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# A Beowulf Handbook

*Edited by*  
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## Preface

*Beowulf* scholarship has developed so rapidly during the modern era that few if any can hope to master all the work that has been done on the poem or to keep abreast of current developments in the field. Scholars from different disciplines employing a multitude of critical methodologies have studied *Beowulf*, thus making the work of understanding the poem more complex. This handbook lays the foundation for up-to-date, nuanced approaches to *Beowulf* by supplying a succession of analyses of all major aspects of it from the beginnings to 1994. After the first, introductory chapter, the individual chapters offer both a rapid glimpse at scholarly trends in the study of *Beowulf* and a more sustained exploration of selected problems. Each begins with a summary and an annotated chronology of the most important books and articles on the topic it treats, then presents an overview of scholarly interest in the topic, a synthesis of present knowledge and opinion, and an analysis of what remains to be done. We have structured the chapters to accommodate the needs of a broad audience: nonspecialists who wish to read *Beowulf* with a basic understanding of the major issues that concern the poem; graduate and advanced undergraduate students who, in scrutinizing the text of *Beowulf*, face a daunting task, although an exhilarating one; college or university instructors who teach *Beowulf* and are unfamiliar with all the problems attendant on this enterprise; and medievalists, whether Anglo-Saxonists or not, who wish to orient themselves in *Beowulf* scholarship either for their own research or for that of their students. The order of the chapters roughly suggests the order in which scholars began taking a strong interest in the particular topics.

In bringing this project to fruition, we have incurred many debts. We want to thank Willis G. Regier, former director of the University of Nebraska Press, for inviting us to undertake this challenging enterprise; the editorial board of the University of Nebraska Press for its stalwart support; the two specialist readers for the Press for their many constructive suggestions; the College of Letters and Science, Division of Humanities, Arts, and Cultural Studies, at the University of California, Davis, for subsidizing the publication of the illustrations for chapter 18; and the staff of ACMRS (the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies) at Arizona State University for its timely help on several aspects of this volume. Stephanie Volf and Irena Praitis invested many hours preparing the bibliography; Ms. Volf undertook the heroic tasks of preparing the index and producing the camera-ready copy; and T. Scott Clapp, Monica von Eggers, and Ann Matchette offered valuable assistance during the final stages of production. Plate 7 in chapter 18, *Beowulf and Nan-Zee*, is reproduced from "Beowulf" No. 3 Copyright © 1975 DC Comics. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

The dedication to this volume acknowledges a master in the field of Old English studies and a friend and valued colleague to nearly every contributor to this book. He is—and will continue to be—deeply missed.

possession of a superior wisdom grounded in hindsight," but more likely one hopes in vain for some vantage point that stands above or apart from the unfolding process that is being studied.

## Chapter 2

# Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences

by Robert E. Bjork and Anita Obermeier

**Summary:** Suggestions for when *Beowulf* was composed range from 340 to 1025, with ca. 515–530 and 1000 being almost universally acknowledged as the possible extremes. An early consensus favored ca. 650–800, but current thinking is balanced between roughly this view and the late ninth to early tenth centuries. Scholars have tried to specify provenance (Denmark, Germany, Anglia, Wessex), most preferring Northumbria or Mercia; they still debate whether the author, who remains anonymous despite sporadic attempts to discover his identity, was a layperson or cleric; and controversy continues as to the nature (e.g., secular or monastic) and number of the poem's audience or audiences.

## Chronology

- 1815:** Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, first editor of the poem, asserts in his introduction that the author was an eyewitness to the deeds of Beowulf and presented the eulogy at Beowulf's funeral. The poem was composed, therefore, after 340, the year Thorkelin claims for Beowulf's death. Thorkelin also argues that the author and audience were Danish (1815b).
- 1817:** N. F. S. Grundtvig identifies Hygelac as the Chochilaicus (d. 515–530) mentioned by Gregory of Tours. Identification implies a date after 550.
- 1820:** Grundtvig, arguing for a date around 700, also suggests a companion of Cædmon or Aldhelm as author.
- 1826:** John Josias Conybeare argues that the poem as we have it was written by a bard in the court of Cnut (1016–35) but attributes the original poem to the eighth or even seventh centuries.
- 1840:** Ludwig Ettmüller dates the poem in the eighth century and proposes a Scandinavian source as well as multiple authorship.
- 1841:** Grundtvig identifies "merewioingas" (2921) as "Merovingian."
- 1849:** Joseph Bachlechner argues that "merewioingas" suggests 752 as the latest possible date for the poem, since the Carolingian line replaced the Merovingian then, and the poet probably would not refer to a dynasty long after it had fallen.
- 1862:** C. W. M. Grein considers *Beowulf* a coherent work by one poet.

- 1869: Karl Müllenhoff, applying Lachmann's *Liedertheorie* (ballad theory) to *Beowulf*, concludes that it began as four independent lays, put together with interpolations before the time of Caedmon (657–680).
- 1883: Hermann Möller argues that *Beowulf*'s initial poetic form was a four-line stanza and claims that nonstanzaic parts are more recent interpolations. He dates the poem in the ninth, tenth, or eleventh centuries.
- 1883: Frederik Rønning, examining stylistic, historical, and linguistic details in the poem, rejects *Liedertheorie*, suggests the late eighth century as the date, Northumbria as the provenance, and a cleric as the author.
- 1884: Thomas Krüger examines the poem's historical and mythological background, backs Müllenhoff about six authors and a late seventh-century date.
- 1886–97: Gregor Sarrazin proposes that *Beowulf* was translated from a Danish original probably composed or reworked by Starkathr around 700 at Lejre, the Danish court of Ingeld. Argues that Cynewulf translated the poem and interpolated Christian material after writing *Christ A* and *B* but before *Elene* and *Andreas*.
- 1886: Eduard Sievers examines the thirty-six Scandinavian loan words cited by Sarrazin as proof for a Danish original and rejects thirty-four as either extant in Anglo-Saxon poetry or prose or part of a common Germanic heritage.
- 1888: Bernhard ten Brink elaborates Müllenhoff's conclusions and places the final redaction of the poem in Mercia in the eighth century.
- 1892: John Earle posits 775–800 as the date because of the Offa episode, lines 1931–62. Poem is therefore a political allegory for Offa's son, Ecgferth, by Archbishop Hygeberht of Lichfield.
- 1906: Lorenz Morsbach dates the poem to shortly after 700 on linguistic grounds (loss of final *u* after long root syllables and of postconsonantal *h* before vowels).
- 1912: Arguing mainly from the religious allusions in the poem, H. Chadwick postulates that the poem existed in its "full epic form" well before 650 and was later reworked by a Christian poet.
- 1917, 1923: Levin Schücking, on the basis of historical context, suggests 890–900 as the date, the Danish court in England as the provenance, since the poem is thoroughly Danish in orientation.
- 1920: F. Liebermann argues for a date of 725 and speculates that the poem could have been written at the court of Cuthburg, sister of King Ine of Wessex, queen of Northumbria and later abbess of Wimborne.
- 1922: Friederich Klaeber (1922a) claims a unified work by one poet, perhaps at Aldfrith's court.
- 1935: Ritchie Girvan argues for a 680–700 date in Northumbria on the basis of linguistic, historical, cultural evidence.
- 1935: W. A. Berendsohn offers an analysis of the poem similar to ten Brink's. Supports an eighth-century date. Last proponent of *Liedertheorie*.
- 1936: Alois Brandl, reading the poem as political allegory, dates it to the reign of Wiglaf of Mercia (827–838).
- 1937: C. C. Batchelor, discerning traces of Pelagianism in the poem, argues that it could not have been written much later than 705.
- 1943: George Bond, on the basis of onomastic evidence, links *Beowulf* to events in the reign of Beornwulf, 823–826, and Wiglaf, 828–838, of Mercia.
- 1948: Sune Lindqvist, on the basis of the Sutton Hoo discovery, argues for a date of ca. 700 and contends that the poem was written to honor a line of the royal Swedish house that descended from Wiglaf in the poem.
- 1951: Dorothy Whitelock suggests ca. 775–800, perhaps in the court of Offa of Mercia. Poem must be pre-835, when Viking raids began in full force.
- 1953: C. L. Wrenn suggests a pre-750 date because of what he says is an archaic instrumental, "wundini" (which is actually "wundum" or "wundnum," 1382).
- 1957: Robert Reynolds sees a connection between *Beowulf* and the *Wonders of the East* and argues for a tenth-century date (late ninth at the earliest).
- 1958, 1963: Francis P. Magoun Jr. arguing for the presence of "an anthologizing scribe," distinguishes authors for three parts of poem: A (1–2199), A' (2009b–2176), B (2200–end).
- 1961–62: Gösta Langenfeld, arguing that the Scandinavian historical elements in the poem could not have been known in England before the late eighth century, posits an early ninth-century date.
- 1963: Paul F. Baum suggests that the poet was a "serious and gifted poet, steeped in the older pagan tradition from the continent." He mentions, but immediately discounts, the possibility of female authorship.
- 1966: Robert P. Creed (1966b) refutes multiple authorship, tries to explain Magoun's A' by suggesting a scribe wrote the epic down during performance.
- 1970: Arthur G. Brodeur attacks Magoun's (1958, 1963) theory of multiple authorship. Finds no evidence for the discrepancies Magoun asserts.
- 1977: Nicolas Jacobs, disputing Whitelock's theory, argues for a late ninth-, early tenth-century date.
- 1978: Patrick Wormald, exploring the historical and cultural backgrounds of the poem, argues for an eighth-century date, a clerical author.
- 1980: Richard J. Schrader hypothesizes that the *Beowulf* poet was a monk trained in the classical rhetorical tradition of Bede and that the poem is part of a literary tradition going back to Virgil.
- 1980: Louise E. Wright argues that "merewioingas" refers to Merovech, the legendary founder of the Merovingians identified in a chronicle not known in England before 751. The word supports a date after 751.
- 1981: Kevin Kiernan (1981a) posits two poems about *Beowulf* with the author of the second being the final redactor of the unified whole, ca. 1016–25.
- 1981: Ashley Crandall Amos casts doubt on the reliability of any of the linguistic or metrical criteria proposed for dating Old English poetry.
- 1981: Contributors to *The Dating of Beowulf* review many kinds of evidence for dating. Among them Thomas Cable, E. G. Stanley, Colin Chase, Walter Goffart, Alexander Murray, R. I. Page, Roberta Frank, and Kevin Kiernan either argue for a date later than the eighth century, an audience as late as the eleventh, or leave open those possibilities.
- 1981: W. G. Busse and R. Holtei, on the basis of historical criteria, chiefly the problem of loyal behavior to one's lord, date the preserved version of the poem to the reign of Ethelred (978–1016) and define the audience as Ethelred's thanes.
- 1981: David Dumville argues that there is no historical evidence to align date of manuscript and composition and that the poem has a monastic context.

