

statement of heroic fame won in ancient times and renewed with every retelling of the hero's story. In his youth, Beowulf asserted the doctrine that for the dead warrior, a living fame is best. In his age he summons up his will for the battle against the dragon in a speech that reviews his life and his place in Geatish history (pp. 1970; de Looze 1984). Beowulf defines himself as one of the Hrethelings, as Hygelac's champion and at last his avenger. Beowulf finds his resolve in the memory of his heroic service to his beloved king, Hygelac, then vows to perform deeds meriting fame in the battle (2514), to act as becomes a noble warrior (2535). The poem's theme and the hero's goal are one.

Chapter 15

Beowulf and Archaeology

by Catherine M. Hills

Summary: Archaeology has been deployed since the nineteenth century to illustrate the artifacts and burial rites described in *Beowulf*. Parallels for helmet, sword, and hall, for cremation and ship burial, can be found in Britain and Scandinavia at various times and places during the first millennium A.D. Archaeology can also illustrate the kinds of society and the relationships between peoples that existed in northern Europe at this time. New Danish evidence can be added to well-known material from sixth- to seventh-century England and Sweden, such as that found at Sutton Hoo. A ninth- to tenth-century context for the poem is not incompatible with the archaeological evidence.

Chronology

- 1852:** Charles Roach-Smith discusses the Benty Grange boar helmet and Anglo-Saxon shields and swords in connection with *Beowulf*.
- 1855:** John Yonge Akerman quotes the account of Beowulf's burial and says it throws little light on the urn burial of the Anglo-Saxon tribes.
- 1863:** John M. Kemble discusses excavated Anglo-Saxon cremations and accounts of cremation in Beowulf as a "noble" rite. As cremation is not mentioned in the "mass" of Anglo-Saxon legislation he concludes it was a strictly pagan rite.
- 1881:** Discovery of boat burials at Vendel, Uppland, Sweden, dating to the seventh to the tenth centuries.
- 1908:** Knut Stjerna describes recent archaeological finds in Scandinavia, including Vendel, as a context for *Beowulf*.
- 1913:** Birger Nerman uses *Beowulf* to identify the occupants of the burial mounds at Uppsala.
- 1915:** G. Baldwin Brown repeats references to helmet and sword, refers to Offa of Angeln as ruler of a territory near to the homeland of the Anglo-Saxons, and argues for composition of *Beowulf* at the court of King Offa of Mercia.
- 1928:** Discovery and excavation of boat graves at Valsgärde, Sweden.
- 1936:** E. T. Leeds says the northern sagas are "boastful" and add little to our understanding of archaeology. No halls such as Heorot have been found, only small, squalid huts full of rubbish.

- 1936: Sune Lindqvist compares burial mounds at Uppsala and Ottarshögen to Beowulf's burial mound.
- 1936: R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres identify Hengest in *Beowulf* with the Hengest who is said to have invaded England in the fifth century.
- 1939: Discovery of the ship burial in Mound I at Sutton Hoo.
- 1940: Publication of volume of *Antiquity* devoted to reports and discussion of Sutton Hoo. H. M. Chadwick identifies occupant of Mound I as Rædwald.
- 1948: Lindqvist claims Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf* "both become the clearer by comparison."
- 1953: Start of excavations by Brian Hope-Taylor at Yeaveering, near Wooler, Northumbria. Site identified as Ad Gefrin, *villa regalis* of King Edwin of Northumbria.
- 1957: Rosemary Cramp publishes paper on *Beowulf* and archaeology, including discussion of literary and archaeological evidence for swords and helmets and the Yeaveering halls.
- 1959: C. L. Wrenn relates Sutton Hoo to *Beowulf* in chapter included in Chambers (1959).
- 1960: David M. Wilson, in his general introduction to Anglo-Saxons, discusses weapons, halls, etc., as found in archaeology and in *Beowulf*.
- 1965-70: Reexcavation of Sutton Hoo Mound I, record of now damaged impression of ship, and recovery of more fragments.
- 1969: J. N. L. Myres suggests that pottery found in Kent includes Frisian and Jutish elements, as might be expected as a reflection of the career of Hengest.
- 1969: Michael Müller-Wille publishes survey of boat-grave burials in northern Europe.
- 1971: Rupert Bruce-Mitford adds archaeological discussion, drawing on Sutton Hoo, to reissue of Girvan's *Beowulf and the Seventh Century*.
- 1974-88: Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye Biddle excavate at Repton, where they find remains of mass grave and other burials of Viking date.
- 1975: Publication of volume 1 of the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial report by Rupert Bruce-Mitford. Accounts of excavation, ship, coins, date, and the identity of the person commemorated or buried in Mound I.
- 1976: David M. Wilson edits volume on Anglo-Saxon archaeology; *Beowulf* mentioned in relation to iron fittings on buildings and pattern welding of swords, also in chapter by Rahtz on settlements and buildings.
- 1977: Publication of Yeaveering report by Hope-Taylor, who claims that "*Beowulf* is more strikingly illustrated by Sutton Hoo but it is Yeaveering that exemplifies that aspiration to an ideally majestic hall . . . expressed in the poem."
- 1978: Publication of volume 2 of the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial report: arms, armor and regalia.
- 1980: George Speake explores possible symbolism of boar and serpent images in Anglo-Saxon animal ornament with quotations from *Beowulf*.
- 1982: Discovery of Anglo-Saxon helmet at Coppergate, York.
- 1983: Publication of Sutton Hoo Ship Burial volume 3, Bruce-Mitford and Care-Evans. Bronze and silver vessels, lyre, textiles, and other objects.
- 1983-91: Renewed investigations at Sutton Hoo, directed by Martin Carver.

1984: Continuing excavations at Gudme, on Fyn, Denmark, and at nearby contemporary port and market at Lundborg.

1986-88: Excavation at Lejre, Seeland, Denmark, traditional home of early Danish kings, of large timber hall dating from seventh to tenth centuries.

1988: C. J. Arnold calls on archaeologists to abandon the "*Beowulf* and brooches" approach to archaeology.

1989: Richard Hodges argues for the origin of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in military and political takeover, not mass migration. Offa's court still likely context for composition of *Beowulf*.

1992: Publication of York helmet by D. Tweddle.

1992: Publication of three volumes of papers relating to Sutton Hoo, including interim reports on recent work at Sutton Hoo by Carver, on Snape by Filmer-Sankey, and on Aethelburg by Dickinson and Speake, papers on the coins by Stahl and Oddy, on early Anglo-Saxon East Anglia by Scull, on Denmark by Hedeager, and paper by Roberta Frank casting doubt on closeness of connection between Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf*.

