

THE NORDIC BACKGROUND TO BEOWULF'S LAST WORDS

Constance B. Heatt
The University of Western Ontario

The Old English Beowulf may seem a dubious example of "later European tradition" in which to explore a Nordic background when the poem is, in fact, demonstrably earlier than any surviving Old Norse text. While it has recently been fashionable to place the date of Beowulf as not necessarily much (if any) earlier than the sole surviving manuscript, which means late 10th century, even that date is considerably in advance of the dates of recording in writing (at least) of the sagas and eddic poetry which scholars have investigated as possible backgrounds to the poem. And, in fact, a recent, and still evolving, body of work by one American scholar is now persuading more and more of us that Beowulf is, after all, very early--probably dating from the beginning of the 8th century.¹

I am, nevertheless, hardly the first to suggest that such a background is an appropriate consideration for Beowulf studies; nor am I the first to take such an approach to elucidating Beowulf's "last words." The pioneer in that subject was our organizer, Lars Lönnroth, who, twenty years ago, pointed out that the section of Beowulf which includes the hero's last words has many of the "standard ingredients" of various Old Norse "death-songs" and proceeded to compare it to Hjálmar's Death-Song.² As Lars remarked, this passage had not previously "been compared with its Norse parallels, none of which is listed among the Old Norse parallels in Klæber's edition" (p. 13). The steps he saw as "standard" in corresponding to the Old Norse parallels here, with Hjálmar's Death-Song as the principal example, seem to be as follows, if we ignore elements in the scene he mentions but which do not really correspond to anything in his Norse 'parallels': (1) Beowulf collapses, fatally wounded; (2) he speaks to his faithful companion (3) about his former life and (4) makes provision for his funeral; (5) he gives his companion treasures; and (6) mention is made (in this case, by Wiglaf, after Beowulf's death) of the warriors in the mead hall (formerly, in the case of Beowulf) who are not there to help.

Lars' argument was focussed on the theory of oral-formulaic transmission, and was thus not in the least concerned with the profound differences between Beowulf and such Old Norse heroes as Hjálmar, who is not one of the legendary figures referred to in the Old English poem. What Lars was concerned with were traditional features linking Beowulf's last words and the words of dying 'heroes' in other Germanic heroic literature, not a specific nexus of story 'source material' that may have been used by the Beowulf-poet. Thus he did not have to concern himself with the fact that the poem's date precedes by some centuries most of the Old Norse accounts of legendary material

to which it refers--for example, accounts of the exploits and histories of Sigemund and Heremod. But this is a very real problem which has always confronted Beowulf studies, and one with implications which have frequently been ignored.

In the case of Heremod, the main obstacle is confused and apparently conflicting evidence. His role in Beowulf itself is perfectly clear: he is an outstanding Bad Example, a foil to the hero of the poem. The details of his history, as given there, appear to be reasonably straightforward. Heremod was a king of the Danes at a time preceding the advent of the Scylding dynasty, and probably immediately before the arrival of Scyld Scefing, according to the genealogies of the Anglo-Saxon kings and some other (not exactly conclusive) evidence in the poem itself.³ At the beginning of his career he won fame as a valiant and mighty warrior, but he turned into a niggardly and bloodthirsty ruler who killed his own men and, presumably as a result, fell into the hands of enemies who put him to death.

This account is reasonably consistent with the account of Starkaðr's murder of the Danish King Armóðr in the Nornagests-báttir and Egils saga ok Ásmundar, especially if we can identify that murder with Saxo's account of King Olo, whose career was almost identical with that of Beowulf's Heremod and who was, like Armóðr, murdered while bathing by Starcatherus.⁴ But the story of the murder of Armóðr/Olo, like the ignominious end of Beowulf's Heremod, does not appear to harmonize with the Eddic references to "Hermoðr" as a hero, like Sigmund, dispatched by Odin to greet a new arrival in Valhalla.⁵ Surely only a warrior who died a hero's death in battle would be an official greeter in Valhalla: there must have been heroic tales about Heremod of a significantly different nature from what we can learn from Beowulf, Nornagests-báttir, et al. Yet, this does not necessarily mean we are up against a real inconsistency between Scandinavian legendary traditions and the story known to the Beowulf-poet; what the difference (assuming there was one) may show is a corresponding difference in attitude between that poet and the authors of such eddic poems as Hákonarmál. That is, behavior considered to be heroic (if often tragic in outcome) in the pagan north may be exactly what the Christian Anglo-Saxon poet is rejecting as unacceptable.

