The original audience of Beowulf was steeped in ancient Scandinavian royal legend. But for modern readers of the poem, these traditions are frustratingly obscure and confusing.

This book argues that Beowulf is a dynastic drama centered on the fortunes of three great royal houses, the Scyldings, Scytlings and Hrethlings. At the center of the poem is the Greatish hero, whose adventures provide the link between these three dynasties. By unraveling the web of Scandinavian royal legends known to the work’s original audience, the volume allows the modern reader to appreciate better the role of the monsters as portents of dynastic and national crises. It begins by offering a new interpretation of the work’s structure based on the principle of the dynastic life-cycle, providing explanations for features of the poem that have never been satisfactorily explained, most famously its many digressions and episodes. Highlighting the work’s often-overlooked originality, it then proposes that the poet created a fictionalized monster-slaying hero and inserted him into royal legend in order to dramatize specific moments of dynastic crisis. Finally, it brings into focus the poet’s debt to biblical paradigms of kingship and considers how the Anglo-Saxons came to read Beowulf as their own Book of Kings.

FRANCIS LENEGHAN is Associate Professor of Old English at The University of Oxford and a Fellow of St Cross College.


ANGLO-SAXON STUDIES 39
THE DYNASTIC DRAMA OF BEOWULF
Anglo-Saxon Studies
ISSN 1475-2468

GENERAL EDITORS
John Hines
Catherine Cubitt

‘Anglo-Saxon Studies’ aims to provide a forum for the best scholarship on the Anglo-Saxon peoples in the period from the end of Roman Britain to the Norman Conquest, including comparative studies involving adjacent populations and periods; both new research and major re-assessments of central topics are welcomed.

Books in the series may be based in any one of the principal disciplines of archaeology, art history, history, language and literature, and inter- or multi-disciplinary studies are encouraged.

Proposals or enquiries may be sent directly to the editors or the publisher at the addresses given below; all submissions will receive prompt and informed consideration.

Professor John Hines, School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University, John Percival Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff, Wales, CF10 3EU, UK

Professor Catherine Cubitt, School of History, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England, NR4 7TJ, UK

Boydell & Brewer, PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk, England, IP12 3DF, UK

Previously published volumes in the series are listed at the back of this book
THE DYNASTIC DRAMA OF BEOWULF

Francis Leneghan

D. S. BREWER
For my mother and father
Contents

Preface viii
Acknowledgments xi
Abbreviations xii
Family Trees: The Dynasties of Beowulf xv
Dramatis Personae xviii

Introduction: Reading Beowulf as a Book of Kings 1
1 The Dynastic Life-Cycle and the Structure of the Poem 32
2 Shaping the Dynastic Drama 104
3 The Role of the Monsters in the Dynastic Drama 153
4 Beowulf and Biblical Kingship 195
Conclusion: Reading the Dynastic Drama in Anglo-Saxon England 236

Appendix A: Plot Summary of Skjöldunga saga 247
Appendix B: Plot Summary of Hrólfs saga kraka 251
Bibliography 256
Index 293
Preface

In an article published in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in the year 2000 entitled ‘Goodbye to *Beowulf*’, Valentine Cunningham remarked:

Kingsley Amis went too far, of course, in his spleen over what Oxford English involved him in (‘the anonymous, crass, purblind, infantile, featureless HEAP OF GANGRENE D ELEPHANT’S SPUTUM, “Barewolf”’), but his feelings about compulsory *Beowulf* have not been uncommon.¹

Twenty years on, however, *Beowulf* is enjoying a period of unprecedented popularity, not only as a staple of undergraduate English courses worldwide, but also as the subject of countless translations, retellings and adaptations.² No longer routinely mocked as a relic of Dark Age primitivism, the poem is now widely recognized as one of the masterpieces of early medieval literature, a work of rare sophistication and supreme artistry. Equipped with digital reproductions of the manuscript and scholarly bibliographies, the modern *Beowulf*-scholar can now engage with the text from any number of critical and methodological perspectives. In recent decades, scholars have turned their attention to neglected areas of the work such as gender,³ psychology and the representation of mental

---


³ See, for example, G. R. Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*
Preface

states, landscape, trauma, humour, and, most recently, intimacy, affect and erotics. Aided by new digital resources, specialist studies of style, prosody, metrics and linguistics are revealing new aspects of the poet’s artistry and sharpening our sense of the work’s position within the corpus of Old English literature. Recent archaeological discoveries, combined with the unearthing of new and meaningful analogues and possible sources, continue to enhance our knowledge of Beowulf’s literary and cultural background.

