Beowulf

The poem Beowulf was written down in Anglo-Saxon England in about the 11th century, although it may be a much older story that was passed down orally. Although it was written in England, it tells of events that happened in 6th-century Scandinavia. Beowulf was king of the Geats (in what is now southern Sweden). At the beginning of the story, he travels to Denmark to help the king of the Danes who is having trouble with a monster who is terrorizing his great hall.

At the end of the poem, Beowulf is an aging king in Sweden. His final battle is against a dragon that hoarded a great trove of treasure and killing those who try to take any of it.

The passages below are taken from the very beginning of the poem and the very end. The first tells of the burial at sea of a Danish king. The second describes Beowulf’s burial.
Burial at sea of Scyld Shefing
Lines 1 - 37

Lo, we have heard of the Spear-Danes in the days of old:
of the glory of the great princes:
how those athelings¹ did great deeds!
Often Scyld Shefing shattered the courage
of troops of marauders by taking their mead-seats.
He terrified those nobles—long after the time
he appeared as a foundling. Comfort for that fate
came when he grew and prospered in glory,
until those who live in the neighboring lands,
over the whale’s road, had to obey him;
yield him tribute. That was a good king!
...

Scyld, when old and his hour had come,
turned away to the protection of the lord.
His loving companions carried him out
to the ocean’s edge, as he had ordered
when still he could speak as the Scylding’s² lord;
long had that dear prince ruled in the land.
Shining in the harbor, a ring-prowed ship
stood, ice-covered and ready to sail, the prince’s vessel.
There they laid their beloved lord,
their giver of rings, that glorious man,
on deck by the mast among many treasures,
fine things from foreign lands.

Never was a ship more nobly adorned
with battle weapons and garments of war,
with blades and with byrnies.³ On his breast they laid
many gifts that would go with him
in his far wanderings over the waves.
They girded him round with ancient gold
more generously on that final journey
than those folk did who set him adrift
alone on chill seas when only a child.

At last they set up a golden standard
high over his head, then let the waves have him—
gave him to the sea. Their hearts were sad
and mournful their minds, for men cannot say,
neither hall-councilors nor heroes under the skies,
who received that cargo.

¹ Noblemen
² The Danes (here referred to as the descendents of Scyld)
³ Mail coats of armor
Death of Beowulf
Lines 3063 - 3182

Where the man of valor
shall meet his death, when he may no longer
live with his kinsmen in the lofty hall,
as ordained by fate, is always a mystery.
So it was for Beowulf, when ready for battle
he approached the mound. How his departure
from the world would occur, he could not foresee.
...
[Beowulf killed the dragon and won a hoard of treasure that he dragon had
guarded. But he was himself mortally wounded]

... “He was still alive then,
wise and aware, an old man, wearily
speaking in sorrow. He wished me to say
farewell, and to bid you to build a mound
where the pyre was, as high as his deeds were heroic,
a beacon as great as he had been
the worthiest of warriors in all the world.
...

“Now let us go
to gaze once more on the gold in the mound,
At those shining treasures. I will show you the way,
so that you may have the joy of beholding
that abundant wealth. Let the bier be made ready
quickly, by the time that we have returned,
so that we can carry our beloved king,
our dear prince, to the place where he
must rest in the keeping of the High Ruler.”
...

The Geatish people prepared for him
A huge pyre, high on the headland,
splendidly hung with helmets and shields
and shining byrnies, as he had bidden.
The lamenting warriors then laid their lord,
Their mighty prince, in the midst thereof,
and a few were assigned to set alight
that fire on the cliff top. A cloud of wood smoke
rose up dark from the roaring flame,
encircling the weeping--the wind subsided--
until the blaze had broken that bone-house,

4 These words are spoken by Wiglaf, who fought the dragon with Beowulf.
hot within.

Sad at heart,
the last companions mourned for their prince,
and a woman, her hair bound up, bewailed
the passing of Beowulf. In a song of despair
and suffering, she told of the sorrows to come,
of how she feared greatly days of grief,
many a raid of ravaging warriors,
the shame of slavery. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

Then they raised for the ruler of the Geats
a mound on the hilltop, high and broad,
to be seen from afar by seafaring men,
a warrior's beacon, built in ten days.
Around the ashes of that atheling
They set an enclosure so fairly designed
that the wisest of men should find it worthy,
and they placed in the mound the precious treasure
of rings and jewels from the ravaged hoard,
y they twisted gold they had taken earlier.
They let the earth hold that princely hoard,
left it in the ground, where still it lies,
as useless as it was of yore.
...

And thus the Geatish people grieved
at the death of their prince: his hearth companions
said that he was, of the world’s rulers,
the kindest of men and the gentlest of kings,
the most loving to his people, and the most eager for fame.