

◀ The saga of Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer is depicted in a group of carvings that grace the entrance to a Norwegian church built in the 1100s. In this detail from one of the carvings, Sigurd is shown slaying the fearsome dragon Fáfnir. What does the style of this wood carving suggest to you about the artistic skills of these people? About what they consider important?

Beowulf

To Hrothgar was granted glory in war,
Success in battle; retainers bold
Obeyed him gladly; his band increased
To a mighty host. Then his mind was moved
5 To have men fashion a high-built hall,
A mightier mead-hall than man had known,
Wherein to portion to old and young
All goodly treasure that God had given,
Save only the folk-land, and lives of men.
10 His word was published to many a people
Far and wide o'er the ways of earth
To rear a folk-stead richly adorned;

Beowulf (bā'ō wulf).

1 Hrothgar (hrōth'gar), king of the Danes.

6 mead (mēd), *n.* an alcoholic drink made from fermented honey and water.

9 folk-land, common land owned by the community. Germanic tribal law reserved this land for grazing.

11 o'er, over.

The task was speeded, the time soon came
 That the famous mead-hall was finished and done.
 15 To distant nations its name was known,
 The Hall of the Hart; and the king kept well
 His pledge and promise to deal out gifts,
 Rings at the banquet. The great hall rose
 High and horn-gabled, holding its place. . . .
 20 Then an evil spirit who dwelt in the darkness
 Endured it ill that he heard each day
 The din of revelry ring through the hall,
 The sound of the harp, and the scop's sweet song.
 A skillful bard sang the ancient story
 25 Of man's creation; how the Maker wrought
 The shining earth with its circling waters;
 In splendor established the sun and moon
 As lights to illumine the land of men;
 Fairly adorning the fields of earth
 30 With leaves and branches; creating life
 In every creature that breathes and moves.
 So the lordly warriors lived in gladness,
 At ease and happy, till a fiend from hell
 Began a series of savage crimes.
 35 They called him Grendel, a demon grim
 Haunting the fen-lands, holding the moors,
 Ranging the wastes, where the wretched wight
 Made his lair with the monster kin;
 He bore the curse of the seed of Cain
 40 Whereby God punished the grievous guilt
 Of Abel's murder. Nor ever had Cain
 Cause to boast of that deed of blood;
 God banished him far from the fields of men;
 Of his blood was begotten an evil brood,
 45 Marauding monsters and menacing trolls,
 Goblins and giants who battled with God
 A long time. Grimly He gave them reward!
 Then at the nightfall the fiend drew near
 Where the timbered mead-hall towered on high,
 50 To spy how the Danes fared after the feast.
 Within the wine-hall he found the warriors
 Fast in slumber, forgetting grief,
 Forgetting the woe of the world of men.
 Grim and greedy the gruesome monster,
 55 Fierce and furious, launched attack,
 Slew thirty spearmen asleep in the hall,
 Sped away gloating, gripping the spoil,

16 Hall of the Hart, Hrothgar's mead-hall, or meeting hall. The hart or male deer was a symbol of Germanic kingship.

19 horn-gabled, perhaps with roof ornaments carved to resemble a stag's, or deer's, antlers.

22 revelry, (rev'əl rē) *n.* noisy partying.

23 scop's sweet song. The scop (skop) was the tribe's storyteller, chanting his tales to the sound of a harp.

25 wrought, (rôt), *adj.* made. *Wrought* is an archaic past tense of the verb *work*.

35 Grendel (gren'dl).

39 seed of Cain. In the Bible, Cain murders his brother Abel and is driven into the wilderness by God (Genesis 4:8-14). According to later legend his offspring included a variety of monsters.

45 maraud (mə rōd'), *v.* go about in search of plunder.

■ What impression do you get of Grendel throughout this selection—that he is an animal behaving as an animal behaves or that he is a rational creature planning to murder humans and eat them?

Dragging the dead men home to his den.
 Then in the dawn with the coming of daybreak
 60 The war-might of Grendel was widely known.
 Mirth was stilled by the sound of weeping;
 The wail of the mourner awoke with day.
 And the peerless hero, the honored prince,
 Weighted down with woe and heavy of heart,
 65 Sat sorely grieving for slaughtered thanes,
 As they traced the track of the cursed monster.
 From that day onward the deadly feud
 Was a long-enduring and loathsome strife.

