Beowulf: A Paper Doll Pirate History (1934)

Originally appeared in Dutch, anonymously, in:
Leeuwarder nieuwsblad : goedkoop advertentieblad
Nieuwsblad van Friesland : Hepkema’s courant
Soerabaijasch handelsblad

(Ed. and trans. Thijs Porck, 2019)
Preface

This set of paper dolls, based on the Old English poem *Beowulf*, appeared as fifteen weekly installments in at least three Dutch newspapers in the year 1934 under the heading “Beowulf: Een Zeerooversgeschiedenis” [Beowulf: A Pirate’s History]. The cut-out paper dolls represent the figures of Hrothgar, Grendel, Beowulf, Grendel’s mother, Hygelac and the dragon, as well as costumes that could be hung over the paper figurines. The cut-out images were accompanied by the text of a serial children adaptation of *Beowulf*, narrating its eponymous hero’s fight against the three monsters.

*Beowulf: A Paper Doll Pirate History* (1934) is just one of many examples of Dutch adaptations of the Old English poem. In the Low Countries, *Beowulf* became one of those stories (along with Sigurd, the dragon slayer) that was deemed suitable for children to read. As is to be expected, this adaptation alters its early medieval English source to accommodate its youthful readers. For example, while mentions of death and horror are not necessarily shunned, the gloomy end of the original poem (with its repeated reproaches of the cowardice of Beowulf’s men and the impending doom of the Geats) is drastically changed: Beowulf forgives his followers for fleeing on this occasion.

The text in this booklet was drawn from the children’s pages in various Dutch newspapers from 1934. The Dutch text was published anonymously and is now out of copyright. It has been newly translated into English and accompanying images were copied and digitally modified from the scanned newspaper pages. The translation is faithful to the original text, barring some very minor changes for continuation’s sake. Each image is accompanied by its original colouring instructions (provided in italics); it is recommended to paste the figures of installments 1, 3, 5, 10, 12 and 14 on cardboard, so as to make sure they can stand upright, even with the additional weight of the various costumes.

This full set of paper dolls allows children of all ages to ‘play Beowulf’.

*Thijs Porck, Leiden University*

*5 December 2019*
1. This is another continuation-story, so that, every week, you will receive an image to colour in as well as part of the story. If you collect the various continuations and images, you will have a beautiful collection at the end. The title of the story already suggests that this could be an exciting one. In this first image you should use the colour purple for the clothing and brown for the armour.

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A long time ago, there lived a king, who was called Hrothgar. He was a king of a tribe that has long since died out. Hrothgar was beloved by his people, because he had a good heart and a healthy, clear mind.

In early times, men hardly did anything other than wage wars. This also goes for Hrothgar and he had utterly defeated many armies and captured many prisoners. After he had won another one of those important victories, he decided to build a large palace, where his men and all his subjects could celebrate to their hearts’ desire.

Everyone helped building it and so it was done within a very short amount of time. This palace was now called Heorot. King Hrothgar eventually invited all people to come to his palace. It promised to be a great feast!
2.

An innumerable number of candles lit the hall Heorot on the night that king Hrothgar opened it so as to allow the throngs of people to enter. The sun had nearly set and almost all of his people were united in the hall. They marvelled at the beautiful structure and the amount of light its windows let through; they enjoyed the delicious food, which was served in great quantities.

Suddenly, everyone turned their head to the gigantic entrance and the talk and laughter quieted down immediately. There, king Hrothgar and his queen entered the hall. The people bowed deeply and took off their hats. The king waved with his hand, the queen friendly nodded and that was a sign for the people to cheer for the royal couple.

Slowly, the cheers subsided and the king and his queen took to their seats and looked to it that their subjects were not bored and made sure they lacked nothing. The feast was in full blaze and nobody gave a thought to the angry spirit that wandered among fens and marches and who was called Grendel.

*The clothing should be coloured scarlet red, the animal hide grey, the shoes black and the cloak green.*
3.

