

~ SPECIAL FEATURE ~

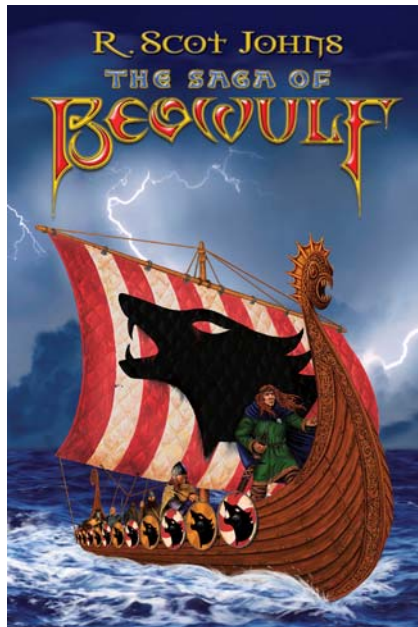
THE SAGA OF BEOWULF

AN EPIC ADVENTURE
1500 YEARS IN THE MAKING

The debut epic fantasy novel by

R. Scot Johns

INTRODUCTION



The Saga of Beowulf is the first complete novelization of the epic Old English poem *Beowulf*.

Based on ten years of research utilizing countless historical documents, the story chronicles the tragic wars of the rising Nordic nations, the endless blood-feuds of their clans, battles with mythic creatures in an ancient heroic age, and the final, futile struggle of one man against the will of Fate that made of him a Legend.

“I wanted to tell the story in its entirety,” says author R. Scot Johns, “to bring the tale as accurately as possible to a modern audience, in its original setting of early 6th century Scandinavia. It had never been done before in its full scope, with both the historical and mythological elements intact. And it took me well over a decade, so now I know why.”

The story follows the young Norse warrior Beowulf as he embarks upon a fateful quest for vengeance against the

creature that slew his father, setting in motion a sequence of events that will take him from the fetid fens of Denmark to the frozen fields of Sweden, ranging from the rocky heights of Geatland to the sprawling battlefields of ancient France as he battles men and demons in a quest to conquer his own fears, all the while fleeing from the woman he has sworn to love.

Steeped in Nordic myth and lore, the tale unfolds upon a northern landscape filled with dragons, ogres, trolls, and six-foot broadswords carved with runes. And yet it is a realm that still exists in history, a world where Danes and Swedes and Franks do battle for the future of their clans, nations that exist today, in places where the bones of those who live within these pages now are lain.

“I drew on every name and slight digression told in passing in the poem,” Johns said. “And bolstered that with all the details I could glean from ancient chronicles and modern archaeology, sources ranging from the near-contemporary *Historia Francorum* and the Icelandic *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* to the excavations done in Old Uppsala and the Rhine river estuary. Such a great wealth of *Beowulf* scholarship has been undertaken in the last century that one could easily spend a lifetime scouring through it. For those who have studied the poem at all thoroughly there are many subtle details you will find here. And for those who have not, there is in store for you an epic tale of bravery and wonder such as only the Norsemen could have forged with sword and song.”

WHAT READERS SAY

“Worlds better than most fantasy novels from the major publishers. The Saga of Beowulf unfolds like an epic Hollywood movie. I could almost see these towering Norsemen battling for land and king amidst blood and flame. Johns' storytelling is poetic, and his focus on the cares and motivations of kings and peasants alike brought to mind my all-time favorite heroic fantasy author, the late David Gemmell. It's one of the finest heroic fantasy tales I've ever read.”

- Justin Gaines, Amazon Top 500 Reviewer

“Johns has captured the feel of the saga in his work. The story is populated by characters who are complex and

tormented by their fate. There is bravery and cowardice, honesty and treachery, all of it described with richness and power. There is some of the fatalism of the Norse tradition, but the heroes at their best struggle against it to shine brightly, if briefly, against the dark. This book is one of the defining works of our language and culture, a terrific story told with great skill."

- Alex McGilvery, ArmchairInterviews.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



R. Scot Johns wrote, edited, and type-set *The Saga of Beowulf*, as well as creating the cover and interior art, including the title font and logos. A life-long student of ancient and medieval literature, with an enduring fascination for Norse mythology and fantasy epics, he first came to Beowulf through his love of J. R. R. Tolkien, a leading scholar on the subject.

A medieval Honors English Lit major, he has given lectures on such topics as the historical King Arthur and the construction of Stonehenge. He lives in Boise, Idaho and works for Books Are Fun, a division of Readers Digest.

ABOUT THE BOOK

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by R. Scot Johns

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EXCERPTS FROM THE NOVEL

PROLOGUE

To the Unknown Poet...

Late in the third year of King Hrothgar's reign the Great Hall of Heorot was completed at Lejre, and there was much joy in the land of the Danes. Denmark was then new-born, and only recently had the Scylding clan founded by Hrothgar's far-father Scaef risen to prominence in the rugged lands between the wild North Sea and the dark Baltic. The year was 503 and that joy was to be short-lived.