- 1981: Patricia Poussa revives Schücking's argument for a date in the tenth century and an audience in the Danelaw.
- 1982: Frederic G. Cassidy proposes that the poet was a monk writing for a monastic audience; he was tolerated because of his "scholarly eminence."
- 1982: Horst Weinstock seconds Cassidy, opts for a later date, and theorizes that the poet might have written the epic for a monastic community engaged in missionary work to the Continental Saxons.
- 1982: Robert T. Farrell surveys Scandinavian contact with England 400–1000, concludes the poem was most probably composed in eighth-century East Anglia.
- 1982: Roberta Frank in one article finds that the poet's synthesis of religious and heroic idealism reflects attitudes current in the tenth century but not before. In another she argues that various Nordicism in the poem point to a late ninth- or early tenth-century origin.
- 1982: Michael Lapidge, showing direct and indirect connections among *Beowulf*, Aldhelm's Wessex, and the *Liber Monstrorum*, suggests that the poem could have been composed in pre-Conquest Wessex.
- 1982: Michael Swanton, arguing that the poem reflects two systems of kingship, finds that the transitional period of the late eighth century is the most likely time of composition.
- 1983: John D. Niles argues that the poet's ambiguous depiction of the Danes fits in well with the hypothesis of a tenth-century date.
- 1985: Janet Bately, reviewing spelling patterns in the poem, concludes that it probably cannot be dated later than the early tenth century. An examination of "sibpan" in the poem supports the single-author theory.
- 1986: Karl Schneider, noting the transitional nature of the Christianity in the poem, dates it to 640–650 and places it in the court of Penda the Mercian. The poet "may be identical" with Widsith.
- 1986: Zacharias P. Thundy posits that the poem was written between 924 and 931 by Wulfgar, a retainer of King Athelstan.
- 1988: David Dumville, on paleographical grounds, dates the manuscript to the early eleventh century, not to the reign of Cnut.
- 1989: Audrey Meaney reviews the elements of the Scyld Scefing prologue to the poem and doubts that they came together before the early tenth century; she accepts the possibility that the *Beowulf* manuscript represents various layers of composition.
- 1990: Alfred Bammesberger reexamines *Beowulf* 1382a, "wundnum" and its suggested variants, as a means of dating the poem and concludes that it does not illuminate the dating question.
- 1992: R. D. Fulk applies Kaluza's law to the poem and maintains that *Beowulf* was most probably composed before 725 if Mercian in origin or before 825 if Northumbrian. Evidence favors Mercian origin.
- 1993: Sam Newton, on the basis of genealogical, orthographic, lexical, phonological, and archaeological evidence, argues that the poem may have been composed in eighth-century East Anglia for an audience of Danish extraction or familiarity with the East-Anglian Danish heritage.

- 1993: Niles (1993a) argues that the poem may reflect West Saxon politics and ideology during the period of nation building in the tenth century.
- 1993: Niles (1993c) posits that the text of *Beowulf* came into being as the result of a commissioned event (an "oral poetry act") staged by a patron for the benefit of a textual community.

"[It] will be clear to anyone," asserts Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin in his introduction to the first edition of *Beowulf* in 1815, that "our poem of the Scyldings is indeed Danish" despite its coming down to us in an Old English translation. The nameless Danish skald who originally wrote the poem "was an eyewitness to the exploits of kings Hrothgar, Beowulf, and Hygelac, and was the eulogizer at Beowulf's funeral," which Thorkelin unflinchingly fixes at 340, his earliest possible date for the poem's composition (Thorkelin 1815b). Though unequivocal, Thorkelin's contentions are demonstrably wrong or decidedly moot, mere curious footnotes to the whole bewildering debate about perhaps the most vexing problems in *Beowulf* scholarship: when was the poem composed, where, by whom, for whom?

Scholars responded quickly to Thorkelin. The first Danish reviewer (probably Peter Erasmus Müller in 1815) questioned Danish provenance for the poem and guessed at a date between the end of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth centuries (Cooley 1940, 51). The German Nicolaus Outzen claimed German provenance and intuited a date later than the fourth century because of the poem's Christian allusions and literary excellence (1816, 321). And the Dane N. F. S. Grundtvig (1817, 284–88) identified Hygelac in the poem with the historical figure Chochilaicus, the king mentioned by Gregory of Tours as having been slain in Frisia on a raid, probably between 515 and 530. The poem, therefore, had to be written in the sixth century or after. Grundtvig later suggested, in fact, that it was composed around 700, during what he thought to be the great flowering of Anglo-Saxon literature, probably by a companion of Cædmon or Aldhelm (1820, xxvii–viii). Independent of Grundtvig, John Josias Conybeare (1826, 156–57) corroborated this idea, at least in part. The original poem, he thought, probably did come from the eighth or even seventh century since, among other things, the poet displays such an intimate knowledge of Jutland before the eighth century. But the poem as we have it was probably produced by a bard in the court of Cnut (1016–35). Only then would the exploits of a Danish hero, which Conybeare believed Beowulf to be, have been popular in England.