The angry spirit called “Grendel” wandered round dark marshes and fens; he hated all that was human, because he was a son of Satan the Devil; cruel was his heart and behaviour.

The guests of king Hrothgar celebrated until the depth of night and only when day rise was visible through the many windows did everyone lie down to sleep in the palace Heorot.

It was five o’clock in the morning, when Grendel approached the recently built hall and without any trouble he broke through the triple-barricaded and heavily protected iron fence and he looked down upon the sleeping men and women. Crying out many angry words, he grabbed thirty party-goers with his hands and killed them without moving any muscle in his face and he returned with his booty to his dark and sombre living place.

None of the survivors had dared to intervene or cry out for help. Only when Grendel had long left the feasting hall did the remaining feasters get up and their sorrow and sadness were great. Blood stains were everywhere; outside the palace it was also very easy to follow the path that Grendel had taken with the people he had captured.

The sorrow over the departed men and women gradually grew less, but the fear which people felt for Grendel grew stronger every day. For who knows what else this devilish spirit was planning?

For this third image, the body (and the tail) need to be coloured brown, the animal hide yellow and the comb on the head red.
It was not only that night that Grendel brought disaster to Heorot; in the summer he spent his time in the dark forests of the land, but in the winter, when it was cold and Grendel could not easily get his daily food, he came to the town and plundered and robbed after his heart’s desire. The inhabitants fled into their houses: many were spared, yet some became victims of Grendel.

King Hrothgar nevertheless remained in his palace; he did not run, he did not hide, but he stayed on his throne, no matter how big the risk. This throne appeared to be surrounded by a mysterious air, which Grendel could not penetrate.

Hrothgar was growing older and the grey king pondered in dark hours: “If only I could find someone who could rid my beloved land of this horrible monster! I would promise riches to whomever would be that brave.”

Beowulf, an equally brave prince, heard this. He was still young and was not afraid to fight against Grendel.

See here more clothing that King Hrothgar used. The tunic is green, the cloak, girdle and shoes and leg bands should be coloured brown.
5.

This Beowulf was a nephew of King Hygelac and one of the bravest men in the world. His name was on everyone’s lips and he had won many battles. His strength was as big as thirty men and his sword had already cut many helmets in half.

On a certain day, some of the subjects of King Hrothgar came to Beowulf, to ask him for help against the monster Grendel. Beowulf listened to them quietly, thought the matter over and said calmly: “I will go to my uncle Hrothgar and try to free his kingdom from Grendel.”

Some hours later, he sailed out of the harbour. He was accompanied by fifteen of his bravest warriors and he set sail for the land of his uncle Hrothgar. Beowulf was convinced that he would gain much glory in fighting Grendel and that he would return to his homeland with many treasures.

Dead or alive, Grendel would leave the land that he made so unsafe!

_The cloak should be coloured grey, the tunic red, the shoes and leg bands brown and the hair yellow._
With a big ship, Beowulf sailed out of the harbour one day and had to cross the
great ocean in order to reach the country of his uncle. On the way, he
couraged his men and promised them beautiful gifts if they would behave
bravely in the upcoming battle. Beowulf hardly ever left the ship’s bridge,
because he was known as one of the most capable captains of the sea.

After having travelled for only a couple of days, Beowulf reported that
there was land in sight. This land belonged to his uncle Hrothgar. Since the
latter did not know that his nephew came with good intentions, he had sent
ships to intercept them. Beowulf quickly let the scouts know what he was
planning to do and, as friends, they sailed into the harbour together.

King Hrothgar had by then already spotted them from his watchtower
and, when he saw that the ship carried a friend and not a foe, he quickly
prepared to receive his guests in a worthy and hospitable manner.

How surprised he was, when he
saw his nephew step ashore and, when
he heard why the latter had come, the
old king proudly patted him on the
shoulder.

“May God keep you, my boy,” he
said gravely, as they went to the palace,
followed by their men.