At that time the Danes had not yet spread across the Jutland peninsula which would one day become their home, but still clung to the cold, hard rock known then as Sea-Land, pressed hard on all sides by the raging ocean tides. Turbulent times would mold this sturdy people into a great seafaring race, proud and strong, whose descendants would range across the far reaches of the world in search of riches and fame. Vikings they would be called, and all who saw their sails would know fear and terror.

But that time had not yet come.

Another race was on the rise at that time as well. They dwelt upon the rocky western shores of Sweden, known then as Göta-Land, the land of the Geats, for so they were called. All along those shores they made their home, beside a frigid Northern Sea that swelled and crashed upon a broad and wild land of sprawling lakes and densely wooded slopes whose jagged peaks were crowned in spires of rugged stone. They, too, were a hearty folk and mighty in those days, already a proud seaworthy people who embraced the shores and the coastal lands that looked across high waves toward the southern island realm of the war-famed Danes. Many loved and feared them, and the tales told of their deeds are filled with dread and wonder.

But their Fate was to be far different from that of the Danes, or of the Swedes who would one day devour their lands, for they were doomed to perish utterly and to fade forever from this world. Yet they would not fall easily, nor fade quietly

away, and before that hard day came upon them they would mark their passing with sword and song.

None can now say what poet first wove the words which tell their tale; the poet has fallen as surely as the warriors whose bold deeds he has set down in song. But though the name has perished, still the song remains: in Valhalla it is sung, and down the far corridors its echo may yet be heard.

Unferth's blade came down upon the royal table, barely missing Hrothulf's head, severing a golden cup and spilling out its crimson contents on the polished oak. Red wine spread like seeping blood across the inlaid table as the Queen clutched tighter to her frightened sons.

Back Hrothulf came once more, and barely Unferth lunged aside in time, avoiding the frenzied blow and falling to the floor below the raised dais with a painful thud, for his balance was thrown off now that he could not move his other arm, and thus, the precision and efficient manipulation of his moves was lost. Blood seeped from his gaping wound, leaving a streak across the tiled floor as he rolled to his good side and pushed himself back up just as Hrothulf's sword came down.

The weapons crashed once more, grinding steel on steel as Halga's son pressed down upon the dark-eyed Dane. Hrothulf leered as he leaned in, using the advantage of his weight to hold Unferth down upon the ground as all about the battle raged.

"I am the rightful King!" spat Hrothulf in his face, so that only he could hear. "You will not deny me of my Fate!"

"That I will not," Unferth returned, struggling against the heavy weapon pressing down upon him. "Your Fate has already been decided, and I am only here to see it carried out."

With a wrenching twist that nearly made him swoon with pain, Unferth spun about and swung his sword-arm elbow into Hrothulf's crotch, bringing the assailant quickly to his knees as their swords clashed down upon hard stone, nearly hitting Unferth's wounded arm. With his hilt yet gripped within his clenching hand, Unferth punched his disarmed foe hard in the face, knocking Halga's son onto his back, sprawling out across the inlaid stones of Heorot.

Slowly, Unferth rose to his feet, standing over Hrothulf with the weapon pointed at his throat. Hrothulf's

sword lay out of reach beneath the royal table, where it had skittered across the stone-paved floor.

“Unferth, no!” cried Queen Wealthew. “He is of your own Danish blood!”

Unferth turned then to the Queen, prepared to risk his own exile – and even death – to reveal the plot that he himself had helped to instigate, and only now impeded, to his peril.

“Do not kill my son!” Yrsa pleaded at her side.

Out in Raven’s Meadow the night was drawing to a close, and dawn would soon be coming on. The Swedes could smell it in the air, and feel it in the chill that crept over the land just before the sun’s return each day. The howl of night’s moonlight marauders was gradually giving way to the rising chatter of the winged woodland creatures as they called out for their morning meal.

Hæreth lay still in the back of the supply wagon where she had been for two long days, guarded day and night and given little to eat or drink. But she was neither thirsty nor hungry, and she was not asleep. She knew that with the dawn would come the Swede’s attack, for she had overheard the Swedish guardsmen speaking of it in the night.

“Rutger says the King will strike at first light,” said Otto not long after they had taken up their watch the night before. The long night then lay stretching out ahead of them, and it was sure to drag, what with the Geatish Queen tied up and sleeping soundly. Little excitement could he expect to keep him awake until the dawn.

“Oy, is that so, now?” asked Osmund in response.

“Aye, it is,” Otto replied, glad to have some news to tell that Osmund had not heard. “And I s’pose Rutger knows, him being Captain to the King and all.”

“And none too soon, neither, I’d say,” Osmund replied. “These night posts will be the death of me afore long. I’m a man of action, I am. I can’t abide this infernal standin’ round.”

“Well,” said Otto, “we won’t be standin’ round come dawn!”

“And thank the Gods for that, I says,” said Osmund. Osmund cast a covert glance back at the Queen, who seemed to be asleep, though it was hard to tell, for it was dark and she could hardly move for the tightness of her bonds. The tattered remains of her flaxen bed-dress did little now to

hide her shapely form, or conceal her peach-soft skin, dirty though it was.