What Grundtvig and Conybeare have provided us (the latter unwittingly) are the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* for dating *Beowulf*. The epic had to originate between the death of Hygelac and the date of the manuscript itself, which most scholars place at ca. 1000 and which could conceivably fall in the reign of Cnut (see N. Ker 1968, 45–46). Conybeare also raised for us—again unwittingly—a

fifth perplexing question about the poem's genesis, and that is, What exactly are we trying to date? Is it the poem as preserved in the manuscript or some urtext, in whatever form or forms, that lies buried or dispersed in the Continental, Scandinavian, or Anglo-Saxon past?<sup>1</sup>

The early history of scholarship on these problems suggests the relatively unsystematized way investigators approach them, but as the history develops, the argument resolves into distinct, interrelated categories. Dating the poem by means of external and internal evidence can lead to knowledge of its provenance; knowledge of its date and provenance allows speculation about who may have written the poem and for whom. This chapter takes up these issues in turn.

### I. Date and Provenance

Dating and locating the poem, impossible tasks, are nevertheless the simplest of the four and essential for approaching the questions of authorship and audience. Scholars have marshaled at least seven different kinds of evidence to try to place *Beowulf* in history and geography: (a) sources and analogues, (b) archaeology, (c) history, (d) literary history, (e) manuscript studies, (f) genealogies, and (g) linguistics, which itself has several categories.

(a, b) Sources and analogues and archaeology are examined in detail elsewhere in this handbook (chapters 7 and 15), so only two points need to be raised here. Although analogues tell us little about date, they do demonstrate that the Scandinavian material in *Beowulf* "is not derived from, nor influenced by, any known Northern tradition" (Newton 1993, 25) and the poem, therefore, is most probably "a peculiarly English expression" of the Germanic material (Andersson 1983, 300). Archaeological evidence, on the other hand, which is by no means conclusive because of the vague descriptions of artifacts in the poem, supports the possibility that the poem may have been composed as early as the seventh (more probably the eighth) but as late as the tenth century. The date of *Beowulf*, therefore, can be generally set in eighth- to-tenth-century England, assuming, of course, that the poem is a unified whole by a single author.

(c) For a more precise sense of when and where the poem was composed, scholars have turned to history. One particular reference in the poem has attracted the most attention for this purpose, "merewioingas" (2921, the sole appearance of the word in Old English poetry or prose). In 1841, N. F. S. Grundtvig conjectured that the word means "Merovingian" (497, 509), and, in 1849, Joseph Bachlechner, who is always credited with the identification, argued that the allusion suggests that the poem could not have been composed after 752 when the Carolingian line replaced the Merovingian. The poet, he reasoned, would not refer to a dynasty long after it had fallen. Some scholars (e.g., Liebermann 1920, 267; Chambers 1921, 487; Brandl 1929, 182) accepted the identification as proof of an early eighth-century date. Others, such as Friedrich Klaeber, did not. He stated that "no absolutely definite chronological information can be derived" from the mention of

the Merovingian dynasty since the use of the name could have "continued in tradition even after" the dynasty's fall (1950a, cviii). Although Louise E. Wright implicitly agreed about the name's continued use, she disagreed about its value for dating the poem. She offered a convincing argument that "merewioingas" refers to Merovech, the legendary founder of the Merovingians uniquely identified in a chronicle not known in England before 751. The allusion, therefore, "can be used to fix, not a *terminus ad quem*, but rather a *terminus a quo*" and *Beowulf* can be dated "as late as the early ninth century" (2, 5). The reference could support a still later date, since Klaeber's observation about tradition applies to Wright's argument as well as Bachlechner's. "Merewioingas," therefore, helps little in specifying the poem's date.

Apart from focusing on this one allusion in the poem, scholars have employed three broad, overlapping historical approaches: searching for the source or justification for one or more element of the poem in external history; exploring periods of cultural transition and their possible presence in the poem; and reading the poem as political allegory. These approaches typically presuppose one of four periods and places of power and culture capable of supporting the production of such a sophisticated work of art as *Beowulf* is: seventh-century East Anglia (the age of Sutton Hoo), late seventh- to early eighth-century Northumbria (the age of Bede, 675–725), late eighth-century Mercia (the reign of Offa, 757–96), and ninth- to tenth-century England (the Danelaw and "English England"). Eleventh-century England (the reign of Cnut, 1016–35) has also been proposed.

The first, most amorphous approach embraces a wide range of considerations. In 1861, for example, noticing the similarity of word forms in *Beowulf* and "the Northumbrian monuments and the Durham Ritual," Daniel H. Haigh placed the composition of the poem in Northumbria and stated that "all the events [the poet] records, with two exceptions, occurred in this island, and most of them in Northumbria, during the fifth and sixth centuries" (3–4). The Dane Frederik Rönning in 1883 and the German Felix Liebermann in 1920 also argued for Northumbrian provenance. Rönning examined dialect features of the poem (91–98) and traced the path of the Scandinavian material in it from Sweden and Denmark to the north of England, where (he claims) the Grendel legend left its greatest mark (106). He concluded that the tale of the Gothic hero *Beowulf* originated in southern Sweden, then migrated either directly or with the Angles to northern England, where it was reworked into an epic whole by a Northumbrian poet, perhaps in the eighth century (107).<sup>2</sup> Liebermann argued for a more specific date, 725, speculating that the epic could have been written at the court of Cuthburg, sister of King Ine of Wessex, queen of Northumbria and later abbess of Wimborne. The social structure reflected in the poem fits that date better than it does a later date (267), and no historical evidence in the poem points to a date after 725 (270).

Likewise arguing for Northumbrian provenance is Ritchie Girvan, who in 1935 showed "a close correspondence between seventh-century conditions in North-

umbria and the poem both in the material and intellectual side" (51). On the basis of linguistic and cultural evidence as well, Girvan set the date of composition between 680 and 700 (25). In 1937, while not arguing for provenance, C. C. Batchelor discerned traces of Pelagianism in the poem's vocabulary and therefore claimed that the epic could not have been written much later than 705, when the reign of Aldfrith ended and Aldfrith's opposition to "Roman formalism" was replaced by faith in Augustinian predestination (332). Dorothy Whitelock, however, stated in 1951 that we may look too readily to Bede's Northumbria for the origin of the poem and suggested that there are other possibilities, such as the court of Offa of Mercia, ca. 775–800, which would have been a fitting arena for the sophisticated Christian poet and audience that the poem requires (63). She was convinced that the epic must come from before 835, when Viking raids began in full force with ensuing deep Anglo-Saxon resentment of Scandinavians (25–26).

Scholars before and after Whitelock who concerned themselves with the poem's Scandinavian content have reached varied conclusions about it and its bearing upon the date. Gösta Langenfelt (1962, 34) posited an early ninth-century date, using Whitelock's findings and arguing that the Scandinavian historical elements in the poem could not have been known in England before the late eighth century, when they would have been brought back by missionaries to northern Germany. Robert T. Farrell (1982) surveyed Scandinavian contact with England from 400 to 1000 and concluded that the poem was most probably composed in East Anglia in the eighth century. Sam Newton (1993) concurred. He based his conclusion on a complex assessment of linguistic, historical, archaeological, and genealogical information, all of which conspire to locate the peculiarly English Scandinavian material in the poem in pre-Viking East Anglia.

Scholars drawn to a later period of Scandinavian influence in England appear as early as 1917. In that year, Levin Schücking tried to prove that a poem so thoroughly Danish in orientation could have been composed in 890–900 in a Danish court in England. During that time, he asserted, an appropriate mix of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian culture existed to give rise to the poem, and he speculated that a Scandinavian prince could have asked a famous English poet to compose it for the instruction of his children (407). His view did not gain much support, even before Whitelock, but in 1981 Patricia Poussa revived it. Neither Schücking nor Poussa "adequately explain the apparently pre-Viking background of the poem," however (Newton 1993, 56).

