



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Beowulf

A heroic tale of fact or fiction?

Ritgerð til B.A. prófs

Anna Lind Borgþórsdóttir

Maí 2012

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ABSTRACT

The Old English epic *Beowulf* is under discussion in this essay and the idea of the truth embedded in the poem. As no concrete evidence exists on the provenance of the poem, its authorship, date or truth of content, all statements from published writers on the subject are mere conjectures. Presented is a detailed account of the manuscript from when the 16th century scholar Lawrence Nowell handled it, to the time it came into the possession of Sir Robert Cotton in the late 17th century. It is now housed in the Cotton Collection in the British Library. Plot structures are discussed with references to Aristotle, Vladimir Propp and Christopher Booker. Debates on the age, composition, formulaic transmission and writing are discussed with reference to the views of John D. Niles, Robert E. Bjork, Kevin S. Kiernan, Julius Zupitza, Seamus Heaney, Marijane Osborn and others. The *Beowulf* versions of Thorkelin, Klaeber and Tolkien are discussed. Finally we take a brief look at the Christian and Pagan content in the poem, along with archaeological evidence connected to the poem.

Keywords: Beowulf, Old English, Poetry, Middle-Ages manuscript, oral transmission.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this essay is to look at the ideas of various scholars and researchers in their published books and articles on *Beowulf* and related material. The poem in question is an Old English manuscript which has been preserved in only one copy. There is no solid date or authorship for the poem and little is known about its origin. Therefore, all statements put forward about the poem's provenance are mere speculations. It is to be expected that different scholars have different opinions on the matter. This gives an opportunity for many debates, not to mention if additional information about the manuscript comes to light in the future. However, every reader must follow his own conviction and beliefs and measure the truth and accuracy of his mission.

As an admirer of stories as a whole, a romantic believer in adventures, a truth-seeker and a person intensely curious about our ancestors, I now put forward my own musings about the poem. The question of the truth of the narrative is an interesting one, mainly the existence of the ancestor warrior Beowulf, his battles and life. Furthermore, I believe that oral tradition was performed in the Middle-Ages in a story-telling manner and served as a popular form of entertainment for the public. More importantly, these narratives, both verse and prose, were a way to preserve the history and customs of people both alive and deceased. Even in our times we still have individuals and societies that carry out this tradition. To support my opinion I submit the Scottish singer Duncan Williamson (1928-2007)¹ and the tribes in the islands of the South Pacific².

The probability of exaggeration in oral stories passing from generation to generation is high, so we can accept that there is a danger of that occurring.

¹ Duncan Williamson was a Scottish storyteller, singer and writer, born in a large family. He was the seventh of sixteen children. He is said to have been born in a tent by Loch Fyne in Argyll. His parents, who were Roman Catholics, were both illiterate but knew how to perform oral transmission of traveler lore. Duncan was raised in that environment and during his life he collected old stories and songs. He then performed them orally himself. His explanation of the oral tradition is simple and easy to understand. He says that when you tell a story, the person who told it to you is standing behind you, that person's teller behind him and so forth. Hence a long line of teller's one behind the other (Hunt, 2007).

² Ruth Finnegan and Margaret Orbell; *South Pacific Oral Traditions* published 1995, a research on oral traditions in the South Pacific, still being performed ("Voices in Performance andText," 2012).

Therefore, although I believe there is truth to the story in the account of the events, I draw the line with the supernaturally strong warrior Beowulf and the evil mystical beings in the poem; I assume they are fictional and the result of exaggeration.

I hope this essay will arouse its readers, not least those with limited knowledge of *Beowulf*, to seek further reading on the subject.

2. TELLING STORIES

Every day is a story in itself. It is the stories of our lives: the things we do, the events around us and even our dreams. Our existence is a story and we tell stories not only to amuse each other, but to keep the accounts of our ancestors alive among our descendants. We have various forms of telling stories. They can be oral, printed, in pictures, in films or by singing. We have poetry and prose, songs, operas, movies, television, radio, books and newspapers. We are constantly discovering new ways of storytelling and one of our newest forms is the E-book or the electronic book. Yes, we do tell stories. However, when did it begin?