1993: Sam Newton restates arguments for seeing *Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo as reflections of the same society.

The history of the relation between archaeology and *Beowulf* begins in the mid-nineteenth century. J. M. Kemble edited and translated the poem, and discussed the accounts of burial practice it contains in connection with the excavated cremations he knew from England and Germany. He was struck by the accounts in *Beowulf* of cremation as a "noble" rite whereas "in all the mass of legislation" from Anglo-Saxon England he could not find one mention of it, and concluded that cremation was a strictly pagan rite, expunged from Christian record (1863, 96). J. Y. Akerman also quoted from *Beowulf* in his discussion of early Anglo-Saxon burial rites (1855, xv), and Charles Roach-Smith added detailed consideration of artifacts (1852, 237, 240, 247). The helmet, then recently found at Benty Grange in Derbyshire, surmounted by the figure of a boar, seemed to provide illustration of the boar helmets in *Beowulf*. Similarly, Anglo-Saxon swords, seaxes, and shields were compared with the poem's descriptions of weapons. This approach, of direct comparison between actual ancient artifacts and descriptions in the poem, has remained dominant. Even the choice of topics has remained constant. Baldwin Brown (1915, 194-95, 206), repeated Roach-Smith's boar helmet discussion, adding swords and noting that mail coats, mentioned in *Beowulf*, had not been found in graves. The Swedish archaeologist Knut Stjerna, in "Essays on *Beowulf*," expanded the discussion through Swedish archaeological material, which, when he wrote, offered far more possibilities for comparison.

Burial rites, boar helmet, sword, and shield reappear more recently in, among others, D. M. Wilson (1960, 115-16, 128; and 1976, 254, 266), Speake (1980, 80-81), and Welch (1992, 89, 93). These authors had the benefit of two remarkable

archaeological excavations, which seemed to put the reality of the things and places described in *Beowulf* beyond doubt. The discovery of the treasure in Mound I at Sutton Hoo in 1939 provided the arms, armor, regalia, gold, and silver to match any poet's imagination. The author of *Beowulf* need not have been fantasizing. It all really existed, in Suffolk in the seventh century. What Roberta Frank has termed the "marriage" between *Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo has certainly seemed an indissoluble union to most people who have thought about the subject for the past fifty years. Even if the story of the recital of the poem at the coroner's inquest is, sadly, apocryphal, it was not long before popular and scholarly writing had connected the two with ever more circumstantial detail. The Swedish archaeologist Sune Lindqvist wrote a paper on "Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf*" in 1948 in which he argued strongly that the burial and the poem "complement one another admirably" and "both become the clearer by the comparison" (140). This sets the scene for most subsequent writing on the subject. In volume 1 of the report on Sutton Hoo Mound I, Rupert Bruce-Mitford quotes the account of Scyld's funeral and includes other references to *Beowulf* as possibly relevant to his interpretation (1975–83, 716–17).

Hope-Taylor's excavations at Yeavinger in the 1950s gave further "proof" of the reality of *Beowulf*. Here were large timber halls from the days of Edwin and Oswald of Northumbria, confirmation that buildings like Hrothgar's Heorot could and did exist in England as early as the seventh century. Hope-Taylor himself drew the parallels: "*Beowulf* is more strikingly illustrated by Sutton Hoo, but it is Yeavinger that exemplifies that aspiration to an ideally majestic hall 'lofty and wide-gabled' which is repeatedly expressed in the poem" (1977, 315).

The best expression of this approach to the subject is the paper "*Beowulf* and Archaeology" by Rosemary Cramp (1957). Cramp possesses a knowledge of the poem in the original, lacking to most archaeologists, and her arguments are expressed with more subtlety, and also more caution, than usual. Parts of the present chapter are no more than an update on Cramp, to take account of more than thirty years further digging in Anglo-Saxon grave fields (and elsewhere) since she wrote.

A secondary strand of research has been the attempt to use *Beowulf* and archaeology to write history. From Sijerna onwards Swedish archaeologists have tried to use *Beowulf* to attach names to the kings buried at Uppsala and elsewhere. Baldwin Brown noted the reference to Offa of Angeln in *Beowulf* and suggested it was a "reasonable theory" that *Beowulf* received its present form at the court of King Offa of Mercia in the eighth century (1915, 566–67). This idea was developed in Whitelock's influential *The Audience of Beowulf* and is still favored by Hodges (1989, 145). J. N. L. Myres identified the Hengest of the Finnsburg fragment with the Hengest who came to conquer Kent in the fifth century (Collingwood and Myres 1936, 346). In his account of Anglo-Saxon pottery, Myres identified a type he called "Anglo-Frisian" and suggested that "if one had been asked to guess the style of pottery which a Jutish chieftain with Frisian contacts (i.e., Hengest) would have

used towards the middle of the fifth century" it would be very like some of the earliest Anglo-Saxon pottery from Kent (1969, 96–97).

Other archaeologists either make very little reference to *Beowulf* or have actually expressed doubt as to its relevance to Anglo-Saxon archaeology. E. T. Leeds felt that attempts to correlate the two, as exemplified by Sijerna's essays, "leave the reader with a certain sense of unfulfilment" and "do little more than dot the i's and cross the t's of the deductions of archaeological research" (1936, xi). Leeds also found his opinion of the "boastfulness" and exaggeration of northern sagas amply confirmed by comparison of the evidence for Anglo-Saxon houses, much of it from his own excavations, with the description of Heorot. Excavation showed miserable hovels, or, at best, simple farmsteads, but not great halls. Yeavinger might have changed Leeds's mind on that point (the excavations at Yeavinger were in progress but not published at the time of his death in 1955), but his endeavor to "treat the material purely from an archaeological standpoint" has found successors.

Arnold calls on us to abandon the "*Beowulf* and brooches" approach (1988, 16) and resolutely eschews any reference to the poem in his account of Anglo-Saxon archaeology. He belongs to a generation of archaeologists who have come to the Anglo-Saxons by way of prehistoric archaeology or practical fieldwork, and not through history, art history, or literature. Because the theoretical underpinnings of prehistory derive from anthropology rather than from history, it has an emphasis on social and economic structure rather than on specific events and named people. Thus, it is well suited to the kind of evidence archaeology is capable of providing. In the past few decades, the increase both in excavation and in the capacity to extract information from unpromising data like seeds, soil stains, and animal bones has encouraged archaeologists in their own capacity to reconstruct the past, whether of early Anglo-Saxon England or elsewhere, without reference to written sources. Arnold is consistent in his view that *Beowulf* has little to do with modern archaeology. Richard Hodges, however, although also trained in anthropological theory, has remained surprisingly enamored of named historical figures—Ine, Offa, Alfred—and deploys *Beowulf* in a fairly traditional manner (1989, 58, 88–89).

