

## The Origins of Beowulf: From Vergil to Wiglaf

**Review Number:**

617

**Publish date:**

Tuesday, 31 July, 2007

**Author:**

Richard North

**ISBN:**

9780199206612

**Date of Publication:**

2007

**Price:**

£65.00

**Pages:**

400pp.

**Publisher:**

Oxford University Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199206612.do>

**Place of Publication:**

Oxford

**Reviewer:**

Michael Lapidge

*Beowulf* is an anonymous Old English poem about a hero from Geatland (in modern Sweden) who travels to Denmark where he kills man-eating monsters, and who, in later life, back home in Sweden, confronts and kills a fire-breathing dragon, but dies in the effort. In spite of its fairy-tale subject, the poem has attracted serious scholarly interest for nearly two hundred years. But since, like most Old English poetry, it carries no overt indication of where or when it was composed, or by whom, its origins have always attracted speculation. The framework within which the speculation can be conducted is that, on one hand, one of the characters in the poem (Hygelac, the king of the Geats) can be identified with a warlord mentioned by Gregory of Tours who invaded Francia and was killed there c.520, and, on the other, that the poem is preserved in a single manuscript written within a few years of 1000. Most students of the poem opt for a date in the eighth, ninth or tenth century, and do not attempt greater precision. But since there is no agreed evidence indicating where, let alone by whom, the poem was composed, there has never been a shortage of crackpot theories about its origins, such as those by A.S. Cook, who assigned *Beowulf* to the court of King Aldfrith of Northumbria (d. 706), or by D.R. Howlett, who argued that the poet has encoded his name in lines 887–8 ('under harne **stan** / **æpelinges** bearn') and was to be identified as the Æthelstan who was a priest in the service of King Alfred, with 887–8 representing the years in which he composed the poem; or by K.S. Kiernan, who, in violation of the palaeographical dating of the unique manuscript, argued that it was composed during the reign of King Cnut (1016–35), when its Danish subject-matter would have found a receptive audience in England. But Richard North's recent book is the mother of all crackpot theories.

The cornerstone of North's theory is an apparent coincidence of names: that, at the end of *Beowulf*, old King

Beowulf is killed by a fiery dragon, but before he expires he manages to consign his kingdom to a young kinsman named Wiglaf. North begins with the fact that, in 825, a king of Mercia named Beornwulf was killed in battle with the East Angles (but note: the name ‘Beornwulf’ is philologically distinct from ‘Beowulf’), and within a couple of years one Wiglaf became king of Mercia (827), a successor of sorts to Beornwulf (it is inconvenient that Beornwulf was in fact succeeded not by Wiglaf but by one Ludeca, who was killed soon afterwards). It is North’s argument that *Beowulf* may be read as ‘an Anglo-Saxon roman à clef’ (p. 294) on the succession of Mercian kings in the late-eighth and early-ninth centuries, focussed principally on Kings Offa, Cenwulf, Beornwulf, and Wiglaf. Now in the poem there is indeed a character named Offa (who is in fact a king of Angeln in Denmark), and, as we have seen, a character named Wiglaf. Beornwulf, who in real life is not known to have killed either man-eating monsters or dragons, is supposed to be represented by Beowulf, and Cenwulf by the character Hygelac. According to North, *Beowulf* was composed in 826–7, shortly after Beornwulf’s death, and he situates its composition in the Mercian minster of Breedon, and suggests that the abbot of Breedon at about this time, one Eanmund, was the author of the poem. In order to give substance to these (apparently preposterous) identifications, North is obliged to provide a detailed analysis of early-ninth-century Mercian history. Herein lies the potential interest of his book for readers of *Reviews in History*.