Not longer was it than one night later
 70 The fiend returning renewed attack
 With heart firm-fixed in the hateful war,
 Feeling no rue for the grievous wrong.
 'Twas easy thereafter to mark the men
 Who sought their slumber elsewhere afar,
 75 Found beds in the bowers, since Grendel's hate
 Was so baldly blazoned in baleful signs.
 He held himself at a safer distance
 Who escaped the clutch of the demon's claw.
 So Grendel raided and ravaged the realm,
 80 One against all, in an evil war
 Till the best of buildings was empty and still.
 'Twas a weary while! Twelve winters' time
 The lord of the Scyldings had suffered woe,
 Sore affliction and deep distress.
 85 And the malice of Grendel, in mournful lays,
 Was widely sung by the sons of men. . . .

The Coming of Beowulf

Then tales of the terrible deeds of Grendel
 Reached Hygelac's thane in his home with the Geats;
 Of living strong men he was the strongest,
 90 Fearless and gallant and great of heart.
 He gave command for a goodly vessel
 Fitted and furnished; he fain would sail
 Over the swan-road to seek the king
 Who suffered so sorely for need of men.
 95 And his bold retainers found little to blame
 In his daring venture, dear though he was;
 They viewed the omens, and urged him on.
 Brave was the band he had gathered about him,
 Fourteen stalwarts seasoned and bold,
 100 Seeking the shore where the ship lay waiting. . . .

63 **peerless** (pir'lis), *adj.*
 without equal; matchless.
 63 **honored prince**, Hrothgar.
 65 **thanes**, warriors. A thane
 ranked between an earl (a
 nobleman) and an ordinary
 freeman.

72 **rue** (rū), *n.* regret.
 73 'twas, it was.

83 **lord of the Scyldings**,
 Hrothgar. His grandfather,
 Scyld (shild), was founder of
 the Danish line of kings, the
 Scyldingas.

88 **Hygelac's thane . . . Geats**,
 Beowulf. Hygelac (hī'jə lak)
 was king of the Geats (yā'əts),
 a people who lived in south-
 western Sweden. Hygelac
 actually lived and was famous
 for his unusual height. He
 died in battle in A.D. 521.

90 **gallant** (gal'ənt), *adj.*
 noble in spirit or in conduct.

■ Anglo-Saxon poetry often
 makes use of a poetic device
 known as **kenning**. The writer
 uses a compound word
 that names something in a
 metaphorical way. For exam-
 ple, line 93 refers to the
 "swan-road." What sort of
 "road" would swans travel on?

99 **stalwart** (stól'wərt), *n.*
 strong, brave, and steadfast
 person.

Beowulf and his men sail from the valley of the Gota River in Sweden to the Danish island of Zealand to offer their services to King Hrothgar. They are greeted by Wulfgar, the king's herald, or official messenger, who carries their message to his king.

Beowulf's Welcome at Hrothgar's Court

Wulfgar saluted his lord and friend:

"Men from afar have fared to our land
Over ocean's margin—men of the Geats,
Their leader called Beowulf—seeking a boon,
105 The holding of parley, my prince, with thee.
O gracious Hrothgar, refuse not the favor!
In their splendid war-gear they merit well
The esteem of earls; he's a stalwart leader
Who led this troop to the land of the Danes."

110 Hrothgar spoke, the lord of the Scyldings:

"Their leader I knew when he still was a lad.
His father was Ecgtheow; Hrethel the Geat
Gave him in wedlock his only daughter.
Now is their son come, keen for adventure,

115 Finding his way to a faithful friend.
Sea-faring men who have voyaged to Geatland
With gifts of treasure as token of peace,
Say that his hand-grip has thirty men's strength.
God, in His mercy, has sent him to save us—
120 So springs my hope—from Grendel's assaults.
For his gallant courage I'll load him with gifts!
Make haste now, marshal the men to the hall,
And give them welcome to Danish ground."

Then to the door went the well-known warrior,

125 Spoke from the threshold welcoming words:
"The Danish leader, my lord, declares
That he knows your kinship; right welcome you come,
You stout sea-rovers, to Danish soil.
Enter now, in your shining armor
130 And vizored helmets, to Hrothgar's hall.
But leave your shields and the shafts of slaughter
To wait the issue and weighing of words."

