

granted Grettir the right to prove his vow of innocence through the ordeal of the red-hot iron, but on the appointed day a young boy—some say a demon in disguise—mocked Grettir in the church, and Grettir struck the boy in that sacred place. After such sacrilege Grettir could not undergo his ordeal, and so he had to leave the court of Olaf and Norway forever, with the vilest of charges over his head; it was his bad luck that these charges would precede him to Iceland.

VOLUNDR THE SMITH

This Norse heroic saga shrouds the myth of an ancient Germanic god, one whom we know to have been worshiped by the early Anglo-Saxons; Weland is mentioned specifically by name in the Old English poems *Deor's Lament* and *Waldere*, and his name crops up in a few other documents, as well. Moreover, weapons of quality were sometimes designated "the work of Weland" by the Anglo-Saxons. Through such references we know the Old Norse Volundr, Nidud, and Bodvild of the present saga to be equivalent to the Anglo-Saxon Weland, Nidhad, and Beadohild. Swan maidens are important to this saga, and such creatures of Germanic folklore and legend usually are associated with the Valkyries, and perhaps with Freya's feather coat. In this saga Volundr fashions himself a similar coat, thereby providing one of several narrative links between his saga and the story of Daedalus, the imprisoned master craftsman who fashions wings for his escape. This similarity was not lost on the Norse, who called the Labyrinth of Daedalus the *Volundarhús*, which we might render, "the house of Weland." Another obvious relationship to ancient mythology is that between the hamstrung Volundr and Vulcan/Hephaistos, the lame smith-god of the classical world. Finally, the ring taken from Volundr and given by Nidud to his daughter Bodvild is classic in its vaginal imagery, as we have seen before; meanwhile, Nidud's seizing of Volundr's sword—ever a phallic image—smacks of an act of violent male dominance, and ultimately taps into a mythic vein of castration anxiety. Likewise, Volundr's attempt to avenge himself upon Nidud through the rape of Bodvild underscores both the sexual imagery and the struggle for male dominance of the two antagonists.

Long ago three swan maidens had doffed their feather garb for a time by the shore of a lake and were spending their time spinning and weaving flax. While these maidens were in their human guise, Volundr and his two brothers came upon them. Seizing the maidens without their cloaks, the brothers took them to wife, and the three couples lived together in love for seven years. At the end of this time the wives grew weary of their mortal lives, and they donned their flying coats and fled while their husbands were hunting. When the brothers returned they were distraught, and two of them went in search of their wives immediately; Volundr, however, remained where he was and plied his craft as smith. His fame as an artisan spread far and wide, and eventually the evil King Nidud sent men to seize him and his treasure. Volundr was out hunting when these men arrived, so they stole one of his most beautiful rings and hid themselves; when Volundr returned, he noticed that a ring was missing, and he was overjoyed with the thought that his wife had

returned to him at long last. He began roasting his kill, and fell asleep waiting for his wife to appear. Volundr awoke to discover himself shackled hand and foot by the minions of Nidud, who soon brought him before their king. Nidud took Volundr's sword for his own, and the most precious of Volundr's rings Nidud gave to his own daughter Bodvild. Then, taking the advice of his queen, Nidud had Volundr hamstrung and set ashore on a deserted and lonely island, where only the king visited him.

On this island Volundr was forced to use his hammer and tongs to the profit of his captor, and he spent many, many lonely and toilsome hours brooding over his escape and his vengeance. Finally an opportunity for both arrived. One day the sons of the king came to visit Volundr in secret; showing them his many treasures, Volundr promised to make them rich even beyond the dreams of their greedy and miserly father. They returned the next day to collect the promised riches, and Volundr opened his greatest chest so that they might gaze within; when they had stuck their heads well and truly in the trunk, however, Volundr brought down the lid upon their necks in such a manner as to decapitate them. Their bodies he hid under his floor, but their skulls he lined with silver and cunningly crafted into goblets for their father, King Nidud; their eyes he fashioned into jewels for their mother, the queen; their teeth he formed into brooches for their sister, the princess. Soon thereafter the opportunity arose for Volundr to seal his victory. Bodvild, the daughter of his nemesis, came to the smith in secret and asked him to repair her ring, which she had broken; she begged him to keep silent about her visit. Volundr greeted her kindly, and promised to do as she asked, and more; he was so generous to her that she suspected no treachery when he offered her a drink to refresh herself. Drinking deeply from the cup of the smith, Bodvild soon fell under the spell of Volundr's liquor and thus was powerless to defend herself from the attack that soon came: the lame captive took his vengeance on the father through the defilement of the daughter on the filthy floor of the smithy. Then Volundr donned the feather coat he had fashioned and flew away, never to return; from the safety of the sky he crowed down to Nidud the terms of his vengeance, and the king in his rage and despair was impotent to exact his own.

