

LEGENDS OF LEJRE, HOME OF KINGS

MARIJANE OSBORN

Lejre may be a name that evokes the legendary past, but it is also a real place in the Danish landscape, a forty-minute drive west of Copenhagen. Moreover, like the village of Hisarlik marking the “real” site of legendary Troy (Allen 1999), Lejre abounds with relics assuring us that significant events actually occurred here in ages past, perhaps giving rise to legend, or else drawing legend to the site. During the Germanic Iron Age, a great hall stood on the grassy sloping hills above Lejre, and centuries later, not far away, a Viking Age hall towered high on these same hills. We can see traces of the holes that held its posts, shadows in the terrain amid which lingers evidence of life in these halls like the fragmented stories located here.

These sherds of story, and thus the great halls of the past, are connected with *Beowulf* through the Skjöldung (OE *Scylding*) kings of Denmark with which Lejre is associated.¹ The earliest references to the Skjöldung/Scylding line of kings are English, however, not Scandinavian. While some Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies include the name Scyld (in one or another spelling),² the earliest actual story material about these kings appears in two Old English poems: in *Beowulf*, as part of the background to the poet’s main narrative concerning monster fights, and in a few lines of the poem known as *Widsith*. Even so, the *Beowulf*-poet does not tell the full story of the Scylding dynasty; he merely alludes to that story, and he does so in a way suggesting his certainty that listeners can fill in the gaps. Today we can fill in those gaps only with reference to episodes of the story as they were told by later Scandinavian writers who probably knew nothing of *Beowulf*.

This essay will review the legends of Lejre as told or alluded to in a series of medieval texts, beginning with the earliest known references to these legends and to the place where they are located. Later medieval sources greatly elaborate upon the story of the Scyldings to which the *Beowulf* poet refers, but the emphasis here will fall on its basic elements.

¹ The words Scylding and Skjöldung (with the hybrid plural form Skjöldungs) will be used interchangeably as adjectives throughout this essay, depending on whether the context is English or Scandinavian.

² For details see Bruce 2002: 31–42. The Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies (and their political dimension, or their implications for the dating of *Beowulf*) have been the topic of lively discussion, notably by Sisam 1953, Murray 1981: 104–6, Davis 1992, Newton 1993: 54–76, and Meaney 2003.

The Earliest Notices of the Skjöldung Kings

The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, set entirely in Scandinavia, begins with a 52-line proem celebrating the “Spear-Danes” and especially Scyld Scefing (“Scyld descendant of Scef”), founder of the Scylding dynasty. Outside of *Beowulf*, which cannot be dated with certainty,³ the earliest mention of Scyld is in the A-text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the so-called Parker Chronicle. Here under the year 855, in the course of an elaborate pseudo-genealogy of King Æthelwulf of Wessex (the father of King Alfred the Great), Scyld is introduced as *Sceldwea Heremoding* (“Scyld son of Heremod”) and is said to have lived some twenty-eight generations before Æthelwulf.⁴ Only once in Old English tradition outside of *Beowulf*—namely in the late tenth-century Latin *Chronicon* of Æthelweard, who takes pride in his descent from King Æthelwulf—is Scyld identified as the immediate son of Scef. Æthelweard’s account of the origins of a founding king of Denmark is similar to the story of the coming of Scyld in *Beowulf*, but there is a difference. In his chronicle, the child who lands on an island called Scani and later rules in *Anglia vetus* (“Old Anglia”) is Scef, not Scyld.⁵ In both English and Scandinavian tradition, however, Scyld (Scandinavian *Skjold* or *Skjöldr*) is the founder of the legendary Danish dynasty that takes its name from him.⁶

As for where that king had his chief seat, both the *Skjöldunga saga* and Snorri Sturluson specify that Skjold made his home at Lejre (*Hledro* or *Lethra* in the Latin version of the saga and *Hleiðrar* in Snorri’s Icelandic *Ynglinga saga*). Neither the *Beowulf* poet nor any other English author, however, mentions that place-name in connection with either Scyld or his descendants.

After the Scyld proem, the dynastic interest in *Beowulf* centers on Scyld’s great-grandson King Hrothgar, whose name corresponds to the “Ro” and “Roas” of Scandinavian tradition; on his two sons Hrethric and Hrothmund, the latter unknown in Scandinavian tradition; and on his nephew Hrothulf, who corresponds in name though not perhaps in nature to the Hrolf Kraki of Old Icelandic tradition (Rolf Krake in Danish). Hrolf Kraki is the domi-

³ Proposals that are currently entertained range from the seventh century to the early eleventh. For a representative set of opinions see Chase 1981. The unique manuscript copy of the poem was written out ca. A.D. 1000, plus or minus a few years (Ker 1957: 281–82). In a discerning review of the problem of dating the poem, Liuzza takes the date when the manuscript copy was written as “the only meaningful date for the ‘effective composition’ of *Beowulf*,” leaving aside the question of origins and possible earlier versions. For a critique of Liuzza’s methods see Fulk 2003.

⁴ Bately 1986, *sub anno* 855. Heremod is mentioned twice in *Beowulf*, but there he is not Scyld’s father, for Scyld comes to the Danes as a foundling. The elaborate genealogy attributed to Æthelwulf is generally thought to date from the reign of King Alfred (r. 871–899), even if, as a token of filial respect, it is entered under the year 855, the year in which Æthelwulf’s death is introduced.

⁵ Campbell 1962: 33, where Scyld is the nineteenth forefather of Æthelwulf; cf. Murray 1981: 106–8, Bruce 2002: 38–40.

⁶ It has been argued that the character Skjold (or the personal name Skjöldr) was invented as a back-formation from the word *skjöldungr*, a word meaning shield-bearer (Christiansen 1992: 105) and a *heiti* for king (Frank 1981: 126–27, Anderson 1999: 121).

nant player (and, in most accounts, the culminating player) of the legend-complex as known in Scandinavia. In *Beowulf*, nothing overt is said about any trouble between him and Hrothgar, though some specialists in *Beowulf* infer, on somewhat insubstantial grounds, that the poet imagines Hrothulf as poised to wrest the throne from Hrothgar's sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund, upon the aged king's demise.⁷ There is no question, however, about the poet's dark hints concerning Hrothgar's conflict with his son-in-law Ingeld.

The earliest datable reference to the feud between Ingeld and members of the Scylding/Skjöldung dynasty comes, again, from England. In 797, shortly after a band of Vikings had shocked Europe by sacking the island monastery of Lindisfarne, the churchman and teacher Alcuin wrote an admonitory letter to a member of the English clergy in an effort to reform what he considers to be the lax discipline of English monastic communities, and thus to avert God's wrath from the English.⁸ Alcuin mentions Ingeld by name in this letter:⁹

Let God's words be read at the episcopal dinner-table. It is right that a reader be heard, not a harpist; patristic discourse, not pagan song. What has Hiniel'd to do with Christ? The house is narrow and has no room for both. The heavenly king does not wish to have communion with pagan and forgotten kings listed name by name: for the eternal king reigns in heaven, while the forgotten pagan king wails in hell.