While Beowulf is, of course, about heroic action, it is at least as much about kingship and the impact on society, for good or ill, of kingly behavior. Its hero is held up for our admiration because he used his gifts (of strength and so forth) for the public good, and because he was generous and kindly, unlike Heremod. The qualities which distinguish Beowulf are rarely to be found in the heroes of edda and saga, a point which is basic to Thomas D. Hill's article "The Confession of Beowulf and the Structure of Volsunga Saga."⁶ Hill argues that the real point of Beowulf's "last words," which he takes to be ll. 2729-43,⁷ is to "implicitly contrast this hero with the heroes of the most famous cycle of heroic legend of the Germanic world, the Volsungs" (p. 177). His argument is

largely focussed on lines 2738-42a, in which the dying Beowulf regrets that he has no direct heir to inherit his armor, but relates with satisfaction that no neighboring king had dared to threaten him during a fifty-year reign and that he had stayed peacefully at home, watching over what was his own and not seeking treacherous quarrels or swearing false oaths. He rejoices that God will not find him guilty of murdering kinsmen.

Hill's claim is that Volsunga saga provides the major background to Beowulf's remarks because the Volsungs provide an outstanding and well-known example of the kind of overweening men (ofrkappsmenn) prone to the sort of hostilities Beowulf prides himself on having avoided, and were spectacularly guilty of the slaying of kinsmen. Hill side-steps the question of relative dating, stating that even if the saga is later its materials are "archaic," and perhaps, he suggests, more so than Beowulf (p. 166). But the Beowulf-poet gives no hint that he knew the extent to which the Volsungs constitute an outstanding example of such behavior. Only 'Wals,' 'Sigemund,' and 'Fitela' are mentioned in the poem, and there is no suggestion that 'Fitela' was the product of an incestuous union. As Klaeber points out (p. 159), this omission may mean that the poet and his audience were unaware of the details about Sigmund's generation found in Volsunga saga. Further, the dragon fight elsewhere attributed to Sigmund's son Sigurð is here, and only here, the outstanding exploit of Sigemund himself.

If what was known to the Beowulf-poet did not include Sigurð and the events precipitated by him and by his death--as Axel Olrik clearly suggested when he wrote that Sinfjotli was really the last of the (original) Volsungs⁸--then the family tragedy of the Volsungs would not have seemed notably different from any number of other real or legendary events involving the same factors. While Hill acknowledges that the "violation of kinship obligations" turns up elsewhere in early Germanic society and literature, as does the "overweening" hero, he sees only Volsunga saga as notably combining the themes of kinship violation and ofrkapp; but a combination of one or more such persons and kinship violation is to be found almost everywhere in the sagas.

To take just two examples, Gísla saga Súrssonar and Njáls saga both have their share of ofrkappsmenn and violations of kinship bonds. Gísla saga is about little else, and William Ian Miller has shown that "the central feud" in Njáls saga is the result of a whole series of deeds involving ofrkapp and kinship violation.⁹ Among demonstrably older Germanic works, the same themes can be found in the Hildebrandslied, generally held to be of ca. 800 and thus perhaps contemporary with Beowulf.¹⁰ Volsunga saga is hardly alone in developing the theme of the catastrophes likely to ensue when an ofrkappsmaðr is involved in kinship violation, and I think that to narrow the focus to Volsunga saga is unjustified. While Beowulf is certainly to be seen in contrast to "the archaic heroes to whom

the poet alludes" (p. 177), those (plural) heroes are not limited to Sigemund--and Sigemund himself is, in the poem's context, presented wholly favorably, not as an example of behavior Beowulf is to be congratulated for avoiding. On the contrary, Beowulf is congratulated for being LIKE Sigemund (and UNLIKE Heremod).