In the 1980s, renewed excavation at Sutton Hoo, directed by Martin Carver, gave rise to research that takes account of archaeological realignment away from attempts to write history from artifact typologies and towards socioeconomic issues and ideology. Three collections of papers appeared in 1992 that show the range of traditional and new thinking now being applied to Sutton Hoo, most obviously its location in a wider context (Carver 1992c; Kendall and Wells 1992; Farrell and de Vegvar 1992). This is not just one rich burial but a whole burial ground, to be understood in relation to contemporary East Anglia, early Anglo-Saxon society as a whole, and the North Sea and beyond. Among these papers are both direct and indirect attacks on the relevance of *Beowulf* to archaeology as well as others that maintain a more traditional line.

One surprising lacuna in almost all the works so far cited is any serious discussion of Danish archaeology. Sweden got into the picture long ago, chiefly at the instigation of Swedish scholars, and Carver has tried to put Sutton Hoo in a wider, North Sea perspective, but using Swedish and Norwegian, more than Danish, evidence. Danish buildings and pottery have occasionally put in an appearance, but in general little attention has been devoted, by English-speaking scholars, to the possibility of illuminating *Beowulf* through the archaeology of the country where the most famous events of that poem are supposed to have happened. This used to be partly excusable on the grounds that the archaeology of the migration period in Denmark was very unimpressive. Little sign of kings, treasure, or even monsters could be found. This is no longer the case. Discoveries and research in recent years now allow Denmark a position of central importance in the North during the Roman Iron Age and later, and, if one wishes to seek a real historical context for the story of *Beowulf*, one could do worse than look at the archaeology of fifth- to sixth-century Denmark (for an introduction to this, see Hedeager 1992b).

A fresh appraisal of the relation between archaeology and *Beowulf* needs to take account of Denmark as well as new evidence from England and elsewhere. Also, the possibility that the poem may have been composed, or written in its final form, as late as the end of the tenth century extends the chronological range of the evidence to be surveyed. We must also consider the fundamental problem of the difference between the two types of source material, epic poetry and archaeological remains, and ask the heretical question, Is there after all any real connection between *Beowulf* and archaeology?

Beowulf is not the only epic to have inspired archaeologists. Homer's Troy and King Arthur's Camelot have both been pursued through excavation, and we have learned much about the Aegean Bronze Age and ancient Britain as a result. Archaeologists should not look gift horses in the mouth, and the motivation to dig up Hissarlik in Turkey, or South Cadbury in Somerset, was the popular identification of those places as, respectively, Troy and Camelot. But Moses Finley (1964) argued long ago that such identifications may be chimeras. The *Iliad* and *Beowulf* are works of fiction. Epics based on historical events for which we have alternative sources, like the *Song of Roland*, show how cavalier the treatment of historical fact can and could be. Minor figures could assume central importance; battles could change their date, their location, and even their protagonists. This could very easily have happened with *Beowulf*: indeed, it seems quite likely since, although minor figures, notably Hygelac, seem to have some historical basis for their existence, *Beowulf* himself is notably lacking from any other historical or literary account. There may be a considerable kernel of historical fact embedded in *Beowulf*, or we may be wasting our time looking for a "real" Heorot. Another point made by Finley is that we are very selective in our search for history in epics. Schliemann set out to find Troy and claimed to have looked on the face of Agamemnon. He did not climb up Mount Olympus to look for Zeus. Similarly, we have looked for the hall

at Heorot, for helmets and swords and even for Beowulf's grave. No one has tried to dig up Grendel, his mother, or the dragon. Can we be sure we have distinguished correctly between the mythical and the historical?

Perhaps it does not matter whether Troy, Camelot, Heorot, or any of the people who are said to have built, lived in, or destroyed those places ever really existed. Audiences for the poems, including ourselves, may have always preferred to believe they are about people who once existed—and perhaps they are—but they are just as "true" as illustrations of the human condition or as good stories.

I could stop this chapter here and argue, like Arnold, that archaeologists should have nothing to do with *Beowulf*. There are, however, positive and negative reasons for continuing. Archaeology is often deployed optimistically by non-archaeologists—just as archaeologists use history—to fill in gaps and provide support for weak arguments. In particular, it has been suggested that if precise dates could be given for all the features of *Beowulf* likely to have provided physical remains (not including the dragon), it would help date the poem. But most of those features—cremation, ship burial, large timber halls, lavish treasure, helmets, swords, mail coats—can be found somewhere in the northern world throughout most of the first millennium A.D. I shall set out some of the evidence for this below.

The fictional element in the poem is often thought less likely to have extended to physical objects—helmets or halls—than to personalities and events. Author and audience will have imagined these from their own experience, which will limit their possibilities and allow us to partially reconstruct their world. *Beowulf* had no guns, and Heorot was not built of concrete. It is also true that, even if a conscious effort was made to describe something from the past, not the present, an ancient sword unlike any owned by the listeners, the attempt would not have been entirely successful. Contemporary features would have crept in. In this century, many reconstructions of Anglo-Saxon and Viking period houses have been drawn and sometimes actually built. The longer these exist, the more clearly we can see that they belong as much to the 1930s or the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s, when they were created, as to the period they are meant to represent. An early medieval poet would have had neither the ability nor the inclination to produce accurate historical descriptions. One might hope therefore that the things described are essentially what poet and audience knew. Specific artifactual details therefore probably can be used, with due caution, recognizing that many of the descriptions given are sufficiently vague for anyone to hang his or her own imagined picture on the words. I shall examine some of this material, before concluding, by looking at how archaeological evidence can be used more widely in the reconstruction of early medieval society.

I. Funeral Rites

Accounts of burials and funeral rites in *Beowulf* have been used to show both how unfamiliar and how familiar the poet was with pagan practices. The Swedish burial mounds at Uppsala, from around 500, and the ship burials at Vendel,

Valsgärde, and Sutton Hoo, from the sixth and seventh centuries, have been cited as more or less corresponding to aspects of the funeral rites of either Scyld Scefing or Beowulf himself.

Near the beginning of *Beowulf*, we are told that when Scyld Scefing died, he was laid in a ship heaped with treasure and weapons, which was then sent off on the open sea to an unknown destiny. If this type of burial really took place, it is not one easily to be recovered by archaeologists, although underwater exploration might one day reveal the remains of such a ship. We can, however, look for parallels among the burials interred in ships on land, some famously equipped with treasure.