When Alcuin names Ingeld (Lat. *Hiniel'dus*) as an example of a heathen king about whom English harpers sing, he almost certainly has in mind the story, alluded to in *Beowulf*, about Ingeld's feud against the Scylding kings who killed his father, Froda. Two major feuds occur in the legendary history surrounding Lejre, the first beginning in the generation of Halfdane and Froda, called here the "Froda feud" and ending with the attack upon Heorot by Froda's son Ingeld to whom Alcuin refers, and the second feud occurring two or more generations later, called here the "Hjarvarth feud" after Hrolf Kraki's opponent and leading to that king's death, to be discussed later. What follows in the next section is an attempt to unravel the details of the Froda feud, to locate those details in Scandinavian sources, and to trace their connections to *Beowulf* and Lejre.

⁷ Thus Olrik 1919: 70–1; Klaeber xxxii; Chambers *Intro.* 25–27, 426. Hrothgar's son Hrethric (in *Beowulf*) appears in Scandinavian texts with many variations on his name and in various relationships: as the son of Ingeld, of Hrolf Kraki, of Signy, etc. In *Skjöldunga saga* it is he who is the usurper, slaying Hrothgar (Hroar, his half-brother). Olson 1916 describes Hrethric best, as "a fluctuating character" (94).

⁸ Bullough questions the customary identification of the letter's addressee, "Speratus," as Bishop Hygbald of Lindisfarne, concluding: "The Speratus to whom Alcuin addresses the Ingeld letter and one other that survives is surely the bishop of a non-monastic cathedral church in the Mercian, not the Northumbrian, kingdom" (1993: 110).

⁹ Trans. Bullough 1993: 124, capitalization and punctuation adjusted.

The Froda feud

Sven Aggesen (writing ca. 1188) tells us that Haldanus murdered his brother Frothi for the throne, whereas *Skjöldunga saga*, not so long afterwards, reports that Frodo started the feud by murdering his brother Haldanus to obtain the rule in Lejre. The latter scenario is repeated in the much later *Hrólfs saga kraka*, where Frothi's murder of his brother Hálfðan is followed by his attempt to kill the murdered king's sons as well, but they escape to seek vengeance for their father (chaps. 1–4). The name forms Haldanus and Hálfðan correspond to the *Beowulf* poet's Healfdene, who is not Froda's brother in the poem. Froda is a Heathobear, not a Scylding, in *Beowulf*. Healfdene is the father of three sons: Hrothgar, Heorogar, and Halga (lines 57–61), the “victorious Danes” by whom, according to Klaeber, Froda “in years gone by had been slain” (xxxiv). Their vengeance upon Froda for their father's murder is required by the feud ethic, although neither the first nor the second stage of the feud (Froda's killing of Healfdene or Healfdene's sons' vengeance for this) is reported in *Beowulf*.

That vengeance seems, however, to be implied by a prophecy in stanzas 18–20 of the early Old Norse poem *Grottasöngur* (“The Mill Song”). This poem concerns two maidens of giant race, Fenia and Menia, who are enslaved by King Frothi in order to work at his quern, grinding out good fortune for him through what seem to be magical arts. Because Frothi is cruel to them, the giant maidens turn to prophesying his doom, predicting that an army will destroy the settlement and that he will lose “the throne of Lejre” (*Hleiðrar stóll*). In *Grottasöngur* the sole motivation for this act of destruction is the anger of the mistreated maidens, but the doom they prophesy for Frothi takes the form of an armed attack on Lejre. In stanza 18–20 one of the maidens foretells this bloody outcome:

Hendur skulu höndla harðar trjónur,
vopn valdreyrug. Vaki þú, Fróði,
vaki þú, Fróði, ef þú hlýða vill
söngum okkrum og sögum fornum.

Eld sé eg brenna fyr austan borg,
vígspjöll vaka; það mun viti kallaður.
Mun her koma hinig af bragði
og brenna bæ fyr buðlungi.

Mun-at þú halda Hleiðrar stóli. . . .¹⁰

(“Hands shall grip the hard shafts,
the bloodstained weapons; wake up, Frothi!

¹⁰ These ON stanzas and the one that follows are cited, with minor adjustments, from Ólafur Briem's modernized version of *Grottasöngur* (1968: 515–21); cf. Neckel's edition (p. 306 below).

Legends of Lejre, Home of Kings

Wake up, Frothi,¹¹ if you want to hear
our songs and our ancient tales.

“I see fire burning east of the city,
warfare awakened, that must be a beacon;
an army is coming here very shortly.
It will burn the settlement despite the prince.

“You shan’t hold onto the throne of Lejre. . . .”¹²

The *Grottasöngur* poet ties the plight of Frothi to the Skjöldung feuds in stanza 22:

Mölum enn frammar. Mun Yrsu sonur,
niður Hálfðanar, hefna Fróða.
Sá mun hennar heitinn verða
bur ok bróðir; vitum báðar það.

Accepting the manuscript reading of line 2 of this stanza (which reads *við Hálfðana* ‘against the Half-Danes’ rather than *niður Hálfðanar* ‘the descendant of Halfðan’), Larrington translates these lines as follows (1996: 263):

“Let’s grind more! The son of Yrsa
will avenge Frothi on the Half-Danes.
He’ll be famed as both her son
and brother; as we two know.”

The last two lines provide the earliest known reference to the incest theme that identifies Yrsa’s son as Hrolf Kraki. By association they identify the *Fróthi* named here as the particular king of that name (there are many) who is implicated in the feud mentioned in *Beowulf*. But Harrington’s translation of the first two lines does not make good sense in terms of this feud, since both *Beowulf* and the later Scandinavian sources would lead us to expect Hrolf (Helgi’s son) to be the enemy of Fróthi, who has killed his grandfather Halfðan, and not his avenger.¹³ Axel Olrik’s translation presents a situation closer to what we know from else-

¹¹ The giantess’s rousing call “Wake up, Frothi!” appears to echo Hjalti’s call to the housecarls in the poem *Bjarkamál in fornu* (also titled *Húskarlahvöt*), which tells of the doomed stand of Hrolf Kraki and his champions at Lejre. The major fragment of this early *Bjarkamál* is conveniently translated by Jesse Byock (1998: xiv); Lejre is not mentioned in that fragment. See further n. 31 below.

¹² Larrington 1996: 262, with the spelling of “Frothi” normalized (as it is in the next quotation from this source as well). Compare the translation by Patricia Terry given at p. 307 below.

¹³ The translation problem lies in the fact that the verb *hefna*, to avenge, takes the genitive of thing avenged and the dative of the person on whom vengeance is taken, and both the name forms *Hálfðanar* and *Fróða* are grammatically ambiguous.

where: “We grind still further: Yrsa’s son shall avenge Halfdane’s death on Frothi” (1919: 270).¹⁴ It is interesting that Helgi is not named in this poem, though elsewhere (e.g., in *Hrólfs saga kraka*) it is he who kills Frothi. Here the avenger is identified only as Yrsa’s son. In any case, the issue pertinent to our discussion is *Grottasöngr*’s setting of a major battle of the Froda feud at Lejre.

Snorri Sturluson makes no mention of Lejre or any of the Skjöldungs when he retells the story of Fenia and Menia in *Skáldskaparmál*, mentioning *Grottasöngr* as his source. In this more fanciful prose version of the story, Snorri has the maidens actually produce the attacking warriors by grinding them out on their magical millstone.¹⁵ In the original stanzas, given here, we can reasonably assume that the maidens are simply grinding away at the quern while making their prophecy about the attack of Halfdane’s avenging grandson.

