



HAL
open science

The historicity of Beowulf

André Crépin

► **To cite this version:**

André Crépin. The historicity of Beowulf. Points de vue sur Beowulf, Nov 1998, Nancy, France. pp.7-16. hal-04626077

HAL Id: hal-04626077

<https://hal.science/hal-04626077v1>

Submitted on 26 Jun 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

André Crépin
Université de Paris IV

The Historicity of *Beowulf*¹

The narrator of the poem introduces his work as a piece of history:

Yes, we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes' kings in the old days — how the princes of that people did brave deeds. (1 A)²

The poet claims to be the transmitter of a whole tradition. The king of the Danes is himself the chronicler of his own people:

The old Scylding, who had learned many things, spoke of times far-off. At times a brave one in battle³ touched the glad wood, the harp's joy; at times he told tales, true and sad; at times he related strange stories according to right custom;⁴ at times, again, the great-hearted king, bound with age, the old warrior, would begin to speak of his youth, his battle-strength. His heart welled within when, old and wise, he thought of his many winters. (37 A)

Hrothgar, then, related events "of times far-off" and of more recent times in which he took part, both as reporter and as actor.

¹ My thanks to Mildred Martin-Camille for correcting some of the mistakes in my English. — In this paper I chiefly use material detailed in my edition and French translation of *Beowulf*, Göppingen: Kummerle Verlag (Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 329), 2 vol., 1991. — I keep the spelling of Donaldson's translation (see note 2). — The topic of historicity is dealt with by Leo Carruthers, "Historicity, Archaeology and Romance in *Beowulf*", *Lectures d'une oeuvre : Beowulf, Symbolismes et interprétations*, ed. Marie-Françoise Alamichel, Paris : Editions du temps, 1998, 11-27: "*Beowulf* is not history, but a story, an historical romance".

² Joseph F. Tuso, *Beowulf, The Donaldson Translation, Background and Sources, Criticism*, New-York and London: W.W. Norton (A Norton Critical Edition), 1975. (page 1; A: top of the page; B: middle; C: bottom).

³ To be corrected: "the brave one", i.e. the king.

⁴ Rather: "according to the rules of traditional poetry".

The story of Beowulf, the first and original version of our poem, was composed by Beowulf's companions:

Then the brave in battle rode round the mound, children of nobles, twelve in all, would bewail their sorrow and mourn their king, recite dirges and speak of the man. They praised his great deeds and his acts of courage, judged well of his prowess. (55 A)

To what extent can we trust these poets cum warriors cum historians? I'll examine the data about the Scandinavian kingdoms — those of the Danes and of the Geats, and more particularly Hygelac's unfortunate raid. The second part of my paper will deal with the archaeological finds at Yeavinger and Sutton Hoo. My third and last part will deal with the originality of our poem: a Christian poem about heathen communities, and I will offer my suggestion about the dating of the poem.



The first substantive in the poem, a compound, sums up the matter it is about, the Spear-Danes, that is to say the warlike Danes. From the start we are facing the paradox of an English poem about Danes, in other words Scandinavians.

After reading the poem we may question the aptness of the word "Danes", since Beowulf is indeed a Scandinavian but a Geat, not a Dane. An explanation would be to consider the word "Danes" as a generic label, including Geats, Swedes as well as Danes strictly speaking. In the poem about the Battle of Maldon, fought in 991, the Norwegian invaders are called "Danes". Moreover, in the early Middle Ages, Danes occupied not only what is nowadays Denmark but also the Southern part of present-day Sweden.

Danes in our poem, however, must be understood in the narrower sense: as the particular people living on the sides and islands of the Kattegat, a people ruled by King Hrothgar of the Scylding lineage. He was a *Scyld-ing*, a descendant of Scyld as the Merovingians, mentioned in our poem (*The Merewioing king*, 51 A) descended from Meroveus. And we must content ourselves with the assessment that the beginning of the poem is oblique: that the Danes are not the people of Beowulf, and that the Beowulf mentioned

Historicity

line 18 was not the hero of our poem. The first modern editor of the poem, the Icelander Thorkelin, in 1815, made a mistake when he entitled it *De Danorum rebus gestis*, perhaps a deliberate mistake to please the King of Denmark who had commissioned his research.

As for the Geats, they have only left a thin shadow of their existence in the title of the king of Sweden, *rex Sverum Gothorumque* — king of the Swedes and of the Goths, that is to say the Geats, in Swedish *Götar*. The Swedes lived in the North, the Geats in the South, and the Geats were defeated and conquered by the Swedes before the 9th century.