---


10 See esp. C. Rauer, Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues (Cambridge, 2000); and Bruce, Scyld and Scef. See further T. M. Andersson, ‘Sources and Analogues’, in Bjork and Niles (1997), pp. 125–48; and CCB, pp. 130–68. For new archaeological evidence with a bearing on the dating of Old English
Yet, despite these advances many fundamental questions about *Beowulf* remain unanswered. There is still no consensus, for example, on the poem’s date and provenance, with recent arguments ranging from the seventh to eleventh centuries.¹¹ Nor can scholars agree on matters such as the work’s genre, structure, or theme, while a number of passages are still regarded as suspicious or inauthentic.¹²

This book offers a new interpretation of *Beowulf* as a dynastic drama concerning the fluctuating fortunes of the great royal houses of Scandinavia in the fifth and sixth centuries.¹³ It argues that the hero’s three great monster-fights assume mythical significance within this dynastic context as portents of the fall of royal houses and nations. By shifting the focus away from the characterization of the hero himself and on to the wider social and familial structures within which he operates, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf* places the legends of the Scyldings, Scylfings and Hrethlings at the centre of the discussion. Situating the poem in an eighth-century context, when Germanic ideas about royal succession based on valour in battle were coming into conflict with Christian notions of dynasty and moral worthiness, it proposes that the poem served as an Anglo-Saxon Book of Kings, mythologizing the origins of dynastic kingship in the pre-Christian courts of southern Scandinavia.

---


¹³ I use the term ‘drama’ throughout this book in the sense of a ‘series of actions or course of events having a unity like that of a drama, and leading to a final catastrophe or consummation’ (OED, s. v. drama 3).
Acknowledgments

For generously reading part or all of this book in draft and sharing their insights, as well as saving me from many mistakes, I warmly thank Daniel Anlezark, Mark Atherton, Louise Nelstrop and Andy Orchard. The anonymous reader for Boydell & Brewer provided invaluable advice on the overall structure and direction of the book, as well as many points of detail, for which I am also very grateful. For assistance with proofreading, thanks go to Rachel Burns, Sally-Ann DelVino and Amy Faulkner. Any remaining errors are, of course, entirely my own fault.

For discussing various aspects of this book and sharing their expertise, I am particularly grateful to Helen Appleton, Hannah McKendrick Bailey, Marilina Cesario, Jim Earl, Sarah Foot, Susan Irvine, Hugh Magennis, Richard North, Heather O’Donoghue, Winfried Rudolf, Mercedes Salvador Bello, Hattie Soper, Roxanne Taylor and Daniel Thomas. At Trinity College Dublin, I was fortunate to have such inspirational teachers of Old and Middle English as the late Helen Cooney, Helen Conrad O’Briain, Gerald Morgan and John Scattergood, and it gives me great pleasure to register here my deep gratitude to them for setting me on this path. I am also thankful to my colleagues at the Faculty of English, St Cross College and St Peter’s College, Oxford, especially Marina MacKay and Abby Williams, for their support and friendship. I would also like to thank my undergraduate and graduate students who have contributed to this book in so many ways over the years.

For hospitality and encouragement along the way, I thank Frank Armstrong, Tamara Atkin, Marc Brightman and Vanessa Grotti, Edward Clarke and Francesca Magnabosco, Jed Dale, Ann Kenny, Clare MacCumhaill and Rob Leach, Sinéad O’Hart, Malachy O’Neill and Helen Crawford, Barry Ryan, Sebastian Sergeant and Evelyn Léon, and Tara Stubbs and Avshalom Guissin.

For permission to reproduce images, I am grateful to The Potteries Museum and the Bodleian Library. For editorial and production assistance, I warmly thank Nick Bingham, Emily Champion, Elizabeth McDonald and Paul Pearson. Special thanks go to Caroline Palmer at Boydell for her enthusiasm for this project and for her patience and guidance throughout the publication process.
Abbreviations

ANQ  American Notes and Queries: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews
ARV  ARV: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore
ASE  Anglo-Saxon England
BAR  British Archaeological Reports
CASSS Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, 12 vols <http://www.ascorpus.ac.uk/index.php>
CSASE Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
CCSL Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, 201 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–2014); references are given to volume and page number(s)
DOE Dictionary of Old English: A to I online, ed. Angus F. Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos and Antonette diPaolo Healey (pubd online 2007) <http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doe/dict/index.html>
DOML Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library
EETS, e.s. Early English Text Society, extra series
Abbreviations