The telling of stories has been done since the beginning of mankind. In earlier times before broadcasting and printing, such as in the Middle Ages, people had writings, the picture form and the oral tradition. The skill of writing was only in the hands of few and not many more people could read. Hence, the majority of the population was dependent on pictures and oral narrations for amusement. Cave paintings dated to 25.000-30.000 years BC have been found in Europe ("Cave painting," 2012). One of the oldest painted caves found in Europe are the caves in Lascaux Grotto in France, in French Grotte de Lascaux ("Lascaux Grotto," 2012). Then on the other hand we have written texts. Evidence has been found for texts that are from thousands of years BCE (Before Common Era). To mention one example, there are the Cappadocian tablets from 2000-1735 BCE, from Anatolia ("Anatolian languages," 2012).

This brings us to the contents of the stories. Most likely they were about our ancestor's life story, their day-to-day chores, and their battles and victories.

However, not necessarily all parts of a story are true and based on facts. With our imagination we can add fiction around our facts and give our readers a more amusing story. A simple happening can result in a great story. To emphasize, we use the words from the English author and literary critic Dr Samuel Johnson (1709-1784):

„how small a quantity of REAL FICTION there is in the world; and that same images, with very little variation, have served all the authors who have ever written.“(Booker, 2004, p. 8)

Consequently, there are various types of stories and to name a few we have myths, legends, fairytales, folktales, religious tales and heroic tales. Stories can be classified in groups depending on their similarities, such as their concept, form and method of narration. Each group can then be analyzed further into plot, concept, setting and so on (McKay & Dudley, 1996) . This grouping of similarities in literature is one branch of literary theory, which is in a way a systematic study of what kind of literature we have. The following paragraphs give a brief outline of some of the theories that have been developed for plot analysis.

3. PLOT STRUCTURES

To get a better perception of this area of literary theory we will look closer into in which way plots have been analyzed. According to British professor and writer Peter Barry (1947-) “the ‘plot’ is those events as they are edited, ordered, packaged, and presented in what we recognize as a narrative.” (Barry, 2002, p. 223) Several scholars have come up with systems to categorize plots and some of them have been listed together and posted on a learning/teaching site hosted by Drexel University College in Florida (ipl2, 2011).

One of the oldest pieces of evidence of this kind of examination or analysis can be dated to the end of the 4th century BC. It was the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384 BC–322 BC) who first preformed literary analysis in

his work *Poetics*. In his opinion the characters are the key factors in a story and how they are revealed in action in the literature. One of his points is that in tragedies there are three main stages of the plot. The first point is the *hamartia* or the fault or misfortune of some sort for the character. The second is the *anagnorisis* or the recognition of a situation the character is in and the third stage is the *peripeteia* or the turn-around of his fortune (Barry, 2002, pp. 21. 224-226).

One of the most famous modern theories of the plot was put forward by the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp (1895-1970). From his observation of a hundred Russian folk tales he put together a list of 31 functions that can possibly occur in a plot. Propp notes that not all of the functions occur in a story, although their sequence does not change (Barry, 2002, pp. p 226-231).

The third scholar to be mentioned is Christopher Booker, an English journalist and author (1937). He wrote a book on this subject, *The Seven Basic plots, why we tell stories*. Booker read and studied stories of all sorts, from tragedies to fairytales, from old to modern and everything in between. He realized there was a pattern in them and classified them accordingly. His theory is that there are only seven basic plots in a story and all stories are variations built around one or more of these plots (Booker, 2004, pp. 5-6; 13).

The fact that researchers have the means and ability to see ongoing patterns in stories, leads to one of the main points of focus in this essay. This point is that, in spite of difference in age and culture, all narratives have a pattern. Every story whether fact or fiction, can be expected to fall into a distinctive form.

4. THE POEM OF *BEOWULF*

Beowulf, the old epic poem from the Middle-Ages (5th-15th century AD), can undoubtedly be analyzed according to all the three methods above, Aristotle's, Barry's and Booker's. However, is that evidence enough to say that the poem is all fiction for amusement purposes only? Or is it possible that this tale is based on actual events in the past?

Beowulf is the longest preserved poem in Old English, over 3000 lines long. Old English was spoken in Anglo-Saxon England in the era before the Norman Conquest. Yet, no concrete evidence has been found in this large manuscript of its provenance and only one copy of it was preserved. Furthermore, no proof has been found any of anyone reading the poem between the 12th and 18th century (Bjork & Niles, 1997, p. 1). No notes have been written on the manuscript itself and there are no other writings on it that confirm its age. Even though folios 179 and 198 of the *Beowulf* manuscript are more worn than the other pages we can only suggest that this was caused by someone reading them.

The earliest verification of someone handling the poem is the 16th century scholar Lawrence Nowell (died c. 1570), a forerunner in the study of Old English and a servant to Lord Burghley³, who wrote his name on the top of the first page of the manuscript and included the date 1563. The manuscript was then in a collection with four other pieces of work, two in verse and three in prose, that had survived in the vernacular.

