

NAXOS
AudioBooks

Beowulf

New translation by Benedict Flynn

THE
COMPLETE
TEXT

UNABRIDGED

Read by **Crawford Logan**

POETRY



NA242512D

1	Beowulf Part I	5:04
2	So those warrior Scyldings passed their lives	5:26
3	The hour came. The ship rode the flood in close	3:46
4	They turned to leave: the ship waited anchored...	8:16
5	A bench was cleared for the Geats in the hall	5:13
6	There was laughter then, and the din resounded...	3:45
7	Outcast and joyless Grendel came to Heorot.	4:50
8	Part II	3:41
9	Meanwhile the Danes raced their mounts...	5:49
10	The Dane's chief went on to reward the others.	5:03
11	This was the lay, the song of the poet,	4:33
12	Part III	3:27
13	Hrothgar spoke, protector of the Scyldings:	4:38
14	They all gazed at the hot gore surging up	6:23
15	A radiance appeared and a light streamed in	4:53

16	Hrothgar first examined the hilt, engraved	5:26
17	Then the warriors hastened, keen to return...	3:43
18	Part IV	4:02
19	After Hygelac offered greetings	4:02
20	'But, my tale is what happened with Grendel...'	5:55
21	Part V	5:39
22	Beowulf heard the news of the terror,	4:03
23	Beowulf the brave king sat on the windy headland.	4:52
24	Beowulf addressed his dear companions	5:25
25	Wiglaf, sad at heart, addressed the warriors.	3:29
26	The fatal wound inflicted by the earth-scorcher began	5:25
27	Part VI	5:39
28	Ongentheow, old and heavy-hearted, turned	5:15
29	What happened brought to nought the hope of one	6:11

Total time: 2:24:09

Beowulf

Consider this story. The peace of a happy community is shattered by the emergence of an all-powerful monster from its watery lair. Fear and confusion reign as it seizes its victims at will, again and again. When the threat seems almost unbearable, a hero sets out to do battle with it. A struggle ensues, the monster disappears, apparently dead. But still victims are taken and torn to pieces. There is a climactic battle, the hero finally overcomes the threat to his world, the community rejoices. Life can begin again.

Is it 'Jaws'? It might be, the story is strikingly similar. But no, the monster is not a big fish, the hero not the police chief of Amity, Long Island. It is the first part of Beowulf, an ancient poem that comes to us with a slightly dusty reputation, as being primarily of interest to scholars. But built from the same source material as Frankenstein and Godzilla, fears deeply rooted in our psyches, it is a poem as gripping as any horror-flick, an epic re-telling of one of the fundamental plots of good versus evil.

In this version our hero is Beowulf, a warrior among the Geats with the strength

of thirty men. He crosses the sea from southern Sweden to the land of the Danes to rid them of Grendel, a shambling, man-eating monster. Grendel's nocturnal attacks have rendered a gilded mead-hall called Heorot, pride and joy of the Danes, cursed and uninhabitable for twelve years. But this night when Grendel emerges from his lair on the misty fenland nearby to seize his victims in the barricaded hall, Beowulf joins him in battle. The monster retreats, fatally wounded. Success is short-lived however. Warriors are still seized from Heorot at night. Beowulf must search out and face a second revenging monster, Grendel's even more fiendish mother in her dark infested lake lair. He triumphs after a near-death underwater struggle, and laden with glory and gold, sails back to his homeland, where in time, he becomes king. Finally, fifty years later, Beowulf faces evil in a third guise, in the form of a dragon terrorising his country. He confronts the reptile at its cave, but meets his own fate in the battle too .

Beowulf's struggles against evil are powerfully straightforward. What can make the poem puzzling is the way the story is

told. The narrative appears to flit between past events and a known future just when, to our understanding of story-telling, the action ought to move ahead. At two points, the story of Sigemund's triumph over a dragon, and the battle at the stronghold of Finn, it seems to wander into entirely different poems. But these are digressions only if we look at the poem with a 21st century view. They have a purpose. Like a medieval narrative picture that lacks perspective but works on its own terms as a whole, the poet's allusions and supporting incidents create a believable world and, by comparison, celebrate Beowulf's heroic deeds.