EETS, o.s. Early English Text Society, original series
EETS, s.s. Early English Text Society, supplementary series
EHR English Historical Review
ELH English Literary History
ELN English Language Notes
EME Early Medieval Europe
ES English Studies
Garmonsway G. N. Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson, trans., Beowulf and its Analogues, including ‘Archaeology and Beowulf’ by Hilda Ellis Davidson (New York: Littlehampton, 1971)
JEGP Journal of English and Germanic Philology
MÆ Medium Ævum
MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MLN Modern Language Notes
MLR Modern Language Review
MP Modern Philology
NM Neuphilologische Mitteilungen
NQ Notes and Queries
OE Old English
OED Oxford English Dictionary online (pubd online 2009), http://www.oed.com

xiii
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ON</td>
<td>Old Norse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBA</td>
<td>Proceedings of the British Academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG</td>
<td>Patrologia Graeca, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne et al., 161 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1856–66). References are given to volume and column number(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMLA</td>
<td>Proceedings of the Modern Languages Association of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>Patrologia Latina, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne et al., 221 vols (Paris Imprimerie Catholique, 1841–55). References are given to volume and column number(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PQ</td>
<td>Philological Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RES</td>
<td>Review of English Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saga-Book</td>
<td>Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELIM</td>
<td>Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SN</td>
<td>Studia Neophilologica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>Studies in Philology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Family Trees

The Dynasties of Beowulf
Scyldings

Scyld Seefing

Beow

Healfdene

Heorogar  Hrothgar = Wealththeow  Halga  daughter = Onela

Heoroweard  Hrethic  Hrothmund  Freawaru = Ingeld  Hrothulf
SCYLFINGS

Ongentheow

Ohthere       Onela = daughter of Healfdene

Eanmund       Eadgils

HRETHLINGS

Hrethel

Herebeald     Hæthcyn     Hygelac = Hygd     daughter = Ecgtheow

daughter = Eofor     Heardred     Beowulf
Lines of Royal Succession in Beowulf

**Scyldings**

Heremod

[interregnum]

Scyld Scefing (of unknown origin)

Beow (son of Scyld)

Healfdene (son of Beow)

Heorogar (son of Healfdene)

Hrothgar (brother of Heorogar)

Hrothulf (paternal nephew of Hrothgar, son of Halga)

Heoroweard (paternal cousin of Hrothulf, son of Heorogar)

Hrethric (paternal cousin of Heoroweard, son of Hrothgar)\(^{14}\)

**Scylfings**

Ongentheow

Onela (son of Ongentheow)\(^{15}\)

Eadgils (paternal nephew, son of Onela’s brother, Ohthere)

**Hrethlings**

Hrethel

Hæthcyn (son of Hrethel)

Hygelac (brother of Hæthcyn)

Heardred (son of Hygelac)

Beowulf (maternal nephew of Hygelac, son of Hygelac’s sister)

\(^{14}\) Italics denote events which take place outside the narrative of the poem, inferred from other sources.

\(^{15}\) It is unclear if Onela seized the throne from his brother, Ohthere, leading to the exile of the latter’s sons among the Geats.
Dramatis Personae

Scyldings

Heremod  An early king of the Danes, deposed because of his greed
Scyld Scefing A foundling who restores the Danes to glory and establishes a great line of kings, the Scyldings
Beow  Scyld’s son and heir
Healfdene  Beow’s son and heir
Heorogar  Healfdene’s eldest son and heir
Hrothgar  Healfdene’s second-born son; heir to Heorogar; builder of the royal hall, Heorot; husband to Queen Wealhtheow
Halga  Healfdene’s third-born son
Healfdene’s (unnamed) daughter  Queen to Onela, King of the Swedes
Heoroweard  Heorogar’s son
Hrethric and Hrothmund  Hrothgar’s sons
Hrothulf  Halga’s son
Wealhtheow  Queen of the Danes; wife of Hrothgar; a Wulfing
Freawaru  Daughter of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow; betrothed to Ingeld, prince of the Heathobards
Unferth  King Hrothgar’s advisor
Wulfgar  King Hrothgar’s spokesman

Grendelkin

Grendel and his mother  Monstrous descendants of Cain; enemies of the Scyldings

Heathobards

Froda  King of the Heathobards; enemy of the Scyldings
Ingeld  Froda’s son; betrothed to Freawaru, princess of the Scyldings
Dramatis Personae

Scylfings

- **Ongentheow**  
  King of the Swedes

- **Ecgtheow**  
  Brother of Ongentheow? Father of Beowulf; previously exiled at the court of King Hrothgar

- **Ohthere**  
  Ongentheow’s son

- **Onela**  
  Ongentheow’s son and successor; husband of Healfdene’s (unnamed) daughter

- **Eanmund and Eadgils**  
  Ohthere’s sons; exiled among the Geats, under the protection of King Heardred

Hrethlings

- **Hrethel**  
  Former King of the Geats

- **Herebeald**  
  Hrethel’s eldest son; killed in a shooting accident by his brother, Hæthcyn

- **Hæthcyn**  
  Hrethel’s second-born son and successor

- **Hygelac**  
  Hrethel’s third-born son; successor to Hæthcyn as King of the Geats