Although some or most of the Anglo-Saxons who invaded Britain in the 5th century came from Jutland (nowadays part of Denmark) and Angeln (a country lying south of Denmark), although the Vikings (attacking England from 797 onwards) came from Scandinavia, the English before the tenth century seem to have known very little about Scandinavia. It was a distant country, on the borders of the civilized world, and the learned monks in Britain willingly fused and confused Geats from Scandinavia with Goths from the Continent and Getæ from Scythia on the Black Sea.

In fact, even today, little is known about the history of Scandinavia in the early Middle Ages.

The only character in the poem to appear in history books is Hygelac. Gregory of Tours mentions the failure of his raid to the mouth of the Rhine c. 521. His name appears as Chlo- or Chro-chilaicus, or Hrodolaicus: these variants show the difficulty to interpret the Germanic spirants in Latin (cf. the evolution of Hludovicus into the variants Clovis and Louis). Hygelac's raid was of the same type as the later expeditions of Vikings: its only purpose was plunder. Hygelac's raid was first successful but Hygelac, perhaps because he had taken too large a booty, had to wait for supplementary boats to carry it away and therefore the Franks had time to call for help and to re-attack and kill Hygelac. Four passages in our poem recall the event: Hygelac on this raid wore the famous necklace of the Brosings (22 A), Beowulf swam back home with "the armor of thirty earls on his arm" (41 C), after avenging Hygelac by

killing his slayer (44 A). The fourth passage broadens the scene and mentions the various foreign peoples involved (51 A): Franks, Frisians, Hugas, Hetware and Merovingians.

Two anachronisms can be detected in this list.⁵ The event happened c. 521 in the mouth of the Rhine. Now Hetware became known in this region only after a Viking raid at the same place in 715. As for the name Hugas for Franks, it was used only in the 10th century. Two deductions can be inferred from these anachronisms: 1) that our text at least such as it appears in MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv, was not composed before the 10th century, 2) that the poem cannot be relied upon in all its details.

Its characters are or have become legendary. Hygelac was buried on an island in the delta of the Rhine and his huge bones became as it were a wonder, attracting many lookers-on. Here is the entry in the *Liber monstrorum* (I, 2):

And there are monsters of an amazing size (*monstra miræ magnitudinis*), like King Hygelac, who ruled the Geats (*Getis*) and was killed by the Franks, whom no horse could carry from the age of twelve. His bones are preserved on an island in the river Rhine, where it breaks into the Ocean, and they are shown as a wonder (*pro miraculo ostenduntur*) to travellers from afar.⁶

The Scandinavian texts, most of them of a late date (12th-15th c.), mention the characters of our poem, but in different contexts.⁷ Hygelac, for instance, in the *Danish History* of Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1200) is the name (*Hugletus* in Latin) of a Danish king who defeated the Swedes, and of an avaricious Irish king, who was killed by the hero Starkarthr (Starkatherus). As for Beowulf, he appears elsewhere under the names of Bjolfr (a contraction of

⁵ Walter Goffart, "Hetware and Hugas: Datable Anachronisms in *Beowulf*", *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. Colin Chase, University of Toronto Press, 1981, 83-100.

⁶ Translation by Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the 'Beowulf' Manuscript*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995.

⁷ Historical and archaeological documents are conveniently gathered and translated in G.N. Garmonway, Jacqueline Simpson and Hilda Ellis Davidson, *'Beowulf' and its Analogues*, London: Dent and New-York: Dutton, 1968, 2nd ed. 1980.

Historicity

Beowulf), Bjarki (a derivative of *bjorn* "the bear") or Bothvarr (a reinterpretation of the compound: *bodh* "battle" [cf. Old English *beadu*] — *vargr* "wolf"). In the Latin summary of the *Skjoldunga saga* ("History of the Scyldings"), Bodvarrus is Norwegian, and one of the twelve champions of King Rolfo (= Hrothulf). The same story is found in Saxo but with more details: Biarco has to fight against a huge bear. In the romances c. 1400, in prose (*Hrolfs saga kraka*, "History of Hrolfr the pole") and in verse (*Bjarka rimur*, "Poems of Bjarki"), our hero is the son of a prince transformed into a bear, or he must face a huge white bear. In my opinion the Scandinavian texts are important as they witness the legendary survival of Beowulf but they throw no clear light on our poem.

Much more serious is the archaeological evidence.



The archaeological finds in Scandinavia and in Britain corroborate the data of our poem concerning not the events or the characters but the civilisation described.

Two constructions, made of wood, masterpieces of human craft, loom prominent in the poem: the hall and the ship.