The giant maiden’s prophecy that the feud will result in the destruction of the king’s fortress at Hleithra (“the settlement will burn”) corresponds to the *Beowulf* poet’s allusion to the future destruction of the hall that he names Heorot in the course of a feud between these same dynastic families. In his account, however, Heorot will be destroyed in the later generation of Froda’s son Ingeld. He refers mysteriously, at lines 81b–85, to a fire in which Heorot is to be destroyed, following directly upon the description of the construction of that hall:

Sele hlifade

heah ond horngeap; heaðowylma bad,
laðan liges; ne wæs hit lenge þa gen,
þæt se ecghete aþumsweoran
æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde.

(The hall loomed up, high and wide-gabled; it awaited the deadly surges of hostile flame. It would not be very long before blade-hatred between son-in-law and father-in-law would awaken in the manner of deadly enmity.)

The son- and father-in-law referred to here are Ingeld and Hrothgar, respectively, but we only know this from a passage much later in the poem. Later on, in lines 2020–2029a, *Beowulf* himself outlines the situation from which this burning of Heorot will result. By this time Froda is dead, as are Hrothgar’s two brothers (including Halga — ON Helgi — who might have killed Froda), and Hrothgar has inherited the throne. Drawing upon a time-honored method of feud settlement, Hrothgar tries to secure the peace by marrying his daughter

¹⁴ This is the interpretation chosen by Patricia Terry in her translation of stanza 22 (1990: 246); see p. 307 below. Reading it otherwise, Joseph Harris gets around the problem of whose side Hrolf takes by suggesting that “the interpretive crux in stanza 22 is partly solved by associating stanzas 19–20 with dark prophecy, such as *Völuspá*; stanza 22, then, predicts shameful events in the life of Fróði’s most famous descendant, Hrólfkraki, as an ironic sort of ‘revenge’ on Fróði” (1993: 245). This argument depends on Hrolf being descended from Frothi rather than from Halfdan. I am grateful to John Lindow for helping me to understand the ambiguous grammar of this crux.

¹⁵ Faulkes 1995: 107.

Freawaru to Froda's son Ingeld. As Beowulf astutely remarks about this plan, however, "Oft seldan hwær / æfter leodhryre lytle hwile / bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge!" ("Seldom anywhere after the fall of a prince does the spear lie still for more than a little while, however suitable the woman [that is, the bride] may be," 2029b–2031). Then Beowulf imagines how an *eald æscwiga* ("old warrior," 2041) will urge Ingeld to his duty of avenging his father. Saxo Grammaticus, moving the feud to a later time in Danish history, greatly elaborates upon a scene somewhat like this one in a long poem with surrounding story in book 6 of his *Gesta Danorum*, in which the warrior Starcatherus incites Ingellus (Ingeld) to action. The fact that similar scenes are found in *Beowulf* and Saxo's much later *Gesta Danorum* suggests that they may both derive from a strong earlier tradition or lay, perhaps like the "pagan song" about Hinieldus to which Alcuin objects.¹⁶

In *Beowulf* the old warrior is successful in arousing Ingeld to take up arms (lines 2063–2069a), but the final scene of the Froda feud appears in another poem, in lines 45–49 of *Widsith*. These lines tell of a battle at Heorot in which "the glory of the Heathobards," presumably including Ingeld, is cut down, and they also tell of the peace that follows this battle:

Hroþwulf ond Hroðgar heoldon longest
sibbe ætsomne suhtorfædran,¹⁷
sibþan hy forwræcon wicinga cynn
ond Ingeldes ord forbigdan,
forheowan æt Heorote Heaðobeardna prym.

(Hrothwulf and Hrothgar kept their peace together for the longest time, nephew and uncle, after they destroyed the Viking kindred and brought low Ingeld's chosen warriors, cut down at Heorot the glory of the Heathobards.)

These vernacular poems in Old English and Old Norse that allude to a feud waged by a king named Froda (Frothi) and his son Ingeld (Ingjald) against the descendants of Healfdene thus situate a violent eruption of this feud at Lejre (in *Grottasöngur*) and at "Heorot" (in *Beowulf* and *Widsith*). This difference in naming the place may result from an association of the Skjöldungs with Lejre current in Danish oral legend, whereas in England, where the place-name was unfamiliar, there was no reason to mention it.

Although the many later partial or competing accounts of these events by Scandinavian writers suggest that they are drawing on a residual field of oral tradition, these few lines of

¹⁶ More commentary on Saxo's contribution will follow below.

¹⁷ These two lines are usually taken to mean that following the resolution of the Froda feud, violence looms between Hrothgar and his nephew Hrothwulf (the *Beowulf* poet's Hrothulf, or ON Hrólfkraki), even though it is long suppressed. The passage may mean no more, however, than what it says: namely that the two men lived in peace together in Denmark for a long time, perhaps until Hrothgar died naturally of old age (as in the *Lejre Chronicle*). Indeed, given the violent tenor of life among members of the warrior aristocracy during this era, a long period of peaceful relations between close kindred may have seemed unusual enough to be worth mentioning.

poetry offer all the information about the Froda feud that we possess from early times. Since this feud, the first of two great fights associated with Lejre, will be of recurrent interest in the present essay, it will be helpful to have at hand Friedrich Klaeber's connected account of its events according to *Beowulf* and *Widsith*, supplemented by some information from Scandinavian analogues:¹⁸

Froda, king of the Bards, slays Healfdene; (Heorogar,) Hroðgar, and Halga make a war of revenge [a war not mentioned in *Beowulf*], Froda falls in battle. After an interval of nearly twenty years, when Froda's son, Ingeld, has grown up, Hroðgar, the renowned and venerable king, desirous of forestalling a fresh outbreak of the feud, marries his daughter Freawaru to the young Heaðo-Bard king. Yet before long, the flame of revenge is kindled again, the Bards invade the Danish dominions and burn Heorot, but are completely routed.

In this last sentence Klaeber attempts to reconcile the burning of Heorot, which he takes to be implied at lines 82–85 of *Beowulf*, with the events related in *Widsith*, where no hall-burning is mentioned. The major difference between the events that Klaeber lists and those related in the later accounts is that whereas Froda and Ingeld are identified as Heathobards in *Beowulf*, the Scandinavian authors from the twelfth century onward make their feud a dynastic one, with Frothi and Ingjald (in various spellings) being direct descendants of Skjold rather than the “foreign enemy” that Klaeber calls them.¹⁹

Geomythography: Royal Mounds, Incest, and Regicide at Lejre

The evocation in *Beowulf* of the legendary Scylding kings, whose afflictions the hero sets to rights (at least temporarily) and on whose feuding he comments, links the Anglo-Saxon story to Lejre in Denmark even though this location is never named in the poem. In the Scandinavian accounts Lejre is named often. “There is a place in those regions that is the capital of the realm, called Lederum,” says Thietmar of Merseburg in the early eleventh century—around the time the *Beowulf* manuscript was being written down—and he speaks of huge winter sacrifices taking place in this capital of the island of Zealand.²⁰ Thietmar does not mention the legendary kings of Lejre, but he was not a Dane or writing for Danes,

¹⁸ Klaeber p. xxxvi, with one comma added. Subsequent citations of Klaeber in the present paragraph are from the same page. The dates that Klaeber ascribes to these events are omitted here as reflecting, perhaps, excessive confidence regarding the precision with which the events of legendry can be plotted onto the time-line of history. Nevertheless, some readers will find them useful as a sort of scaffolding.

