Beowulf carries Grendel's head to King Hrothgar and then returns gift-laden to the land of the Geats, where he succeeds to the throne. After fifty winters pass, Beowulf, now an old man, faces his final task: He must fight a dragon who, angry because a thief had stolen a jeweled cup from the dragon's hoard of gold, is laying waste to the Geats' land. Beowulf and eleven warriors are guided to the dragon's lair by the thief who stole the cup. For Beowulf, the price of this last victory will be great.

The Final Battle

Then he said farewell to his followers, each in his turn, for the last time:

"I'd use no sword, no weapon, if this beast could be killed without it, crushed to death. Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn
limb from limb. But his breath will be burning hot, poison will pour from his tongue. I feel no shame, with shield and sword and armor, against this monster: When he comes to me I mean to stand, not run from his shooting flames, stand till fate decides which of us wins. My heart is firm, my hands calm: I need no hot words. Wait for me close by, my friends. We shall see, soon, who will survive this bloody battle, stand when the fighting is done. No one else could do what I mean to, here, no man but me could hope to defeat this monster. No one could try. And this dragon's treasure, his gold and everything hidden in that tower, will be mine. Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"

Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong, and with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on his breast, strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under the rocky cliffs: No coward could have walked there! And then he who'd endured dozens of desperate battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and shields clashed, the best of kings, saw huge stone arches and felt the heat of the dragon's breath, flooding down through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone to stand, a streaming current of fire and smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats' lord and leader, angry, lowered his sword and roared out a battle cry,
A call so loud and clear that it reached through
The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's
Ear. The beast rose, angry,
Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
But war could have followed. Its breath came first,
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,
Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf
Swung his shield into place, held it
In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon
Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it
Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword
Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming
Blade. The beast came closer; both of them
Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats' Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared
Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,
Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying
To its fate. Flames beat at the iron
Shield, and for a time it held, protected
Beowulf as he'd planned; then it began to melt,
And for the first time in his life that famous prince
Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword
And struck at the dragon's scaly hide.
The ancient blade broke, bit into
The monster's skin, drew blood, but cracked
And failed him before it went deep enough, helped him
Less than he needed. The dragon leaped
With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting
Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.
And the Geats' ring-giver did not boast of glorious
Victories in other wars: His weapon
Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it Most, that excellent sword. Edgetho's Famous son stared at death,
Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
Into darkness that all men must make, as death
Ends their few brief hours on earth.
Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,
And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling
Flames—a king, before, but now
A beaten warrior. None of his comrades Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble Followers; they ran for their lives, fled
Deep in a wood. And only one of them
Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering, As a good man must, what kinship should mean.
His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan's son 
And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish, 
Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see 
How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering 
Everything his lord and cousin had given him, 
Armor and gold and the great estates 
Wexstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's 
Mind was made up; he raised his yellow 
Shield and drew his sword. . . . 
And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered 
The kind of words his comrades deserved: 
"I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking 
And boasting of how brave we'd be when Beowulf 
Needed us, he who gave us these swords 
And armor: All of us swore to repay him, 
When the time came, kindness for kindness 
—With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us to join him, 
Chose us from all his great army, thinking 
Our boasting words had some weight, believing 
Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us 
For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill 
This monster himself, our mighty king, 
Fight this battle alone and unaided, 
As in the days when his strength and daring dazzled 
Men's eyes. But those days are over and gone 
And now our lord must lean on younger 
Arms. And we must go to him, while angry 
Flames burn at his flesh, help 
Our glorious king! By almighty God, 
I'd rather burn myself than see 
Flames swirling around my lord. 
And who are we to carry home 
Our shields before we've slain his enemy 
And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf 
So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing 
He ever did deserved an end 
Like this, dying miserably and alone, 
Butchered by this savage beast: We swore 
That these swords and armor were each for us all!" . . .
Together, Beowulf and the young Wiglaf kill the dragon, but the old king is fatally wounded. Beowulf, thinking of his people, asks to see the monster's treasure. Wiglaf enters the dragon's cave and finds a priceless hoard of jewels and gold.

... Then Wiglaf went back, anxious
To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him
Treasure they'd won together. He ran,
Hoping his wounded king, weak
And dying, had not left the world too soon.
Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found
His famous king bloody, gasping
For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water
Over his lord, until the words
Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.
Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:
"For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank
Our Father in Heaven, Ruler of the Earth—
For all of this, that His grace has given me,
Allowed me to bring to my people while breath
Still came to my lips. I sold my life
For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take
What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,
Help them; my time is gone. Have
The brave Geats build me a tomb,
When the funeral flames have burned me, and build it
Here, at the water's edge, high
On this spit of land, so sailors can see
This tower, and remember my name, and call it
Beowulf's tower, and boats in the darkness
And mist, crossing the sea, will know it."
Then that brave king gave the golden
Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,
Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,
And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them well:
"You're the last of all our far-flung family.
Fate has swept our race away,
Taken warriors in their strength and led them
To the death that was waiting. And now I follow them."
The old man's mouth was silent, spoke
No more, had said as much as it could;
He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul
Left his flesh, flew to glory.

Gilded bronze and ivory casket.
National Museum, Copenhagen.
Wiglaf berates the faithless warriors who had not gone to the aid of their king. With sorrow, the Geats then cremate the corpse of their greatest king. They place his ashes, along with all of the dragon's treasure, in a huge burial tower by the sea, where it can be seen by voyagers.

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... And then twelve of the bravest Geats
Rode their horses around the tower,
Telling their sorrow, telling stories
Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,
Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life
As noble as his name. So should all men
Raise up words for their lords, warm
With love, when their shield and protector leaves
His body behind, sends his soul
On high. And so Beowulf's followers
Rode, mourning their beloved leader,
Crying that no better king had ever
Lived, no prince so mild, no man
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.

Gold boat (probably 1st century) found at Brolighter, County Londonderry, Ireland.