The Finnsburg episode includes an account of the mass cremation of Finn's slaughtered warriors, put on the pyre with mail coats and gold. At the end of the poem there is the story of Beowulf's last battle, his death, and his burial. This involves the construction of a funeral pyre, on which the body was laid, which had helmets, shields, and mail coats hung around or laid on it. All this was consumed by fire. Then a mound was built, to be a landmark, apparently on top of the remains of the pyre, and into this mound the dragon's treasure, unburned, was put. This offers several features for investigation: cremation, including the burning of weaponry, the construction of a mound on top of the pyre as a landmark, and further deposits of unburned treasure in the mound.

Cremation burial was practiced throughout Europe at the start of the first millennium. Within the Roman Empire, including Britain, inhumation became the dominant rite by the fourth century, but elsewhere cremation remained common much later, in northern Scandinavia as late as 1000. It has sometimes been thought that all Christian burials were unfurnished inhumations while all other burial rites can be identified as pagan, but the situation is not so simple. The coincidence of the spread of unfurnished inhumation and the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century led to a connection between the two that found justification in Christian doctrine about the resurrection. This had not originally been the case: the cremated bones of purportedly no less a person than Saint Peter are displayed beneath his church in Rome today. Nor was conversion to Christianity followed automatically by abandonment of the practice of putting grave goods with the dead: a number of well-equipped early medieval graves have been excavated from beneath churches. Many medieval ecclesiastics were buried with vestments and liturgical vessels that, in a prehistoric context, would be interpreted as grave goods. There are no hard and fast rules according to which pagan burials can always be distinguished from those of Christians, although there may be a balance of probability in one direction or the other.

In the fifth century, cremation was reintroduced to Britain from northern Germany and Scandinavia. Both rites were practiced throughout Anglo-Saxon England during the fifth and sixth centuries, but cremation was predominant only in eastern England and was even there replaced once more by inhumation during the sixth century (before conversion to Christianity). Anglo-Saxon cremation involved

the construction of a funeral pyre on top of which the body was laid. Women wore their jewelry, burnt fragments of which were buried with the bones, but men were seldom cremated with their weapons. Glass, bronze, and pottery vessels might also be put on the pyre. Animals were often also cremated. The bones and the remains of the burned objects were collected up, not always very carefully, and put into decorated pots. Unburned objects, mostly toilet implements such as tweezers and shears, were sometimes added. The pot was then buried in a pit in a cemetery, often a large burial ground with many graves. Small mounds or cairns may have been commonly raised over these cremations, but few of these have survived centuries of subsequent ploughing. Points of contact with *Beowulf* are the rite of cremation and the deposit of both burned and unburned objects, but otherwise these burial practices do not provide very close models for the poem's burials.

These cremations do vary in their relative wealth, but they are not usually distinguished by very lavish grave goods (Hills 1994; McKinley 1994). Occasional exceptions come from the later sixth or seventh centuries, when inhumation had otherwise become the norm. Bronze bowls were used as containers for these elaborately equipped cremations, instead of pots, as at Coombe in Kent (Davidson and Webster 1967) or Sutton Hoo, where one cremation contained a sword (Carver 1992c, 368).

After the seventh century, Anglo-Saxons did not cremate their dead, although they continued to bury grave goods occasionally into the eighth century. Elsewhere the practice lasted much longer, and it could have been known in England as a current contemporary foreign ritual rather than an ancient, discarded native one. In Denmark, graves of the sixth through the eighth centuries are rare. Those that have been found include both inhumations and cremations, neither richly equipped. In the Viking period, there are rich inhumation burials.

In Norway and Sweden, cremation remained common until the tenth century or even later. Many burials consist of a mound or cairn of stones heaped over the funeral pyre, and although most are poorly equipped, some were more elaborate. Rich cremations can be found in Sweden as late as the tenth century, for example, at Skopintull, near Birka, not far from modern Stockholm (Roesdahl 1992, 157). This burial contained fragments of gold, mounts for a horse harness, and possibly even a boat. Burials such as this must have been public events, and accounts of them could have traveled far, as did the famous account of the cremation in a ship witnessed by the Arab traveler Ibn Fadlan in Russia in the 920s. At Birka, more than a thousand burials of ninth- and tenth-century date have been excavated, including cremations and inhumations of various types. Some of these were probably graves of visiting merchants, who might have been English or have traveled to England.

But in the ninth century, and possibly into the tenth, there was no need for an Anglo-Saxon to go abroad to experience pagan burials. There are not many recorded pagan Viking burials in Britain, a fact usually explained as the result of

rapid conversion and use of Christian cemeteries. But there are some. Particularly striking is the evidence from Repton in Derbyshire (Biddle and Kjolbye-Biddle 1992). Here, what had been an important Mercian church, the site of a royal mausoleum, was taken over by the Viking army in 873–74 as a fortified base. As well as there being several burials with Viking artifacts in the churchyard, there was an extraordinary assemblage nearby, associated with coins of the 870s, that included the bones of at least 249 individuals, 80 percent males, buried in an earlier stone building. Over these a mound had been raised, into which further burials had been cut. These bodies were not cremated, but they offer some parallel for the mass cremation of the Finsburg episode. Only four kilometers from Repton is Ingleby, where there is another Viking cemetery. Some of these burials were cremations, with mounds raised over pyres and remains of weapons. The events surrounding these burials, especially the mass grave at Repton, would have impressed themselves on the memory of any local survivors.

Ship burial is found in Britain and Scandinavia, and hardly anywhere else in Europe, in the first millennium (Schönback 1983, Müller-Wille 1968–69). The earliest examples known so far are from Slusegård, Bornholm, Denmark, dating to the second and third centuries. These do not seem to have any immediate successors, although recently excavated sixth-century boats from Snape, Suffolk, seem very similar (Filmer-Sankey 1992). Better known are the larger ships from Snape, from Sutton Hoo Mound I, and from the series of graves from Sweden, especially from Vendel and Valsgärde. These contained burials of unusual wealth, including weapons, drinking vessels, and the remains of animals. At Sutton Hoo, there is both the large ship from Mound I, with its famous treasure, and another burial in a wooden chamber underneath a ship. Recent research has emphasized the variety of burial rite in contemporary use amongst the pagan Anglo-Saxons. At Sutton Hoo, there was inhumation in a ship, in a chamber, under a ship, next to a horse, in a coffin, as sacrificial victims around a cremation, and possibly also around a tree. Cremations were contained in bronze bowls, on a wooden tray or boat, in a pot, or simply put in the ground. Men, women, and children were among the burials (Carver 1992a, 367–71). At Snape, there was inhumation in a ship, in boats, on biers, or in coffins, cremations in pots, one in a bronze bowl, and some possibly left to be buried on the pyre (Filmer-Sankey 1992, 47–49). Commentators who have felt that the *Beowulf* poet was confusing accounts of burial rites he did not know of at firsthand to create impossible rituals were not aware of this considerable contemporary variation. If those burying their dead at Sutton Hoo could call on such a range of practice, so could a poet.

