

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 *fyrd*; 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

a device for foreshadowing the strife between kinsmen that is to come, and as one of several examples that illustrate the fragility of peace-weaving. In both cases Hrodgar's family will suffer—Hrodgar's sons come to be displaced by his kinsman, and his daughter herself will be an unhappy peace-weaver—but he does not hear his doom in the words of the scop, although the audience is meant to. Finally, the Danes of the Finnsburh episode are sometimes equated with the Jutes, and it is perhaps noteworthy that the Hengest of this passage has sometimes been linked to the Horst and Hengest credited with beginning the invasion of Britain by the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. This Germanic myth of founding is thought to derive ultimately from an Indo-European well-spring, and so may reflect an archetype of origin concerning twins or brothers; the most well-known manifestation of this archetype might well be the story of Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome.

Hoc, king of the Danes, thought to end the long feud between his people and the Frisians by marrying his daughter Hildeburh to Finn, the king of that nation. All was well for a time. One year, however, Hnaef, son of Hoc, came to Finnsburh to pay a visit to his sister Hildeburh, and the old enmity surged up anew in the hearts of the Frisians; they ambushed the Danes in their guest quarters. Hnaef was among the Danes killed, but a host of the Frisians also met their doom, including the closest kin of Hildeburh; hence this unhappy woman lost brother and son in conflict against one another. Ample was Hildeburh's reason to mourn, and well might she lament the treachery of the Frisians; the Danes were to serve her equally ill, however, in a very short time. It seems that both sides had sustained mighty losses, and a truce was reached before they fought to the very last man. As they all were locked in together by ice for the winter, the Frisians offered to the Danes a hall and high-seat of their own, and an equal share in power, honor, and treasure. Hengest for the Danes and Finn for the Frisians compacted this peace with solemn oaths, although Hengest by necessity now served the slayer of his rightful lord Hnaef. No word nor deed of malice was to be brooked nor provoked on either side, and for Frisians to mock Danes for accepting treasure at the hands of their king's killer was to invite instant death.

Then Finn drew gold from his own hoard, bright gleaming treasure for the pyre of Hnaef; that lordly man was all surrounded by ornaments and armaments, and Hildeburh commanded that her son be placed at his uncle's shoulder. Thus Hnaef and his nephew—kinsmen and enemies both—were consumed together by the flames of the pyre. Well might that lady sing a song of sorrow then; her dirge was accompanied by the dark music of the bursting of bones and the welling of wounds within the flames. Heads exploded and joints popped, and those two warriors sailed from Finnsburh as black ash lifted by smoke. No white ship's sail might so speed away Hengest, however, until the spring thaw. He longed to journey home from exile, but even greater was his desire to avenge his fallen lord, truce or no truce. So when Hunlafing placed a naked blade in his lap as token of his loss and of his duty, Hengest did not hesitate: Finn died then in a bloodbath in his own hall, and the Danes returned to their ships sated with vengeance and with the wealth of Finn's treasury. Hildeburh they took with them, back to her home of old in the land of the Scyldings. Her homecoming was melancholy: through no fault of her own she had lost husband, brother, and son within the space of one winter to the same hateful feud she had been sent to heal.

## Sagas of Ireland

The Irish sagas are traditionally divided into three types: the mythological cycle, concerned with the gods and origins; the popular heroic cycles concerned with such figures as Cuchulainn and Fionn Mac Cumhail; and the so-called historical cycle or cycles of the kings, the subject of which is kings and sacred kingship in Ireland.

### The Mythological Cycle

The mythological cycle is found primarily in *The Book of Invasions*, transcribed for the most part in *The Book of Leinster* and including the important mythological narratives of *The Battles of Magh Tuireadh*. We have already discussed the "five invasions" of Ireland in connection with the pre-Celtic pantheon of deities in that country. The mythical "history" of Ireland preceding the arrival of the Milesians, or Goidelic Celts, is dominated by the Tuatha De Danann and the stories of their struggles with hostile inhabitants of Ireland.

#### THE BATTLES OF MAGH TUIREADH

In the first battle of Magh Tuireadh, the Tuatha defeated the ruling inhabitants of Ireland, the Firbolg, and then formed an alliance with the Fomorians. The Tuatha king, Nuada, had lost his arm in battle and was replaced as king by Bres, who was of both Fomorian and Tuatha descent. But after the removal of the oppressive Bres, the Tuatha would eventually be forced to fight the magical single-armed, single-legged Fomorians in the second battle of Magh Tuireadh.

Nuada, whose lost arm had been replaced by the silver one made by the medicine god Dian Cecht and then by one of flesh made by Dian Cecht's son Miach, had once again occupied the Tuatha throne. One day, as he presided over a feast at Tara, the place of his court, there arrived at his gates the warrior Lugh, who through a series of tests, proved himself master of all the arts of war, art, and technology. Lugh was given leadership of the Tuatha, and with the Dagda and Ogma as his primary generals he prepared for the war with the Fomorians.

The Dagda gained strength through sexual relations with Morrigan, one of the three Kali-like goddesses associated with death and destruction in battle. He was sent by Lugh to spy on the Fomorians. After offering and receiving a promise of truce from them, the Dagda was maliciously turned into a comic big-bellied buffoon of a character, consuming an enormous amount of food and making a huge ditch by dragging his gigantic phallic club along the ground. While with the Fomorians, he also slept with the granddaughter of their great mother goddess Domnu.

In the great battle itself, the Fomorian Ruadan, son of Bres and the Dagda's daughter Brigid, was sent to kill the smith-god Goibhniu, but was himself killed, causing Brigid to wail and thus to institute the Irish tradition