Other scholars favoring a later period of Scandinavian influence take on Whitelock directly, pointing to the fallacy involved in presupposing as homogeneous an audience as she does. Nicolas Jacobs (1978) reconsidered the possibility of date for the poem after 835 and concluded that "any periods in which political considerations may have discouraged the composition of *Beowulf* are likely to have been brief and at most intermittent" (42). R. I. Page (1981) offered an overview of Anglo-Saxons who had regular nonbelligerent contact with the Vikings (e.g.,

Athelstan of Wessex, Alfred) and argued that excluding the Viking age as a time when the poem could have been composed means assuming an "unsophisticated audience for a sophisticated poem" (113). Two of Page's co-contributors to *The Dating of Beowulf*, Alexander Callander Murray and Roberta Frank, shared his basic premise.

One more contributor to *The Dating of Beowulf*, Walter Goffart, argued for a late date for the poem, but did so by examining another of its historical features, the words *Hetware* and *Hugas*, traditionally thought to be ancient references to the Franks. Goffart sought to prove that the former derived from the eighth-century *Liber Historiae Francorum* (84–88) and that the latter reflected the name "Hugh" that was popular in the territories of the Franks in the ninth and tenth centuries only. *Beowulf*, therefore, seems to have been written "no earlier than the second quarter of the tenth century" (100). Since Goffart did not definitively negate other interpretations of *Hugas*, such as the traditional one, his theory opens a new avenue of inquiry but remains inconclusive.

The first historical approach to date and provenance then, which has the advantage of breadth, leaves us with a *Beowulf* from eighth-, ninth-, or tenth-century Northumbria, Mercia, or East Anglia.

The second approach, a bit more circumscribed than the first though overlapping with it, concentrates on periods of cultural or literary transition and the possible reflection of those periods in the poem. Three have been advanced as candidates thus far: the late seventh to late eighth centuries, the ninth century, and the tenth century. The first is the period of the gradual Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity and of the amalgamation of Germanic and Roman ideas of kingship. In 1928, analyzing the synthesis of Christianity and Mediterranean learning in the poem, William W. Lawrence dated it to 675–725 during the age of Bede (280). Likewise, in 1978, exploring the historical and cultural backgrounds of the poem and focusing on its peculiar mix of Christian and pagan elements, Patrick Wormald argued that it reflects the assimilation of the Anglo-Saxon church by the warrior nobility in the eighth century (57). In 1986, Karl Schneider found a similar, but earlier, assimilation. Examining what he termed "the camouflaged paganism" (199–232) in the poem, as well as its linguistic features, he claimed that it was most probably composed in Mercia between 640 and 650 during the reign of Penda (74). Michael J. Swanton, studying Germanic and Roman ideas of kingship—the former deriving governing power from the people, the latter from the king through God—discerned traces of both in the poem (1982, chapters 4–6) and assigned it to the late eighth century, when, he argued, a shift from one system to the other probably took place. Peter Clemoes, focusing on such matters as the use of figures and tropes in the poem and their reflection of the transition between an old and a new style that he noticed in Old English poetry around the ninth century, placed the poem between the oral poetry of Cædmon and the written poetry of Cynewulf, most probably in the second half of the eighth century (1981, 185).



The second period of transition—also literary—is the ninth century. Noticing the seemingly transitional nature of the poem as Clemoes did, Colin Chase focused on the “delicate balance of empathy and detachment” (1981b, 162) in it and compared it to Old English saints’ lives and their early antipathy to and late attraction to Germanic heroic values. He concluded that the hagiographical evidence suggests that the poem “is likely to have been written neither early, in the eighth century, nor late, in the tenth, but in the rapidly changing and chaotic ninth” (163).

The poem seems to reflect yet a third period of transition, the shift from an Anglo-Saxon to an Anglo-Scandinavian ethos in the tenth century. Wilhelm G. Busse and R. Holtei (1981) noted this fact when they applied text pragmatics and reception theory to the poem to demonstrate that it operates within “a dynamic text tradition” that adapts itself to “changing social and political conditions” (277 [see also Busse 1987]). Not intending to date the “time of composition of *Beowulf*” (286) by this method, they did date the manuscript version of the poem to the reign of Ethelred (978–1016), chiefly because of the presence in it of the problem of loyal behavior to one’s lord. Roberta Frank (1982a) found a peculiar synthesis of religious and heroic idealism in the poem that was current only in the tenth century and tentatively suggested that period for when the poem was composed. Similarly, John D. Niles (1983) argued that the poet’s ambiguous depiction of the Danes, both flattering and unflattering, “reflects interests and attitudes that would have been prevalent among the aristocratic Englishmen in the early or middle years of the tenth century, but not earlier” (111). He subsequently elaborated that idea, offering “seven good reasons for locating *Beowulf* in the period of nation-building that followed the ninth-century Viking invasions” (1993a, 95). Besides the depiction of the Danes, he points to the Scylding connection with the West Saxon pseudo-genealogies, the affinity of the language of the poem with that of known tenth-century works, the presence of virtuous pagans, the evidence of Old Norse analogues, probable English allusions (Hengest, Offa, Wiglaf), and the role of the Geats (a tribe apparently confused with both the Getae and the Jutes during this period) (1993a, 95–101). While the evidence that Niles and others have assembled does seem to favor a tenth-century date for the manuscript version of the poem, cultural studies, like their predecessors, remain inconclusive.

The third historical approach to date and provenance promises the most specificity of all such methods of dating but is the least dependable. Six scholars, beginning with John Earle in 1892, have read the poem as historical allegory. Because of the mention in lines 1931–62 of Offa, the legendary late-fourth-century Angle, Earle (lxxxiii–c) tried to read the narrative as a complex allusion to events during the reign of Offa of Mercia (757–96). He equated Thryth and Eomer in the poem, for example, with Offa’s queen Cynethryth and son Ecgferth in history. Similarly, in 1920 Liebermann thought the poem may allude to Cuthburg’s marriage to a foreign prince, then her divorce and return home (275). In 1921–22, placing the

poem in the reign of Aldfrith of Northumbria (685–705), Albert Cook theorized that Aldfrith is concealed beneath the name Offa. In 1936, because of Wiglaf’s presence in the poem, Alois Brandl dated it to the reign of Wiglaf of Mercia (827–38), rooted out numerous references to Mercian history (e.g., Heremod represents Penda [ca. 632–55]), and placed the poem in the same class of *Tendenzdichtung* (politically-motivated writing) as Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (168). In 1943, George Bond, too, linked the poem with the history of Mercia (e.g., Heremod represents Ceolwulf [821–23]), arguing that the first half allegorizes the reign of Beornwulf (823–26), the second that of Wiglaf. Finally, in 1986, sensing allusions to the reign of Athelstan (924–39), including hints in *Beowulf* of Edward the Elder (899–924), Zacharias P. Thundy placed the poem firmly in Wessex between the years 924 and 931.

The flaw in the historical-allegorical approach to *Beowulf* should be manifest from the range of places (Mercia, Northumbria, Wessex) and dates (seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries) its proponents have established by its use. We simply do not have enough information about the poem’s specific historical context in the first place, and the poem is not constructed in such a consistently symbolic way in the second, to substantiate a single allegorical reading. Although the first problem may someday be solved, the second will persist, so such interpretations remain primarily conjectural (see Whitelock 1949, 76–79).

(d) Literary history has also been employed to date *Beowulf* but mostly to place the poem in relation to other poems, which are themselves difficult to date. Klaeber (1910) embellished Sarrazin’s argument (1886b, 1892) that the poem follows *Genesis A* and in his edition placed the poem between “the so-called Cædmonian group in the neighborhood of 700” and Cynewulf in the late eighth century (1950a, cxiii). In 1940, theorizing that *Beowulf* may be the first secular Germanic and Old English epic, Hertha Marquardt placed it after the Cædmonian poems with *Exodus*, as a Christian/heroic hybrid, in between (153–54). And, as we have already seen, in 1981 Peter Clemoes and Colin Chase focused on the transitional literary nature of the poem and placed it in the late eighth and ninth centuries respectively. Roberta Frank, however, compared the laments at the end of *Beowulf* with the Old Norse memorial eulogy (1982b, 3) and concluded that the similarities suggest an Anglo-Saxon/Scandinavian interaction and origin for the poem in the late ninth or tenth century (13).