Rich ship burials occur again in the Viking period. A recent program of tree-ring dating has produced precise dates for some of the Norwegian ships (Bonde and Christensen 1993). Timbers from the grave chambers, constructed specifically for the burials, were examined, because the ships themselves could have been old when buried. At Oseberg some timbers had sapwood and bark, allowing the calculation

of a precise date, 834, for their felling and the construction of the grave chamber. The ships at Gokstad and Tune have slightly less precise dates of shortly after 900. In Denmark, the ship at Ladby, on Fyn, was buried in an existing cemetery during the tenth century (Roesdahl 1992, 162).

Attention has usually focused on the rich burials listed above, but there are probably many more burials in boats that have left no trace, because they had no metal fittings and the wood has entirely disappeared after burial in the ground, or because they were cremated. Many cremations from Scandinavia have left behind iron rivets of the kind used to build ships, in some cases in such quantity that they are reasonably interpreted as the remains of cremation in ships. In the British Isles, Viking burials in boats have been found on the Isle of Man.

The raising of a mound as a landmark above a burial is a feature found in Britain in the Bronze Age and again among the Anglo-Saxons. In Scandinavia, it is a feature of both the Migration and the Viking periods. Most of the burials already discussed as either rich cremations or ship burials had large mounds raised over them, on sites chosen for their visibility, like Beowulf's barrow. Particularly towards the end of the sixth century and into the seventh, when otherwise burials are ceasing to contain many finds, there are a few strikingly rich burials, marked out by large and prominent mounds. Besides those located at Sutton Hoo, Snape, and Asthall, there are others to be found at places such as Taplow or Broomfield. One explanation for this final pagan outburst is that it is a defiant gesture in the face of advancing Christianity. Another is that these burials reflect increased social inequality and were constructed by new dynasties, who had acquired increased power over larger kingdoms than had existed before. A large public funeral, involving feasting, sacrifice, and the deliberate burial and/or destruction of great treasures, all commemorated by a large visible monument, was a means of asserting control and authority, perhaps for people whose hold on that authority was still somewhat new and insecure. Later Anglo-Saxon kings had a more established basis for their power and had also converted to Christianity, so they were normally buried—and commemorated—in churches they had built themselves partly for that purpose.

In *Beowulf*, the dragon guards a hoard in an ancient barrow, described variously as of earth and of stone. Knowledge of ancient barrows and stone tombs could hardly have been avoided from their prominence in the landscape both in the British Isles and in Scandinavia. Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries sometimes had Bronze Age barrows as their initial focal point, and "heathen burials" provided landmarks for boundaries in late Saxon land charters. Prehistoric burials did sometimes contain gold, as might have been known or suspected by later people. The stone tomb at Maes Howe, on Orkney, was broken into by Scandinavians who left runic graffiti as witness of their presence, including a reference to treasure carried off from the mound. Maes Howe, or the passage graves of the Boyne Valley

in Ireland, would provide fitting homes for a dragon—both places possibly known to Vikings but not to Anglo-Saxons.

II. Halls

Until the 1950s, Anglo-Saxon houses in England were represented only by sunken huts, dismissed as squalid hovels. This changed with the discoveries at Yeavinger. This site has been identified as a residence of the sixth- and seventh-century kings of Northumbria. The most massive hall and a timber amphitheater are attributed to the time of King Edwin, when Bede tells us Paulinus preached at a *villa regalis* of Edwin at "Ad Gefrin" and converted and baptized many people (*Eccl. Hist.* 2.14). Hope-Taylor's 1977 analysis of the buildings showed that complex and sophisticated carpentry techniques had been used in their construction. There were even a few surviving iron fittings, unusual for excavated timber buildings, which produce mainly foundation plans, to set beside the iron fittings that are said to have made fast the walls and door of Heorot. This discovery spurred a search for other, comparable buildings. Air photographs produced other sites in the same area—Sproston and Millfield, the latter identified as Bede's Mælmin—and also in southern England (Welch 1992, 43–49; Scull 1991; Rahtz 1976). At more ordinary settlements, smaller "halls" have appeared beside the huts. At Cowderys Down near Basingstoke, a series of buildings were excavated, including one measuring twenty-two meters by nine meters, which showed a sophistication of carpentry comparable to that of Yeavinger (Millett and James 1983).

At Cheddar in Somerset, historically a residence of the West Saxon kings, excavation showed a tenth-century timber hall twenty-four meters long (Rahtz 1979). In Northampton, a large timber structure was replaced in the ninth century by a stone hall (Williams, Shaw, and Denham 1985), although this could have been part of a religious complex. Otherwise, we have very little evidence for urban royal palaces. We do not know what Offa's palace in Tamworth was like or the late Saxon palaces in Winchester, Gloucester, or London. So we do not know when it would have ceased to be normal for an Anglo-Saxon king to have as his major residence a timber hall rather than a stone palace. The concept and techniques of building in stone returned to England with the Christian mission, and from the seventh century some ecclesiastical buildings were constructed in stone, although they were not normally very large. Anglo-Saxons traveled to Rome and saw the great buildings there, and they also knew the palace of Charlemagne at Aachen. A king like Offa is likely to have emulated his Continental contemporaries in palace building as in other activities, and others would have followed him. Cheddar was not the main residence of the West Saxon kings. By the late eleventh century, Edward the Confessor and William of Normandy were certainly building in stone.

The evidence is still lacking, but it is likely that an English poet describing a contemporary royal residence would not have imagined it as a timber hall after the eighth century. This does not, however, give us a defining date for the poem's

composition, as long as we allow the poet to draw on Danish evidence for details, as he obviously did for the main story. In Denmark, there is good archaeological evidence for the construction of great timber halls from as early as the second century to well into the tenth century and later. Extensive excavations of settlements from the pre-Roman Iron Age to the Viking period have given a clear picture of the range of buildings, their construction, and their development. Timber was the universal building material. Farmhouses took the form of "long houses" with animal stalls at one end, human habitation at the other. In the Viking period, there was a tendency for buildings to widen in the middle to produce a "boat-shaped" plan. These last were sometimes quite large, but not spectacularly so (Hedeager 1992a, 180–223; Randsborg 1991, 76–78). However, there are two recent finds in Denmark of halls far larger than anything so far excavated in England.