Unfortunately, ninth-century Mercian regnal succession is little more than a list of names because, leaving aside the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, there are no pre-Conquest narrative sources to speak of. North therefore turns to the evidence of Mercian charters. Basing himself principally on Simon Keynes’s *Atlas of Attestations*, North attempts to deduce kinship affiliations from recurring name-elements in the witness-lists of Mercian charters. For example, he deduces that ealdormen named Beornheard and Beornnoth must be kinsmen of King Beornwulf (pp. 272–4); from Worcestershire place-names which have the same elements (such as ‘Barnesleyhall’ from OE ‘Beornodesleah’), he then deduces ‘a policy of territorial enlargement’ into Worcestershire by the ‘Beorn’ kinship group, including King Beornwulf himself. He then notes that the ‘Burghal Hidage’ reckoned the value of the territory of the Hwicce (which corresponds roughly to Worcestershire) at 7,000 hides, a figure which is quickly linked by North to the fact that Beowulf in the poem was given 7,000 hides by King Hygelac (p. 272). Overall, however, North’s handling of charter evidence fails to inspire confidence. He seizes on the names in witness-lists without ever asking himself whether the charters in question are authentic ninth-century instruments (or whether they are much later post-Conquest forgeries, in which case the names may have been lifted, and corrupted, from earlier documents). He often misunderstands the language of the charters themselves (as when he translates *tempore clericorum ibidem degentium* as ‘at a time when degenerate clergy lived there’ (p. 273): *degentium* simply means ‘were living’ and has nothing to do with degeneracy). He attempts to argue that Eanmund, abbot of Breedon in the 840s, was a literate scholar, on the grounds that he allegedly drafted charters in favour of Breedon: ‘From the principle that the beneficiary drafts the privilege, it follows that the writing of these charters of the 840s was done or supervised by Abbot Eanmund himself’ (p. 327); but the ‘principle’ is not one that any student of Anglo-Saxon diplomatic could accept without qualification. A beneficiary *might* sometimes have been involved in the production of a charter, but such involvement is very far from being the general rule. North then turns to consider S 193 (BCS 434) which, since it includes a line quoted from Aldhelm’s *Carmina ecclesiastica*, marks ‘the draftsman as a poet’ (p. 327); and since *Beowulf* refers at one point to Eanmundes laf (‘Eanmund’s legacy’ [2611])—Eanmund was a Swedish warrior whose sword was handed down to Wiglaf—North hypothesizes that Eanmund was the author of *Beowulf*, and that ‘Eanmund’s legacy’ refers to the poem itself.

Another aspect of North’s reconstruction of ninth-century Mercian history which fails to convince is his use of post-Conquest narrative sources to supply details of family alliances lacking in the charters. The sources on which he most often relies are Thomas of Marlborough’s thirteenth-century *History of Evesham* (which North quotes from the nineteenth-century Rolls Series edition, rather than from the recent Oxford Medieval Text by J. Sayers and L. Watkiss) and the fifteenth-century pseudo-Ingulf *Historia Croylandensis*. Leaving aside the doubtful value of such sources for the reconstruction of Anglo-Saxon history—I suspect that no Anglo-Saxon historian would be caught dead quoting the pseudo-Ingulf—it is worrying that North often fails to understand the Latin which he quotes, as when he translates a sentence from the *Vita duorum Offarum*

(another post-Conquest text of dubious reliability), *prospere veneris, fili et gener as* ‘prosper from this, O son and offspring of love’ (p. 236), where *prospere* is an adverb, not an imperative, and *veneris* is the future perfect of *venio* (‘opportune you’ll have come, my son and son-in-law’), not the genitive of the noun *venus*; or when, quoting from Thomas of Marlborough’s *Vita S. Wistani* the words *Brifardum videlicet consulem* (p. 319), he translates them as ‘Berhtfrith the consul’, and then comments: ‘with the term *consul* Thomas presents Berhtfrith as one of two caretaker rulers, of whom neither is king’ (ibid.)—as if the author were referring to the Roman republic, when two consuls were elected at the beginning of each year. In fact *consul* in Anglo-Saxon sources is simply a fancy word for ‘ealdorman’, as H. M. Chadwick established long ago. If North’s use of historical sources is a pervasive cause of alarm, so, too, is his specious reasoning. One example will have to suffice. North wishes to situate the composition of *Beowulf* at Breedon, as we have seen. But there is no evidence that Breedon in the ninth century had a library of any kind (certainly no manuscripts written at Breedon survive), and *Beowulf* is obviously the work of a Christian poet who had some knowledge of Latin texts, not least the Bible. So North must somehow establish that ninth-century Breedon did indeed have a library. His convoluted argument occupies his chapter 6 (pp. 157–93), and runs as follows. An early-eighth-century scholar from Breedon, one Tatwine, refers in one of his poems to *philosophia* (North misquotes the relevant lines on p. 177), and some aspects of *Beowulf* suggest that its poet had read Boethius, *De consolazione Philosophiae*, so perhaps a copy of that work was available at Breedon (the lines of Tatwine refer to *philosophia*, not to Boethius, and are doubtful evidence at best); furthermore, the *Beowulf*-poet takes care to make a (philosophical) distinction between things perceived by the senses and things understood by the intellect (pp. 173–5), a distinction like that made in Cicero’s *Academica priora*, and subsequently by Augustine in his *Contra Academicos*. Neither text was known in ninth-century England. However, Augustine’s treatise, as well as Boethius’s *De consolazione Philosophiae*, are recorded as being present in the ninth-century library of Corbie (in Picardy). Now, North continues, the ninth-century sculptured frieze at Breedon shows Carolingian influence; in particular, the design of one of the mounted spearmen in the frieze has a parallel in the so-called ‘Corbie Psalter’ of c. 800 (p. 178). North concludes in a specious piece of reasoning: ‘Breedon’s carvings show that this minster looked up to what Corbie had to provide. The fact, therefore, that Corbie held the *De consolazione*, *Contra Academicos*, and *Conlationes* goes some way to showing that Breedon did also’ (p. 181). How? Why?