(e) Manuscript studies for dating *Beowulf* focus on the content of the Nowell Codex (the unique manuscript containing the poem), the relation of that manuscript to others, and the codex’s physical features. In 1957, comparing the monsters in *Beowulf* with those in *The Wonders of the East*, another of the five texts in the Nowell Codex, Robert Reynolds argued that both were composed in the late ninth or tenth centuries. In a complex 1982 study, Michael Lapidge showed direct and indirect connections among *Beowulf*, Aldhelm’s Wessex, and the *Liber Monstrorum*, an English text mentioning Hygelac as a Geat, not a Dane as he is referred

to in Continental sources, and datable to ca. 650–750. While not arguing for a specific date and place of composition, Lapidge concluded that the evidence he assembled “points to the south rather than the north of England, and suggests that a context for the poem’s conception and especially its transmission can be discovered in and in the vicinity of pre-Conquest Malmesbury” (190). In 1981, Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, and Gregory Waite tentatively compared the language of *Beowulf* with other Old English texts in order “to place the manuscript and possibly the text in the context of the surviving Old English literary and linguistic remains” (36). They found that the spelling system of the poem is matched closely by remaining texts in the same manuscript but not by others; that spellings in the poem show close affinity to those in *Exodus* and *Daniel*; that the vocabulary shows affinity to *Andreas* and *Judith* (36), and that “the mixed spellings in *Beowulf* are not necessarily to be explained by a long or complicated textual transmission, but may represent copying conventions or tolerances in a number of late tenth-century scriptoria” (37). They did not try to specify a date for the poem.

Also in 1981, returning to Levin Schücking’s premise (1905, 11, 66) that “Beowulf’s Return” had been composed and inserted by the final author as a connecting link between the Grendel part and the Dragon fight, Kevin Kiernan (1981a, 252–54) posited two poets for the poem with the second being the final redactor of the whole. Kiernan also returned to Conybeare’s belief that the poem was probably written down during the reign of Cnut (15–23), but he made the radical assertion that the poem and the eleventh-century manuscript are contemporaneous (22). This point of view has occasioned—to say the least—lively debate. Scholars have attacked Kiernan’s linguistic and codicological arguments (e.g., Amos 1982; Clement 1984; Newton 1993, 7–9) and have questioned the paleographical evidence placing the manuscript in the reign of Cnut (e.g., Dumville 1988; Gerritsen 1989). The latter ignore Neil Ker’s point that Anglo-Saxon script from ca. 990 to 1040 is impossible to date closely (1968, 45–46). Although most would currently probably agree that the manuscript has little to tell us about the date of the poem (Fulk 1982, 357), the issue is far from settled (Kiernan 1983).

(f) Genealogies provide a sixth kind of evidence that scholars have called into play in an effort to date *Beowulf* and establish its provenance. Klaeber (1950a, 254–55) reprinted the relevant genealogical lists, the West Saxon containing references to Beo, Scyld Scefing, Scef, and Heremod in the poem; the Mercian to Garmund, Offa, and Eomer; the Kentish to Folcwalda and Finn. No one has used the Kentish genealogy so far, but scholars such as Earle (1892, lxxxvi ff.) and Whitelock (1951, 63) have regarded the parallels between the Mercian genealogy and the Offa episode in *Beowulf* as evidence of Mercian provenance, the reference being seen as a way to flatter King Offa of Mercia (757–96). Such claims, however, are speculative at best.

Alexander Callander Murray (1981), Michael Lapidge (1982), and Audrey L. Meaney (1989) all focused on the West Saxon genealogies. Murray pointed out that

they were composed after the Viking invasions<sup>3</sup> and correspondingly display an unmistakable interest in blending Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian traditions. The prologue to *Beowulf* seems clearly to be a Viking age genealogy that can be dated to the late ninth century (105), and so, therefore, can the poem. Lapidge, not trying to establish date, did use genealogies to argue for a possible provenance (Wessex) since Alfred extends his pedigree to include Scyld, Scef, Heremod, and Beow, thus indicating that a poem resembling *Beowulf* may have been known to him (187). And, after a complex analysis of the West Saxon genealogy of Æthelwulf dated 855, Meaney stated that “Scyld Scefing and his arrival from overseas cannot have become part of the prologue of *Beowulf* before 858, and almost certainly not before Alfred’s reign” (21). That analysis, coupled with evidence from burial customs and hagiography, caused Meaney to assign the composition of the prologue to the years 924–55, during the reign of Athelstan (37). Finally, in trying to establish an early East Anglian provenance for *Beowulf*, Sam Newton (1993) examined both Mercian and West Saxon genealogies. He concluded that the reference to Offa in the Mercian example and *Beowulf* does not point exclusively to Mercia as a source for the poem’s northern preoccupations and that the differences between West Saxon examples and *Beowulf* suggest that the poem was not influenced by them (chapter 3).

Genealogies, like much of the other evidence for dating examined thus far, prove mercurial. They seem to substantiate dates in the eighth through the tenth centuries as well as a provenance in Mercia, Wessex, or East Anglia.

(g) Finally the language of *Beowulf* has occupied scholars in their effort to place and date the poem. We know more, in fact, about dialect than date. Predominantly West Saxon (mostly late) with an admixture of mainly Northumbrian and Mercian elements, the poet’s language also shows signs of Kentish influence. This blend naturally causes some difficulty for anyone seeking to define a specific place of composition, but most scholars have supposed the poem was originally composed in an Anglian dialect. The phonological evidence usually cited to support this conclusion is actually unreliable. For example, spellings like “waldend” (for late West-Saxon *wealdend*, “ruler”) indicate not Anglian provenance but conformity to the koine in which nearly all Old English poetry is preserved (Tupper 1911, 248–49; Sisam 1953, 119–39). Fulk has argued, however, that a large body of Anglian morphological features, generally missing from poetry known to come from the south and otherwise conforming to the poetic koine, is found in *Beowulf* and other poems usually thought to be Anglian. Examples are the use of *hafo* in addition to southern *hæbbe* (have); *sægon* in addition to Southern *sawon* (saw); *fore* in addition to southern *for*; the use of the accusative as well as dative case after the preposition *mid*; of *sæ* as a masculine noun; of *fæger* with a long first syllable; and of accusative pronouns like *mec*, *þec*, and *usic* (Fulk 1992, 309–25). In addition, some Anglian vocabulary shows the same distribution, for example *oferhygd* (pride, arrogance) for southern *ofermod* (Schabram 1965b, 123–29), *in* for southern *on*,

and *nympe* or *nemne* for the conjunction *butan* (Jordan 1906, 46–48). Evidence for identifying the dialect of origin is thus sparse and should be viewed with caution. What there is of it does suggest “Anglian” provenance, but being more precise than that is difficult. Recent scholarship, however, favors the Midlands rather than the north (reversing a historical trend), with Newton (1993) arguing specifically for East Anglia.

Isolating date by linguistic means is another matter entirely. In their extensive review of the issue in 1981, in fact, Cameron, Amos, and Waite observed that “from our current understanding of the language of *Beowulf* we could not call any date in the Old English period impossible” (37). Scholars have nevertheless employed various tests to try to fix the date, relative or “absolute.”