These works, referred to as the *Beowulf codex* (Bjork & Niles, 1997, pp. 2, prg 4), were among the few documents preserved from destruction at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries⁴. During the decades before 1550 medieval libraries were being destroyed, the contents scattered and many of them ruined. According to Chris Trueman,⁵ author of a website of World History, over 800 monasteries had been dissolved by 1540 and a lot of the documents and literature that was stored in these monasteries got destroyed. As the poem had no content regarding church matters or importance to those in power at the time, the *Beowulf codex* manuscript was not considered to be important and

³ Lord Burghley, Sir William Cecil and his family were key politicians at the time when Henry VIII, and Elizabeth I ruled in England, mainly in the 16th century (Trueman, 2011b).

⁴ The Dissolution of the Monasteries in England in the 16th century occurred when King Henry VIII was made head of the Church in England and the Pope in Rome lost his authority there. This change was passed by the Parliament in 1534 as the Act of Supremacy. The King dissolved the monasteries, convents and other church assemblies seized their income and assets (Bjork & Niles, 1997; Trueman, 2011a, pp. paragr 8,9).

⁵ Cris Trueman graduated with BA in History and MA in management. He has taught History and Politics in England for over 25 years (Trueman, 2000-).

that perhaps helped in its survival. In those days the public in England had no access to cultural treasures and this would not change until the 20th century.

From Lawrence's custody the manuscript came in the possession of Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1631) and eventually became part of the Robert Bruce Cotton library. The library stayed in the Cotton family's custody during the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th. After Sir Robert died, his son Sir Thomas Cotton (1594-1662) was in charge and then Sir Robert's grandson Sir John Cotton (1621-1702). The Cotton library was one of the foundation collections in the British Museum, founded in 1753. In the year 1700 the Cotton family exhibited a large collection of medieval manuscripts to the English nation, including *Beowulf*. According to Julian Harrison, a curator of Early Modern Manuscript at the British Library, the Cotton family gave the manuscript to the nation (Harrison, 2009).⁶ This can be marked as the first time the poem was seen by the British public, most likely only people from the upper classes (Bjork & Niles, 1997, pp. 3, lines 1-2).

Shortly after, the Cotton documents were moved for safety reasons to Ashburnham House at Westminster. On the 23rd of October 1731 a fire broke out at Ashburnham and many documents from the library ended up irreparably damaged and many entirely ruined. The *Beowulf* manuscript seemed to only have suffered minimum damage in the fire itself; however in the following years it was handled inadequately and some of the pages were damaged and letters on the edges crumbled away (Zupitza, 1882, pp. vi, 1 paragr).

The Icelandic scholar Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin (1752-1829), had two transcripts of *Beowulf* in his belongings, one made by him and the other by a hired scribe. Thorkelin, who claimed to be Danish from a young age after settling in Denmark to study, was on a trip in Britain from 1786 -1791 on a mission to find documents relevant to the history of Denmark. This was to be his contribution to the Royal Archives in Denmark, where he was waiting for a position as Keeper of the Royal Privy Archives (Fjalldal, 2008). These transcripts are the oldest copies of the manuscript that have been found and are now in the Royal Library of Denmark.

⁶ http://www.bl.uk/researchregister/1.10/?app_cd=RR&page_cd=RESEARCHER&l_researcher_id=176

Beowulf is now safeguarded in the British Library as the Ms Cotton Vitellius A.xv. In view of the fact that the manuscript is extremely fragile and must be handled with care, it was put in paper frames in 1945 (Harrison, 2009, p. pargr 9). In 1993 the British Library launched a project called *The Electronic Beowulf Project*, explained in the next paragraph, in cooperation with the academic directors Kevin Kiernan and Paul E. Szarmach. Their main aim was to make the manuscript more accessible to the public along with ensuring its preservation.

The Electronic Beowulf Project is an electronic archive that stores images and wide-ranging information on the poem, among other manuscripts in the Cotton Vitellius A. xv collection. With special infrared and ultraviolet lighting techniques it managed to reveal many of the pages of the manuscript that had been ill readable or completely illegible. Some edges of the pages had crumbled away, some been covered for protection and some letters were missing. This was probably mostly caused by the fire in 1731 but also in part because of how badly the manuscript had been handled in the past. The pages and letters were electronically restored and the public was given a chance to view the old manuscript electronically. According to the Kiernan, Thorkelin's two transcripts of the poem were crucial in their effort in restoring letters that were lost or covered on the manuscript (Kiernan, 1995, p. prg 2).