¹⁹ Klaeber concludes his account of Scylding history with speculation about Hrothulf seizing the kingship upon Hrothgar's death in A.D. 535 and “slaying his cousin Hreðric, the heir presumptive” (xxxvi). Not all critics accept this scenario, about which the poet tells us nothing; for an alternative view to Klaeber's see Sisam 1965: 35–38; see also n. 17 above and notes 23 and 29 below.

²⁰ See pp. 297–99 below for the text and translation of this passage.

so either he may not have known of those stories, or having heard them he might not have thought them of interest to his intended audience.

Less than two centuries after Thietmar, the anonymous author of the *Chronicon Lejrense* (*Lejre Chronicle*), writing during the reign of the Danish king Valdemar I (1157–1182), thought these stories of great interest to his countrymen and revels in telling them. Eric Christiansen describes the *Lejre Chronicle* disparagingly as “a brief collection of legends and names from the pre-Christian past, the work of an eccentric entertainer with slight intellectual ambition” (Christiansen 1992: 19). Whatever its intellectual level, the *Chronicle* is indeed entertaining, and it is the earliest extant work to give us in rough outline, though without the Skjöldung feuds, the vivid story that reappears centuries later in saga form.

The *Lejre Chronicle* extends the history of the kings of Lejre backwards to begin “in the age of David” (the David of the Old Testament). After various events that leap across the centuries, Denmark is founded by an eponymous king named Dan (with a queen Danna), who is laid in a mound at Lejre upon his death; Skjold is not mentioned. Dan’s son Ro has in turn two sons, Helgi and Haldan (*Haldanus*), and when Ro dies peacefully (there is no Froda feud at this point) they bury him, too, “in a mound at Lethra.” They then divide the kingdom into two parts, Haldan ruling the land (until he dies and his son buries him at Lejre) and Helgi, as a pirate, ruling the sea.

Now the chronicle introduces the incest story, alluded to in *Grottasöngur*, that leads to the birth of Rolf Krake (here called simply *Rolf*) and the great conflict in which that king falls at Lejre. This is the first time a full narrative is developed to account for that final battle, and it is a complex one. It begins with Helgi, during his travels, having casual sex with a girl named Thora, the daughter of a chieftain named Rolfcarl (“Rolf the Old”); unknown to him, she bears him a daughter, Ursula. After many years, this self-same Helgi is driven ashore at the same harbor and, again unknowingly, violates his own daughter. Made pregnant by receiving the seed of her father, Ursula gives birth to a son, whom she calls by the name of her grandfather Rolf. Later Ursula is given in marriage to King Athisl of Sweden (whose name corresponds to the Eadgils of *Beowulf*), and she bears him a daughter named Skuld who is “a sister to Rolf, since she was born from the same mother.”²¹

After various interruptions, the chronicle returns to the story of Rolf, now nicknamed Krake (*Crake*). He grows up and is chosen king, and he dwells at Lethra with his sister, Skuld, until such time as she is abducted by (or simply marries, without Rolf’s consent) “a count in Scania called Hiarward, of German birth.” This figure, who now takes on a crucial role in the narrative, corresponds nominally to the *Beowulf* poet’s Heorowearð. Although in *Beowulf* Heorowearð is merely mentioned in passing as a son to whom Hrothgar’s older brother Heorogar, when king, does not give his battlegear (lines 2160–62a) — presumably royal gear that would have confirmed him as the Scylding heir — in the *Lejre Chronicle* Hiarward is not a Dane at all. Skuld, however, has an interest in the Danish throne, for any offspring from her union with Hiarward will be of Skjöldung blood. Egged on by Skuld, and with the presence of bringing tribute to the Danish king, Hiarward comes to Lejre with armed warriors

²¹ In later versions the parent that Hrolf and Skuld share is a father, not a mother.

concealed in his vessel. Rolf is overwhelmed and killed. The *Lejre Chronicle* thus provides a brief narrative of betrayal, an incipient “Hiarvarth feud” that Saxo Grammaticus will soon expand into a small epic in Latin hexameters.²²

Hiarvarth is perhaps the single most puzzling figure in the tangle of persons seeking rule in Lejre. In *Beowulf*, where his situation in Heorot is passed off in two and a half lines, the poet need not have mentioned him at all. It may be that he was already too implicated in the story to omit, but why, then, did the poet not say more, even allusively, as he does about the Froda feud? In any case, already in *Beowulf* Heoroweward is presented in a situation where he might have legitimate cause for resentment. His earliest Scandinavian appearance, in extant documents, is in the *Lejre Chronicle* as the antagonist of Rolf Krake, who is already elevated to the role of the noblest Skjöldung. Here Hiarvarth is presented as a German, as if to explain his hostility. Married to Skuld, he becomes involved in a situation that in later accounts will be magnified into a feud where malignant demonic powers side against Helgi and his son Hrolf to bring an end to the glory of Lejre; Hiarvarth is manipulated like a puppet to bring about that downfall, then casually discarded. The development of his initial opposition to Hrolf into a feud involving reciprocal hostilities will be a major theme running through the rest of this section.

The Hiarvarth fight (without supernatural intervention) occurs in two sentences at the end of chapter 8 of the *Lejre Chronicle*, which concludes by suddenly producing another Frothi, the son of Rolf Krake’s daughter. When his father (not a Skjöldung) dies in chapter 9, this Frothi succeeds to the throne, and “when he was killed by the sons of Swerting, his son Ingeld was raised to the kingship.” We will have to wait for *Skjöldunga saga* and then Saxo to explain how the murder of this later Frothi instigates a feud like the one we know from *Beowulf*.

Before such complications were added to this body of legendry, however, Sven Aggesen wrote an abstract of the story of the Skjöldung kings in the first chapter of his *Short History of the Kings of Denmark* (the *Breve Historia* of 1188). Sven apparently knew Lejre (*Lethra*) itself, as he reports that it lay at that time “scarcely inhabited among quite the meanest of villages,” in striking contrast to its past glory as the site of the king’s “most famous residence.” The king to whom Sven here refers is Rolf Krake, whose death at Lejre, not mentioned in *Beowulf*, is from this time forth the event most often associated with that place. Sven speaks of Skjold as “the first man to rule over the Danes,” and he specifies that the Danish kings were therefore called *Skioldunger* in the poetry of the Icelanders (about which he apparently knew more, in this connection, than is known today). Sven’s version of Skjöldung dynastic history is somewhat closer to *Beowulf* than to the *Lejre Chronicle* in the way he begins the story, though from our perspective he twists it around. Skjold’s heirs, the brothers Frothi (the *Beowulf* poet’s Froda) and Halfdan (*Haldanus*, the *Beowulf* poet’s Healfdene), fight each other for the kingdom, and Halfdan kills Frothi, obtaining the rule. (In *Beowulf*, according to Klaeber’s untangling of the story, Froda kills Healfdene and the latter’s sons then kill Froda.) Halfdan’s pirate-son Helgi (*Helghi*, the Halga of *Beowulf*) inherits the kingdom from him — with no hint of a reciprocal feud — and Helgi’s successor as king is his own son,

²² Hiarward famously reigns “only for a short while, from daybreak until prime,” for reasons that are not revealed in the *Lejre Chronicle* but that are told in the *Skjöldunga saga*, by Saxo, and by Snorri.