The syntactic and phonological-metrical tests for relative dating include the following: “Lichtenheld’s test” of the weak adjective and definite article, the regular absence of the latter in *Beowulf* perhaps indicating an early date (Chase 1981a, 4; also Amos 1981, 110–24); the presence, as evidenced by metrical considerations, of earlier, uncontracted, dissyllabic instead of later, contracted, monosyllabic forms of words; the presence of “earlier long vs. later (analogical) short diphthongs in the case of the loss of antevocalic *h* after *r* (or *l*)”; and the presence or absence of parasiting (addition of an inorganic vowel to *l*, *m*, *n*, or *r* in later West Germanic, rendering an original monosyllable disyllabic) (Klaeber 1950a, cviii). In 1981, Thomas Cable applied a purely metrical test to the poem by calculating the combined percentages of Sievers’s types C, D, and E verses in the poem and compared the percentages with those in other Old English poems.<sup>4</sup> Cable concluded that there is a decrease in the use of these verse types as the Old English period progresses (80), placed *Beowulf* in a middle group of poems (e.g., *Daniel*, *Exodus*, *Elene*), and found that it could have been composed in the ninth century (82). All these tests clearly fail to fix *Beowulf* in time, but philologists are in fairly consistent agreement that the phonological-metrical tests at least do seem to place it in an early “Cædmonian” group of poems (e.g., Klaeber 1950a, cix; Fulk 1992, 348–51).

Other tests for relative dating focus on the poem’s vocabulary. Rönning (1883), for example, pointed to the use of the word “*gigantas*,” a loan word probably from the Latin Bible, as evidence for an eighth-century date (89). Ritchie Girvan (1935) reached a similar conclusion, stating that the poem is “later than Cædmon, not earlier, that is, than about 670” (25). Whitelock (1951, 5) and Amos (1981) basically agreed, the latter noting that although this and other “ecclesiastical Latin loan words do not allow precise dating . . . they do provide a useful *terminus a quo*” (142–43). Kiernan focused on the words “*here*” and “*fyrð*,” synonyms for “*army*,” arguing that the first has positive connotations in the poem while the second does not. Since in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* the situation is the opposite, with *here* referring negatively to the invading Danish forces, *fyrð* positively to the English, such a reversal could occur only in the reign of Cnut (1981a, 21–22). Phillip Pulsiano and Joseph McGowan (1990), however, reexamined the evidence for

Kiernan’s claim and found that it was “not consistent and unambiguous under scrutiny” (12).

Likewise undermining Kiernan’s and others’ claim of a late date for the poem is the apparent absence in it of Scandinavian loan words and the presence of distinctly English spellings for Scandinavian names. Klaeber noted the first (1950a, cxvii), as did Frank, who, however, pointed out that a lack of “demonstrable Scandinavianisms . . . does not rule out a late date of composition,” taking *The Battle of Brunanburh* from ca. 937, with just one loan word, as her example (1981, 123).<sup>5</sup> She went on in an intricate argument to explore the possibility that the poet’s “interest in and knowledge of things Scandinavian was the result of the Danish settlements in England” and the subsequent influence of skaldic verse (124). Though the hypothesis is a compelling one, the evidence for it is inconclusive. “Some words could be cognate, and an occasional Norsism (*lofgeornost? bencðelu?*) could be borrowed from the spoken Norse language rather than skaldic practice” (Andersson 1983, 296). Fulk found a Viking age date unlikely because proper names in the poem do not reflect Scandinavian influence (1982, 343–44). Whether a Scandinavian presence would necessarily affect native onomastic traditions, however, is still a matter of dispute.

The linguistic tests for what is traditionally termed “absolute dating” are few. Lorenz Morsbach was the first to propose one in 1906, when he dated the poem to shortly after 700 by arguing that apocope of *u* (loss of final *u* after long root syllables) and loss of postconsonantal *h* before vowels did not occur until after that date. Since the poem will not scan correctly if one substitutes the earlier word forms for those in the manuscript, the poem has to have been composed after the phonological changes took place. Morsbach’s conclusions about the dates of the sound changes and consequently the date of *Beowulf*, however, have been demonstrated to be unreliable (e.g., Amos 1981, 18–39; Fulk 1992, 369 ff.). Similarly, some scholars (e.g., Holthausen, cited in Klaeber 1950a, cix n. 7) suggested a date prior to 750 because of the presence of “*wundini*” (1382), an archaic instrumental “generally thought to be not later than *circa* 750” (Wrenn 1953, 27). The manuscript evidence for the word is equivocal, however (the word may actually be “*wundum*,” “*wundnum*,” “*wundmi*,” “*wundnu*”: see Stanley 1981a, 208; Kiernan 1981a, 31 ff.; Bammesberger 1990), and the word may represent either scribal error or stylistic choice (Klaeber 1950a, cx).

The most recent, meticulously argued, and seemingly reliable test for (relatively) absolute dating is by R. D. Fulk in 1992. Applying “Kaluza’s law” to *Beowulf* (a “law” that states that early long inflectional endings differed metrically from short ones whereas later long and short endings had equal metrical value), he found that the poem is unique in its observance of that law (164). The evidence we have for the provenance of the poem, Fulk argued, suggests Mercia or Northumbria and favors Mercia. Therefore, since the distinction between long and short endings was being lost in the mid-eighth century in Mercia and in the mid-ninth in

Northumbria, Fulk maintained that *Beowulf* was most probably composed before 725 if Mercian in origin or before 825 if Northumbrian. It can even date from as early as ca. 685, "though such an early date is considerably less probable" (390).

Unfortunately, linguistic evidence obviously joins all other kinds of evidence in not fully substantiating a specific date of composition. Evidence suggesting Anglian provenance also suggests a time of composition between 685 and 825, but this does not rule out a later date. Advocates of a late *Beowulf*, however, must contend with the apparent absence of Scandinavian loan words in the poem, the presence of exclusively English forms of personal names, and "Kaluza's law."

## II. Author

Early speculation on who wrote *Beowulf* was straightforward. Grundtvig, for example, concluded that since the poem was written after the death of Hygelac (ca. 521) and probably during a period of great learning in England, the age of Bede was the most likely time and a companion of Cædmon in Northumbria or Aldhelm in Wessex the most likely candidate (Schrøder 1875, 1–4; H. Chadwick [1912] and Cook [1921–22] make the same suggestion). The simplicity of such reasoning was demolished, however, when *Liedertheorie* (ballad theory) came into vogue. Not really a theory of authorship but of composition, it distinguishes various layers of authorial or scribal contribution to the poem as it separates blocks of pagan lays from Christian matter in the interstices. The theory had obvious ramifications for pinpointing who wrote *Beowulf*: almost everybody did.<sup>6</sup>

Modifications of the ballad theory, however, moved toward compromise and brought a single poet back into play, albeit at the end of a long process. In 1870, for example, Artur Köhler affirmed the composite nature of the poem but also asserted that "the Anglo-Saxon epic in its final form was without doubt fashioned by a single gifted poet" (1870b, 305). And between 1886 and 1897, striving to mediate between the ballad theorists and the advocates of unity and single authorship, Gregor Sarrazin (1886b, 545) argued that an Anglo-Saxon poet (interpolator B) translated and reworked a Danish original (a point refuted by Eduard Sievers in 1886 on linguistic grounds). Sarrazin identified the Danish author as the skald Starkathr, whom he placed around 700 at Lejre, the Danish court of King Ingeld (1888, 107), and made the bold claim that Cynewulf was both the translator of *Beowulf* and later the interpolator of moralizing passages (1886b, 543–44), an assertion refuted by Cook (1925c). On the basis of elaborate linguistic and metrical arguments, Sarrazin placed the time of composition of *Beowulf* between *Christ A* and *B*, and *Elene* and *Andreas* (1892, 415).

Other scholars, rejecting the ballad theory altogether, mostly on aesthetic grounds, continually maintained that *Beowulf* is both unified and the work of one author, a majority view by early 1900 that remains in force today. Grein (1862), Schrøder (1875), T. Arnold (1876), Schemann (1882), Rønning (1883), Fahlbeck (1884), Morsbach (1906), H. Chadwick (1907), Brandl (1908a, b), Smithson

(1910), Schücking (1917), Chambers (1921), Klaeber (1922a), and Tolkien (1936), for instance, all believed that the poem is the work of one man. While some scholars favoring individual authorship have not gone so far as to name the poet, they have tried to individualize him. Klaeber viewed the poet "as a man connected in some way with the Anglian court, a royal chaplain or abbot of noble birth or, it may be, a monk friend of his, who possessed an actual knowledge of court life and addressed himself to an aristocratic, in fact a royal audience." Such a person would be acquainted with Germanic, Scandinavian, and Old English verse, "a man of notable taste and culture and informed with a spirit of broad-minded Christianity" (1950a, cxix). Paull F. Baum similarly suggested that the poet was a "serious and gifted poet, steeped in the older pagan tradition from the continent" (1963, 365). And several scholars have speculated about whether the poet was a cleric or a layperson. Those adhering to theories of multiple authorship tend to favor a number of pagan lay singers and a final Christian redactor. Those advocating single authorship tend to see a unified work by a Christian author—whether a monk or a layperson—working with partially pre-Christian sources.