Though the poet writes in the eighth century and God is present throughout the poem, the world he describes is pre-Christian. Beowulf's world is constrained by *wyrd*, or fate, and blood-feuds, shackled by the mutual ties of honour and loyalty between lord and liegeman. It shows an ideal of noble conduct where gold and earthly fame through honour are the twin poles of a warrior's existence. A warrior must strive for honour constantly, as Beowulf does, in battle and in deeds.

Honour won by liegemen accrues to a lord, distributor of treasure to his clan, and

their defence. The death of a lord means weakness and attack by other more powerful lords. Killing vengeance is demanded of the living, and so blood feuds trickle down the generations. These are things Beowulf predicts himself for his own people when he returns home after defeating Grendel and his mother.

In this sense Beowulf also traces the *wyrd* of three nations; the Danes, at the height of their power, as the great golden hall of Heorot shows to the world, our hero's own people; the Geats, doomed to be left lordless after Beowulf's own passing, and the Swedes, a dreadful ever present threat in the background. It is not a historical poem, but we know of one event often referred to by the poet through a near contemporary source; the death of Beowulf's liege lord Hygelac in a raid around 520 AD. Beowulf himself is, of course, entirely legendary but no less real for that.

The poem comes down to us in one surviving manuscript copied out around 1000 AD, now in the British Library. It is certainly the earliest epic in what can be called English literature, and marks a step away from oral tradition towards written practice. Exactly when Beowulf was written though, we do not know. Possibly the

original was composed around 835 AD. It is unlikely to be later since it glorifies the Danes, whose ruthless raids on Anglo-Saxon England began then. Possibly it was written earlier around 700 AD, in Northumbria during its Golden Age, the time of the Venerable Bede.

The language of Beowulf, Old English, is like our own but not sufficiently so to be read easily, hence the poem's dusty reputation. In the same way, the poetry resembles ours, although given our familiarity with free verse today perhaps we appreciate it more easily than previous generations. Originally it would have been read slowly, to the sound of a harp.

A line of Old English poetry divides into

two balanced halves of two stressed syllables, linked by alliteration. It has no regularly recurring rhythm, but the natural metre of speech organised for powerful effect. Patterns are enhanced by a characteristic vocabulary of poetic compounds to make analogies, such as 'whale-road' for sea, or ring-giver for king. In translation attempts at exact imitations of the style of an Anglo Saxon scop (a professional tribal poet) can become intrusive, or self-consciously archaic. This version of Beowulf in modern English does not labour the alliteration, or cleave rigidly to the equal break in the line but tries to keep a sense and feel and movement.

Notes by Benedict Flynn

Cover picture: Dawn raiders, J H Valda in *The Story of the British Nation*
Courtesy Mary Evans Picture Library

Beowulf

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The oldest long poem in Old English, written about 1000 AD, Beowulf tells the story of a great warrior in Southern Scandinavia in both youth and maturity. The monster Grendel terrorizes the Scyldings of Hrothgar's Danish Kingdom until Beowulf defeats him. As a result he has to face Grendel's enraged mother. Beowulf dies after a battle against a fierce dragon.

The tale is powerfully performed here by Crawford Logan in a lively modern translation from the original West Saxon dialect.

Crawford Logan is Scottish, lives in Scotland, and has been involved with a number of sagas over many years, including *The Archers*, *Dr Who*, *EastEnders*, *The Mousetrap* and *The Forsythe Saga*, all 2500 pages of it. He is married with very grown-up children, cooks, supports Stirling Albion FC, occasionally succeeds in making proper contact with a golf ball, and believes musicians to be as superhuman as Beowulf.

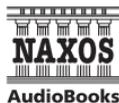
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