This sixth image needs to be coloured as
follows: cloak green, shoes, legwarmers and
trousers brown; the coat golden; and the
shield must be coloured in such a way that it
looks like bronze; it is the clothing of
Beowulf.
After a long day’s march, Beowulf and his subjects reached the palace of the king and he asked the herald whether he could speak to Hrothgar.

“Tell him that I have come to talk about the great enemy of the king: Grendel”

The herald quickly went in and returned with the message that the king was already expecting Beowulf. The meeting between both men was very cordial. Standing in front of many noblemen, Beowulf spoke bravely:

“My men have endured a long and dangerous journey; I have come to kill Grendel. With God’s help we will fulfill this task, if it is in our power.”

After these words, Beowulf gathered his troops and they went to Heorot, the great hall, to await the arrival of Grendel. But would he show up?

This seventh image again gives you the clothing of Beowulf. Animal hide, trousers, shoes and legwarmers should be coloured brown, the cloak should be green.
Beowulf’s subjects, who were very tired from the journey, settled down and Beowulf gave them permission to sleep. He himself would stay awake, no matter how long the night would take.

Meanwhile, Grendel wandered around the marshes and fens and neared the feasting palace Heorot. There, he broke open the two heavy doors and grabbed the man who was closest by. Beowulf was on his post, however: he jumped towards the monster and a horrible battle began!

Kicking and punching, Grendel tried to fend off Beowulf’s warriors and he wanted to kill Beowulf himself, but this brave man, who had the strength of thirty men together, did not let himself be caught. He dodged the punches of Grendel and, whenever he saw an opportunity, he would hit the unhuman monster so hard, that its strength started to whither.

This eighth image shows the clothing of Grendel; it is made of brown fabric, while the scary monstrous creatures on it are of a green colour.
Grendel put up a great fight to get out of the hands of Beowulf, but it was all for naught. Beowulf showed a strength as great as no one had ever seen before.

Suddenly, Grendel escaped and before Beowulf and his men could grab him again, the monster had disappeared into the darkness.

He had left his weapons and he wandered powerlessly through marshes and fens.

When they started to look for him the next morning, they found him lying dead in the mud. Beowulf picked up his enemy and carried him back to the palace.

Great was the joy of King Hrothgar and the entire people. Everywhere, cheers were sounded and that very night a great feast was organized in honour of Beowulf. He sat next to King Hrothgar and had to receive many tokens of appreciation. The people, revelling in joy, stayed up late and happiness and satisfaction could be read on everyone’s faces. Now they would be able to live without fear!

But they had celebrated victory too soon, because Grendel’s mother, an ugly witch, was still alive in the swamps and wanted revenge!

This ninth image gives you another costume for Beowulf; everything needs to be coloured brown, except for the cloak, which has a green colour.
The tenth image is the mother of Grendel: not a very sweet person to look at, eh? And you will soon find out that her appearance is also far from nice. Her hair has a red colour, her cloth green, her body light brown and the cudgel black.

Grendel’s mother, who soon found out that her son had died fighting Beowulf, wanted revenge. She did not think about it for very long and the awful being prepared herself to go to King Hrothgar all by herself. It had quieted down in his land, because people no longer feared Grendel and they had all forgotten about his mother.

His mother snuck through the pitch-black night to the great party-hall, grabbed the first person she saw and killed him. Then she departed as quietly as she had come. The next morning, people noticed the accident and bloody tracks made clear that the culprit was hiding out in the marshes.

King Hrothgar once more called to Beowulf for aid. He did not hesitate for a moment and was determined to fight this monster as well. The very same morning, he prepared himself and went to the marshes and fens. Beowulf was armed with a gigantic sword and that was all the weaponry he carried.
Following the bloody tracks, Beowulf arrived at a deep mere. It was almost impossible to swim across it.

But Beowulf had no other choice. He jumped into the water, held his sword firmly in his grasp and swam for nine days and nine nights before he discovered the hiding place of Grendel’s mother. Then a huge fight broke out within the dark water, which seemed hopeless for Beowulf. The woman had a big advantage with her heavy cudgel which rendered his pointy sword useless.