Some of the images of *Beowulf codex* are retrievable on the British Library website, and the complete product has been published on a CD. In this database one can observe images of around 70 folios, over 130 ultraviolet images, 750 backlit images and over 1300 letters from the manuscript. A guide and index manual for assistance is available at the University of Kentucky website⁷. The CD is available for purchase, in various places, such as Kentucky University, The British Library and the Amazon website. It is also possible to borrow it at various libraries, for example at the National and University Library of Iceland. An official date for the beginning of this venture is not provided, however *The Electronic Beowulf Project* won the 1994-95 Library Association /

⁷ <http://ebeowulf.uky.edu/>

Mecklermedia Award for Innovation through Information Technology for the techniques used (Kiernan & Szarmach, 1995).

The outcome of this electronic archive, other than protecting the manuscript, is an ongoing growing project and it will serve as an encyclopedic resource to many. For researchers such as historians, linguists, poets, literary theorists and many others the information collected in the archive is invaluable (Kiernan & Szarmach, 1995). The *Beowulf* manuscript is also usually on display in the Sir John Ritblat Gallery at the British Library in London so it is very accessible to both the public and scholars ("Sir John Ritblat Gallery: Treasures of the British Library: Literary manuscripts and printed books," 2012).

5. THE STORY OF THE POEM

Scandinavia is the setting of *Beowulf*. According to Marijane Osborn and her assessment of Frederick J. Klaeber's (1863-1954) edition of the poem, which he names *Beowulf and the fight at Finnsburg*, the time period is believed to be around 500 AD. She has put together a simplified time chart of the events in the poem (Osborn, 2004, pp. 38-41).

The poem is about a prince from Geatland, which is what we know today to be the southern part of Sweden. The prince is named Beowulf and the poem is about his battles, life and death. Moreover, it is about the main rulers in Scandinavia at the time, their subjects and relationships among the existing tribes. At this time Scandinavia was divided into more domains than it is today and there were often battles between the tribes concerning power and revenge.

The Geats as a nation had a good relationship with the Danes at the time. Early in the poem a group of warrior Geats led by Beowulf, sail off to Denmark when Hrothgar, the king of the Danes, experiences trouble with an evil creature harassing his hall. The warriors came to the aid of the Danish king, and fought with two supernatural creatures, Grendel and his mother.

Beowulf's third battle occurs about 50 years later. He has been the leader of the Geatish people for the same period. Here Beowulf is older and the foe is a dragon, a much larger creature than the other two he battled; "From

head to tail, his entire length was fifty feet” (Heaney, 2000, pp. 205, l.3042-3043). In this battle Beowulf dies and the poet closes his poem on a prediction of the future of the Geatish people.

6. COMPOSITION OF THE POEM

Unfortunately, the manuscript of *Beowulf* is not dated nor does it reveal the author or writer. According to Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (1948-)⁸ roughly 30.000 lines of poetry in Old English exist and most of them do not reveal author or date (KOO, 2010).

In spite of this, researchers have discovered some methods to try to find information about the composer and date of *Beowulf*. They examine the manuscript to look for facts in history and geography. They search for sources and analogues, examine linguistics trends and research archaeological material. Moreover, they observe world history and literary history, along with the genealogy of that time. The extensive study and comparison of manuscripts in general, is also one of the methods used to determine the age of our poem, *Beowulf*. To list all the scholars and their published conclusion would result in a long list of names and would hardly be reasonable in this essay. Nevertheless, mentioning a few simple methods employed, along with the scholars concerned, is of value.

One of the methods used to analyze literature to look for indications of its age, is to read the text not only literally, but to try to look for figurative language. Poetry may have different levels of meaning and the words used may not signify the dictionary definition. We also have to keep in mind that the meaning of a word in today’s dictionaries can be far different from the definition in the Middle Ages. Today students in primary education, graduate and postgraduate studies are instructed to look for symbols and ambiguity when reading poems and literary works. With this in mind, we will examine the views of scholars who

⁸ Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe is a Professor of English at the University of California in Berkeley.

believe that *Beowulf* should be read allegorically and its connections with religious material from earlier Christian writings.