- **Hygd**  
  Queen of the Geats; wife of Hygelac; mother of Heardred

- **Heardred**  
  Son of Hygelac and Hygd; Hygelac’s successor

- **Beowulf**  
  Son of Ecgtheow; maternal grandson of King Hrethel; Heardred’s successor; last of the Hrethlings

Wægmundings

- **Weohstan**  
  A Wægmunding warrior; father of Wiglaf; slayer of Eanmund, son of Ohthere

- **Wiglaf**  
  Son of Weohstan the Wægmunding; loyal to Beowulf

Others

- **Sigemund**  
  A legendary dragon-slayer

- **Fitela**  
  Sigemund’s nephew (and son?) and partner-in-crime

- **Hildeburh**  
  Daughter of Hoc; princess of the Half-Danes; married to Finn, king of the Frisians

- **Hnæf**  
  Leader of the Half-Danes at Finnsburg

- **Hengest**  
  Leader of the Danes at Finnsburg; possibly a Jute
Dramatis Personae

Finn  King of the Frisians
Offa  A king of the Angles; married to ‘Modthryth’/’Fremu’
Eomer  Offa’s son
Eofor and  Geatish warriors loyal to Hygelac
Wulf
A dragon  Hoarder of treasure

1 Although editors have proposed the names (Mod)-Thryth and Fremu, the name of Offa’s bride may be missing from the MS due to a copying error (as in the case of Healfdene’s daughter) or simply omitted by the poet, as appears to have been the case with both Hygelac’s daughter and Beowulf’s mother. The absence of these names may reflect the fact that dynastic power passes through the male line in the world depicted in the poem. See pp. 18, 19, 25, 86, 206, 209, 210 n.72, 216.

xxi
Introduction:

Reading Beowulf as a Book of Kings

Achilles rings a bell, not Scyld Scēning. Ithaca leads the mind in a certain direction, but not Heorot.

(Seamus Heaney).

For the modern reader of Beowulf, the poet’s frequent and casual allusions to legends of the Scyldings, Scylfings and Hrethlings can seem an unwelcome distraction from ‘the main plot’ of the hero’s monster-fights. Even with the help of genealogies, plot summaries, explanatory notes and analogues, we struggle to grasp the significance of these obscure ancient dynasties. Yet, as the opening lines make clear, the poem’s original Anglo-Saxon audience was well-versed in this material:


2 W. W. Lawrence, for example, devotes an entire chapter of his monograph to ‘Tragedies of the Royal Houses’ (Beowulf and Epic Tradition [Harvard, 1928], pp. 71–106), with the aim of allowing the modern reader ‘to gain such a knowledge of the old stories about the Danes and Geats as the poet took for granted’ (pp. 71–72). For a recent example of a similar approach, see K4, pp. li–lvii.

3 R. Frank, ‘Germanic Legend in Old English Literature’, in The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature, 2nd edn, ed. M. Godden and M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 82–100, at 91: ‘Germanic legend was something people had to know, like chess, claret or cricket, if they wanted to be thought cultured.’ Frank argues for the currency of Germanic legend in Viking-Åge England,
The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf

Hwæt, wē Gār-Dena in geār-dagum,
þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon
hū ēa æþelingas ellen fremedon.
(1–3). (Emphasis added).

[Listen! We have learnt about the might of the people-kings of the Spear-Danes in ancient times, how those princes attained glory.]

The placement of the nouns þēod-cyninga, ‘people-kings’, and æþelingas, ‘princes, sons of nobles’, in apposition in lines 2a and 3a points towards the distinctively dynastic nature of kingship as presented in the poem. Moreover, as George Clark comments, the Beowulf-poet’s worldview suggests that he was an insider at a royal court:

This is a royalist’s poem, its great hero is born a prince and dies a king still serving the memory of the beloved king of his youth. The characters of the poem are royals, courtiers, court poets, and aristocratic warriors; the poem’s vision of history is dynastic and cyclical; royal families prove as mortal as royals themselves.

on the grounds of renewed contact with Scandinavia. For the counter-argument that Germanic legends such as those known to the poet and his audience were popular in the early, pre-Viking period but were less well-known in later Anglo-Saxon England, see L. Neidorf, ‘Germanic Legend, Scribal Errors and Cultural Change’, in Neidorf (2014), pp. 37–57.

4 On the etymology of the terms cyning, þēod-cyning and æþeling, see, pp. 24–26. On the meaning of these opening lines, see F. C. Robinson, Beowulf and the Appositive Style (Knoxville, 1985), pp. 27–28. The collocation of gefrægn (supplied)/gefrūnon, þēod-cyning and ellen occurs again in the description of how Wiglaf assisted Beowulf in his hour of need (2694–96); the alliterative collocation of þēod-cyning and þrym occurs in Genesis A 1965, during the description of how the kings of four peoples set out to seek Sodom and Gomorrah.