Sagas of Anglo-Saxon England

The Germanic oral traditions that informed the saga writers of fourteenth-century Iceland clearly were known to and used by Anglo-Saxon authors, perhaps beginning with the earliest written records in Old English, which probably date from the seventh century. Thus the Anglo-Saxons drew upon a much more recent memory of these traditions, and therefore a comparison of the employment of similar oral material by these two literatures is likely to be both interesting and informative. Furthermore, both literatures might be said to have had a similar sense of history. It is fitting, then, that we begin our examination of the Anglo-Saxon saga with two epic accounts of historical confrontations between the Anglo-Saxons and their adversaries, both Norse and Celtic; here history meets heroic sensibility in a manner that echoes later Norse historicity: in *The Battle of Maldon*, for instance, individual personalities bring to vivid life an otherwise spotty historical record of a relatively

minor regional clash. *The Battle of Brunanburh*, on the other hand, deals with an event of much more widespread importance, and uses traditional heroic diction with a relish we might almost describe as patriotic fervor. We conclude this section with two examples from *Beowulf* that illustrate that the Anglo-Saxons used quasi-historical legendary material as an inherent part of their epic heroic structure in a way very like that of the Norse sagas, although the Old English material predates the Old Norse by several centuries.

Anglo-Saxon Historical Sagas and Heroism

THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

The Battle of Brunanburh was fought in 937 CE by a combined force from Wessex and Mercia against an alliance of Vikings and Scots; the multi-ethnic nature of this conflict seems particularly appropriate for inclusion in this study. The record of this battle as related here survives in a number of copies of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, of which there are multiple versions. This chronicle began as a simple list of years with one or two major events recorded for a given entry, more or less as a device to jog the memory of the compiler as to which year was which. Over time the records for each year became more and more elaborate, some of them—like the present example—even employing the metrical patterns and heroic rhetoric associated with Old English poetry. The style of *The Battle of Brunanburh* is sagalike in its sparse use of language combined with ample specific detail. This account is entirely devoid of a sense of the urgency of Christian combat against pagan invaders so obvious in *The Battle of Maldon*, although Athelstan elsewhere is noted to have been a great patron and defender of the Church. Instead, the writer has chosen to focus on a sense of this battle as representative of the final consolidation of England into one kingdom, a consolidation which seems to him to have been the inevitable end result of the conquest of Britain begun by the invading Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. Hence this saga seems to have been meant as a paean of sorts to the scion of Wessex and to the final domination of his house.

At Brunanburh King Athelstan and his brother Edmund—both sons of Edward—won victory and great glory over the hated Vikings and Scots, enemies in league against the West Saxons. From dewy dawn to dying dusk they shattered the shield-wall of their enemies, uprooted the war-hedge, as was fitting of those who bore the blood of their forefathers; land, home, and gold were ever safe in their keeping. The Norse and Scots felt the keen blades of the warriors of Wessex as they stumbled and ran in disarray, their ranks broken in their flight from fierce fury; nor were the men of Mercia less terrible in dealing out death and destruction to the Vikings of Olaf, who left the flood and flow of the salty sea for that of blood weltering from their wounds; five kings and seven earls suffered the wrath of the West Saxons and their Mercian allies that day. Countless were the dead of lesser rank among the Vikings and the Scots.

Olaf, king of Vikings, made his way to his ship with greater haste than he had left it, and with a retinue far diminished; tiny and tattered was the remnant that fled

the field that day and boarded their bark for home, dreary and desperate as they departed for Dublin. Little more cause for joy had Constantine as he scurried for the safety of the north; he would brag no more than would Olaf. The Graybeard King of Scots was sheared that day of many a loyal kinsman, and of his own sons, cut down by the fury of the onslaught of the sons of Edward. Likewise did the victorious brothers, prince and king, head for home from the site of the slaughter, but theirs was a different song: glad with glory, they sang their joy as they returned to the land of the West Saxons. They left behind a feast of carrion, the bodies of their enemies exposed for those with the taste for carnage: the raven and the eagle, the hawk and the gray wolf enjoyed the fruit of battle's labor. We know from the records of the ancient ones long past that no greater victory had ever been won on this island, since first the Saxons and Angles journeyed hither from the east, wreaking havoc on the hapless Welsh, winning wealth and land and glory in the creation of kingdoms.