One of these scholars is the Italian writer, linguist and philosopher Umberto Eco (1932-), who in his book *The Poetics of the Open Work* discusses the interpretation of various art forms, such as literature, poetry and music. According to him, a work of art is usually a complete version from the author. However, it is also incomplete in the way that the author cannot be sure how the reader will interpret his art. Eco states that this method of giving the reader options of allegorical interpretation and not merely literal, can be found all the way back to a passage in Dante (c. 1265–1321) and originally from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (13:12). The theory of allegory, especially concerning the Scriptures, developed in the Middle Ages and each reader, or listener at that time, had the possibility to understand the literature in different ways, depending on their mood and mental state. In Eco's own words:

“A work in this sense is undoubtedly endowed with a measure of ‘openness’. The reader of the text knows that every sentence and every trope is ‘open’ to a multiplicity of meanings which he must hunt for and find. Indeed, according to how he feels at one particular moment, the reader might choose a possible interpretative key which strikes him as exemplary of this spiritual state. He will *use* the work according to the desired meaning (causing it to come alive again, somehow different from the way he viewed it at an earlier reading).” (Eco, 1979, p. 51)

If this can be applied to *Beowulf* it suggests that we as readers are given the ability to read *Beowulf* with the intention of looking for symbols of different meanings and not only literal explanation. This leads us to look at the interpretations of a few scholars and their published studies on the authority of *Beowulf*.

G.J. Thorkelin published the first complete version of *Beowulf* in 1815. The publication was a Latin translation of *Beowulf*, written using his two

transcribed copies of the manuscript. He claimed that the author of the poem was indeed a Dane, an eyewitness to the poem's events, and he dates Beowulf's death to the year 340. Therefore, the time of composition of the poem must have been shortly after his death. Thorkelin was not very skilled in reading Old English and his translation has been much criticized. Nevertheless, as Magnús Fjalldal Jónsson (1950-)⁹ declares Thorkelin should be shown gratitude for bringing the public's attention to the poem with his translation, in spite of the problems with his translation. In addition, Fjalldal states that Thorkelin had mistakenly identified Boe as Beowulf, when reading *Geschichte der Dänen* published by his friend Peter Suhm in 1804. Suhm claimed that Odin's son, Boe, had died in combat in AD 340. Accordingly, Thorkelin's dates and events in the poem are not based on the correct story of the Geatish prince Beowulf (Fjalldal, 2008).

Frederick J. Klaeber, a German philologist and a professor of Old and Middle English in the University of Minnesota published his edition of the poem *Beowulf* in 1922 as *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. Klaeber's edition has approximately thirty years of ground-work, his research began in 1893. It has been one of the principal sources for those studying the poem. Klaeber's interpretation of the poem, which he puts forward in the introduction to his book, is the one I agree with the most: *Beowulf* is a mythological oral narrative, with Christian ideals, merely based on historical and political facts. The author of the poem, in Klaeber's opinion, was someone in, or connected to, the Anglian royal court (Klaeber, 1922, pp. cxix, l. 10-21), perhaps in King Aldfrith of Northumbria (reign period 685–704/705) ("Aldfrith of Northumbria," 2012). He also states that given the custom of oral transmission the tale has changed in numerous ways with time and different performers. "Facts easily gave way to fiction" (Klaeber, 1922, p. xxix line 15). In Klaeber's opinion there were two scribes of the preserved manuscript, based on the difference in language, spelling and handwriting. Notably, he asserts that the text has been copied repeatedly, the preserved manuscript being the latest, and that the scribes involved were, with no doubt, of different dialectical customs and thus the outcome work of many.

⁹ Magnús Fjalldal Jónsson is a Professor of English at the University of Iceland.

Conversely, we have J.R.R. Tolkien's (1892-1973) essay *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (1936) that was a turning point in research on the poem. Most critics and translators of the poem had seen it as a historical account of some sort. Tolkien, on the other hand, views it as a poem and just a poem. He dates the manuscript to around the 8th century, although the time period is not of a particular interest to him historically, but information about the age of the poem can help its readers to better understand it. His opinion is that the poem is a work of a single imaginative author, who has a typical melancholic mood, a well known characteristic in other Old English literature. Tolkien also thought that the poet was feeling trapped by a changing world as the heathen beliefs were vanishing and Christianity with all its hope was on the rise. Tolkien declares that the poem should be studied as a work of art and not as a historical or religious allegory (Tolkien, 1936, pp. 1,3,8).

The researchers mentioned above and others who have studied the manuscript all have one fact common. They are examining an un-dated and unsigned manuscript, with no other concrete documentation about its existence. Their conclusions are therefore speculations and assertions, with no possible way of verification of any kind. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that there seems to be a major consensus that a single author composed *Beowulf*, an Anglo-Saxon and presumably the author was a *scop*; a *scop* is an orally performing poet and more often a singer as well. The poet is believed to have been a clergyman or possibly a layman; a layman was not a direct member of the clergy yet one of the religious congregations. The poem was composed in Christian Anglo-Saxon England, which is from the 5th century to the latter part of the 11th or around the Norman Conquest of 1066.