Hence, the poem is book-ended by two magnificent royal funerals: the opening describes how the Danes honoured their great warrior king, Scyld Scefing, with a splendid ship-funeral (26–52), while the closing lines relate how the Geats prepared a funeral pyre atop a sea-cliff for King Beowulf, praising him for his noble deeds:

\[
\text{cwædon þæt hē wære wyruld-cyninga}
\text{manna mildust ond monówæræst,}
\text{lēodum líðost ond lófgeornost.}
\] (3180–82). (Emphasis added).

[They said that he was of the kings of the world the mildest of men and the gentlest, the kindest to the people and the most eager for glory.] 7

As Adrien Bonjour comments, the striking contrast between Scyld’s funeral, which leaves ‘an impression of brilliancy and splendour’, with the ‘more depressingly and sorrowful’ account of Beowulf’s obsequies, is ‘one of the finest artistic achievements in the poem’. 8 Underscoring the structural apposition of these two royal funerals are the contrasting dynastic legacies of Scyld and Beowulf: while the Danes mourn the departure of their beloved king, they are comforted by the knowledge that God has provided Scyld with a son and heir, Beow, folce tō frófræ, ‘as a comfort to the people’ (14a); King Beowulf, on the other hand, laments his own lack of a son in his dying speech to Wiglaf (2729–32a) and his own funeral-scene is framed with dire portents of a national disaster (2884–91, 2910b–3027, 3148b–55a). Scyld stands at the head of a great line of kings, the Scyldings; Beowulf is the last member of his own royal house, the Hrethlings.

---


7 This thematic link (or ‘ring pattern’) between the opening and closing lines is strengthened by a series of aural echoes. For example, the final stressed item in the poem is the palatal g of geornost, which creates a ring with the alliteration of palatal and velar g in the first line: Gār/ gēar (cf. C. B. Kendall, The Metrical Grammar of Beowulf, CSASE 5 [Cambridge, 1991], p. 9). Similarly, the first and last sentences of the poem are linked through the use of end-rhyme, an unusual feature of Old English verse (2b and 3b: gefrunon / fremedon; 3182b–83b: monð-wæræst / lóf-geornost). See A. Orchard, ‘Artful Alliteration in Anglo-Saxon Song and Story’, Anglia 113 (1995), 429–63, at 451–63, for discussion of the high degree of inventive alliteration in the Scyld-prologue. For discussion of the interpretation of these lines, see Chapter Four, pp. 227–31.

This pronounced interest in deaths of kings and princes is sustained throughout the narrative. Indeed, the hero’s three great monster-fights are set within a complex network of overlapping royal tragedies, past and future. Yet, despite the clear importance of the dynastic theme to the poem’s conception and meaning, and the importance of royal legend to the work’s overall structural and thematic design, this major area of the poem remains relatively unexplored. Tellingly, there is no mention of the dynastic theme in the section on ‘Structure and Unity’ in the standard modern scholarly edition of the poem. This book therefore aims to help readers ‘sharpen their perception’ of the interlinked royal legends that underpin the action of Beowulf and give the hero’s three great monster-fights meaning.

Traces of the royal legends known to the original audience of Beowulf are preserved in a range of sources from across the medieval period. The popularity of Scandinavian royal tradition in early Anglo-Saxon England is attested by Old English poems, such as The Finnsburg Fragment and Widsith, as well as the Anglo-Latin Liber monstrorum. Anglo-Saxon rulers proclaimed their descent from lines of ancient Scandinavian kings via elaborate royal genealogies that in several places overlap with royal traditions recorded in Beowulf. Legends surrounding the Danish, Swedish and Geatish royal houses are also contained in a wide range of (much later) Scandinavian sources. Although the text of the twelfth-century Skjöldunga saga is no longer extant, an outline of the narrative survives in a Latin abstract made by the sixteenth-century Icelandic historian, Arngrímur Jónsson, while related traditions are preserved in Saxo Grammaticus’s


10 See K4, pp. lxxix–xci.

11 J. D. Niles, ‘Introduction: Beowulf, Truth, and Meaning’, in Bjork and Niles (1997), pp. 1–12, at 10: ‘If specialized scholarship has a mission, it is to help readers deepen their knowledge and sharpen their perceptions of every possible factor that can have a bearing on the understanding of texts and readerly events.’


13 On connections between these genealogies and Beowulf, see esp. pp. 40–46, 143–47, 240–41, 245.

Introduction

twelfth-century *Gesta Danorum* and the fourteenth-century Icelandic *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Early Swedish royal tradition is attested in the writings of the thirteenth-century Icelander Snorri Sturluson. Plot summaries of *Skjöldunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* are provided as appendices to this volume, while relevant sections of other sources pertaining to early Scandinavian royal legends are quoted in full in subsequent chapters.