Lejre, near Roskilde Fjord on Seeland, has been said to be the site of an early capital of Denmark since at least the early eleventh century. Here, between 1986 and 1988, remains of several buildings were excavated, including one massive structure 48.5 meters by 10 meters wide, twice as long as the large halls at Yeavinger (Christensen 1991). This building had been rebuilt on more than one occasion, and the range of carbon 14 dates for it runs from the end of the seventh into the tenth century. The Danes who came to England in the ninth and tenth centuries would have known Lejre and would have portrayed great deeds and kings in a hall like the one there, or even at that very place—some Danes have not hesitated to put *Beowulf* there. In fact, they would have been justified in setting much earlier exploits in such a hall. In 1993 at Gudme on Fyn, a huge hall was excavated (Nielsen and Sørensen 1993). It was forty-seven meters long by nine meters wide, constructed of timbers seventy centimeters in diameter. It seems to have been built in the third century. There was no sign of repair or rebuilding, but such massive timbers could have lasted a long time: medieval barns in Essex have stood since the thirteenth century.

If a hall this big could be built in the third century, it is perfectly reasonable to set a king of the fifth or sixth centuries in one of equal size and magnificence. Hrothgar's Heorot is not at all implausible at the time or place it is supposed to have existed. This does not necessarily mean that the author of *Beowulf* used accurate early sources for his poetic background: if he had any knowledge of Denmark, it would have been natural to put a king in a great timber hall up to the millennium or beyond. By that date, it would probably not have been normal for an English king to have such a hall as his principal, most magnificent, residence. The archaeological evidence for buildings allows either for a poet drawing on English experience, which puts composition early, or for someone who reported faithfully a much earlier account—or who knew of Danish kings and courts at any time up to the eleventh century, the latest possible date for the poem. One detail that seems rather English than Danish is the "stræt . . . stanfah" (320a) that leads to Heorot: stone-paved Roman roads were widespread, if disused, in England, but not in Denmark.

III. Arms and Armor

Weapons could be heirlooms, and royal treasures and armories still preserve arms and weapons from earlier days, so imagination in this area need not be confined to contemporary artifacts. Parts of the *Beowulf* descriptions could refer generally to any elaborate arms from the Roman period to the end of the Middle Ages, but other details seem more specific.

Helmets are the most dramatic and often quoted item of armor found in *Beowulf*. Less than a hundred early medieval helmets have been found in Europe altogether, mostly dating to the sixth and seventh centuries. There are three main types, two of them descended from late Roman parade armor. Later Roman emperors were often portrayed wearing helmets, and this, combined with elaborate decoration of helmets, their rarity, and burial in unusually rich graves, has led to the conclusion that at this date helmets were a symbol of royalty, related to later medieval crowns.

Helmets found in England and Scandinavia usually have a central ridge or comb running from between the eyes to the back of the head. Thirty-seven helmets of this type could be listed in 1992 (Tweddle 1992, 1082–1132), the majority from Sweden, mostly fragmentary, including a group from Gotland that were buried in cremations. Thirteen are reconstructable, the best known being those from Vendel, Valsgärde, and Sutton Hoo. In England, only three Anglo-Saxon helmets have been found: from Benty Grange in Derbyshire, probably of seventh-century date; from Sutton Hoo Mound I, probably sixth century; and a more recent find from York, of eighth-century date. The publication of *The Anglian Helmet* (Tweddle 1992) includes a detailed survey of helmets and of chain mail, because a section of mail was found attached as a neck guard to the York helmet.

Representations of armed men wearing helmets were included in the ornament of actual helmets. Some of these have exaggerated crests in the form of birds' heads or boars, and such designs have been seen as the origin for the references to boar ornaments on the helmet in *Beowulf*. There is also the Benty Grange boar, and there are boars' heads on the eyebrows of the Sutton Hoo helmet.

The York helmet, from the second half of the eighth century, seems to be the latest surviving example. It has a Christian inscription and zoomorphic ornament on the nose and eyebrows. Although it is not so elaborate as some of the earlier helmets, analysis of its manufacture shows a very high level of technical skill. Occasional representations of helmets in sculpture or in manuscripts show that crested helmets continued in use through the tenth century. By the eleventh century, helmets had become the plain, conical objects we see on the Bayeux tapestry, and, by this date also, they seem to have been in wider use than before, although possibly still confined to an aristocratic warrior group. Elaborate, ornamented helmets belong to a period before 1000: but not necessarily very long before. In *Beowulf*, helmets are worn by the retainers of Beowulf and Hrothgar, not just by the leaders,

as would fit a time when they had become more common than in the seventh century, when they seem to have belonged only to kings and war leaders.

Chain mail is first found in Europe in the pre-Roman Iron Age and remained in use until the end of the Middle Ages. Most surviving early examples are heavily corroded and fragmentary, including those from Sutton Hoo, Vendel, and Valsgärde. Examination of the chain mail neck guard from the York helmet showed that this was a product involving considerable skill and time (O'Connor 1992). Again, mail was at first rare and valuable, possibly owned only by leaders, so that its possession by retainers as well as kings in *Beowulf* might indicate a relatively later date.

The most important weapon referred to in *Beowulf* is the sword. Beowulf's own sword, which fails him in the fight with Grendel's mother, and the ancient sword he finds in her lair, with which he kills her, are both described in vivid but confusing detail. Cramp has explored these passages and points out the difficulties involved in using poetic terms as precise technical descriptions (1957, 63–67). The term *wyrnfað*, for instance, might refer to the serpentine patterns produced on iron blades by the technique known as pattern welding. This technique develops from the third century to reach a peak of popularity in the sixth to the seventh centuries and then declines in the face of competition from good-quality Frankish blades in the ninth and tenth centuries (Lang and Ager 1989). One would expect an eighth-century poet to think of pattern welding in connection with famous swords, whereas by the tenth century the best swords were not being made this way. But it could still have seemed appropriate for famous ancient swords to have had such blades. In any case, some of the decoration belonged to the hilt: the blade of the ancient sword melted away in the blood of Grendel's mother, leaving a golden hilt that carried the story of the Flood and a runic inscription. Elaborate golden sword hilts, inlaid with garnets, can be found from the fifth century onward, and occur at Sutton Hoo. But later Saxon and Viking period swords had decorated hilts as well, some with patterns of wyrm-like twisted beasts. There are, however, no hilts with biblical scenes.