7. ORAL FORMULAIC TRANSMISSION

Although scholars have different opinions of the date *Beowulf*'s composition, many of them agree on the theory that the poem was composed long before it was written. One of the theories is that the poem was composed around 700 AD, by a single Anglo-Saxon poet. Moreover, the idea is that it has been an oral

tale for years before (Beowulf [Spark Notes], 2007, p. 1). An oral narrative is a story that has been passed on by one bard to another over generations. This is not unlike the storytelling in the Icelandic cottages through the centuries when the household gathered in the family room after a hard day's work.

In Anglo-Saxon England the majority of the population had little or no education, could not read and even fewer knew how to write. Most of the people with these skills were men, clergymen and men from the higher echelons of society. The manuscripts from the Anglo-Saxon period were mostly written in the latter part of the period or from the 9th to the 11th centuries, both in Latin and the vernacular (Niles, 1993, pp. 131-132).

With the Danish invasions of England, starting in the late 9th century, a new language forced itself into the country with unavoidable changes. King Alfred the Great (849-899; reigned from 871 till his death) and Officials of the Church in England realized that with the diminishing of Latin literacy it was becoming essential to translate scholarly works in Latin to Old English; otherwise in time no one would be able to read these works. Besides the king initiated this program of translation and he encouraged the development of the Anglo Saxon Chronicle, which is the documentation of Anglo-Saxon history ("King Alfred the Great (871-899)," 2012). He encouraged the education of students in Old English and for those who were outstanding student he encouraged further study of Latin. Thus, a large number of the surviving texts are educationally orientated. This is seen as the beginning of literature in Old English ("Old English literature," 2012).

As far as writing down orally performed material, there is more to it than just writing or translating. As I said above, writing was in the hands of few and today they are known as scribes. In some cases it could be an insider of the community of oral tradition who learnt the technique of writing and saw an opportunity to preserve his nation's customs by documenting them. On other occasions and more often, it was an outsider that performed the documenting, someone that was not a participant in the oral community. As the number of people educated in reading and writing increased, a small amount of the orally performed poems and stories were documented. The poem of *Beowulf* was one

of them. At this point I shall discuss scholars who have studied the transmission.

These scholars are Milman Parry (1902–1935) and Albert Lord (1912–1991), both born Americans. At first Lord was Parry's assistant, however after Parry's sudden accidental death he carried on with his mentor's research. The theory described below is well-known, and is identified as the Parry-Lord theory or the theory of Oral-Formulaic Composition.

Parry and Lord studied oral transmission. They did extensive research on populations with oral traditions like those in the Southern Slavic regions and their Serbian oral epic poetry, as well as studying the Greek Homeric epics. Parry and Lord's main aim was to examine how these poems were preserved over a long period of time. These poems were usually sung out and because of an open-ended length they varied from singer to singer and region to region. In a poem being retold over a long period of years it is unavoidable for it to be changed and altered. In addition, there is a great possibility that no bard performs the poem in the same way. The singers did not memorize the poems word by word and therefore it raised a question on how they could be performed time after time by different singers. From their point of view there was undoubtedly a structure in words, form and ideas that the singer used in his performance and therefore he was able to re-create the poem while performing (Niles, 1983, p. 33).

8. THE MANUSCRIPT OF THE POEM

For more than one and a half century, or from the time the first translated version *Beowulf* was published, the Thorkelin version 1815, scholars have been studying and debating various matters concerning the manuscript. One of the issues is the scribe and possible time period of the writing; common theory is that it varies from the late 8th century to around 1000. In addition, yet not less important, one of the arguable topics is the number of writers of the manuscript, was it written by a single scribe or two or more different individuals? The style

and structure of the poem has been analyzed along with the word use and other linguistic facts. (*Beowulf [Spark Notes]*, 2007; Osborn, 2004).

Scholars M. Osborn, Fr. Klaeber and S. Heaney, among others, consider the poem was written in England by a descendant of migrants from Scandinavia¹⁰. Scandinavia is the setting of the poem and the poem is about Scandinavian royals and their court. One of these scholars is the Irish poet, lecturer and translator, Seamus Heaney (1939-)¹¹. In his translation of *Beowulf* his thinking was that once he had grasped the meaning of the lines, he could form them in a metrical way and adapt them into verse (Heaney, 2000, p. p xxiii). This is the translation of *Beowulf* I used and quoted in this essay.