THE BATTLE OF MALDON

The Battle of Maldon occurred in 991 CE at the point on the Blackwater River where a tidal causeway links the mainland with an island. A band of marauding Vikings had made their base on that island, and the local Anglo-Saxon forces—led by Birhtnoth, the earl of Essex—came out to put an end to the ravages of the Northmen. The English refused to pay the tribute demanded by the Norse, and so battle was joined; it is ironic in retrospect that the English crown indeed submitted to this blackmail later in the same year, paying ten thousand pounds in gold and silver—called *Danegeld*, or “Dane-money”—to buy off the great fleets of raiders. The English would pay more as time went on. At Maldon the forces of Essex were successful at first in defending the bridge by single combat, but eventually Birhtnoth allowed the Vikings to cross in force to engage in a full-scale battle, and this decision proved costly; Birhtnoth fell, and after his death a retainer fled on the dead earl's horse, causing a collapse of the English lines when many conscripted soldiers followed their leader—as they thought—in retreat. The Vikings routed the remaining forces of Essex.

The local forces led by the earl were made up of a small body of aristocrats and full-time warriors in the household of the earl, and a large levy of freeman farmers who made up the *fyrð*, a sort of local militia. The household warriors of Birhtnoth would not have had much personal experience of warfare—the victory of the English forces at Brunanburh had bought the kingdom over fifty years of peace—but they would have been steeped in the heroic tradition of their forebears, including the social mores of the Germanic warrior band called the *comitatus* by Tacitus. Simply put, this social code called for generosity on the part of the leader and loyalty unto death on the part of each follower. After the death of Birhtnoth, the voice of the young warrior Aelfwine most clearly illustrates this code in the present poem: “Many is the night we boasted over mead at our prowess in battle; now is the time to match deeds to words. I will not quickly flee the slaughter-bed, to find reproach at home, now that my lord lies dead upon the field.” Whether the

recorder of this episode composed this speech in part upon the actual sentiments expressed on the day of the Battle of Maldon, or whether he drew solely upon the heroic poetic traditions of his people, may not be the point; it is undoubtedly clear that he is transmitting a cultural ideal, although—as this poem amply illustrates—this is an ideal that was not always brought into practice. In any case, in the voice of Aelfwine we hear an echo of Wicglaf's words to Beowulf's wavering thanes in the closing episode of that heroic epic.

The recorder of *The Battle of Maldon* accused Birhtnoth of *ofermod*—perhaps best rendered “overconfidence”—because the earl allowed the raiders to cross the causeway as a force, and thus the battle was lost. It is probably likely that Birhtnoth expected that the Vikings would flee in their ships to another, unguarded location to continue their raiding if he failed to destroy them in detail when he had the opportunity; his was therefore a calculated risk. Moreover, this act of courage and honor—although we might deem it foolhardy with the benefit of hindsight—was well within the bounds of the heroic tradition that the writer otherwise embraced; therefore his bitterness might be attributed to local criticism of the earl in the direct aftermath of the loss. This poem clearly draws upon oral traditions, but more than that, like a saga it fleshes out its characters with a wealth of local color and detail; further, also in a sagalike way, the poet uses a few individual characters, well described, to make larger moral and historical points. This account clearly was recorded locally a short time after the battle.

In *The Battle of Maldon* a heroic sensibility dooms the protagonists, although they gain glory in death, and the description of them by the poet reminds us of the pagan Germanic concept of the immortality to be gained through fame and honor and glory; Birhtnoth's fall, indeed, can be likened to that of Beowulf. Both heroes fall in a battle against monsters; Beowulf's dragon is replaced here by Vikings described in the terms of vicious marauding animals. Both heroes are old men past their prime who suffer death in a final conflict and are translated through apotheosis as a result. Beowulf's apotheosis is traditionally Germanic in the sense that his name and deeds live on in song; Birhtnoth, on the other hand, is a Christian version of the warrior-hero, and through his martyrdom at Maldon a cult of Birhtnoth rose at Ely. The poet self-consciously frames this struggle as that of the *Miles Christi* Birhtnoth against the pagan Vikings, who are the hounds of hell; this Christian interpretation of the conflict between English and Danes is notably absent in *The Battle of Brunanburh*.