The significance of these royal legends to what is conventionally regarded as the poem’s ‘main action’ – that is, the hero’s fights with three monsters – has long been a matter of controversy. For some early commentators, the poem’s chief interest was the valuable light it shed on early Germanic kingship and Scandinavian royal history. For instance, W. P. Ker famously complained that the ‘irrelevances’ of the monster fights were an unwelcome distraction from the more ‘serious things’ half-buried in the so-called digressions, namely fragments of royal legends and other heroic tales. All that was to change with J. R. R. Tolkien’s paradigm-shifting 1936 lecture, ‘The Monsters and the Critics’, which emphatically rejected the attempts of Ker and others to read the poem as ‘bad history’ and defended the poet’s decision to place the monsters at the centre. Tolkien’s interpretation of the poem as essentially a folktale with a historical setting echoes that of Klaeber, who comments:

The subject-matter of *Beowulf* comprises in the first place, as the main plot, three fabulous exploits redolent of folk-tale fancy (the first two forming a closely connected series), and secondly a number of apparently historical elements which are introduced as a setting to the former and by way of more or less relevant digressions.

---


17 K3, pp. xlii–xliii. See also the contemporary comments of R. Girvan, *Beowulf*
Broadly speaking, this is the view of *Beowulf* that has come down to us, one in which the royal legends are relegated to a supporting role as ‘background’ to the monster-fights. As this book will argue, however, the full meaning of the hero’s monster-fights only becomes clear when viewed within the context of the surrounding royal legends, as part of a wider dynastic drama concerning the fates of royal houses and nations. In other words, the dynastic material does not merely serve as ‘background’ but provides the essential context for the monster-fights, while the monster-fights themselves serve to dramatize dynastic legend.

**The Origins of the Poem and its Manuscript**

Although the matter of the origins of *Beowulf* remains unsettled, there is now an increasing body of linguistic, metrical and cultural evidence to support the view that the work originated in an Anglian-speaking region of Anglo-Saxon England, probably the central kingdom of Mercia, during the late-seventh or early-eighth century. That being said, barring the discovery of another manuscript, the precise circumstances under which the work was composed, for whom, and why, are likely to remain shrouded in mystery. Compounding the difficulty is the fact that there are precious few tangible signs of the poem’s circulation between the period of its composition and its copying in the Nowell Codex c. 1000. It is now generally agreed that the author of *Andreas*, an Old English verse saint’s life contained in the Vercelli Book, borrowed certain elements of heroic phraseology and imagery from *Beowulf*. Similar arguments have been advanced, albeit more tentatively, for the possible influence of *Beowulf* on the signed poems of Cynewulf, the Old English prose version of *Alexander’s Letter to Aristotle* with which it now shares a manuscript, and the West-
Saxon royal genealogy.\footnote{A. Orchard, ‘Both Style and Substance: The Case for Cynewulf’, in \textit{Anglo-Saxon Styles}, ed. C. E. Karkov and G. Hardin Brown (Albany, NY, 2003), pp. 271–305; CCB, pp. 163–68; A. Orchard, \textit{Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript} (Cambridge, 1985; repr. Toronto, 2003), pp. 23–35; S. C. Thomson, \textit{Communal Creativity in the Making of the Beowulf Manuscript: Towards a Reception History of the Nowell Codex}, Library of the Written Word 67 (Leiden, 2018), pp. 27–30. For links with the West Saxon royal genealogy, see Chapter Two, pp. 143–47, and Conclusion, pp. 241–46.} A further hint of the text’s circulation may be provided by what appears to be a pen-trial or doodle in a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon hand in MS BL Harley 208 reading \textit{hwæt ic eal fela ealde sæge}, ‘Listen, I [have heard] very many ancient tales’.\footnote{The text is written beneath the text of one of Alcuin’s letters on fol. 88r.} The resemblance between this inscription and the Beowulf-poet’s description of the Danish court poet (\textit{scop}), \textit{sē de eal fela eald-gesegena/ worn gemunde}, ‘the one who could remember from far back a great many ancient tales’ (869–71a), may indicate that this scribe was recalling lines from the poem.\footnote{See Ker §229; M. B. Parkes, \textit{Rædan, areccan, smeagan: How the Anglo-Saxons Read}, \textit{ASE} 26 (1997), 1–22, at 19; A. Orchard, ‘The Word Made Flesh: Christianity and Oral Culture in Anglo-Saxon Verse’, \textit{Oral Tradition} 24 (2009), 293–318, at 309; Thomson, \textit{Communal Creativity}, pp. 256–59. If the scribe was indeed recalling \textit{Beowulf} here, it is all the more interesting that he chose to paraphrase a passage directly concerned with the memorization of ancient poetry. For discussion of this passage and its function as a metaphor for the Beowulf-poet’s own reshaping of tradition, see Chapter Two, pp. 106–11.} Towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, around the year 1000, a version of \textit{Beowulf} was copied into an eclectic anthology of vernacular prose and verse. The items in this collection are broadly linked, it seems, by their concern with the monstrous and the exotic.\footnote{Ker §216; Gneuss and Lapidge §399. The manuscript is conventionally dated to c. 1000, though Kiernan (\textit{Beowulf Manuscript}, Thomson \textit{Communal Creativity}, pp. 65–83) and others have pushed for a slightly later date. For codicological studies and discussion of thematic links between the items, see K. Sisam, \textit{Studies in the History of Old English Literature} (Oxford, 1953), pp. 61–96; K. Powell, ‘Meditating on Men and Monsters: A Reconsideration of the Thematic Unity of the \textit{Beowulf} Manuscript’, \textit{RES} 58 (2006), 1–15; Orchard, \textit{Pride and Prodigies}; N. Howe, ‘Books of Elsewhere: Cotton Tiberius B v and Cotton Vitellius A xv’, in his \textit{Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England} (New Haven, 2008), pp. 151–94; and Thomson, \textit{Communal Creativity}. For the texts, see R. D. Fulk, ed. and trans., \textit{The Beowulf Manuscript}, DOML 3 (Cambridge, MA, 2010).} This codex now forms the second part of MS BL Cotton Vitellius A.xv and is usually referred to either as the Nowell Codex, after the Dean of Lichfield, Laurence Nowell, who wrote his name on the first page in 1567, or simply ‘the \textit{Beowulf} manuscript’.\footnote{The Nowell Codex is preceded in Cotton Vitellius A.xv by an unrelated twelfth-century collection, the Southwick Codex. For a facsimile of the Nowell Codex, see K. Malone, \textit{The Nowell Codex: British Museum Cotton Vitellius A. xv, Second MS}, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 12 (Copenhagen, 1963); for a digital reproduction, see K. Kiernan, \textit{Electronic Beowulf: 4th edition} (London, 2010).} The manuscript was produced by two scribes (conventionally...
The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf

referred to as Scribes A and B) as well as several illustrators. In its present state the Nowell Codex comprises three Old English prose texts, The Passion of Saint Christopher (missing its beginning), The Wonders of the East, also known as The Marvels of the East (illustrated), and Alexander’s Letter to Aristotle, followed by the two poems, Beowulf and Judith (missing its beginning). All three prose texts are in the hand of Scribe A, who also copied up to line 1939 of Beowulf, at which point he was replaced by Scribe B, who also copied Judith. Examination of the codex, however, reveals that Judith in fact once stood before Christopher, meaning that Beowulf, the last pages of which are especially badly damaged, was originally the final item in the collection. Judging by the ambitious nature of this project and the relatively poor standard of its execution, it seems likely that the Nowell Codex was produced for a moderately wealthy patron at a provincial scriptorium rather than a royal court or major ecclesiastic centre. Both scribes inconsistently adapted the Anglian spelling of their exemplar to the Late West Saxon dialect of their day. Like the modern reader, these scribes were at times baffled by the ancient royal names that are littered throughout Beowulf. Scribe A appears to have confused the name of Scyld’s son, Beow, with that of the Geatish hero, Beowulf, at lines 18a and 53b. Similarly, Scribe B garbles the phrase Merewīningas milts, ‘the mercy of the Merovingian’ (2921), as mere wio ingasmilts, and later renders the genitive form of Ongentheow (Ongenþeoes) at line 1968b as four separate lexemes, thereby producing the meaningless on gen þeo

---


26 See P. J. Lucas, ‘The Place of Judith in the Beowulf-manuscript’, RES 41 (1990), 463–78. Based on his recent examination of the manuscript, Thomson suggests that the Nowell Codex originally comprised ‘a missing religious poem, followed by Judith, followed by another religious text in either prose or poetry, followed by the full St Christopher, and then the texts as we have them now: Wonders, Alexander, and Beowulf’ (Communal Creativity, p. 89).

Introduction

es.²⁸ To make matters worse, the Nowell Codex was badly damaged by fire in the early-eighteenth century. Nevertheless, despite its defects, it is this single, battered and error-strewn copy that provides our only complete witness to this extraordinary poem.