Hrothgar's and Hygelac's royal residences resemble the complex excavated at Yeavinger near the Cheviots, at about 25 km south-west of Lindisfarne.⁸ The Yeavinger site is a very ancient Celtic place, but what concerns us here is the *villa regia*, "royal residence", of Edwin who reigned over Northumbria from 616 to 633. Thanks to the holes left in the ground by the posts, some vertical (posts), some slant (buttresses), the plan of the main wooden hall has been restored. It is oriented east-west, following the course of the sun. Just before the threshold towards the east, a man was buried with a kind of standard and a goat's cranium at his feet. The name *Yeavinger* comes from Old English *Gefrin*, itself from Brittonic *gefr*, plural of *gafr* "goat" + *fryn* "hill": "Hill of the goats". The main hall is surrounded with other, smaller buildings. After his

⁸ In Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, eds., *Beowulf*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, p. 186, Leslie Webster comments upon the Anglo-Saxon hall at Cowdery's Down, Hampshire.

victory over Grendel, Beowulf did not sleep in the hall, he and his companions were allowed another lodging (24 A). Similarly, the King and his Queen did not sleep in the hall, they retired to their chambers (22 C). This is in keeping with the general layout of the various buildings at Yeavinger.

The most spectacular excavation is that of Sutton Hoo, at about 100 km north-east of London, on the estuary of the Deben. Sutton Hoo means the spur, the ridge (OE *hoh*), south of dwellings (*be suthan tune*). As at Yeavinger, the site had been "civilized" for a very long time. There are nineteen mounds, at least twelve of them being tumuli, barrows. The biggest tumulus contained a ship: its planks have rotten away but careful excavation has revealed a kind of negative trace of it, like the famous shroud of Turin. The most recent coin found in the boat bears the date of 625: the burial cannot be older than that.

Let me select, and comment upon, a dozen slides published by the British Museum (and numbered ML...):

1. (ML 1) *The outline of the ship*, in 1939. Looking towards the bow. We can see the rows of iron rivets and the impression of the ribs, the timbers having completely disintegrated. The ship was 27 metres long and manned by forty oarsmen.

2. (ML 20) *The iron standard*. It is a royal standard, quite similar to that found at Yeavinger. In our poem a royal standard ("a golden standard") appears three times: at the beginning of the poem (2 A, about the corpse of Scyld in his funeral boat); about the middle (given by Hrothgar to Beowulf, 18 C); towards the end (in the treasure of the Dragon, 48 C). Dæghrefen, the slayer of Hygelac, was "keeper of the standard" (44 A).

3. (ML 18) *The sceptre*. A big ritual stone, a whetstone, perhaps alluding to Weland the Smith, 60 cm long and weighing 3 kg, with representations of heads at its extremities: bearded and without a beard (veterans and young warriors?), and with a bronze stag at the top. (In a former reconstruction the stag was supposed to crown the standard.)

Historicity

4. (ML 19) *The bronze stag*. Hrothgar's palace is named Heorot (> ModE *hart*, 2 C). The half-line *heah ond horn-geap* (82a) must not be translated "high and wide-gabled" (Donaldson, 2 C) but "lofty towering hall with its broad horns" (Garmonsway and Simpson). The hart / stag is a royal emblem: cf. the illumination of Psalm cxi in the Utrecht Psalter, or its derivative the Harley Psalter (verse 9: "... his justice remains for ever and ever, his horn shall be exalted in glory").

Weapons:

5 and 6. (ML 16 and 17) *The helmet*. Similar to helmets found in Sweden, themselves copied from Roman helmets. There is a bird, or a dragon, extending from the nose and facing the head of another beast forming the crest. The wings of the bird/dragon are the two eyebrows and each terminates in a small boar's head. The crown and the cheek-pieces of the helmet are covered with thin bronze plates. Two could be reconstructed: a battle scene (a horseman and a fallen warrior killing each other) and twin dancing warriors. More relevant are the Swedish plates from Torslunda on Öland, representing men and bears. Helmets were adorned to make the warrior more frightful — hence the images of dragons, birds of prey, boars, warriors. "Boar-images shone over cheek-guards gold adorned, gleaming and fire-hardened — the war-minded boar held guard over fierce men." (6 C ; cf. 26 A)

7. (ML 15) *The shield*. A large circular shield, similar to those found in Sweden. The diameter is about 92 cm. It is made of limewood, covered with hide and adorned with gilt-bronze mounts: a bird of prey and a dragon. Against the dragon, which spat fire, Beowulf "commanded that a wonderful battle shield be made of iron. Well he knew that the wood of the forest might not help him — linden against flame". (41 A)

8. (ML 21) *The dragon*, with fierce teeth, three pairs of wings and a forked tail. The *Beowulf* dragon has nothing to do with the dragons in Saints' Lives which have legs. The *Beowulf* dragon is a flying serpent.