Then the bold one rose with his band around him,

A splendid massing of mighty thanes;
135 A few stood guard as the Geat gave bidding
Over the weapons stacked by the wall.
They followed in haste on the heels of their leader
Under Heorot's roof. Full ready and bold
The helmeted warrior strode to the hearth;

101 **Wulfgar** (wulf'gar),
Hrothgar's herald, an official
who carries messages.

105 **parley** (pär'lē), *n.* con-
ference.

108 **esteem** (e stēm'), *n.*
high regard.

112 **Ecgtheow** (edj'thā ō),
Beowulf's father.

112 **Hrethel** (hreth'l),
Beowulf's mother's father.

■ Many lines in *Beowulf* are devoted to tracing kinship, or family relationships. What does this tell you about the society of these people?

138 **Heorot** (hā'ə rot),
Hrothgar's mead-hall, the
"Hall of the Hart."

140 Beowulf spoke; his byrny glittered,
 His war-net woven by cunning of smith:
 "Hail! King Hrothgar! I am Hygelac's thane,
 Hygelac's kinsman. Many a deed
 Of honor and daring I've done in my youth.

145 This business of Grendel was brought to my ears
 On my native soil. The sea-farers say
 This best of buildings, this boasted hall,
 Stands dark and deserted when sun is set,
 When darkening shadows gather with dusk.

150 The best of my people, prudent and brave,
 Urged me, King Hrothgar, to seek you out;
 They had in remembrance my courage and might.
 Many had seen me come safe from the conflict,
 Bloody from battle; five foes I bound

155 Of the giant kindred, and crushed their clan.
 Hard-driven in danger and darkness of night
 I slew the nicors that swam the sea,
 Avenged the woe they had caused the Weders,
 And ended their evil—they needed the lesson!

160 And now with Grendel, the fearful fiend,
 Single-handed I'll settle the strife!
 Prince of the Danes, protector of Scyldings,
 Lord of nations, and leader of men,
 I beg one favor—refuse me not,

165 Since I come thus faring from far-off lands—
 That I may alone with my loyal earls,
 With this hardy company, cleanse Hart-Hall.
 I have heard that the demon in proud disdain
 Spurns all weapons; and I too scorn—

170 May Hygelac's heart have joy of the deed—
 To bear my sword, or sheltering shield,
 Or yellow buckler, to battle the fiend.
 With hand-grip only I'll grapple with Grendel;
 Foe against foe I'll fight to the death,

175 And the one who is taken must trust to God's grace! . . .
 If death shall call me, he'll carry away
 My gory flesh to his fen-retreat
 To gorge at leisure and gulp me down,
 Soiling the marshes with stains of blood.

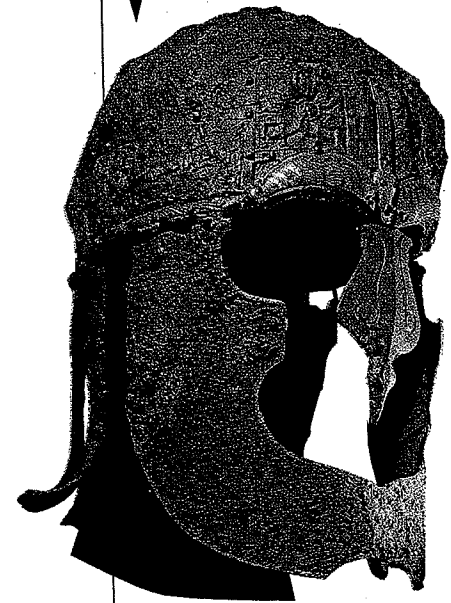
180 There'll be little need longer to care for my body!
 If the battle slays me, to Hygelac send
 This best of corselets that covers my breast . . .
 Finest of byrnies. Fate goes as Fate must!"

140 byrny, shirt of chain mail.
 150 prudent (prūd'nt), *adj.*
 sensible; discreet.
 157 nicor (nik'ər), *n.* a water
 demon, animal in shape.
 158 Weders (vā'dərz),
 Beowulf's people, the Swedes.

■ Notice that the poet often
 uses a series of descriptive
 names (called **epithets**) to
 refer to the same person, as
 in lines 162–163. What do
 you learn about Hrothgar in
 these lines?

■ The Beowulf poet is fond
 of **understatement**, a state-
 ment that expresses a fact less
 emphatically than it should.
 What makes line 180 an
 example of understatement?