We also have the research of Julius Zupitza (1844-1895) a German philologist. In 1882 he analyzed the manuscript by examining every line and letter. He observed every pen stroke, the structure and changes in every letter and word and also detected the use of different ink from one page to the other. On every page he wrote his entries and conclusion parallel to the text. In some of these entries Zupitza made a note that the scribe of that specific page or lines was different from the one on the previous pages, sometimes he merely added a question mark. He also noted if corrections and improvements had been made on the pages. Zupitza did not speculate on who the scribes were, only refers to them in his notes with the words “hand”, “later hand”, “modern hand” and “different hand” (Zupitza, 1882, p. 102).

On the other hand, we have the American poet Kevin S. Kiernan (1958-) who argues that the poet was contemporary with the 11th century scribes. He also suggests that the scribe or scribes used the authors’ actual notes for support when writing down the poem. His conclusions are made following his

¹⁰ Roman Britain was attacked from all directions and their regime came to an end in Britain in 410. The attackers from the east were the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, all from what we know today as northern Germany and Denmark. These invaders from the continent, later referred to as the Anglo-Saxons, settled down in England (James, 2011).

¹¹ Heaney is a Nobel Laureate in Literature and won the Whitbread Book of Year Award in 1999(Costa Book Awards), the most prestigious and popular literary prizes in the UK and recognizes some of the most enjoyable books of the year by writers based in the UK and Ireland (Costa Book Awards; Nobelprize, 1995).

study of the manuscript with digital techniques, philological theory and linguistics, among other methods (Kiernan, 2009).

Although researchers differ in their views on how many scribes transcribed the manuscript, the majority see the characteristic changes that take place in the script approximately half way through. According to Kiernan's digital techniques, there were three scribes. The first writer wrote lines 1-1942 and the second lines 1942-3184. The third however, whom Kiernan names "the nathwylc scribe", wrote lines 2210-53a on a palimpsest (a manuscript where the original text has been erased and sometimes still vaguely visible and a new text written) with a mixture of characteristic styles from the other two (Kiernan, 2009; Kiernan & Szarmach, 1995).

9. CHRISTIANITY OR PAGAN RELIGION

As I have previously mentioned, many scholars think that the poem deals with pagan traditions, folk stories and Christianity, a reasonable assumption if we look at the atmosphere in society at the time. The Anglo-Saxons invaded and settled in England in the 5th century and the officially Christian Roman Britain came to an end. The new settlers brought along with them pagan beliefs and customs. According to Steven Muhlberger, the Roman pope Gregory sent the missionary Augustine to Kent in England to Christianize the pagan Anglo-Saxons.¹² This was in the last years of the 6th century. Gregory was convinced that the world was coming to an end and on judgment day he would be evaluated on his attempt to carry out God's will. So he set out to convert as many as possible and his mind was set on the pagan people in England, despite the distance from Rome. The re-establishment of the Christian religion and the church as a vital enterprise is said to have taken the greater part of 7th century (Muhlberger, 1999). The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons was

¹² Steven Muhlberger is a Professor of History in the Nipissing University in Ontario, Canada. His lectures on the history of medieval England were posted in 1999 on the ORB site (On-line Reference Book for Medieval Studies). The ORB is an academic site with articles on medieval studies for students and researchers. The articles are written by medieval scholars, all reviewed by two peers. All authors are expected to maintain high standard and accuracy in their articles.

complete in the 7th century and a vigorous Church of England was established by the end of the century. Therefore it is not difficult to agree with the researchers, such as Klaeber, Osborn and Tolkien and assert that *Beowulf* is a narrative influenced by the transition of the English nation from being heathen to Christianity and that it is likely that the poet was a Christian.

The poet appears to have been familiar with the scriptures of the Bible and he presumes his audience also recognized them. In the poem we have accounts of God's creation of the world, the Noah flood and the story of Cain, who Grendel is claimed to be a descendant from. Even the dwelling place of Grendel's mother, the dark cave deep in the lake, is described as '*some hellish turn-hole*'. Nevertheless, there is no mention of any Christian articles, such as angels, Christ himself, saints and there are no accounts of worship or church ceremonies (Klaeber, 1922, pp. xvi-xlvii). This is an indication of the poet's observation of the world during the time of diminishing pagan religion and the increase of a Christian one.