Lord Birhtnoth placed his men in position, riding to and fro and instructing them; when all was prepared to his satisfaction, he dismounted and stood with those retainers he knew to be most steadfast and hardy. Then the messenger of the Vikings spoke, his voice ringing out across the water: Tribute he demanded, gold for peace, if the earl of the English wished his foes to take to their ships without strife. Haughty were the words of the pirate. Birhtnoth responded, the sea-wolves waited not long for their answer: Point of spear and edge of sword would he pay, war gear to profit not the greedy jaws of the slaughter-beasts in their feast of defenseless En-

glish. Birhtnoth commanded the Viking herald to take back to his people a grimmer message, harsher an answer: A steadfastthane of Aethelred stood with his army, ready to repulse the invaders; Christian soldier should have victory over heathen dog, and it would be too shameful for words should the earl offer tribute to those who had come unbidden so deep into England. Death would he deal before tribute.

Then, as the tide moved out and the causeway was fit to pass, the earl of Aethelred placed loyal Wulfstan in defense, with Aelfere and Maccus at his shoulders. As quickly as war-hungry wolves advanced they found a bitter welcome at the end of a spear, and drank deep the draft of death in the briny waters at Wulfstan's feet. The Vikings might not pass in this way, and when they saw this it came into their minds to trick Birhtnoth, to use his courage against him; they asked for leave to pass the ford unmolested, so that battle might be joined in force. This devious request the earl granted; many men would regret his show of confidence. The earl placed the matter in the hands of the Lord. The Vikings advanced across the receding waters, and then in the slaughter bed soon slept many a Dane and Essex man. Spears flew and blades clashed, and din of battle rang over the water; edge to edge the English held their shields in the war-hedge. Wulfmaer, sister-son to Birhtnoth, fell in the onslaught, and him Eadweard avenged with Norse blood; when chance allowed, loudly thanked the earl his man for the payment of this debt! On all sides battle pressed in, and Birhtnoth steadied his men with words of wisdom and comfort. The brave Graybeard earl then led his men, charged into the fray, brought shield and sword against the heathen; with a Viking spear he was wounded, but he shattered the shaft with a stroke of his shield, and thrust through the throat with his spear the seaman who had harmed him. Thrusting again, he hit in the heart the heathen dog, and the earl laughed and gave thanks to God for granting this gift.

The earl's joy at bloodletting soon slackened, however, as a spear of the sea-wolves sank in his side; Wulmaer son of Wulfstan, a boy young of winters, withdrew this woe-wielder from the wound. He shot the spear back the way it had come, and struck down the sailor who sent it. Thanks gave Birhtnoth to the Lord then for long life and many joys; he entrusted his soul to his Savior. Then the earl was hacked down by the damned heathens, and Aelfnoth and Wulmaer were laid low beside him, as befits thanes loyal to their leader. Then many fled the fight who found fear on that field; Godric, son of Odda, was first to seek safety, seizing the steed of his stricken sire. Both his brothers he bore with him. This is how Godric thought to repay the earl who had granted him so many fine mounts. Many followed that foul and faithless friend who thought him their lord. It would have been better had more men minded the goodly gifts granted them by Birhtnoth's benevolence. So Offa had harangued them, that boast over beer often is bolder than deed on a dire day.

Those still loyal to the lord laid low surged at the sea-dogs; Aelfwine, warrior young of years, reminded retainers of old oaths. This man of Mercia meant not to fail the fame of his family; death beside his dear lord and kinsman he preferred to dishonor. Full of fury he fought the foe, and he gave heart to his friends. Offa gave thanks to Aelfwine for his wise words and cursed the traitor Godric; Leofsunu likewise for his lost lord vowed vengeance, and dreaded dishonor far more than death. Dunnere the farmer, far from his fields, bolstered his betters with words befitting a warrior; he fought for the *fyrd*. These doomed men deemed death no disaster, now that their noble earl was no more; they fought and they died, pressing on against the pirates. Aescferth son of Ecglaf, a Northumbrian hostage, and Eadweard the Long, and Aetheric, and Offa and Wistan, all fought till they fell. Oswold and

Ealdwald—bold brothers—brought heart to the host, as did Byrhtwold; this hoary old hero sought the sleep of the slaughter-bed beside his battle-chief. Godric son of Aethelgar hewed many a heathen until he fell in front of the *fyrð*; he was not the Godric who flew from the field.

Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxon Heroic Saga as History

BEOWULF AND THE HISTORY OF THE SCYLDINGS

The origin of the Danish royal house offered as the opening of *Beowulf* embodies a typical saga interest with genealogy; it also draws upon the mythic archetype of the origin and birth of the hero in its attempt to link the king of Denmark with a quasi-deity from the misty past. This practice is by no means limited to Germanic myth, but it is noteworthy that such attempts abound in the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon sources, and that the kings of those nations regularly validated their right to rule through such family trees. *Widsith*, one of the oldest extant Old English poems—dating to perhaps the seventh century—contains little more than lists of ancient kings and peoples, and attempts thereby to link the heritage of the Anglo-Saxons with that of the Romans and the Hebrews. Thus the poet of that work used these links with older nations as a sort of cultural validation, just as kings created legitimate roots in the heroes and gods of old. The *Widsith* poet also celebrated the important function of memory of the court scop, who served as the only historian available in the pagan Germanic world; such a role gave poets the power of posterity, in a sense, but their need to please a royal audience makes them—at best—suspect witnesses.