Rolf Kraki, “who became powerful through his inherited valor and was killed at Lejre.” Sven makes no mention of anyone corresponding to the Hrothgar and Heorowearð of *Beowulf*, nor does he tell the circumstances of Rolf’s death.²³

The three writers who next take up the story are the anonymous Icelandic author of the *Skjöldunga saga* (ca. 1200); the Dane Saxo Grammaticus, who drew on that work in his *Gesta Danorum* (ca. 1210); and a little later (perhaps ca. 1230) the Icelander Snorri Sturluson, who drew on it again in his *Ynglinga saga* (“The Saga of the Ynglings”),²⁴ the work that forms the first part of his great *Heimskringla*. All three are learned writers trying to rationalize tradition in order to construct a coherent sequence of events.

The original text of the anonymous *Skjöldunga saga* has not survived; it was rewritten in Latin by the Icelandic scholar Arngrímur Jónsson in 1596.²⁵ The kings told of in this document are enormously reduplicated, so that by the time we come to “our” Froda, the one whose feud is now familiar from previous accounts, he is listed as the nineteenth king of Denmark. Nevertheless, *Skjöldunga saga* is of interest for the complete story it tells of the Lejre kings. Moreover, it refers to the marriage and whetting of Ingeld much as the *Beowulf* poet does, almost as if their sources were the same. This Latin paraphrase begins, however, by telling of Odin (or Othin) coming to Scandinavia as a conqueror from “Asia,” a theme that Arngrímur may have introduced from Snorri’s *Prose Edda*.²⁶ Odin gives Sweden to his son Ingo and Denmark to his son Scioldus (ON Skjöldr), who takes up residence in Zealand (*Selandia*) in a stronghold called Hledro (i.e. Lejre). Scioldus has a son Leifus, who has a son Frodo, etc., until, finally, we come to Frodo IV, the nineteenth king.

For reasons of space, only chapters 1–5 of *Skjöldunga saga* are translated in this book (see pages 333–39); the story that follows in the next paragraphs comes from later chapters of that work.

²³ The next king named by Sven is Rolf’s son Rokil Slagenback, whom Christiansen identifies as a fusion of two different kings named Hoerekr in Icelandic sources. The *Skjöldunga saga* and Saxo, too, refer to a king named Hroerek (in one or another variant of that name) who succeeds Rolf. From the stories about him Axel Olrik reasons out a scenario that agrees with the one projected by some *Beowulf* scholars concerning Hrothgar’s son Hrethric: Rolf Krake kills him (1919: 53–65, 70). This is all speculation, however. Moreover, it is in conflict with contemporary accounts, for in these three narratives and in several genealogies as well, Hroerek, variously named and quite alive, succeeds his father Rolf as king, though the glory of Lejre vanishes with the father.

²⁴ The Ynglings were the legendary kings of Norway.

²⁵ Jakob Benediktsson gives a full account of the complicated textual history of this “oldest and most important work of the historical group” of Icelandic writings about the Scyldings (1957–1959: 49). In Friis-Jensen’s evaluation (1987: 84), “Arngrím’s Latin paraphrase of this saga is believed to follow the Icelandic original fairly closely, but it is not a word-for-word translation, and Arngrím’s personality breaks through in many places.” I am aided in my own understanding of Arngrímur’s version by an as-yet-unpublished translation into English by Clarence H. Miller, the well-known translator of Renaissance Latin texts.

²⁶ Or else it is a theme that Snorri may have taken from the original *Skjöldunga saga*. In the beginning of both these works, the continent of Asia is apparently conflated with the land of the gods, the Old Norse *Æsir*.

Chapter 9 recounts the Froda feud, whereas in other sources the events associated with Froda and his son Ingeld are set much closer to the time of the founding figure Skjold. Persuaded by his advisers that it is a good defensive move, Frodo, with his royal seat in Le-thra and Ringsted, has his henchman Starcardus murder his half-brother, here named Alo. (Starcardus will appear again when we come to Saxo.) Frodo has two sons, Halfdanus and Ingialldus, the latter becoming his heir. When Ingialldus grows up, he takes as his wife the daughter of Svertingus, a Swedish baron who pays tribute to Frodo. In chap. 10 Svertingus murders Frodo much as in the *Lejre Chronicle*, with the aid of the king of Sweden, Frodo having unjustly subjugated both of them. After Frodo's death, his sons Ingialldus and Halfdanus rule Denmark together, and Ingialldus repudiates the daughter of Svertingus at the urging of Starcardus. (We recall how in *Beowulf* Ingeld's "wife-love becomes cooler" when the "old warrior" incites him to avenge his father, 2065b–2066.) His brother Halfdanus produces three children, Signya, Roas, and Helgo (the latter two corresponding to the Hrothgar and Halga of *Beowulf*). Thereafter, Ingialldus, greedy for the throne, leads a surprise attack against Halfdanus and kills him. Ingialldus marries his brother's widow and by her has two more sons, Raericus and Frodo. (Thus *Skjöldunga saga* identifies Ingeld as the father of Raericus, who corresponds onomastically to *Beowulf*'s Hrethric, Hrothgar's son.) Halfdanus' sons, however, Roas and Helgo, hide out from their murderous uncle Ingialldus, and when they grow up they kill him in revenge for their father's death. Thus ends the first of the two great feuds recounted in this saga. Together Roas and Helgo become "the twenty-first king of Denmark," Roas living a quiet life at home and Helgo enjoying the life of a pirate.

Chapter 11 of *Skjöldunga saga* tells the incest story, following the plot as previously laid out in the *Lejre Chronicle* but changing some details and adding others. For example, the queen that Helgo plans to have sex with is named Olava, not Thora, and she lives in Saxony. When Helgo approaches her, she tricks him and sends him away, and later he avenges his humiliation by tricking and raping her. The issue of this unsavory business is Irsa. Years later Helgo comes back the same way, spots and seizes the beautiful Irsa (unaware that she is his daughter), takes her back to Denmark, and marries her, and they produce Rolfo. Hearing of their happiness, Olava, still vengeful, comes to Denmark and reveals all. Irsa leaves Helgo for Sweden, and later Helgo dies in battle.

In chapter 12 Rolfo comes to the throne as "the twenty-second king," and his uncle Roas is slain by his cousins Raericus and Frodo, the avenging sons of Ingialldus. These names are all familiar, in slightly different form, from *Beowulf*, although the family relationships, generations, and allegiances are quite different. King Rolfo is given his name Krage by the young man Woggerus, who, in return for Rolfo's generous gift of a ring, swears to avenge him if occasion arises. Of course King Rolfo and those around him laugh. Now begin the events leading up to the "Hiarvarth feud." Rolfo has two daughters: Driva, who is married to a Swede, and Skur, whom he marries to a "very renowned warrior, the Norwegian Bodvarus."²⁷ Bodvarus

²⁷ Thus enters into the story the hero who in *Hrólfs saga kraka* is called Böðvarr bjarki, a warrior whom many modern readers associate with the hero Beowulf. Böðvarr (Lat. *Bodvarus*) is his name in Icelandic texts, with "bjarki" being a nickname like Hrolf's "kraki." In later retellings Bodvarus will develop into the bear-warrior implied by the name Bjarki.