Bearing in mind these changes in the nation's customs, it is clear that it influenced the poet and the poem contains evidence of a former pagan background and ideas of pagan beliefs. For instance in the account where Grendel has taken Heorot over, the Danes were devastated and turned to their heathen gods for advice and help. The poet declares that this was the custom of the people in that society as they did not know the one and only true God. In Heaney's translation it is in lines 178-183: "That was their way, their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge of good deeds and bad, the Lord God, Head of the Heavens and High King of the World, was unknown to them" (Heaney, 2000, pp. 14-15).

There are also several other occurrences of heathen customs, such as evil omens, the power of fate, and bloody revenge. In the story of Beowulf's battle with the dragon there is an interpolation. The poet tells a story of the sword Wiglaf uses, which is a trophy taken from the King of Sweden's brother by Wiglaf's father. This leads to an unsettled blood-feud. Furthermore, this story raises questions of whether the Swedes will declare war when Wiglaf inherits the Geatish throne after Beowulf's death. Moreover, the dragon is a

manifestation of the disasters which will destroy the Geats, who are in conflicts with the Franks and Swedes.

Last but by no means least, to give further evidence of the pagan customs is the pagan burial method of burning the deceased. This happens in three accounts in the poem: the event in the digression about the battle between the Danes and the Frisians where the latter burnt the bodies of those that were killed (l. 1107); the account of when Hrothgar and his people could not perform the burning of Aeschere 's body, who Grendel's mother had killed, as she took the body with her (l. 2124); and in Beowulf's funeral when the Geats built him a pyre and set it on fire (l. 3137).

10. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

As we have examined the sociological elements of Anglo-Saxon England the last stop of our voyage are the archeological findings. So much can be learnt through archeology and a great deal has been revealed about the Anglo-Saxon people through archaeological research. These discoveries were mostly made with the excavation of cemeteries, where weapons, battle gear such as helmets and other personal belongings were found in and around the grave sites (James, 2011).

According to Klaeber *Beowulf* is the oldest source we have on the history of Scandinavia regarding relations between the tribes of the period, less concerning individuals. He has linked Heorot, Hrothgar's royal hall, to the Old Norse name Hleiðr (Lat. Lethra) and to Lejre, a small Danish village on the island Zealand near Roskilde (Klaeber, 1922, pp. xxxvii). Archaeological excavations in the years of 1986-1988, directed by Tom Christensen of Roskilde Museum, discovered remains of two great halls on the site dating from ca. 680-990. During further excavations in 2004-05 the archeologists discovered remains elsewhere in Lejre of another hall. These remains were dated to the mid 6th century, which is close to the time when the events in *Beowulf* are assumed to take place (Niles, 2007).

Another example of archeological findings connected to the poem is the ship burial at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, England. Sutton Hoo is a site of seventeen burial mounds from the 6th or 7th century located in Suffolk in England. They were first excavated in 1939 and revealed a wooden ship from the 7th century. Also identified was the rich burial of an East Angles leader of the Wuffings dynasty, Raedwald, dated approximately to 625 AD ("Archeology," 2012). As I have shown in the previous chapter, the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity was completed in the 7th century and the Church of England had become energetic institution. By that time the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had been formed, trading centers were founded and mint coinage had started. The treasures found at Sutton Hoo may be actual evidence of the Anglo-Saxon nobility ("Anglo-Saxon England," 2012).

11. CONCLUSION

In this essay I have examined the ideas of various scholars and researchers and their published works on this Old English epic poem of *Beowulf*. I have discussed the ownership of the manuscript in sequence and its whereabouts today, as well as the possible age, author and provenance of the poem. I have discussed oral traditions and given my opinion on story-telling. With my discussion of paganism versus Christianity I have shown the atmosphere in the Anglo-Saxon England when *Beowulf* was composed and discussed the Christian embedding in the poem and the theory that the poet was a Christian. Last, but not least I have discussed archaeological findings to support my opinion on the historic reality of *Beowulf*.

As I stated before the manuscript is only preserved in one copy, is undated, gives no authorship and little is known about its origin. Hence, all statements concerning the poem are mere speculations and opinions are likely to change with continued research on of the manuscript and its contents. Although Tolkien looks at the poem merely as a poem, he agrees on the date of composition and recognizes the atmosphere in Anglo-Saxon England. However, I agree with Klaeber's opinion about the poem. With the examples and

arguments given in this essay, I am certain of the truth in the historical events that are embedded in the poem, although it has been embellished with the extravagant warrior Beowulf and the three evil supernatural creatures.

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