We touched upon the narrative of the lineage of the Scyldings—that is, the descendants of Scyld Scefing—in our discussion of Hrolf Kraki's saga, so we will avoid repetition and note here only how that information is used in *Beowulf*. The lineage of Hrodgar may be merely of tangential interest to a modern reader, but to an audience steeped in the oral tradition of the north it served as a conduit through which elements of the present story were connected with many other tales. Thus, although the "plot" of the epic—as we tend to think of narrative structure—does not start until the end of this "prologue" of sorts, to the original audience the prologue itself served a vital function: it provided the immediate context for the saga to come, a context that is not intrusive but allusive, and therefore all but invisible to those who don't spot the keys. In other words, the attack of Grendel—which immediately follows this passage—did not happen just anywhere to anyone, but in a place and to a people already familiar to the audience of the poem. Such oral compositions as *Beowulf* originally were by their very nature volatile and allusive, with shifting episodes and elements to suit the needs and emphasis of the moment. Genealogical passages are one of these allusive elements of oral poetry, and a modern audience more comfortable with linear narratives ignores these allusions at its peril.

Lo! Often have we heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes of yore, how those heroes great deeds did. Scyld son of Scaef took many a mead-hall from the hold of his foes, rose from obscurity— orphaned, a waif on the waves—to be lord of his land, mighty in main. Scyld took tribute from foreigners far over floods. He was a good king! Beow the Dane was his son, granted by God as a pillar for his people when Scyld should leave this life. Beow the boy gained great glory, as is fitting for he who hopes not to fall short of the fame of his father; so should he succeed his sire successfully. On the day of his death the Danes set Scyld adrift—as earlier he had deemed—from shore in a shapely ship. The corpse of the king was covered with treasures, in truth a trove; set high over his head was a standard of gold, which greatly did glitter. So sailed Scyld, so soon as soul had fled, far over the floods that he as foundling had fared. None the poorer was he, in departing his people, than when the princeling first put in to port. To what haven he headed, traveling with treasure, dead on the deck, none could name. Then Beow became king of that country, beloved lord of that land; his son Healfdene inherited his high-seat. A wonderful warrior, Healfdene fathered four offspring, hardy and hale: Heorogar and Hrodgar and Halga were sons of that sire, and his daughter did he dower to Onela the Heatho-Scyfling. Hrodgar gained glory until his war-band was waxing, full of famous fighters; meanwhile he meant a mead-hall to raise up. The greatest of halls, all gilded and glorious, grandly gabled and high, Heorot he named it.

BEOWULF AND THE BATTLE OF FINNSBURH

The story of the tragedy of Hildeburh is included in *Beowulf*, but it also survived for many centuries in a fragmentary form that is now lost. The episode in *Beowulf* is typically Germanic and sagalike in that individual characters are fleshed out to bring to life a historical narrative and to assert moral values. *Beowulf* as a whole and this episode in particular both concern themselves with the social practices of "ring-giving" and "peace-weaving." Ring-giving is the practice through which a lord regularly presents his followers, called thanes, with gifts of treasure, armor, arms, and the like, in return for their steadfast loyalty unto death. One of the primary duties of such a follower—as we saw in *The Battle of Maldon*—is to avenge the death of his lord at any cost.

Peace-weaving is the practice of marrying a daughter of high rank from one tribe to a leader or son of high rank in an enemy tribe; the theory is that the love between these two, and more importantly the relationship of both tribes to the children of this union, will serve to bring the two groups together peacefully, and thus to patch old rents and fissures. Unfortunately, as Hildeburh learns to her great sorrow in the Finnsburh episode, these two practices and the social forces that form them often are at odds, and the intense pressure of the desire for honor and vengeance often overwhelms the greater goal of peace and prosperity for all. Indeed, the very mechanism of ring-giving requires warfare and raiding as a means of the production of treasure for the king to give to his thanes, and thus attempts at peace are perhaps doubly endangered.

The Finnsburh episode is told from an overtly Danish perspective, and thus any historical value must be questioned, even within the narrative framework of the poem. The episode seems to be used in *Beowulf*, however, as