Rønning (1883), Wormald (1978), Schrader (1980), Dumville (1981), Lapidge (1982), and Cassidy (1982) all argued that the nature of the poem and its historical and cultural context indicate a cleric as author. Rønning asserted that the poem must have been authored "pen in hand" (89). Since opportunities for writing did not exist in the lay world, and since there are religious elements in the poem, the evidence "points toward the cloister" as place of origin and a monk as author (89). Wormald reasoned that since there was no independent lay epic and the poet shows evidence of a Christian-Latin education, he must have been "at the fringes of clerical society" (44), while Schrader, also regarding the evidence of classical learning in *Beowulf* as proof that the author had to be a cleric, probably in the age of Bede, felt that he was undoubtedly a monk (56).

Dumville continued this basic line of reasoning, arguing that Irish monasticism could have been favorably disposed to heroic literature and that *Beowulf* was either written or composed orally in a monastic setting or oral material was thoroughly changed in writing at that time by a Christian poet (146). Thus the author must have been a cleric, and the work must have been transmitted through the scriptorium, since, as Rønning pointed out previously, no other means of book production are known in Anglo-Saxon England (157, 156). Shifting the poem's provenance to Wessex ca. 700, Lapidge inferred that "a many-faceted scholar such as Aldhelm could have assisted at [*Beowulf's*] composition" (157). Finally Cassidy considered the poet a careful crafter of words who practices the complex art of tectonic composition (9). He must therefore have been an extremely learned churchman whose monastic, unappreciative audience indulged his literary effort while he was alive (11).

The paltry evidence about who wrote *Beowulf* thus seems to suggest that a cleric is responsible. Not all scholars have accepted the conclusion, however. Work

on traditional oral composition by Parry and Lord helped advance the argument that the *Beowulf*-poet was a singer of tales, an argument supported by Magoun (1953, 1958, 1963), Lord (1960), Storms (1974), Niles (1993c, 1993b), Irving (1989), and Foley (1990). Creed (1966b) makes the logical and necessary connection between the theory of oral composition and the extant epic in written form. He postulated a single singer of *Beowulf*, whose oral composition was recorded by a scribe (138). In 1983 and 1993, Niles elaborated Creed's idea by focusing on the performance of the epic, which could have been recorded on behalf of an aristocratic patron and thus could have become the basis for further dissemination either orally or scriptorally (1983, 112-13; 1993c). In 1991, Kendall opted to combine the lay and monastic theories of the author. He posited an "aristocratic" youth associated with a court and steeped in oral composition traditions who later entered a monastery, where he wrote down the oral literature he had heard and practiced previously (2-4).

Merely individualizing the *Beowulf* poet is difficult enough, so few scholars besides Sarrazin have actually tried to name him. In his 1892 allegorical interpretation, Earle claimed that Archbishop Hygeberht of Lichfield, closely tied to Offa, wrote the poem (xcviii). In 1971, categorizing the language of *Beowulf* as Old Phalian, which he said is still evident in Low German today, Wilhelm Tegethoff argued that the poem is the work of Adalbert of Bremen, the largely unappreciated eleventh-century German cleric whose praises are sung by church historian Adam of Bremen (i). And two authors in 1986, the second much more confidently than the first, ventured possible names. Noting the common reference to Offa in "Widsith" and *Beowulf*, Schneider suggested that the poet "may be identical" with Widsith (189). In his allegorical interpretation of the poem, Thundy assigned authorship to Wulfgar, a loyal retainer of King Athelstan named in a land grant charter "at Ham in Wiltshire on November 12, 931" (114).

One last possibility concerning authorship is that the *Beowulf* poet was a woman. Baum (1963) suggested that a learned abbess inspired by Hild of Whitby (Cædmon's abbess) or Hild herself may have written the poem, but his notion was advanced as an example of hypotheses that "do no harm if they are not taken too seriously" (359). Baum's did none apparently, since it was never mentioned again. In 1990, however, Fred C. Robinson revisited the possibility of female authorship of Old English poetry and took the idea quite earnestly. Referring to the "hints at possible [female] involvement in [Old English] versifying," the documented evidence of Christian-Latin women poets, and the substantiated activity of women poets in the rest of the Germanic world, Robinson argued that "there is reason to believe that women may have played as much of a role in Anglo-Saxon literary production as they have in the later periods of English literature" (62-63). This involvement would include, of course, *Beowulf*.

Provocative as it may be, complicated as it is, frustrating as it has always been, the search for the identity of the *Beowulf* poet seems largely futile, and what Thorkelin sagely observed in 1815 obtains today: "one might as well roll the rock

of Sisyphus" as try to identify "our unnamed, unwept poet" (Thorkelin 1815b). Specifying what type of poet the author was, on the other hand (e.g., a singer of tales or a literate author, either layperson or cleric), remains an important, if elusive, enterprise.

### III. Audiences

As with date, provenance, and author, opinions on the audiences of *Beowulf* inscribe an arc of waxing complexity from Thorkelin to our contemporaries. Scholars who agree on Mercia or Northumbria as the poem's provenance naturally try to locate an audience for the poem within that large geographical area. Some use internal and external evidence to establish something as simple as the poem's having been composed for Angles, not Saxons (Kier 1915, 12), others to show that the audience was secular or monastic, and yet others to prove that the audience lived at a particular time and the poem served a particular purpose.

Of the studies addressing the secular or monastic nature of the audience, more favor the former than the latter, a fact of mild curiosity since most scholars view the author as a cleric. Ten Brink (1888), for example, asserted that the cultural background of the audience must have been one of both a temperate heathendom and a temperate Christianity coupled with a positive nationalistic feeling (223). This mixture could have flourished best in Mercia after 650. The paucity of clergy and Christian institutions there at that time and the absence of Christian scholarship and poetry, ten Brink asserted, were favorable to keeping ancient tradition and ancient popular poetry alive and to maintaining a balance that would have been tipped toward a more radical Christianity in other parts of England (224). In 1906, taking the opposite view, Morsbach suggested that *Beowulf* could have been a literary reaction against the flourishing religious epic and the church's dogmatic stance against pagan traditions (276). Girvan, too, believed that the epic's audience had to be secular. The poet presents both traditional heroic material, such as ship burials, and glimpses of his own contemporary courtly life, alluding perhaps to the failed peaceweaving efforts of Oswiu's daughters (1935, 37, 47-48). Whitelock envisioned a Christian audience with enough knowledge to follow the biblical allusions and with an experienced ear for poetry (1951, 5-8). According to Whitelock, the poet wrote his "literature for entertainment" (20) for a lay audience of novice and veteran Anglo-Saxon warriors, who would also be sportsmen, listening to familiar things (19, 44). The poet, Whitelock presumed, would be "subtle and sophisticated," the audience "alert and intelligent" (99).

Expanding on Whitelock's notion, Baum maintained that such an audience must fulfill two prerequisites: it must have an interest in the "exploits of a heathen hero" and in Germanic history and lore and must be attentive enough to comprehend and enjoy a difficult and often cryptic narrative (1963, 360). Baum concluded that poet and audience had to be alike, and so the audience could not be the broad lay one of Whitelock but had to be a select and highly trained audience of a few

ivory-tower listeners/readers (360–65). Both Mitchell and Storms rejected this idea. Mitchell pointed out that the depiction of “the ideal of Germanic heroic life” in the poem does not require specialized knowledge to recognize (1963, 128). Storms argued that a lay scop and lay audience in Northumbria would have a greater personal interest in the vicissitudes of political power than a more highly trained monastic writer and audience would have (1974, 22). For Busse and Holtei, too, the targeted audience was laymen, this time the thane class during Æthelred’s reign, because thanes could appreciate the *comitatus* ethos in the poem (1981, 328–29). In 1981, contra Whitelock, Page argued for the possibility of a heterogeneous audience not necessarily in the Danelaw, and, in 1993, Newton favored a pre-Viking audience “already familiar with tales concerning the renowned Scyldings” (54–55).