“She’s a pretty lass,” Osmund observed, eyeing Hæreth lustily. “What say we have a go, eh Otto?”

“Nay, not me,” Otto replied. “She’s for the king, Oz. He’ll have his way with her afore he’s through, though. Most likely kill her in the end.”

“Aye, then what’s stoppin’ us?” Osmund asked.

“I’m just doin’ me job here, Oz,” Otto returned.

“Orders is orders, and I don’t want no trouble. I got two more years, then I can settle down with me wife and mind the farm.”

“Oy, always the farm!” said Osmund. “Leave off with the pigs and cows already!”

“What?” Otto shot back. “What’s wrong with pigs and cows? You eat enough of ‘em!”

“Bloody Hel, Otto, we’re warriors! We may not live two more years, you imbecile!”

“Well, it don’t hurt none to plan for the future,” Otto replied in a hurt and downcast tone.

Hæreth followed the conversation with her eyes, for the Swedish Guards were stationed one on either side of her before the open wagon, and she could see their own eyes shining in the night as they glanced across at one another. Two nights now these same two men had taken up their posts at Hæreth’s side, and all night long kept up an endless stream of idle chatter that never ceased or even slowed until the rising of the sun and the changing of the Guard. By now Queen Hæreth felt she knew them both, and slept all through the day that she might be entertained all through the night by their endless ramblings.

Seeing Hæreth watching him, Otto turned to her instead.

“See,” said Otto, growing more excited now, “me and the missus, we got this little place up in the valley all staked out. Nice thatched hut, two rooms, ocean view. It’s got an indoor well! Get us some sheep, couple o’ cows, a few pigs—”

“Oy!” shouted Osmund. “With the pigs again!”

Hæreth could not help but smile, and hoped for Otto’s sake this war would soon be over. Her gaze grew distant as she thought upon another farmer she had known once, long ago.

Candlelight cast its golden glow over a bed piled high with furs, in the midst of which Queen Hæreth lay with Beowulf beside her, clad only in light and shadow. Softly he

traced the flowing curves of her sinuous figure with the tips of his strong and stocky fingers, following the undulating line down from her shoulder to her thigh, rising slowly then gently falling as a ship upon a rolling sea.

"I'm so glad you've come home again, Beowulf," Hæreth softly whispered in a hushed and breathy voice. "Back home to me. I thought never to see you more."

"I could never stay away from you, Hæreth," Beowulf replied. "You draw me ever back again, as a moth is drawn to flame."

Gently he kissed her then, and her sparkling sea-green eyes flickered with an inner light that came not from the many glowing candles scattered through the room.

"You did promise to return to me," laughed the Geatish Queen.

"Aye, that I did," said Beowulf sincerely, "as you promised always to be mine. The two of us together, for ever and all time."

Again they kissed, and this time it was she that came to him. Long was that embrace, and soft, and warm, and Beowulf thought that he would never let her leave his arms again, or take his lips from hers.

But just then a wrenching crash rent the silent stillness as the chamber door burst inward, and the King of Geats stormed in with gleaming weapon poised. Covered all in hairy hides and heavy matted furs, the Geatish King glared down at them with bright red burning eyes, his grizzled beard hanging down over his heavy paunch, the Iron Crown upon his skull-like head strung thick with dangling moss and weeds.

"Faithless wench!" bellowed Hygelac. "So this is how a lowly peasant girl repays the King who made of her a Queen!"

Hæreth quickly drew the covers up to hide her naked form.

"I never wanted to marry you, you fat pig!" she spat her rage. "You made me do it out of spite for Beowulf, because you're jealous of him! He is all that you could never be!"

Beowulf rolled aside as Hygelac's heavy broadsword sank down deep into the bed where he had lain. Hæreth's eyes went wide as the King drew out the sword and towered over her.

"Savor well the last moments of your wretched life, foul Demon of Darkness!" the King of Geats cried out, raising up his heavy blade.

Beowulf screamed as Hæreth's crimson blood spilled out across the bed, gushing from the gaping wound where the shining sword had run her through, piercing through her golden skin to sink into the floor beneath the bed.

Beowulf raged and lunged at Hygelac, smashing the Ogre King against the wall with crushing force.

"Why, uncle?!" he screamed and spat, smashing his clenching fist time and again into the Geat King's glaring face. "You took everything from me! Why?!"

Reaching out for the protruding hilt, Beowulf wrenched the sword free from its bloody sheath and swung with all his might, screaming maniacally as the blade swept out, passing cleanly through his Uncle-King's thick neck. Hygelac's gurgling mouth gaped wide.

"Beowulf!" the King's voice cried, its thin red lips drawn wide to bare sharp teeth. Again the voice called out as the Geat King's severed head toppled slowly to the floor—

DELVE DEEPER

Read the first six chapters at www.fantasycastlebooks.com, plus enjoy a wealth of additional resources, including author adaptation notes, a deleted sequence, development artwork, a Norse Rune decoder, bookmarks, audio excerpts, an author interview, and much more.