The Modern Recovery of the Text and its Critical Reception

Following the copying of the Nowell Codex, the text of Beowulf lay relatively undisturbed for much of the next millennium. Although some early-modern antiquarians evidently took an interest in the manuscript, it was not until the early-nineteenth century that Beowulf became the subject of sustained analysis.²⁹ With the rise of ‘national philologies’, scholars began to study the text in the hope that they might discover first-hand evidence of the languages and customs of the ‘Germanic Heroic Age’.³⁰ Extensive efforts were made to excise the ‘Christian elements’ by a process of textual ‘disintegration’, in the hope of recovering the unadulterated pagan material that lay behind.³¹ Even with the gradual recognition that Beowulf is a work of art in its own right, rather than a mangled version of a series of earlier lays, unfavourable comparisons with the epics of ancient Greece and Rome nevertheless persisted. The generally low crit-

²⁸ See Neidorf, Transmission, pp. 88–89. Neidorf takes the scribes’ evident unfamiliarity with royal names as indicative of the decline of Germanic legend in late Anglo-Saxon England (Transmission, pp. 96–101). Thomson, however, notes that these same scribes at times struggled to make sense of other types of personal names (e.g. biblical) elsewhere in the manuscript, while emphasizing that some of these transmission errors could have been a feature of their exemplar (Communal Creativity, pp. 34–35, 154–57, 216–23).
²⁹ The poem was catalogued and partially transcribed in 1705 by Humfrey Wanley. For a recent discussion of evidence of engagement with the manuscript by later medieval and early modern readers, see Thomson, Communal Creativity, pp. 9–10, 338–48. For samples of eighteenth-century interest in the text of Beowulf, see Shippey and Haarder, pp. 1–10, 75–90; and K4, p. xxvi.
³¹ The most important exponent of this approach, known as liedertheorie, was Ernst Moritz Ludwig Ettmüller (1802–77); for a sample of his work, see Shippey and Haarder, pp. 231–34. For summaries of this method, and criticism of its underlying principles, see E. G. Stanley, In the Foreground: Beowulf (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 16–20; Shippey, ‘Structure and Unity’, pp. 154–58.
The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf

ical standing of the work prevailed until well into the twentieth century, as influential voices such as W. P. Ker complained of its thematic incoherence and structural inadequacies. This view of the poem as essentially a botched job, the production of an ambitious author ill-suited to the task, characterizes the early phase of modern Beowulf-scholarship.

Tolkien’s 1936 lecture, ‘The Monsters and the Critics’, signalled a sea-change in critical attitudes towards Beowulf. In response to Friedrich Klaeber’s complaint of a lack of steady advance, Tolkien insisted that the poem was not meant to advance, steadily or unsteadily. Although he was critical of the poet’s abstract presentation of the dragon, and sceptical about the integrity of certain passages, such as the gif-stöl crux (168–69) and the ‘Christian excursus’ (175–88), Tolkien’s generally sympathetic treatment of the poet’s compositional method paved the way for a series of post-war studies that highlighted the work’s artistic sophistication. Adrien Bonjour’s 1950 monograph, The Digressions in Beowulf, set out to demonstrate that these contentious passages serve as a highly appropriate foil to the transcendental interest of the main theme. Another major advance came with Arthur Brodeur’s 1959 book, The Art of Beowulf, which highlighted the work’s richness of diction and the inventiveness and skill of its author. Comparing Beowulf with other long Old English narrative poems such as Andreas, Exodus, Judith and Elene, Brodeur maintained that none of them attains the dignity, the beauty, the nobility of thought of Beowulf; none exhibits its conscious mastery of form. Fred C. Robinson’s 1985 monograph used the poetic technique of apposition, sometimes referred to as variation, whereby elements in a structure are

32 See Chapter One, pp. 32–33.
33 Tolkien, ‘Monsters’, p. 81. Comparing Beowulf with classical epic, Tolkien comments: ‘the real resemblance of the Aeneid and Beowulf lies in the constant presence of a sense of many-storied antiquity, together with its natural accompaniment, stern and noble melancholy. In this way they are really akin and together differ from Homer’s flatter, if more glittering, surface’ (‘Monsters’, p. 75, n. 21).
34 Tolkien, ‘Monsters’, p. 66: ‘the conception […] approaches draconitas rather than draco: a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the undiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad (the evil aspect of all life).’
35 For discussion of the meaning of the gif-stöl crux in the dynastic drama, see Chapter Three, pp. 162–76.
36 Bonjour, Digressions, p. 71. Bonjour distinguishes between digressions and episodes: ‘Strictly speaking, an episode may be considered as a moment which forms a real whole and yet is merged in the main narrative, whereas a digression is more of an adjunction and generally entails a sudden break in the narrative’ (p. xi). The first sensitive treatment of the poet’s use of digressions and episodes was that of L. P. Schrøder, Om Bjovulfs-drapen: Efter en række foredrag på folkehøjskolen i Askov (Copenhagen, 1875).