This iron warrior's helmet, with its
 cap covered by richly decorated
 bronze sheets, dates from
 Sweden of the 600s. What does
 the helmet's construction suggest
 about the dangers faced by the
 warrior who wore it? What does
 the helmet's rich ornamentation
 suggest about the warrior's status
 in his society?



Hrothgar invites Beowulf and his men to a banquet in their honor.

Then in the beer-hall were benches made ready
185 For the Geatish heroes. Noble of heart,
Proud and stalwart, they sat them down
And a beer-thane served them; bore in his hands
The patterned ale-cup, pouring the mead,
While the scop's sweet singing was heard in the hall.
190 There was joy of heroes, a host at ease,
A welcome meeting of Weder and Dane.

Unferth Taunts Beowulf

Then out spoke Unferth, Ecglaf's son,
Who sat at the feet of the Scylding lord,
Picking a quarrel—for Beowulf's quest,
195 His bold sea-voyaging, irked him sore;
He bore it ill that any man other
In all the earth should ever achieve
More fame under heaven than he himself:
"Are you the Beowulf that strove with Breca
200 In a swimming match in the open sea,
Both of you wantonly tempting the waves,
Risking your lives on the lonely deep
For a silly boast? No man could dissuade you,
Nor friend nor foe, from the foolhardy venture
205 Of ocean-swimming; with outstretched arms
You clasped the sea-stream, measured her streets,
With plowing shoulders parted the waves.
The sea-flood boiled with its wintry surges,
Seven nights you toiled in the tossing sea;
210 His strength was the greater, his swimming the stronger! . . .
Therefore, I ween, worse fate shall befall,
Stout as you are in the struggle of war,
In deeds of battle, if you dare to abide
Encounter with Grendel at coming of night."
215 Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
"My good friend Unferth, addled with beer
Much have you made of the deeds of Breca!
I count it true that I had more courage,
More strength in swimming than any other man.
220 In our youth we boasted—we were both of us boys—
We would risk our lives in the raging sea.
And we made it good! We gripped in our hands
Naked swords, as we swam in the waves,

192 Unferth (un/'ferth),
Ecglaf's (edj/'laf's) son.
Unferth's name can be inter-
preted as "Peacebreaker."

199 Breca (brek'/ə), a friend
of Beowulf's youth.

203 dissuade (di swād'/), *v.*
persuade not to do some-
thing.

■ Unferth's role is a com-
mon one in epic poetry, that
of the king's rude retainer
who mocks the hero. What
questions does this episode
raise in your mind?

Guarding us well from the whales' assault.
225 In the breaking seas he could not outstrip me,
Nor would I leave him. For five nights long
Side by side we strove in the waters
Till racing combers wrenched us apart,
Freezing squalls, and the falling night,
230 And a bitter north wind's icy blast.
Rough were the waves; the wrath of the sea-fish
Was fiercely roused, but my firm-linked byrny,
The gold-adorned corselet that covered my breast,
Gave firm defense from the clutching foe.
235 Down to the bottom a savage sea-beast
Fiercely dragged me and held me fast
In a deadly grip; none the less it was granted me
To pierce the monster with point of steel.
Death swept it away with the swing of my sword.
240 "The grisly sea-beasts again and again
Beset me sore; but I served them home
With my faithful blade as was well-befitting. . . .
Fate often delivers an undoomed earl
If his spirit be gallant! And so I was granted
245 To slay with the sword-edge nine of the nicors.
I have never heard tell of more terrible strife
Under dome of heaven in darkness of night,
Nor of man harder pressed on the paths of ocean.
But I freed my life from the grip of the foe
250 Though spent with the struggle. The billows bore me,
The swirling currents and surging seas,
To the land of the Finns. And little I've heard
Of any such valiant adventures from you!" . . .

Beowulf Slays Grendel

In the hall as of old were brave words spoken,
255 There was noise of revel; happy the host
Till the son of Healfdene would go to his rest.
He knew that the monster would meet in the hall
Relentless struggle when light of the sun
Was dusky with gloom of the gathering night,
260 And shadow-shapes crept in the covering dark,
Dim under heaven. The host arose.
Hrothgar graciously greeted his guest,
Gave rule of the wine-hall, and wished him well,
Praised the warrior in parting words:
265 "Never to any man, early or late,
Since first I could brandish buckler and sword,

228 combers, waves.

231 wrath, (rath), *n.* great anger.

252 Finns, probably the Lapps, inhabitants of Finmarken, around the North Cape in the northern extremity of Norway and above the Arctic Circle.