9. (ML 2) *Purse-lid*. The bone or ivory of the purse-lid has disappeared but the outer frame and the decorative plaques have been preserved. The purse contained 40 gold coins of Continental origin. These 40 coins perhaps represented the wages of the 40 oarsmen who were supposed to take the ship to its destination in the afterlife. The plaques represent: 1) pairs of animals interlocked back to back, 2) a bird of prey attacking a duck (two symmetrical pieces), 3) a man between two beasts (two samples).

10. (ML 3) *Detail from the purse-lid*: a man between two beasts. Inlaid with cloisonné garnets and millefiori glass. Cf. the Torslunda plaque representing a man and two bears. I have suggested that the plaques here represented animals used in hunting: horses (the interlocked animals), hawks, hounds.

11. (ML 35) *The lyre or harp*. Only tiny fragments of maplewood and of ornamental mounts have been recovered and there were two successive reconstructions of the lyre. The cover illustration of Tuso's book is based on the first reconstruction. The more recent one adopts the form of the instrument played by King David in the illuminations adorning the psalms, OE *harp*, Bede's Latin *cithara*. The lyre or harp was kept in a beaver-skin bag, hairs from which still adhere to the outside of the frame.

The harp played an important part in the performance of songs/poems, as is made clear by *Beowulf* and the chapter on Cædmon, the first English Christian poet, in Bede's Latin *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, composed in 731 — but it is difficult to specify its role in the reciting of poems.⁹

12. (ML 25) *The two spoons* of late-classical type, 25 cm long. Each has a Greek inscription: + SAVLOS "Saul", + PAVLOS "Paul". They may refer to Paul's conversion, and the pair of spoons may have been a baptismal present for a convert. But the first letter in the first inscription may be a badly written P!

⁹ John C. Pope (*The Rhythm of 'Beowulf'*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942, 2nd ed. 1966) has built his theory of Old English versification on the accompaniment of the harp, filling up the silent beats in the reconstructed rhythm.



The two major pieces of archaeological evidence — Yeavinger and Sutton Hoo — are connected with the 7th century.

The Yeavinger residence was that of King Edwin, whose conversion to Christianity and death in battle (633) are clearly reported by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The Sutton Hoo ship may have been a royal tomb — or a cenotaph, that is a monument in memory of a man buried elsewhere. Thanks to the dating provided by coins in the purse, the king honored by the ship burial may be identified as Rædwald, a contemporary of Edwin, who died in 624 or 625, or rather one of his successors, for instance Æthelhere, who died in 654. What is sure is that Christianity was still unsettled in East Anglia. Rædwald practised syncretism: he had an altar to Christ but kept another one to the old Germanic gods. We know nothing about the religion of Æthelhere, but his elder brother Anna was a devout Christian.

Such a period of transition from paganism to Christianity would favour the composition of a poem recalling the glory of the pagan past while interpreting it in the light of Christianity. The more so as the East Anglian kings reckoned a certain Hrothmund in their genealogy, and it has been suggested that this Hrothmund was Hrothmund, one of the two sons of Hrothgar (21 C). The treacherous Hrothulf killed the other son, according to the Scandinavian sources, and Hrothmund may have fled to East Anglia.

Other hypotheses have placed the composition of *Beowulf* in the Northumbria of Bede (died in 735), the Mercia of Offa (d. 796) or of his son Ecgferth, the Wessex of Alfred (d. 899), the England of Athelstan (d. 939), of Edgar (d. 975) or of the Scandinavian Cnut (d. 1035).

The number and the seriousness of those scholarly hypotheses lead to a unique conclusion: our text, that of manuscript Cotton Vitellius A.xv, is only one version among many. One of the latest — preceded by others, each version adding, subtracting or modifying elements according to the political context, but always preserving the two basic themes of the poem: the praise of a noble pagan, the agent

of divine Providence — and, therefore, the portrait of the ideal prince, first as a loyal vassal, then as a self-sacrificing king. The poem may have been recited during the festivities celebrating the baptism of Guthrum, the Scandinavian enemy of Alfred, now his godson; it may have been copied to support Cnut's policy of reconciliation between English and Scandinavians.



Conclusion

What about us, in 1998, who have no such horizon of expectations? *Beowulf* sounds like an exotic product, difficult to grasp because of its meanders, its allusions by now irretrievable. Its mists, its mysteries fascinate us. We have to imagine, deconstruct and reconstruct. We have to explore the histories of several peoples in the past, *in geardagum* (1 A) and to invent the missing links, the evanescent background. This intoxicating mixture of erudite research and reverie *à la* Kubla Khan led Professor J.R.R. Tolkien to write the chronicles of his own imaginary kingdoms; and Professor J. Gardner to call upon the monsters.¹⁰ Let us listen therefore "to the sound of the harp, the clear song of the scop" (3 A), let us dream.

¹⁰ John Ronald Renel Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954-1955; John Gardner, *Grendel*, ill. by Emil Antonucci, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971.