What of the other elements of Beowulf's statement: can they be seen as having reference to the Volsung nexus? Hill thinks that Beowulf's pride in "having kept his inheritance well" while avoiding aggressive attacks (p. 172) is meant to contrast with the Volsungs' violent and aggressive means of gaining and maintaining their thrones (p. 173), but he admits that Beowulf's pride in not swearing false oaths is not especially relevant to Volsunga saga and suggests that this motif applies more to "the characteristic faithlessness of the kings of the north, who like their divine patron, Odin, did not hesitate to lie when it suited their purpose."¹¹ In fact, however, all of the aspects of his reign in which Beowulf takes pride have a primary, important context in the poem itself. The first points he makes, and the formulaic language with which he makes them, take us right back to the beginning of the poem, the paradigmatic prologue setting forth the model of a 'good king,' Scyld Scefing.¹²

But to say that Beowulf itself is the primary context of Beowulf's last words which the reader/hearer should call to mind certainly does not mean that the Nordic context is not also relevant. The poem's references to Sigemund et al. make it clear that that context IS Beowulf's context. There is certainly no question that Beowulf's last words, however they reflect matters prominent in the poem itself, share a number of motifs with the "death-songs" (or death scenes) of other Germanic heroes; but perhaps insufficient attention has been paid to the significance of the ways in which they differ from those to which they have been compared. As Hill remarks (p. 166), "there is a marked contrast between [Beowulf's] summary of his own life and the definition and characterization of the hero in other relevant Germanic heroic legends."

Hjálmar, for example, laments his fate (which Beowulf refrains from doing) and states that holding five estates was not enough to content him;¹³ Beowulf, on the other hand, states that he kept his own well, and (by implication) did not try to acquire the property or territory of others. Hamðir dies at the hands of his brother-in-law after quarreling with one brother about their mutual guilt for the death of another¹⁴ in one of those Volsung situations rife with the "murder of kinsmen" which Beowulf was able to avoid; and Hamðir's last words express his jubilation at killing as many of his brother-in-law's men as he possibly could in that last battle. And a particularly striking contrast to Beowulf's words is provided by Bjarki, the hero Klaeber described as "possibly after all identical with Beowulf himself" (p. xix), a view supported by Gwyn Jones in his book Kings, Beasts, and Heroes.¹⁵

While we have only small fragments of the original Norse Bjarkamál, it is generally agreed that the Latin version of Saxo Grammaticus preserves most of the sense of the poem.¹⁶ In its version of Bjarki's last words, it is very close to the version found in the later Hrólfs saga kraka. Boðvar Bjarki's last words in the saga are, as translated by Gwyn Jones,

But Othin as yet I do not descry here, though I strongly suspect that he will be spreading his wings against us here, that foul and faithless devil's whelp! Could anyone but point him out to me, I would squeeze him like any other vile and tiniest mousling. Wicked, poisonous beast, shameful would be his handling if I might lay hold of him! And none in this world but would store more hatred in his heart, if he saw his liege-lord so treated as we now see ours.¹⁷

Saxo's version does not elaborate the threats against Odin to such an extent, and lacks the motif of "I will squeeze him like a mouse"--which corresponds to a stanza of the Bjarkamál passed on by Snorri;¹⁸ instead, Saxo treats much more fully the need to fight for Hrolf's sake in a passage containing such familiar elements as the warrior's duty to repay his lord for past gifts and the presence of the Beasts of Battle. Bjarki's words here are:

If I should set eyes on the fearsome husband of Frigg, though he is protected by his white shield, and manoeuvres his tall horse, he shall not go unhurt from Leire; it is right to lay low the warrior god in battle. Now, warlike Hialti, let a handsome destruction overtake those who fall before the face of their king, having spent their last energies. While life lasts may we strive to perish with honour and our hands reap a fine end. Struck down I shall die at the head of my slain leader, and you will drop face-foremost at his feet, so that one who views body on body may see how we make return for the gold received from our master. We shall be the carrion of ravens and nourish gluttonous eagles, our bodies a banquet for birds of prey. Though fearless in war it is proper that earls should fall, and embrace their illustrious king in a common death.¹⁹

The final twelve lines in Saxo's version, and most of the last sentence in the saga, would not be out-of-place in the mouth of Wiglaf, but the contemptuous and defiant attitude Bjarki shows towards Odin has, naturally, no counterpart in any Old English poem--including Beowulf, where the hero repeatedly thanks the deity and utters no reproaches at all.