256 Healfdene (hā'alf den ə), Hrothgar's father.

266 brandish (bran'dish), *v.* wave threateningly; flourish.

Have I trusted this ale-hall save only to you!
 Be mindful of glory, show forth your strength,
 Keep watch against foe! No wish of your heart
 270 Shall go unfulfilled if you live through the fight.”
 Then Hrothgar withdrew with his host of retainers,
 The prince of the Scyldings, seeking his queen,
 The bed of his consort. The King of Glory
 Had stablished a hall-watch, a guard against Grendel,
 275 Dutifully serving the Danish lord,
 The land defending from loathsome fiend.
 The Geatish hero put all his hope
 In his fearless might and the mercy of God!
 He stripped from his shoulders the byrn of steel,
 280 Doffed helmet from head; into hand of thane
 Gave inlaid iron, the best of blades;
 Bade him keep well the weapons of war.
 Beowulf uttered a gallant boast,
 The stalwart Geat, ere he sought his bed:
 285 “I count myself nowise weaker in war
 Or grapple of battle than Grendel himself.
 Therefore I scorn to slay him with sword,
 Deal deadly wound, as I well might do!
 Nothing he knows of a noble fighting,
 290 Of thrusting and hewing and hacking of shield,
 Fierce as he is in the fury of war.
 In the shades of darkness we’ll spurn the sword
 If he dares without weapon to do or to die.
 And God in His wisdom shall glory assign,
 295 The ruling Lord, as He deems it right.”
 Then the bold in battle bowed down to his rest,
 Cheek pressed pillow; the peerless thanes
 Were stretched in slumber around their lord. . . .
 But the hero watched awaiting the foe,
 300 Abiding in anger the issue of war.
 From the stretching moors, from the misty hollows,
 Grendel came creeping, accursed of God,
 A murderous ravager minded to snare
 Spoil of heroes in high-built hall.
 305 Under clouded heavens he held his way
 Till there rose before him the high-roofed house,
 Wine-hall of warriors gleaming with gold.
 Nor was it the first of his fierce assaults
 On the home of Hrothgar; but never before
 310 Had he found worse fate or hardier hall-thanes!
 Storming the building he burst the portal,

284 *ere*, (er), *conj.* before.
 303 *ravager* (rav'ij ər), *n.*
 destroyer.