wages war against a man named Hervardus (also called Hiovardus, corresponding onomastically to *Beowulf's* Heorowearð). Hervardus has married Rolfo's half-sister Sculda (i.e. Skuld), and Bodvarus makes him pay tribute to Rolfo.²⁸ At the end of this long and complicated chapter, Hiovardus sails to Zealand pretending to bring Rolfo's tribute, but in fact bringing in arms for his men, under cover. Rolfo is "buried in profound sleep" when Hiovardus takes the gates of Lejre, but his men awaken him (as in the *Bjarkamál*) and he and his champions do their best, retaking the gates. Then "they are seized by some strange lethargy" and the enemy enters Lejre again. This unexplained lethargy suggests opposing magic, and indeed Othin (Lat. *Odin*) himself is seen in the enemy ranks. Supernatural elements now proliferate as dead bodies come back to life ("evidently possessed by the Devil") and there is a magical storm. "In short," the writer concludes, laconic at last, "Rolfo fell with nearly all his men."²⁹

The fall of Hrolf Kraki is given monumental expression in Saxo's great *Gesta Danorum*. Although he does not say much about Lejre,³⁰ Saxo is the most influential author to have written about the Skjöldung kings, whether in medieval or modern times, and his work is a milestone in Danish historiography. His reputation stems in part from his use of a high style that impressed his readers as the simpler style of *Skjöldunga saga* did not. Saxo's prose and occasional poetry are elevated, unlike that of the more sober chroniclers, to suit his high purpose, which was "to conjure up an impressive past for his country, such as would reflect the ideal world of Virgil's heroes" (Fisher and Davidson 2: 117). In order to achieve this end, he changes and expands the story of the Skjöldungs in various ways. Although he mentions the lost *Skjöldunga saga* as a source, he follows the order of the main events as presented in the *Lejre Chronicle*; that is, he first tells in book 2 the story of Hiarvarth's attack on Rolf Krake, resulting in the deaths of both kings, and later, in book 4, he tells about the Froda feud, which in other accounts takes place earlier (e.g. in the versions of the story told by the

²⁸ In this version, as in the *Lejre Chronicle*, Skuld is the daughter of King Adillus and Queen Yrsa of Sweden. At this point we are told of the enmity between Rolfo and Adillus and the great fight on the ice of Lake Väner, a winter battle alluded to at *Beo* 2391–96 with no mention of the ice (see Klaeber's discussion at pp. xl, xliii–xlvi). These events have nothing to do with Lejre, however, and will not be summarized here. North 1992 offers a complete review of this battle — which is mentioned also by Snorri in both his *Skáldskaparmál* (chaps. 53 and 54) and his *Ynglingasaga* (chaps. 28–30), as well as in part VIII of the *Bjarkarímur* — and he speculates about Saxo's purpose in omitting it.

²⁹ Translations by Friis-Jensen (1987: 85). The story continues, more soberly, in chap. 13. The next day, when Hiovardus is hailed as king, Woggerus comes forth pretending to take the oath to serve him, solemnly places his hand on the oath-sword, then seizes the hilt, draws the sword, and plunges it into Hiovardus's breast. "So Hiovardus ruled for barely six hours." To conclude the saga (chap. 14), Raerecus (corresponding to the Hrethric of *Beowulf*) who as Ingiellus's son was the cousin of Rolfo's father Helgo, comes to the throne. It seems that the author of *Skjöldunga saga* did not know a version of the story wherein Hrothulf kills Hrethric. Even in *Beowulf* there was no need for Hrothulf to murder anyone to gain the throne, since as Halga's heir he was already co-ruler with Hrothgar. (For a contrary view, strongly expressed, see Chambers *Intro.* 25–27, and Olrik as in n. 23 above.)

³⁰ Friis-Jensen carefully examines what Saxo does say in a brief section he titles "The topography of Lethra" (1987: 72).

Beowulf poet and Sven Aggesen). The present discussion of Saxo's narrative will be brief and will emphasize what he adds to the story, but that brevity should not lead the reader to underestimate the influence of this work, either in Saxo's own time or upon later generations of writers.

In Saxo's book 2, the Danish king Frothi (Lat. *Frotho*) has died fighting in Sweden leaving three sons, Haldan, Ro, and Skat (Lat. *Haldanus*, *Roe*, and *Scato*, respectively). Haldan "snatched the realm" by murdering Ro and Skat,³¹ and his two sons are Roe (the equivalent to *Beowulf's* Hrothgar, here said to be the eponymous founder of Roskilde) and Helgi (Lat. *Helgo*). Helgi rapes a virgin, named Thora as in the *Lejre Chronicle*, and Thora afterwards gives birth to a daughter named Yrsa (Lat. *Ursæ*). As "hideous revenge for her violation" (51), Thora manipulates her daughter Yrsa, when she is old enough, into seducing Helgi, who does not know she is his daughter. "The impiety was great," says Saxo, but it was redeemed by the birth of the "blessed offspring" Rolf (Lat. *Rolvo*), who would redeem his birth through his high deeds (51). Soon after that event, Haldan dies and Roe is given the crown, and around the same time a king named Hothbrod (Lat. *Hothbrodus*; compare *Beowulf's* Heathobards) ascends the throne of Sweden. Desiring to add Denmark to his kingdom, Hothbrod challenges King Roe and kills him. "When he heard of this, Helgi confined his son Rolf in the fortress of Leire, anxious for the safety of his heir" (52), and Helgi goes to overthrow Hothbrod and place Sweden under Danish power. Later he travels to eastern lands, remorseful about his shameful act of incest, and there he dies. Rolf becomes king, and soon he is embroiled in a conflict with Hjarvarth (Lat. *Hjarwarthus*). Before relating that conflict, however, Saxo tells the story of Rolf and Athisl (Lat. *Athislus*, the equivalent of the Eadgils of *Beowulf*) and their battle on the ice, followed by a new story about Bjarki (*Biarco*, the Bodvarus of *Skjöldunga saga*) coming to the rescue of a mistreated boy named Hjalti (*Hialto*) and helping him to gain courage by drinking the blood of a giant bear; this tale becomes part of the tradition after Saxo. The story of Rolf's naming by Viggi (*Wiggo*) is told, with Viggi's pledge to avenge Rolf's death (55). Somewhat curiously, we are informed that Rolf was the builder of Lejre, in which he had previously been confined as a child. The dramatic high point of book 2 comes when Hjarvarth, spurred on by his wife Skuld (*Sculda*, Hrolf's sister), comes to Lejre to attack Hrolf, pretending that he comes with tribute. Hjalti, now a brave warrior, hears the commotion of a sudden attack and goes to awaken Bjarki. Here Saxo rewrites the ninth- or tenth-century Icelandic poem usually titled "The Old Bjarkamál" in many elegant hexameters, greatly amplifying the original and adorning it with allusions to Virgil's account of the Trojan Horse and the fall of Troy.³² By means of this new and elevated "Bjarkamál," Saxo embellishes and elevates the history of his people, making it "epic" in a style reminiscent of that of the *Æneid*.

³¹ Fisher and Davidson 1: 50. Subsequent page numbers refer to this translation.