Mostly because of the heroic content of the poem, monastic audiences have found less favor than secular ones. Wormald, however, gave considerable reason to doubt that the poem was designed for a royal court (1978, 52–58). Examining the amalgamation of spiritual and secular elements in the church during the age of Bede, he emphasized the phenomenon of *Eigenkirchen*, family minsters founded by, designed for, and controlled by aristocratic households. These minsters, Wormald argued, were places in which the boundaries between monastic and secular life became blurred (53). He suggested that such intertwined conditions could have fostered the composition of the epic. In 1982, Lapidge connected Wormald’s *Eigenkirchen* theory with Liebermann’s conjecture (1920) that *Beowulf* was written by a poet in the service of Cuthburg, the Northumbrian queen presiding over an *Eigenkirche* in Wimborne (156–57). Liebermann speculated that the poet may have returned to Wessex with Cuthburg, entered Wimborne with her, and finished the epic there. This view, Liebermann added, with its implications of the mixed tastes of a half-secular, half-monastic noblewoman, would explain why the epic contains court banquets, battle scenes, and biblical allusions (1920, 275; but see also Kendall 1991, 2–6).

Three other scholars, on the other hand, favored a more purely monastic audience for the poem. Dumville (1981) emphasized the literate nature of the work, assumed a monastic audience, and repudiated Whitelock’s argument that literature of entertainment would be reserved for a lay audience. Cassidy proposed that the poet was a monk writing solely for a monastic audience and in such a rarified mode “that [the poem] was little understood” (1982, 10) and was probably “saved by benign neglect” after the poet’s death (11). Horst Weinstock, commenting on Cassidy, posited a learned and well-read poet whose monastic audience would have been more “alert, intelligent, and congenial” than the lay audience at a secular court (1982, 23). He theorized that the poet may have written the epic for a monastic community engaged in missionary work to the Continental Saxons (23). Weinstock conjectured further that the manuscript copy was kept in the refectory for lectures and recopied in the tenth century when it started to disintegrate (25).

Those arguing for a particular time for the poem generally assume a specialized genre for it or invoke an allegorical interpretation to support their view. At least five early scholars—Outzen (1816, 327), Earle (1892, xc), Schücking (1917, 399), Liebermann (1920, 275–76), and Andreas Heusler (cited in Schücking 1929a, 143)—considered the epic a *Fürstenspiegel*, a mirror for princes designed to instruct them in kingly behavior. Earle and Liebermann were even specific about the princes in question: Earle postulated Offa’s son, Ecgferth (1892, xc), and Liebermann theorized that, if the poem originated in a royal monastery, it probably would have been noticed by a queen like Osburg around 854 and used in the education of her sons (276). Without arguing for a specific genre for the poem, Baldwin Brown (1915), Cook (1921–22), Whitelock (1951), and Wrenn (1953) also suggested the court of Offa or his successors as its birthplace. Bond (1943) made a case for the courts of Kings Beornwulf and Wiglaf and Lindqvist (1948, 139) for a court interested in honoring the royal house of the Uffingas.

None of the above interpretations of audience can be proved, and it is possible that all are wrong. As Baum observed in 1963, the poet may have written “a quasi-heroic poem to please himself, in the quiet expectation of pleasing also just that ‘fit audience though few’” (365). Conversely, he or she may have gathered enough of everything into the poem to please everybody, making everyman its destined consumer. The question of audience, even in the presence of a firm grasp of who wrote the poem and when, is in the end exceedingly slippery, the most difficult of all such questions to answer.

From the intrepid certitude of Thorkelin in 1815 about the date, provenance, author, and audience of *Beowulf*, then, we arrive arduously at a cautious and necessary incertitude. Although we can discern a general trend in scholarship from early to late dating, from favoring northern to entertaining southern provenance, even from viewing the audience as secular to considering it monastic, reasoning about all four questions is based largely on probability, not on established fact. Until new facts surface, all we can say with assurance when asked when, where, by whom, and for whom the poem was composed is that we are not sure. The quandary we thus find ourselves in with these first, essential questions about the poem, of course, has serious ramifications for most, if not all other, interpretations of it. This, as Thorkelin would cavalierly have phrased it, “will be clear to anyone” who reads on in this handbook.

#### Notes

For their many invaluable suggestions for improving this chapter, we thank Theodore M. Andersson, R. D. Fulk, and John D. Niles. Bjork is primarily responsible for date and provenance, Obermeier for author and audiences.

1. On this issue, see Busse (1987, 9–140, 277–80).
2. Several German scholars stubbornly refused to see anything Scandinavian or British about the poem (Haarder 20 n.10). Heinrich Leo, for example, considered *Beowulf* the oldest German epic but preserved in the Anglo-Saxon dialect. He argued that since Hygelac died between 512 and 530 and Beowulf reigned after him for 50 years before his own death, the poem originated in Germany after 580

during the earliest German migrations to England (1839, 19). Cf. Karl Simrock's 1859 translation entitled *Beowulf: Das älteste deutsche Epos* and P. Hoffmann's 1893 translation entitled *Beowulf: Ältestes deutsches Heldengedicht*.

3. C. Davis (1992) concurs; but see Dumville (1977, 80–81), who marshals evidence that the genealogies were compiled as early as the seventh century.

4. For an explanation of Sievers's system, see chapter 4 below.

5. Newton (1993, 14) uses the same example to reach the opposite conclusion. The presence of loan words in *Brunanburh* and *Maldon* is evidence of Scandinavian/Anglo-Saxon assimilation in the tenth century; the apparent absence of Scandinavian lexical items in *Beowulf*, therefore, may imply "that the material which informs the poem was not derived from sources later than the Viking Age."

6. See chapter 8 for a discussion of *Liedertheorie*.

## Chapter 3

# Textual Criticism

by R. D. Fulk

**Summary:** In the nineteenth century there was greater diversity of attitudes and practices in regard to textual editing than there is now. But proponents of liberal emendation had been defeated by the early years of the century, with the result that the texts in use today reflect, on the whole, moderate conservative practices. In recent years the conceptual basis of even these texts has been challenged with increasing frequency, signaling the rise of a textually ultraconservatism that now seems to dominate in discussions of editing. In so many ways this prevailing attitude conflicts with recent trends in general textual theory and brackets such issues as the relation of text to audience and the means of gauging probability in editorial decisions. Support for a lightly edited text does not reflect trust in the manuscript as much as distrust of editorial subjectivity; and so the dependence of liberal views on philological competence, when conjoined with the century's turn away from philology in Old English studies, ensures that conservatism will continue to dominate.

## Chronology

- 1705: Humfrey Wanley transcribes lines 1–19 and 53–73 of the poem in *Catalogus*.
- 1731: The manuscript is damaged by fire.
- 1787: Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin commissions a transcript of the manuscript; subsequently transcribes it himself, as well.
- 1805: Sharon Turner transcribes forty-one lines from the manuscript in his *History of the Anglo-Saxons*.
- 1815: Thorkelin publishes the first full edition of the poem, based on the 1787 transcripts, remarking in his preface on the negligence of the scribe (treated as singular), and claiming nonetheless to have copied as faithfully as possible except in regard to division into verses, punctuation, word division, and of final *ð/p* (1815b).
- 1815: N. F. S. Grundtvig lists numerous errors in his review of Thorkelin's text.
- 1820: Grundtvig appends to his own translation (pp. 267–312) forty-five page corrections to Thorkelin's edition.