Bjarki's behaviour is very similar to that of other characters in Eddic poetry, where Odin's appearance among men generally tells the man or men concerned that they are doomed. Doomed heroes generally react defiantly--to no avail. Obvious examples include the ending of Grímnismál, stanza 53, where Odin taunts Geirroð, saying that he is indeed in the presence of Odin, and inviting him to approach if he dares; Geirroð

makes a hostile gesture towards the god, but trips over his own sword and dies (p. 68). King Heidric, Odin's victim in a riddle contest, is similarly indignant, and makes a similarly futile attempt to assault the god. In Vaförúfismál, stanza 55, the victim appears to be less defiant, but he knows he is doomed. We do not hear whether he proposes any action against his guest, but his last words suggest his resignation to his doom (stanza 55).

In sources other than Eddic poetry, there are a few instances of visits from Odin which do not have fatal consequences, such as the visit of Odin to Olaf Tryggvason recounted in Chapter 4 of Olaf's saga Tryggvasonar in Heimskringla and the similar visit to St. Olaf in Olafs saga helgi.²⁰ However, Odin's presence in older poetry, including Bjarkamál, bodes ill, and Bjarki's defiant attitude is a typical reaction to reminders of the god's immanence. Another interesting example is Evind Finnsson's Hákonarmál,²¹ in which two valkyries are sent by Odin to fetch King Hákon. Hákon is already dead when he converses with the valkyries, but he nevertheless voices a protest at his fate, accusing the valkyries of turning the tide of battle against him unfairly. They reply that he did win the battle and his foes have fled, but Hákon still expresses distrust of Odin and approaches Valhalla with remarkable wariness and hostility.

The defiance of the doomed hero facing, or about to face, Odin is sufficiently typical of older Norse heroic poetry that it may well have been a traditional scene or "theme" in oral literature: we might describe it as "The Doomed Hero Defies His God." Of course such a 'theme,' unlike the "Beasts of Battle" type-scene, would not be likely to occur in later works written in a Christian milieu.²² The only possible echo in a "Christian" work I know of is Hagen's defiant attitude when told of his doom by mermaids in the Nibelungenlied (âventiure 25).²³ Christian heroic literature, however, often has a strongly parallel scene, that of the hero's dying prayer: such a prayer is, after all, another (if very different!) way of facing the deity, and may (sometimes?) be a deliberate inversion of the postulated original theme.

The principal difference is that the Christian hero (Roland or Byrhtnôþ, for example) is not at all defiant and is apt to die thanking his God. Beowulf, of course, is not a Christian: that, at least, appears to be agreed by all readers of the poem, however they may disagree as to whether he is or is not a negative or positive example of Christian standards. But if Beowulf cannot die a Christian, it is equally certain that he does not behave like a defiant pagan hero. In fact, when Beowulf gives thanks that God will not find him guilty of crimes such as the slaughter of kin, there is an implicit assumption that he knows he will be judged by God and wishes to have God's approval, just as do such explicitly Christian heroes as Roland and Byrhtnôþ. Further, there are strong parallels in Beowulf's words to the dying words of Byrhtnôþ and

Roland in the hero's expressions of thanks for his accomplishments and rewards.

Byrhtnôp thanks God for all the joys he had experienced in the world (ll. 173-174); Beowulf, who takes longer to die, enumerates in sixteen of his last forty-three lines the joys for which he is thankful, ranging from his long and peaceful reign to the immense wealth he expects to leave to his people. In a similar situation, Roland, who manages to speak forty-eight lines between his realization that he is about to die and his actual death, devotes many more lines to enumerating his conquests than to confessing his sins.²⁴ While his listing of these military triumphs may sound a lot like the similar boasts of dying pagan heroes such as Hamðir, Roland's motives seem to include justifying himself before God: all of his victories were victories for the Christian cause.

The dying Beowulf makes it very clear indeed that his own actions were undertaken for the sake of his people--and that he is dying with a clear conscience: which Hill must have realized when he called these statements a "confession." It would, then, seem that the Beowulf-poet was very deliberately modifying a traditional scene, and may have been among the very first to transform the pagan scene in which "The Doomed Hero Defies His God" into a Christian equivalent, in which we find the dying hero thanking his God (and, sometimes, reviewing his accomplishments), with, at least in this case, a number of echoes of the older pagan "death-songs," suitably transformed.