³² Friis-Jensen 1987: 83–98. Saxo locates the fight at Lethra (e.g., Saxo 56, 63), and, seeing himself as "a transformer of tradition" (Friis-Jensen 1987: 65), adds a great deal of content of his own. No more than a few lines remain of the original *Bjarkamál* as it once existed in the vernacular. Margaret Clunies Ross offers manuscript information as follows: "Three verses . . . appear in Snorri's *Edda*, with two additional stanzas found in two of Snorri's historical works, *Heimskringla* ('Circle of the World')

Rolf and his champions lose the battle against the magical forces ranged against them, but Viggí survives and manages to kill Hiarvarth, avenging the king as he once had promised, and “that one day marked the end and the beginning of Hiarvarth’s reign” (64).

Like the *Lejre Chronicle*, Saxo turns the Froda feud into an entirely separate story; he saves it for book 6 and focuses on Frothi’s champion, Starkather (Lat. *Starcatherus*). Although this means severing the sequence of events, it does not affect his great aim, which was to create a “classical” literature about the royal ancestors of the Danes. One part of his nationalistic purpose is to emphasize a long-lasting enmity between Denmark and Germany; thus he reframes the hostile Sverting (Lat. *Suertingus*), called a Swedish king in *Skjöldunga saga*, as the king of Saxony. Sverting invites Frothi to a banquet, intending to burn him in his hall, but Sverting becomes trapped in the fire as well, and both kings die (175). After Frothi’s death his son Ingel (Lat. *Ingellus*) rules in Denmark. Fearing that Ingel will seek vengeance on them for their father’s crime, Sverting’s sons give him their sister in marriage so as to forestall that event (as Hrothgar gives Ingeld his daughter Freawaru in marriage). But Saxo’s Ingel is too absorbed in his indulgent life of luxury (presented as a German vice) to think of vengeance until his father’s old friend Starkather, having previously left Denmark in disgust at Ingel’s self-indulgence, returns and berates both the young man and his wife. The passage in which he does this, traditionally called “The Lay of Ingellus,” constitutes Saxo’s second longest poem in this work (Fisher and Davidson 1: 187–93; Friis-Jensen 1987: 134–45). Starkather’s eloquence is successful, and Ingel finally kills his visitors in his hall. In another poem at the end of book 6, Starkather gives Ingel high praise for this act (one that some might consider an atrocity), saying, “Now [. . .] Ingel, more than in times gone by, / You deserve to be named Lord of Leire and Denmark!” (195).

In books 7 and 8 of his history, Saxo mentions Lejre on several occasions in relation to the deeds and the memorable funeral obsequies of another great Skjöldung king, Harald Hylдетan. In book 9 he names that place again as the location where yet another Skjöldung, Olaf, is buried. These episodes have no relation to either the feud involving Rolf Krake or the Frotho/Ingeld feud, and so they will be passed over without discussion here.

The greatest storyteller of medieval Scandinavia to give attention to these stories is the Icelander Snorri Sturluson, who touches on them in his *Ynglinga saga*, which forms the first part of his *Heimskringla*. Since his subject in that monumental work is the history of the kings of Norway, however, his attention to the early Danish kings is minimal. His one story about Frothi (ON Fróði) in chapter 11 of *Ynglinga saga* is merely the anecdote, sounding very much like an oral tale, of how a Swedish king named Fjölfnir comes to visit Frothi at his stronghold of Hleiðrar and drowns in a vat of mead. What is of relevance about this

and *Ólaf’s saga helga* (‘Saga of St Ólafr’), where the verses are entitled *Húskarlahvöt* (‘The Whetting of the Body-guards’), and two fragments of four and two lines respectively in the *Laufás Edda* of Magnús Ólafsson” (2005: 11). The song was already traditional, if one can put faith in Snorri Sturluson’s account in *Heimskringla*, when Olaf Tryggvasson of Norway requested his skald Thormod to recite it to encourage his warriors at the Battle of Stiklastad in A.D. 1030 (Snorri, *Heimskringla*, chap. 208; Holander 1964: 498–99).

tale is the description of the interior of the hall that is essential to the story: Fjölfnir falls into the vat from an upstairs balcony. In chapter 25 Snorri lists the kings of Denmark in the order Dan, Frothi, and Halfdan and Frithleif (these latter two kings ruling together), and in chapter 27 another Frothi is king. In chapter 28 Athils captures and marries a maiden named Yrsa (with nothing mentioned about her parents), and in chapter 29 King Helgi, the son of Halfdan (Helgi Hálfðanarson), captures Queen Yrsa from Athils and marries her at Hleithrar. Their union produces the son Hrolf Kraki (Hrólfkraki), who is “chosen king at Lejre” at the age of eight, when his father dies. In this chapter Snorri, acknowledging *Skjöldunga saga* as his source, also tells of the battle on the ice between King Athils of Sweden and the Norwegian King Áli, who falls there; and in the next chapter (chap. 30) he says that in the days when Athils’ son was king of Sweden, “Hrolf Kraki fell at Hleithrar.” Snorri mentions neither of the famous conflicts at Lejre and adds little of interest to that story, his attention being focused elsewhere.

Separately, in his *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri retells other episodes from the cycle of the Skjöldung kings, including the story of “Hrolf Kraki and Vögg” that is reproduced at pp. 375–77 below.

The Icelandic *Hrólfs saga kraka*, drawing primarily on Danish accounts for the sequence of events, marks the state of the legend at the end of the Middle Ages, but not even this talented saga writer adds much to the basic plot, the elements of which by now are firmly established. He does, however, add folktale and romance elements, borrowed from other works, that transform the story into the romance toward which it has been tending. Some new episodes seem decorative, but others explain certain narrative elements, such as the tale of Böthvar Bjarki’s werebear father that accounts for the bear nature that “Bjarki” reveals at the end of the saga.³³

One such explanatory tale will eventually become part of the legend as told in modern times. This is the episode, told in chapter 11, of the shape-shifting elf woman who seduces Hrolf’s father Helgi one winter’s night and gives birth to Skuld. Skuld is therefore Hrolf Kraki’s half-sister by his father Helgi rather than by his mother Yrsa (as in the *Lejre Chronicle*). This shape-shifter episode is actually a back-story, evidently added to the saga from a Celtic source to provide a reason for Skuld’s otherwise unmotivated hostility toward Hrolf.³⁴ Skuld’s name means “debt,” and according to this story she represents a debt left unpaid by her father Helgi, a duty not done. After their night together, the elf woman tells Helgi that she is pregnant and commands him, “Visit our child next winter at this same time down at your ships’ landing. Unless you do so, you will pay for it” (Byock 1998: 22). When Helgi inevitably forgets, the elf woman amends her curse so that the “debt” will fall on his son Hrolf Kraki, whose death Skuld is instrumental in causing. With the addition of this episode, the author sets up an occasion for the dark magic at the end of the saga, giving somewhat great-

³³ The name Bjarki can be interpreted as “little bear.” Böthvar Bjarki’s father is a shape-shifter capable of taking on both ursine and human forms.

³⁴ See Eisner 1957 for a detailed study of the shape-shifting “Loathly Lady” of medieval English and Celtic narrative, and see also Eichhorn-Mulligan 2006.

er coherence to (or, at least, embellishing) the account of an apocalyptic battle at Lejre that involves the reanimated dead and Othin visible on the battlefield. Both motifs, as we have seen, are already features of the story as told in the *Skjöldunga saga* and by Saxo.³⁵

Conclusion, with Some Doubts and Questions

After this journey through the mysteriously labyrinthine development of the legend of Lejre, bending in upon itself, coming to apparent dead ends, moving on, what can be deduced from the way that details have accrued to that story?