“If I could only get my hands on her cudgel, I would be victorious,” Beowulf muttered and, as luck would have it, he grabbed the desired weapon with his hands quickly and fought until the old woman let go. That was the end of her: with one strike Beowulf became the victor and could return home. Dead tired he returned to shore, after having made a second trip of nine days and nine nights.

This image is another costume for Beowulf; the wide cloak is blue; leg and foot coverings are brown and his tunic is red. You had better give the sword a grey colour.
On the shore around the mere in which Beowulf had fought his incredible battle with Grendel’s mother, his men were waiting for him. However, when the waiting took too long, they thought that he had been defeated and killed. Although this defeat lowered his status among them, they still organised a mourning service for him. They sang sad songs and constantly kept watch at a lit pyre upon which, they had to imagine, Beowulf lay. Great was their excitement when the real and lively Beowulf himself appeared at the mourning feast. He bellowed a laugh and patted one of his subjects so hard on the shoulders that the poor lad tumbled over three times.

After a short delay, they decided to return to the palace of King Hrothgar. When they arrived, the virtuous king could not find the words to express his emotions. He did nothing other than embrace Beowulf. As a token of his gratitude, he gave him a chest full of jewels and other treasures. Altogether, there was more than a hundred thousand guilders in value.

And, of course, a great feast was organized and Beowulf and his men surely enjoyed themselves. In the end, people had enough of feasting and Beowulf, filled with a feeling of triumph, decided to return to his own land. He wanted to lay his booty (the treasures of King Hrothgar) at the feet of his own king Hygelac, as was the habit of the brave in those days. He soon prepared everything and set sail on a beautiful day – with the wind in his back he sailed home.

The journey went well and it did not take long before they saw the contours of their own land. Soon Beowulf stood before Hygelac. Proudly he offered his treasures to Hygelac, but Hygelac, like any good king would, distributed the treasures equally among all those who had partaken in the journey.
Here is your image no. 12. It depicts King Hygelac, an old but very brave man, as you can see. The cloak that King Hygelac wears is of a beautiful deep colour, i.e. purple. Take good care with this colour, because it is one of the most beautiful ones that was invented by people. The helmet and the spear are of course beautifully bronze: what else would you expect from a king? The shoes of the king are black, like his leg protectors.
After many years had passed, during which nothing happened other than wars
and wild wanderings over waters, Beowulf was crowned king of his
fatherland. And – we need to say this immediately – no mightier king ever sat
on this throne. His subjects would go to extremes for him and kings of
neighbouring lands kept quiet so as to avoid enraging him. His land
prospered; they lived in wealth and, eventually, peace, because Beowulf grew
tired of constant warfare and preferred to live in peace. His towns were not
built to be destroyed, he used to say; they were built to house the women and
children of his subjects and provide them with peace and prosperity.

But the tranquility did not last long. Once upon a time, one of Beowulf’s
subjects had angered him and fell from Beowulf’s good graces. What that
meant I will not need to explain to you (as you know Beowulf’s character). The
poor servant therefore decided that it was best to flee; it was the only way to
escape with his life. Wandering and fleeing through the dark forests, he
suddenly remembered that there was a cave

neighbour that housed a dragon. The dragon
had magical powers and had amassed a
huge treasure.

“If I were to steal the dragon’s
possessions and lay them at the feet of
Beowulf,” the sad fugitive pondered, “he
would surely take pity on me again.”

No sooner said than done. The man
hid himself near the cave’s entrance and
waited for the monster to leave its lair to
drink from a mere nearby. Using this
opportunity, the man stole a beautiful
golden cup.

