thus the seat on which Hrothgar sat was considered to have supernatural quality, and Grendel, the fiend could not approach it. The strangers could not enter the hall without the permission of the king. So *Beowulf* and his fellow warriors had to wait outside the hall before they were permitted to enter the hall of Hrothgar. The queen, the daughters of the king and their women sat behind the king. At the foot of the king's seat sat the jester. Thus Unferth, the jester, of Hrothgar, sat at the foot of the king's seat. The thegns of the king including his sons and the visitors sat on the benches which ran at right angles to the throne. To drink wine in joy was a common phenomenon of the court life. The queen generally filled the cup of wine for the king and the guests.

The triumph in battle or in any adventure was celebrated by the feast and merry-making. During the feast the minstrels sang, and everybody drank wine. In the morning following the night in which *Beowulf* kills Grendel, Hrothgar arranged a great feast to celebrate *Beowulf*'s victory. While the feast went on the minstrel sang the saga of Finn and his sons, of Hengest, Hnaef and Hildeburh. When the song was over the servants served the wine, and the queen Wealhtheow came forth to offer the wine-cup to her husband.

The rulers were very generous and considerate. Whenever their warriors and thegns performed the acts of heroism or won the battle, they presented rich gifts to them. Hrothgar, in requital (return gift) of Grendel's overthrow gave *Beowulf* an embroidered banner, breast-mail, an embossed (decorated) helmet, and a sword. Last, but definitely not least, Hrothgar gives *Beowulf* eight horses with gold bridles, one of which has a fancy saddle designed for a king in battle.

The warriors too, in those days thirsted for fame through the performance of the deeds of valour, and were boasted before and after the performance of the courageous deeds. Hence, it is in order to quench his thirst for fame that *Beowulf* journeyed a very long distance and offered to kill the man-eating monster Grendel. Again, when the queen Wealhtheow bore the cup of wine to *Beowulf*, he (*Beowulf*) took the cup from her hands and said boastfully: "This was my thought when I shipped on the sea; sat down in my boat with a band of my men, that I would fully work out the will of your folk, or fall on the field of slaughter, fast in the grips of the foe. Again, before setting out for the dwelling place of Grendel's mother *Beowulf* boasts to the king Hrothgar: "Not in the earth's breast, nor deep in the sea, nor in the mountain holt, nor in the abyss of ocean, go where she will, shall Grendel's kin escape from me."

The retainers in those days were very faithful and loyal to their lords. When *Beowulf* did not return long after he had plunged into the sea-water in search of the dwelling place of Grendel's mother, the thegns of Hrothgar took him for dead, and left the shore with the observation: "We shall not see him again." But *Beowulf's* own thegns remained there, sick in heart, wishing to see their dear lord again. Proving untrue to the lord through cowardice or fear was attended with shame and disgrace and brought dishonour to the families of cowards. When the followers of *Beowulf* who had fled to the nearby wood before the fearful charge of the fire-spitting dragon, came stealing back after *Beowulf* had slain the dragon and had been mortally wounded during the encounter, Wiglaf who did not flee, and helped his lord (i.e. *Beowulf*) to kill the dragon, reproached them bitterly and told them that it was disgraceful on the part of a warrior to desert his lord through fear and cowardice.

Rank was duly observed, in the ancient Teutonic society. The kings and nobles knew the rank and the ancestry of the kings and nobles of other countries. Thus when Wulfgar delivered the news of *Beowulf's* arrival to Hrothgar, Hrothgar declared that he knew *Beowulf's* father and mother and *Beowulf* himself. Hrothgar claimed that he also knew *Beowulf's* heroic exploits, and that he had the strength of thirty men in his grip.

Women were held in high esteem in the ancient Teutonic society. Their presence was considered essential in the feasts and in the courts. They passed the cups of wine to the warriors and even presented rich gifts to them in recognition of their acts of bravery. In the great feast held to celebrate the occasion of *Beowulf's* victory over Grendel, the queen Wealhtheow offered the wine cup to her husband Hrothgar and *Beowulf*. She also presented to *Beowulf* two golden armlets, a mantle, and a jeweled collar. While commenting upon the picture of Wealhtheow passing the wine cups to the warriors during the feasting and rejoicing after *Beowulf's* arrival in Heorot, Long says; "The picture of Wealhtheow passing the mead cup to the warriors with her own hand is a noble one, and plainly indicates the reverence paid by these strong men to their wives and mothers." At the king's death, the women acted as regents while their sons were young, and could dispose of the kingdom, as Hygd attempted to do. Hygd shows her wisdom and love for the Geatish people when her husband fell in the raid in **Frisia against the Franks. Instead of securing the throne for her own offspring, she offered it to *Beowulf* as she considered her son Heardred to be too inexperienced to defend Geatland*** against the Swedes.**** 'Women were also peace-weavers' as they were given away in marriage in order to put an end to the wars and rivalry. Hence in order to appease the feud, Hrothgar married his daughter Freawaru to Ingeld, the son of Froda, when Froda was killed by the Danes.

The forbears of the English were fatalistic, melancholy, stern and sober. When, after describing the death of Aeschere at the hand of Grendel's mother, and the place where the she monster lived, Hrothgar says to *Beowulf*: "Seek her out if you dare", *Beowulf* replies in a fatalistic and melancholy way: "All of us shall die sooner or later, so let him who can gain honour before death." Fate seemed to them relentless and implacable, but they did never resign cowardly to Fate; rather they did always fight against it bravely.

****Frisia** is a coastal region along the southeastern corner of the North Sea. Frisia is the traditional homeland of the Frisians, a Germanic people who speak Frisian, a language group closely related to the English language.

*****Geatland** is one of three lands of Sweden and comprises provinces. Geographically it is located in the south of Sweden

******Swedes** were an ancient North Germanic tribe in Scandinavia. As the dominions of their kings grew, their land slowly evolved into the modern Swedish nation.

Ingeld is the son of King [Froda](#) of the [Heaðobards](#)