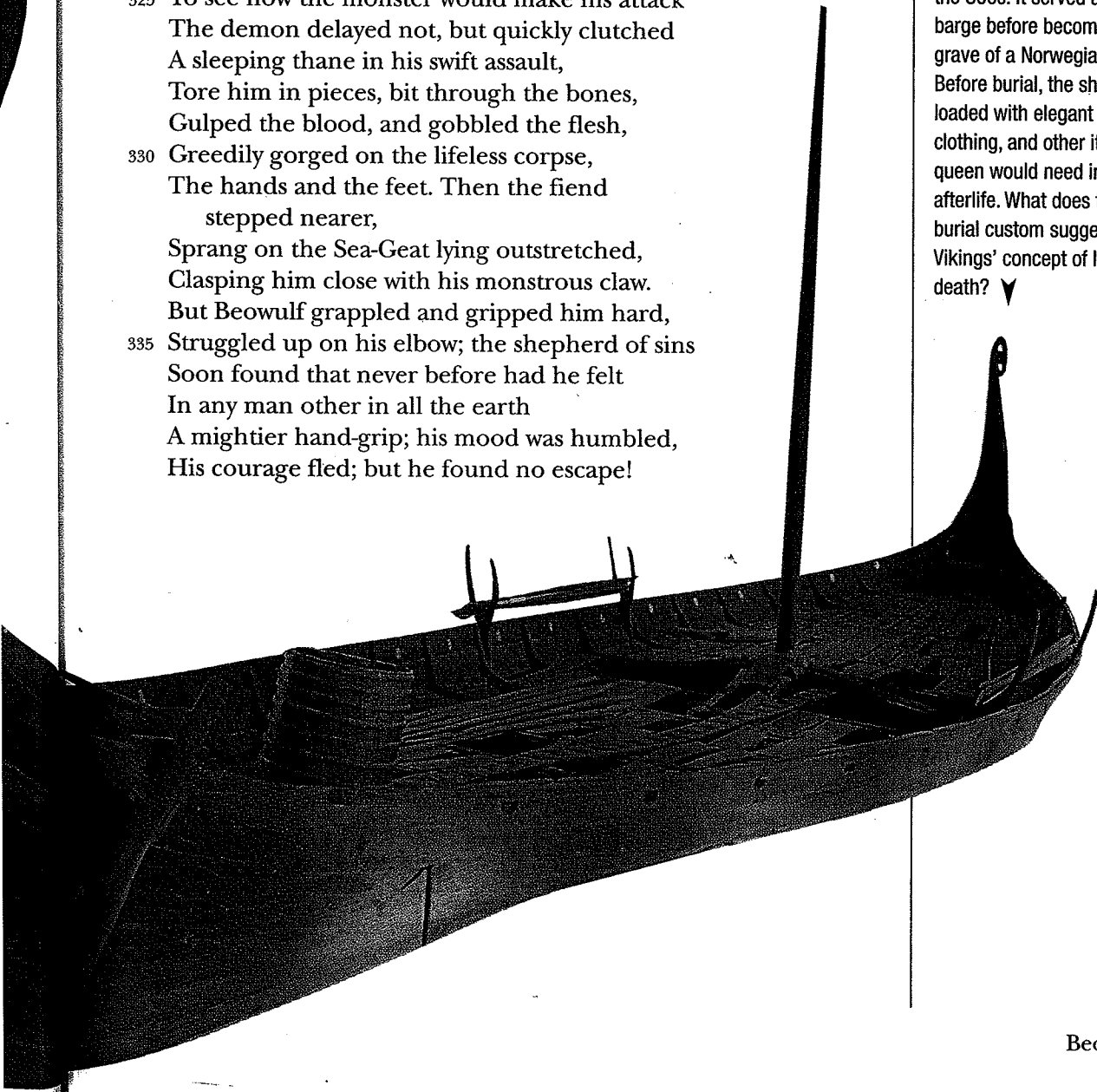


Though fastened of iron, with fiendish strength;
Forced open the entrance in savage fury
And rushed in rage o'er the shining floor.
315 A baleful glare from his eyes was gleaming
Most like to a flame. He found in the hall
Many a warrior sealed in slumber,
A host of kinsmen. His heart rejoiced;
The savage monster was minded to sever
320 Lives from bodies ere break of day,
To feast his fill of the flesh of men.
But he was not fated to glut his greed
With more of mankind when the night was ended!

The hardy kinsman of Hygelac waited
325 To see how the monster would make his attack
The demon delayed not, but quickly clutched
A sleeping thane in his swift assault,
Tore him in pieces, bit through the bones,
Gulped the blood, and gobbled the flesh,
330 Greedily gorged on the lifeless corpse,
The hands and the feet. Then the fiend
stepped nearer,
Sprang on the Sea-Geat lying outstretched,
Clasping him close with his monstrous claw.
But Beowulf grappled and gripped him hard,
335 Struggled up on his elbow; the shepherd of sins
Soon found that never before had he felt
In any man other in all the earth
A mightier hand-grip; his mood was humbled,
His courage fled; but he found no escape!

■ One unlucky thane is torn to pieces before Beowulf grapples with Grendel. Is this because of carelessness on Beowulf's part? If not, what might be the poet's intention here?

The Oseberg ship was a magnificent Viking vessel built in the 800s. It served as a royal barge before becoming the ship grave of a Norwegian queen. Before burial, the ship was loaded with elegant furniture, clothing, and other items that the queen would need in her royal afterlife. What does this Viking burial custom suggest about the Vikings' concept of life after death? ▼