The logic which governs North’s treatment of literary parallels is equally specious. One of the texts which Tatwine—who, as we have seen, was active at Breedon in the early-eighth century—knew well was Vergil’s *Aeneid*. As various scholars have suggested, the *Beowulf*-poet was also familiar with the *Aeneid*. But in order to strengthen his case for the composition of *Beowulf* at Breedon, North evidently felt obliged to add to the evidence for the poet’s knowledge of Vergil. Some of the parallels which he adduces are simply preposterous, as when he suggests (pp. 90–3) that the old Danish king, Hrothgar, who in the poem gives Beowulf some spiritual guidance, is modelled on Vergil’s sibyl, who guides Aeneas through the underworld (it is worrying that he often misquotes Vergil during this discussion: note, for example, *horridum stridens* misquoted from *Aeneid* VI. 288 on p. 93). But the real problem is not with misquotation, but with North’s special pleading, as when he argues that the *Beowulf*-poet modelled his portrait of Hrothgar’s queen, Wealtheow, on Vergil’s Amata, the daughter of King Latinus. Thus he adduces as evidence of the English poet’s debt the fact that at one point Wealtheow set out from her bower with ‘a retinue of maidens’, *mægþa hose* (924), a statement which ‘appears to owe something’ (p. 127) to Vergil’s description of Amata in book XI of the *Aeneid*, who was borne along ‘with a great company of mothers’ (XI. 478: *subuehitur magna matrum regina caterua*). It is not clear to me why a model needs to be found for the English poet’s description of a queen walking in the company of her hand-maidens; but in any case ‘maidens’ are scarcely the same thing as ‘matrons’ (North quickly effaces the distinction by speaking thereafter simply of ‘women’: p. 128). I offer this example as characteristic of North’s tendentious arguments for the *Beowulf*-poet’s indebtedness to Vergil, and for his method of argumentation in general.

When he confines himself to discussing the narrative of *Beowulf*, North is often capable of sensitive analysis, as, for example, his discussion of the motivation of Queen Wealtheow in wishing to use her daughter Freowaru to form a marriage alliance with King Ingeld, rather than with the newly-arrived Beowulf (pp. 101–10); but even the value of this helpful discussion is quickly submerged in a sea of silly (and

unnecessary) hypotheses, namely that the *Beowulf*-poet had access to an earlier, but now lost, Mercian poem on Ingeld and Freawaru, and that it was to this poem that Alcuin was referring when he admonished Bishop Speratus (whom North, following a suggestion by Donald Bullough, identifies with one Unwona, bishop of Leicester) to keep Christian worship separate from pagan poetry, in the famous words 'Quid Hinieldus cum Christo'. The letter in which Alcuin refers to Ingeld contains alliterating phrases (for example, paganis et perditis), from which North concludes: 'This alliteration captures the technique of an eighth-century Mercian poem' (p. 134). (It also captures the technique of Latin prose from its very beginnings, and medieval Germanic verse written most anywhere at any time, but it is not in North's interest to mention this.) And since Breedon is in the diocese of Leicester, Alcuin must have been referring to the (entirely hypothetical) eighth-century poem on Ingeld which, on North's wild interpretation of the evidence, was subsequently used by the poet of *Beowulf*.

One's overall impression of this book is deep disappointment: that a scholar so evidently familiar with *Beowulf*, and possessed of wide-ranging (if not always accurate) learning, should spawn hypothesis upon hypothesis without ever taking the trouble to subject these hypotheses to common sense. One can only wonder about the process, and the readers' reports, by which such a book came to be accepted for publication by the Oxford University Press. Because of the outrageous and uncontrolled nature of the speculation which it contains, *The Origins of Beowulf* is, in this reviewer's opinion, unlikely to have any impact whatsoever on the field of Anglo-Saxon studies.

#### **Other reviews:**

oxford journals

<http://res.oxfordjournals.org/content/59/238/134.full> [2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/617>

#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4113>

[2] <http://res.oxfordjournals.org/content/59/238/134.full>