His plan was a success, Beowulf was
delighted with the cup and forgave his
servant. But the dragon was less pleased and
took revenge. At night, he blew his
poisonous breath over Beowulf’s land and
spit fire so that the palace was set aflame.
The effect of the poison was horrendous: in
the morning, people found their crops
destroyed and shriveled and fear struck in
their hears that they would soon die of
hunger. [*p.t.o.*]
For a moment, Beowulf looked on soberly but soon he used his booming voice to gather his strongest men and told them to prepare for a battle with the dragon. No time should be lost.

On this image, you will find a new costume for Beowulf, which he wore when he had become king. The clothing is beautiful and very manly. The vest and helmet are of a bronze colour; the shows and leg bands are black. The trousers are dark brown as is the leather belt. The big, wide cloak is dark green, with a yellow band at the bottom.
Here is the dragon, you know, the friendly beast that Beowulf and his men set out to search. The dragon has a grey colour but is full of colourful spots. There are red, green and purple ones, and also a lot of hellish yellow ones. His eyes are a hard sort of green and his open mouth is yellow on the inside, so that he looks horrendous. Well, that is fitting for a dragon, don’t you think?

The servant, who had stolen a cup from the dragon, led Beowulf and his men to the place where the beast passed by every day. Having arrived, Beowulf left his men on a hill and set out himself to confront the dragon.

It did not take long before he saw the dragon approach. But… the dragon saw him too! It immediately raised up its legs and opened its fiery nostrils wide. A fiery hot breath, full of flames and gasses, was sent in Beowulf’s direction, but he did not stand aside.

A great fight broke out and it soon seemed impossible for Beowulf to defeat the horrible beast, which was dangerous from every side. Therefore, his men stormed down the hill, but they fled as soon as the dragon directed its fiery breath at them.

Only one man was brave enough not to abandon his king. This was the young and strong Wiglaf, a true son of heroes. He fought like a madman and ultimately succeeded in dealing the dragon a blow to the neck. That was the end of its fiery breath! Apparently, the monster was hit in a crucial spot.

But now it began to angrily whip with its tail and hit with its claws. Beowulf had every trouble to keep his own. Suddenly he thought he could strike the dragon a lethal blow, but before he could lift his sword, the beast slammed him to the ground with its sharp claws.

[*p.t.o.*]
But now it was Wiglaf’s turn to intervene. He did not hesitate for even a moment and… killed the dragon.

Full of sorrow, Wiglaf sank down next to the dying king. He tried to cheer him up by speaking joyfully about the treasures that they would find in the cave of the dragon. But Beowulf did not listen. He only gestured for Wiglaf to call the other men…
Here is the last costume that Beowulf wore and in which he was buried by his men. The armoured vest is of course brightly bronze, while the shield is of a reddish bronze colour. His spear and knife are made of wood, except for the blades, of course. His undergarment is dark green, while his cloak is dark red. The remainder has the usual colours.

When Wiglaf had gathered the men and they all stood round their dying king, he could no longer restrain himself and complained about how they had cowardly fled from Beowulf’s side when he had needed them most. The men were very much ashamed and most of them bowed their heads in shame. But Beowulf weakly raised his hand and told Wiglaf to be quiet.

“Be quiet, Wiglaf,” Beowulf spoke, “what good will talking do us now? My men have shown themselves worthy and brave a hundred times and when they have now been overcome by fear, I will not reproach them for it. I am done for.... Listen to my final command: Forever safeguard these treasures, that we will find in the dragon’s lair, for our people. Preserve them in glass vessels, so that our descendants will remember us. As for me... bury me close to the sea, so that waves will crash on my grave. And erect a hill above my bones and write on the hill: Here rests Beowulf, our king. He was brave!”

And when Beowulf had said this to his men, he fell over backwards, breathed his last breath and died.

His men were duly impressed. They mourned for their king and buried him in the clothes that he wore when he died. But on his grave, they did not only write ‘he was brave’, but ‘he was brave, noble and good’.

And so you have learned about the history of one of the greatest pirates that ever lived. But you will understand: we call these men from the past “pirates”, but in those days they thought differently about them. Beowulf was a king; a great king even, who was loved by his people and was remembered by their descendants for a long time.