340 He was fain to be gone; he would flee to the darkness,
 The fellowship of devils. Far different his fate
 From that which befell him in former days!
 The hardy hero, Hygelac's kinsman,
 Remembered the boast he had made at the banquet;
 345 He sprang to his feet, clutched Grendel fast,
 Though fingers were cracking, the fiend pulling free.
 The earl pressed after; the monster was minded
 To win his freedom and flee to the fens.
 He knew that his fingers were fast in the grip
 350 Of a savage foe. Sorry the venture,
 The raid that the ravager made on the hall.
 There was din in Heorot. For all the Danes,
 The city-dwellers, the stalwart Scyldings,
 That was a bitter spilling of beer!
 355 The walls resounded, the fight was fierce,
 Savage the strife as the warriors struggled.
 The wonder was that the lofty wine-hall
 Withstood the struggle, nor crashed to earth,
 The house so fair; it was firmly fastened
 360 Within and without with iron bands
 Cunningly smithied; though men have said
 That many a mead-bench gleaming with gold
 Sprang from its sill as the warriors strove.
 The Scylding wise men had never weened
 365 That any ravage could wreck the building,
 Firmly fashioned and finished with bone,
 Or any cunning compass its fall,
 Till the time when the swelter and surge of fire
 Should swallow it up in a swirl of flame.
 370 Continuous tumult filled the hall;
 A terror fell on the Danish folk
 As they heard through the wall the horrible wailing,
 The groans of Grendel, the foe of God
 Howling his hideous hymn of pain,
 375 The hell-thane shrieking in sore defeat.
 He was fast in the grip of the man who was greatest
 Of mortal men in the strength of his might,
 Who would never rest while the wretch was living,
 Counting his life-days a menace to man.
 380 Many an earl of Beowulf brandished
 His ancient iron to guard his lord,
 To shelter safely the peerless prince.
 They had no knowledge, those daring thanes,
 When they drew their weapons to hack and hew,

364 ween (wēn), *v.* suppose; believe.

367 compass (kum'pæs), *v.* plot; scheme.

369 swirl of flame, one of a number of references in the poem to the later burning of Heorot.

- 385 To thrust to the heart, that the sharpest sword,
 The choicest iron in all the world,
 Could work no harm to the hideous foe.
 On every sword he had laid a spell,
 On every blade; but a bitter death
- 390 Was to be his fate; far was the journey
 The monster made to the home of fiends.
 Then he who had wrought such wrong to men,
 With grim delight as he warred with God,
 Soon found that his strength was feeble and failing
- 395 In the crushing hold of Hygelac's thane.
 Each loathed the other while life should last!
 There Grendel suffered a grievous hurt,
 A wound in the shoulder, gaping and wide;
 Sinews snapped and bone-joints broke,
- 400 And Beowulf gained the glory of battle.
 Grendel, fated, fled to the fens,
 To his joyless dwelling, sick unto death.
 He knew in his heart that his hours were numbered,
 His days at an end. For all the Danes
- 405 Their wish was fulfilled in the fall of Grendel.
 The stranger from far, the stalwart and strong,
 Had purged of evil the hall of Hrothgar,
 And cleansed of crime; the heart of the hero
 Joyed in the deed his daring had done.
- 410 The lord of the Geats made good to the East-Danes
 The boast he had uttered; he ended their ill,
 And all the sorrow they suffered long
 And needs must suffer—a foul offense.
 The token was clear when the bold in battle
- 415 Laid down the shoulder and dripping claw—
 Grendel's arm—in the gabled hall!

The Joy of the Danes

- When morning came, as they tell the tale,
 Many a warrior hastened to hall,
 Folk-leaders faring from far and near
- 420 Over wide-running ways, to gaze at the wonder,
 The trail of the demon. Nor seemed his death
 A matter of sorrow to any man
 Who viewed the tracks of the vanquished monster
 As he slunk weary-hearted away from the hall,
- 425 Doomed and defeated and marking his flight
 With bloody prints to the nicors' pool.
 The crimson currents bubbled and heaved

☞ Earlier (in lines 168–173 and again in lines 285–293), Beowulf has declared that he will use no weapons to fight Grendel. How does that **choice** contribute to his success and to his status as a hero among his people?

397 *grievous* (grē/vəs), *adj.* causing great pain or suffering; severe.

In eddying reaches reddened with gore;
 The surges boiled with the fiery blood.

430 But the monster had sunk from the sight of men.
 In that fenny covert the cursed fiend
 Not long thereafter laid down his life,
 His heathen spirit; and hell received him.

Then all the comrades, the old and young,

435 The brave of heart, in a blithesome band
 Came riding their horses home from the mere.
 Beowulf's prowess was praised in song;
 And many men stated that south or north,
 Over all the world, or between the seas,

440 Or under the heaven, no hero was greater,
 More worthy of rule. But no whit they slighted
 The gracious Hrothgar, their good old king. . . .