For a start, it is a curiosity of the textual transmission of these tales that Skjold, Roe, Haldanus, Froda, Ingeld, Hrolf, and other *dramatis personae* in the drama of the Skjöldung dynasty are mentioned in the literature of Anglo-Saxon England well before their stories are represented in a written narrative tradition in Scandinavia.³⁶ One way of accounting for this fact, possibly the best way, is to regard it as an effect of the differential rate of the advance of literacy in those two parts of Europe.

Second, one cannot help but be struck by the constancy with which these tales are anchored at Lejre, on the island of Zealand, in all traditions *other than the English*; and, conversely, with the idiosyncratic manner in which the hall “Heorot” is associated with the Scylding kings in both *Beowulf* and *Widsith*, but nowhere else. The names used in these two poems — names that are, of course, English rather than Danish — apparently represent a distinct insular departure from the story as it was generally known in the north.

Third, it is worth noting that the stories of the two feuds with which the author of *Hrólfs saga kraka* brackets his story so effectively both begin centuries earlier as simple ideas associated with Lejre: “The settlement shall burn” in *Grottasöngur* and “Hrolf died at Lejre” in Sven’s *Short History*. Both events develop into complex narratives that the fifteenth-century

³⁵ An interesting alternative witness to the tradition as represented in *Hrólfs saga kraka* is found in the Icelandic *Bjarkarímur*, composed around 1400 according to its editor Finnur Jónsson, wherein Lejre is mentioned throughout, usually in the form *Hleiðargarð* (e.g., in stanza 7 of part I). The *rímur* (rhymes) begin at the point where Vögg gives Hrolf the nickname “Kraki,” here meaning “ladder.” They then include the story of Bøthvar’s bear-heritage (parts I–II), as in the saga. The slaying of the Yuletide beast (a bear in Saxo, a peculiar troll-dragon in the saga) is expanded in the fourth and fifth set of rhymes (parts IV and V) into a double story where first Bøthvar kills a huge she-wolf and has Hjalti drink its blood to acquire courage, then (in part V), when Hjalti is equal to Bøthvar in valor and a huge bear attacks at Yule *i garðinn Hleiðar* (in the stronghold of Lejre), Hjalti kills it with a spear that Bøthvar throws him. He kills a fierce and living creature that *veifar sínum vónða hramm* (“shook its evil paws”), not the propped-up corpse of the saga. Because the extant text begins with Vögg and ends (in part VIII) with the battle on the ice (cp. *Beowulf* 2391–2396), these “Bjarki-rhymes” include neither the Froda feud nor Hrolf’s fight with Hjarvarth.

³⁶ Carl Edlund Anderson observes that *Widsith* does not mention the name Scyldingas “even when discussing Hroþwulf and Hroðgar. *Beowulf* provides the earliest surviving record of [this term’s] use in a dynastic sense” (1999: 123). He says further that “the earliest sure dynastic use of *Skjöldungur* in a Scandinavian context comes from Snorri’s thirteenth-century Edda” (1999: 124).

saga author integrates into a coherent plot covering several generations. These two otherwise unrelated feuds are linked in this saga by the figure of Helgi, avenger of his father and negligent trust-breaker to the elf mother of Skuld, his daughter, who will cause his son's death. More relevant to our purpose here, both in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and in previous accounts of the Scylding dynasty, these two feuds are linked through the insistent enactment of their most dramatic moments at Lejre, a site now known to have had great importance long before the advent of elaborate narrative traditions about the Skjöldungs. It is fair, therefore, to think of these stories as constituting a kind of "legend of Lejre," not just a legend of the Skjöldung kings.

Then there is the curious detail of the supposed burning of Lejre. Most readers of *Beowulf* accept Klaeber's description of lines 81b–85 of the poem as an "allusion to the destruction of the hall by fire in the course of the Heaðo-Bard conflict" (Klaeber 129), and a fire is also foreseen in *Grottasöngur*. Is the great hall or fortress of Lejre, then, generally thought to be set aflame? The major scholars reviewing this material in the early twentieth century, Olrik (1919: 171), Klaeber (xxxv), and later Brix (1935: 5–6), all believed a fire to be an integral part of the story, even though no great fire is mentioned by Sven Aggesen or the authors of the *Skjöldunga saga*, the *Lejre Chronicle*, or *Hrólfs saga kraka* (except as a threat by Hjalti to Böðvar in chap. 33). Froda is burnt to death in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, but that burning does not take place in his own hall at Lejre. Moreover, three different occasions for such a fire are available in the traditions, each occurring in a different generation: in Froda's generation in connection with his death in *Grottasöngur*, then in his son's generation when Ingeld attacks Heorot as is told in *Beowulf* and *Widsith*, and, finally, in Hrolf's generation when that king meets his death in Lejre, surrounded by flames as is possibly implied by Saxo in his rewriting of the *Bjarkamál* poem. Yet, despite Saxo's association of the battle fought at Lejre with the fall of Troy (recalling to us those burning "towers of Ilium"), even he refers only ambiguously to a fire within Rolf's stronghold, presenting it as a hearth-fire and a threat to burn down a building (Fisher and Davidson 1: 57). Friis-Jensen points out that the scholars mentioned above "knew from *Beowulf* that Hrothgar's palace Heorot, no doubt rightly identified with Lethra, would be destroyed by fire during the course of the Danish-Heathobard feud" (1987: 94); but if Saxo actually intended for there to be a fire at Lejre, it would occur during the later conflict with Hjarvarth. After weighing the evidence, Friis-Jensen concludes that "there is not sufficient evidence for supposing that a devastating fire was an essential part of the tradition Saxo knew about King Rolfo's last fight at Lethra" (1987: 94).

We are left with several other puzzles. The *Beowulf* poet has so much information about these Scylding kings, apparently in advance of anyone writing in Scandinavia, that he can drop hints about them that we can interpret only by reading the poem in the light of much later material. Those hints are so convincing that, as in the case of the "fire at Lejre," scholars are even led to read that other material through the lens of *Beowulf*. Where did the poet get his information? Moreover, if he does have the story of the Scyldings "ahead of his time" (which of course brings up the fraught question of when his time was), how can he expect his contemporary audience to be sufficiently familiar with it that he can drop those hints and expect them to be understood? Finally, what does the poet's confidence about this material, combined with his apparent lack of information about a later conflict of Hrothulf

(Rolf Krake) with Heorowearð (Hiarvarth), suggest about the date when he was putting the story together and the audience for whom he was doing this? Concerning Heorowearð, the poet makes him so negligible a figure that it is curious he is mentioned at all, yet there he is in the shadows of the story, waiting for the twelfth-century *Lejre Chronicle* to develop him into a nemesis. How was he found so ready to hand after that long neglect (if neglect there was) — simply from king lists?

One final feature with a possible bearing on the date of composition of *Beowulf* is the Anglo-Saxon poet's unorthodox practice of naming the king's great hall (when normally, in Scandinavian tradition, only gods' halls are named), and his *not* naming Lejre. Perhaps this omission is an aspect of the poem's literary art rather than its date of composition, or of the poet's expectations concerning the knowledge shared by the members of his audience. But he assumes they are familiar with other names in this legendary material, so why not this one?

Clearly there is much still to be learned about this remarkable complex of legends flowing in and around Lejre, with their protean elements that are yet, in certain ways, so predictable from one account to the next.

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