Runic inscriptions are known from a few early Anglo-Saxon sword hilts, but knowledge and use of runes continued in England long after the introduction of the Latin alphabet, while in Scandinavia they remained the dominant script throughout the Viking period (Page 1987).

References to rings in connection with swords in *Beowulf* may relate to the practice of attaching rings to hilts. Ring swords have been found in England, Scandinavia, the Rhineland, and Italy. The earlier examples, with pairs of movable rings, looped into each other and riveted to the sword hilt, date to the early sixth century and come from Frankish areas and Kent. Later pairs of rings are cast as one object and, in some of the latest examples, from Finland, are cast in one with the hilt (Steuer 1987). Even the earlier, movable, rings allow little space for a strap and

probably had no practical function, and the later ones clearly did not. Some swords show signs of having once had a ring, later removed, and rings have been found attached to other objects, such as the shield at Sutton Hoo, or separately, as from a hoard at Gudme. About eighty ring swords have been found, made from gold or silver. They are depicted on helmets but are not often found in graves together with actual helmets. The rings have been interpreted as symbolic of membership in a warrior band or the retinue of a king or of a war leader. As such they fit well into the world of *Beowulf* and for once provide a more limited date range, of the sixth to the seventh centuries.

IV. Treasure

Treasure is too widespread a concept to be useful in contextual definition. Valuables have been buried in the ground, put in graves, or thrown into lakes and rivers, and later dug up again, at many times and places in the past. Stories of its existence, or of the circumstances of its discovery, still cause excitement. Viking period hoards contained more silver than gold, but that might have made it all the more likely that famous ancient treasures would be pictured as of gold.

V. Monsters

Zoomorphic ornament, complicated patterns of twisted beasts and men, forms the most distinctive feature of Germanic art from the fifth century to the end of the Viking period. Its complexity and ambiguity has obvious parallels in the language of Old English poetry, and it clearly had importance and meaning to those who created and used it, though most of this significance is now lost to us. The animals depicted include both naturalistic and fantastic creatures, and the human figures could have been gods, men, or monsters. Such ornament is found especially on high-status objects, like the gold buckle and the shield from Sutton Hoo, the latter decorated with an appliqué often described as a dragon. Animal ornament takes on new forms in England after the conversion, under Celtic and Mediterranean influence, and is found most often as an element of manuscript art, but in Scandinavia its development continues on the old lines through the Viking age.

VI. Early Medieval Society

In this context, we must begin with Denmark. The only generally accepted link between *Beowulf* and historically recorded events is the raid by Hygelac on the Franks, equated with a raid by a Danish king, Chochilaicus, recorded by Gregory of Tours as having happened in the early sixth century. This is the reason for looking to the decades around 500 for the origin of the stories, but given the nature of epic poetry perhaps we should not draw our chronological limits too precisely.

Danish archaeology of the migration period has suffered from a lack of remarkable burials. Around 200, there were rich burials equipped with imported Roman silver and glass, but subsequently the burial record is not impressive until

the Viking period. This has led to a mistaken downplaying of the importance of this region. Societies do not all, always, demonstrate their wealth or their social hierarchy in their burials. It has been argued that lavish display is in fact a mark of instability. Excavation has shown that throughout the first millennium A.D., Denmark was, as now, a settled country of farmers, some living where their descendants live today.

There were also warriors. A dramatic feature of the archaeology of this period is the deposit of huge quantities of weapons, and sometimes ships, in what are now bogs, which may then have been lakes. Currently, these are interpreted as the sacrificed weapons of defeated armies, a celebration, therefore, of native victories (Hines 1989; Ilkjær and Lønstrup 1982).

The zoomorphic ornament discussed above probably developed first in Denmark. The discovery of rich, complete objects in graves elsewhere has partly obscured the pattern shown by overall distributions and by evidence for manufacture. If this very influential art style did develop and spread from Denmark, it is a strong indicator of the cultural importance of this area.

Although there are few rich burials, gold and silver objects have been found in increasing quantities in recent years as a result of the activities of metal detector users. There is a remarkable concentration of such finds on the island of Fyn, at Gudme, in an area where there are a number of place names interpreted as religious, relating specifically to the worship of Odin. The name *Gudme* itself has been interpreted as meaning something like "Home of the Gods" (Randsborg 1990). Among these finds are gold pendants; bracteates, derived from Roman imperial medallions, with symbolic designs; and also tiny gold plaques with pictures of human or divine couples. Not just one hoard but lots of separate large and small finds of gold and silver single out this part of Denmark, including neck rings, finger rings, sword rings, and scabbard mounts, all of solid gold, as well as gold and silver coins and quantities of silver. Objects found at Gudme came from far afield, from the Rhineland, Italy, and Byzantium. They arrived by sea and were unloaded on the coast, a few miles away at Lundborg, where there was a market where people brought, and made, their wares to buy and sell.

Excavations at Gudme reveal the presence of an extensive settlement of large farmhouses from around 200–600. Some of the gold finds came from the foundations of the houses. In 1993, the very large house at Gudme of Fyn, described above, was found, and others like it could well lie in unexcavated areas.

At the time when the story of *Beowulf* was set, there was a rich and prosperous society in Denmark, one that was also successful in war. It had a center at Gudme with both religious and secular importance, the focus of people and treasure from across the northern world and beyond. The finds of detached gold rings suggest this was a place where such rings were given out, as Hrothgar did at Heorot. Gudme was occupied for many years and included at least one memorably large and magnificent hall. Neither Lundborg nor Gudme have yet produced

evidence for defensive structures. It is during the seventh century, when Gudme was in decline, that the first rich burial was made at Lejre, perhaps a sign that authority had passed to a new dynasty with a new center.

There are many ways in which the archaeology of Gudme provides a remarkably plausible context for the Danish episodes in *Beowulf*. This is not to say that the historicity of *Beowulf* has been, or could be, proved by archaeology. But the poem's, set in a famous past, could have continued to be part of living Danish traditions.