1 I refer to recent publications by Robert Fulk, and especially to his oral paper "Redating Beowulf: the Evidence of Kaluza's Law" delivered at the MLA meeting in 1989; presumably he will soon publish his findings in book form.

2 "Hjálmar's Death-Song and the Delivery of Eddic Poetry," Speculum 46 [1971]: 1-20.

3 See my "Modþryðo and Heremod: Intertwined Threads in the Beowulf-Poet's Web of Words," JEGP 83 (1984): 173-81, and cf. Klaeber's comments on Saxo's Lotherus towards the end of his note on Beowulf 901-915; Fr. Klaeber, ed., Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg (Boston, 3rd ed. 1950), p. 164.

4 See Klaeber's note to ll. 901-915, pp. 162-164.

5 These references are given in translation in G. N. Garmonsway and Jaqueline Simpson, trans., Beowulf and Its Analogues (London, 1968), p. 116, and discussed by Klaeber in notes to l. 901ff, pp. 164-165.

6 In The Vikings, ed. R. T. Farrell (London, 1982), pp. 165-179.

7 Others discussing this scene have defined the passage more broadly: Lars Lönnroth considered Beowulf's "death-song" to be ll. 2724-2891, and more recently, in an as yet unpublished paper, Joseph Harris would include Beowulf's words before the battle as well as after, but exclude Wiglaf's remarks insofar as they do not claim to quote Beowulf's.

8 "Sigurth Fafnisbani must have come into the legend as his younger brother at a later time"; The Heroic Legends of Denmark, trans. and rev. (with the author) by Lee M. Hollander (New York, 1919), p. 278.

9 "The Central Feud in Njáls saga," in Sagas of the Icelanders, ed. John Tucker (New York, 1989), pp. 292-322.

10 See, e.g., Paul B. Salmon, Literature in Medieval Germany (London, 1967), pp. 9-10, and Theodore M. Andersson, A Preface to the Nibelungenlied (Stanford, 1987), p. 4.

11 P. 174, citing, in n. 22, p. 179, Hávamál, stanza 110.

12 There are also many negative parallels suggested by Beowulf's words; I have discussed this context in considerable detail elsewhere, in a paper which will be published in a forthcoming festschrift for J. B. Bessinger.

13 Stanza 7 of the poem; in The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise, ed. and trans. Christopher Tolkien (London, 1960), p. 8.

14 Hamðismál, stanzas 26-29; citations from Eddic poetry here are from Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern, I. Text, ed. Gustav Neckel, 3rd ed. revised by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1962).

15 London, 1972.

16 Saxo's Latin version is printed in Olrik, pp. 100-133, with facing-page commentary and parallels, including the extant fragments of the original.

17 In Erik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas (London, 1961), pp. 316-17. Since neither the saga nor Saxo preserves the Bjarkamál exactly, there seemed little point in giving them in the original languages.

18 See Olrik, p. 131.

19 The History of the Danes, trans. Peter Fisher, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson (Cambridge, 1979), I, p. 63.

20 In Flateyjarbók; the episode is discussed and translated by Margaret Schlauch in "Widsith, Vithförull, and Some Other Analogues," PMLA 46 (1931): 969-87; p. 971.

21 In Nora K. Chadwick, ed. and trans., Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 101-109.

22 The theme, or type-scene, was first reported by Francis P. Magoun, Jr., in "The Theme of the Beasts of Battle in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 56 (1955): 81-90, in which he noted a dozen examples in the corpus of Old English poetry. There are, of course, at least as many in Old Norse sources.

23 It may be that these merewip owe something to the older tradition of valkyries, especially since one of them has a name which sounds proper for a valkyrie, 'Sigelint' (cf. 'Sigrdrifa' and the Sigrún of Helgagviða Hundingsbana). See Das Nibelungenlied, ed. Karl Bartsch, rev. Helmut de Boor, 13th rev. ed. (Wiesbaden, 1956), pp. 244-47.

24 Laisses 168-176; pp. 138-147. Most of Roland's lines are direct address to Durendal, his sword; his confession proper takes up only four lines.