Then spoke Hrothgar; hasting to hall
 He stood at the steps, stared up at the roof

445 High and gold-gleaming; saw Grendel's hand:
 "Thanks be to God for this glorious sight!
 I have suffered much evil, much outrage from Grendel,
 But the God of glory works wonder on wonder.
 I had no hope of a haven from sorrow

450 While this best of houses stood badged with blood,
 A woe far-reaching for all the wise
 Who weened that they never could hold the hall
 Against the assaults of devils and demons.
 But now with God's help this hero has compassed

455 A deed our cunning could no way contrive.
 Surely that woman may say with truth,
 Who bore this son, if she still be living,
 Our ancient God showed favor and grace
 On her bringing-forth! O best of men,

460 I will keep you, Beowulf, close to my heart
 In firm affection; as son to father
 Hold fast henceforth to this foster-kinship.
 You shall know not want of treasure or wealth
 Or goodly gift that your wish may crave,

465 While I have power. For poorer deeds
 I have granted guerdon, and graced with honor
 Weaker warriors, feebler in fight.
 You have done such deeds that your fame shall flourish
 Through all the ages! God grant you still

470 All goodly grace as He gave before."
 Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
 "By the favor of God we won the fight,

431 **covert** (kuv'ərt), *n.* hid-
 ing place.

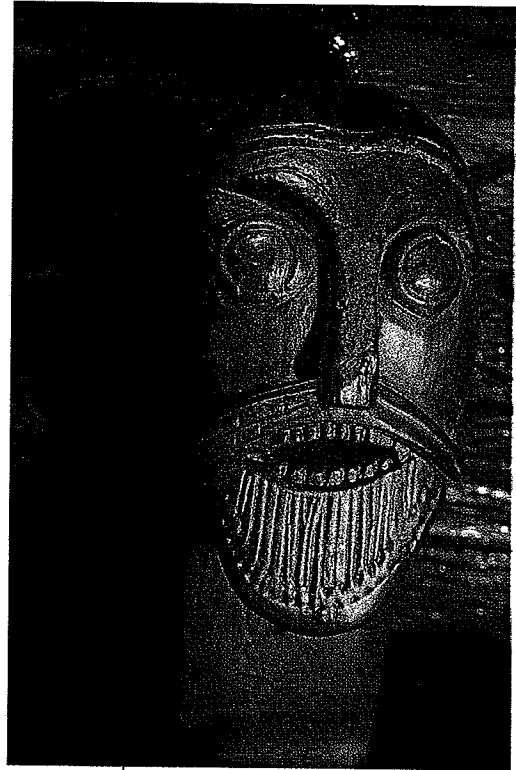
435 **blithesome** (blīth'səm),
adj. happy and cheerful.

437 **prowess** (prou'is), *n.*
 bravery; daring.

■ What happens to
 Grendel's hand?

466 **guerdon** (gérd'n), *n.*
 reward.

Did the deed of valor, and boldly dared
The might of the monster. I would you could see
475 The fiend himself lying dead before you!
I thought to grip him in stubborn grasp
And bind him down on the bed of death,
There to lie straining in struggle for life,
While I gripped him fast lest he vanish away.
480 But I might not hold him or hinder his going
For God did not grant it, my fingers failed.
Too savage the strain of his fiendish strength!
To save his life he left shoulder and claw,
The arm of the monster, to mark his track. . . .”
485 Then slower of speech was the son of Ecglaf,
More wary of boasting of warlike deeds,
While the nobles gazed at the grisly claw,
The fiend’s hand fastened by hero’s might
On the lofty roof. Most like to steel
490 Were the hardened nails, the heathen’s hand-spurs,
Horrible, monstrous; and many men said
No tempered sword, no excellent iron,
Could have harmed the monster or hacked away
The demon’s battle-claw dripping with blood.
495 In joyful haste was Heorot decked
And a willing host of women and men
Gaily dressed and adorned the guest-hall.
Splendid hangings with sheen of gold
Shone on the walls, a glorious sight
500 To eyes that delight to behold such wonders.
The shining building was wholly shattered
Though braced and fastened with iron bands;
Hinges were riven; the roof alone
Remained unharmed when the horrid monster,
505 Foul with evil, slunk off in flight,
Hopeless of life. It is hard to flee
The touch of death, let him try who will;
Necessity urges the sons of men,
The dwellers on earth, to their destined place
510 Where the body, bound in its narrow bed,
After the feasting is fast in slumber.



▲ This ferocious human mask is just one of the many intricate carvings that decorate a wooden cart found aboard the Oseberg ship (see pages 16–17). What might the mask suggest about the Viking view of human nature?