In later centuries, there continued to be strong rulers in Denmark capable of conducting engineering works at home and trade and warfare abroad (Roesdahl 1982, 134–58). Initial phases of the Danevirke, the boundary across Jutland between Denmark and north Germany, and of the trading centers at Ribe and Hedeby, near Schleswig, belong to the eighth century. King Godfred of Denmark, murdered in 810, was taken seriously when he attacked Charlemagne's empire. In the tenth century, there are the complex of church and burial mounds at Jellinge, new forts, town defenses, and reconstruction of the Danevirke to put to the credit of Harold Bluetooth and his descendants, who were to add England to their empire. In some ways, tenth- and fifth-century Denmark were not dissimilar. Kings fought rivals at home and abroad, with their retinue of warriors. However, many other people lived lives as merchants or farmers. Tenth-century Denmark seems an ideal context for telling the story of *Beowulf*, for much the same reasons as used to be adduced for its composition in seventh- to eighth-century England: a society still close to its heroic pagan past, but newly converted, with an aristocratic culture where status was achieved through warfare and conspicuous consumption.

But the poem is written in Old English, not Old Danish. How, when, and why did the story cross the North Sea? Connections between England and Denmark can be traced throughout the early medieval period, although it is not easy to use archaeological evidence to distinguish between trade, migration, invasion, or the spread of ideas. In the fifth and sixth centuries, elements of English material culture can be traced to Scandinavia, including Denmark. From the later seventh century, ports like Ipswich were part of a North Sea trading network that allowed movement of people, goods, and ideas all around northern Europe. Finally, from the end of the eighth to the early eleventh centuries, Viking raids and settlement culminating in the Danish conquest of England provided many opportunities for transmission of Danish traditions to England.

The sixth and seventh centuries have long attracted the attention of English and Swedish scholars in connection with *Beowulf*, and it is not hard to see why. The princely burials of that date contain all the ingredients found in *Beowulf*: elaborate funeral rituals involving ships, cremation, burnt and unburnt treasure, great memorial mounds, and the objects themselves, elaborately decorated weapons, gold and silver vessels, horse trappings, drinking horns, harps, and chain mail. Investigation of all these, their ornament and symbolism, seems to lead directly to *Beowulf*,

as Newton (1993) has most recently argued. The complexity of ritual and ornament provide a visual version of the poetic imagery. Martin Carver has described Sutton Hoo as itself a form of epic poem—an ideological statement by a pagan dynasty at bay against encroaching southern Christianity (Carver 1992c, 151).

But however close some of the parallels between poem and burial may be, the Christian elements of *Beowulf* show that in its present version it could not be contemporary with Sutton Hoo. The eighth century in England was a time of expansion and prosperity. Against a background of conflict, larger and more stable political units were carved out, culminating in Mercia under Offa. This period saw the expansion of towns, long-distance trade, and diplomatic contacts on a scale lost since the Roman Empire, while royal and ecclesiastical patronage saw the growth of art, literature, and church building. It has seemed to some the ideal context for the composition of a great English poem, embodying recollections of times past yet not entirely forgotten, composed in an age when there were still great halls, jeweled swords and helmets, and folk memory or travelers' tales of pagan burials. Alternatively, it has been suggested that the "exciting picture" of kingship found in *Beowulf* was composed as compensation for the mundane reality of state formation in the eighth century (Bassett 1989a, 4). This persuasive scenario may have prevented even a search for alternative contexts. Since archaeologists have tended to follow current consensus among literary scholars, a date later than the eighth century has not seemed a serious proposition until recently.

The ninth or tenth centuries are not impossible in archaeological terms. At first, *Beowulf* seems alien to what we know of later Anglo-Saxon England. Ring swords, pattern-welded swords, boar-crested helmets, lavish burials in ships or as cremations, and royal halls of timber would by then be memories from the past. By King Alfred's time, bands of warriors traveling with heroic war leaders were found only among enemies: the English had an organized army. But much of this description does of course fit the Vikings, in England as well as in Scandinavia. Vikings did still bury dead rulers in ships or cremate them on funeral pyres, with weapons ornamented with fantastic beasts. Their kings feasted in great timber halls and heard stories and poems of their own and their ancestors' heroic deeds. They did all of this in the parts of Britain they conquered, as much as at home.

The capacity for the Vikings to become assimilated into Anglo-Saxon society is witnessed archaeologically by the way a mixed Anglo-Scandinavian culture flourished in the Danelaw (J. Richards 1991) and by their conversion to Christianity. The sculptured stone crosses from northern England (Bailey 1980) provide a vivid illustration of the ways in which the two cultures met. The Christian, Anglo-Saxon stone cross was taken up as a medium for Viking art. It is still Christian, but on it are Viking beasts and mythology, somehow integrated into the Christian message. The cultural processes that allowed Odin to appear on Christian crosses could also underlie the creation of an Old English epic poem from Danish traditions.

In conclusion, I think the archaeological evidence is at least partly compatible with a later date of composition for *Beowulf* than that usually suggested by reference to Sutton Hoo. It also provides a richer understanding of the various societies among which both the original stories and their later literary elaboration were produced and allows a better assessment of the importance of early medieval Denmark.

Chapter 16

Gender Roles

by Alexandra Hennessey Olsen

Summary: Scholarly approaches to the depiction of women in *Beowulf* have changed substantially over the years. Until about 1970, most Anglo-Saxonists assumed that, since men were responsible for public functions like king, warrior, and avenger, and since women held roles viewed as purely private such as hostesses, peaceweavers, and ritual mourners, women were passive in the social world depicted in *Beowulf*. Anglo-Saxonists also assumed that women were therefore marginalized by the poet. After 1970, women in the poem and in Anglo-Saxon society have more often been viewed as active and powerful figures who function on a nearly equal footing with men. Among the several women of the poem, Grendel's mother, Wealhtheow, and Hygd have attracted the most critical attention.

Chronology

- 1895:** Richard Burton argues that Wealhtheow, Hygd, Hildeburh, and Freawaru represent the ideal woman as a dignified queen and peaceweaver and that Thryth is the negative of the ideal.
- 1909:** Grace Fleming von Sweringen believes that *Beowulf* is a poem without genuine women characters and that Wealhtheow and the other women do not play an active role in the story except as characters of passion, imagination, and courage.
- 1936:** J. R. R. Tolkien argues that the poem has two major structural divisions, youth and age. He treats Grendel's mother as secondary to her son.
- 1938:** Henry Bosley Woolf makes an onomastic study of the significance of alliteration in the names of fathers and daughters, arguing that Freawaru was a nickname for Hrothgar's daughter Hrut.
- 1940:** Kemp Malone suggests that the name Freawaru evokes mythical characters and was invented by the *Beowulf* poet to give the Ingeld episode a legendary character.
- 1941:** Malone suggests that the contrasting characterizations of Hygd and Thryth were inspired by the meanings of their names, "Thought" and "Power."