

4. Beowulf's Death

Then Wiglaf with the treasures found his King and Friend,
His glorious Chief, ableading,¹ near his life's end.

Again he plashed² with water; until the point of word
Pierced athrough the breast-ward³ of Beowulf, the old,

5 And spake⁴ he in his grieving, with gaze upon the gold:

"For this splendour-booty⁵ be thanks unto the Lord,
Unto the King-of-Glory, for what I here behold,
To God, the everlasting, in that 'tis mine to give
Such gifts unto my people, while an hour I live.

10 Now have I bartered for the hoard⁶ of gold

The end of this my old life. Look ye⁷ well, my fere,⁸
To my people's needs now. I'm no longer here.

Bid the battle-bold men build a mound⁹ to me,
Shining, after death-pyre,¹⁰ on foreland¹¹ by the sea;

15 Out upon Whale's Ness,¹² it shall lift on high,

Reminder to my people of the man was I,
That ever thereafter sailor-folk will hail

"Beowulf's Barrow"¹³ when home from far they sail,
O'er the misty ocean, past the Ness-of-Whale."

20 From his neck he doffed¹⁴ then, he, the Sturdy-Souled,¹⁵

And gave to his Retainer,¹⁶ a collar of gold;
Gave the young Spearman his helmet gold-bedight,¹⁷
His ring and his byrnie,¹⁸ bade him use them right:

"Thou art only remnant of our common line,

25 The Kin¹⁹ of the Waegmundis, Wiglaf mine.

Wyrð²⁰ has swept before ye all my stock and stem,²¹
The jarlmen²² in their glory. I must after them."

The last of words was that for which that agéd Heart had breath,
Ere,²³ he chose the bale-fire,²⁴ the hot waves of death.

30 And so from breast of Beowulf the soul took flight

To seek the just award of souls soothfast²⁵ in the right.²⁶

(from: *Beowulf*, ll. 2788-2820)¹

The passage describes the last moments of Beowulf's life. He has just been wounded by the dragon and is dying: near him is young Wiglaf. The two characters are quite different from each other in age, behaviour and rank: Beowulf lovingly calls Wiglaf "Wiglaf mine" (l. 25) while the boy considers him his "King and Friend" (l. 1). Wiglaf is probably related to Beowulf since he calls him the "only remnant of our common line" (l. 24) and apparently appoints him to succeed him on the throne, asking him to look after his people's needs (ll. 11-12): to this end he passes on to him his own collar of gold, his helmet, his ring and his "byrnie."

Beowulf seems to foreshadow the end of his own people; he knows he is going to die and asks Wiglaf to build a mound for him on Whale's Ness,

1. This modern version is by William E. Leonard (*Beowulf, a New Verse Translation*, New York, 1923); though the original is not rhymed, this modern version is.