

**Shippey, Tom. 2022. *Beowulf and the North before the Vikings*.  
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Although this book examines the historical contexts of the Old English poem *Beowulf* from a variety of perspectives, it is directed not toward historians (although they are surely part of the book's broader audience) but primarily toward students and scholars of *Beowulf*. The arguments of the book are presented in a very readable, accessible style, so it is also directed toward a general audience that is interested in either *Beowulf* or early Scandinavian history, or both. Through its examination of so much of the internal and external history of the poem, it reminds us of what an extraordinary, complex creation *Beowulf* is, and I hope that its publication will encourage us to engage more fully with this complexity. Despite all the fictional elements in the poem—which embrace everything to do with the hero and his adventures—much of the remainder of the work emerges as faithful a record of the Scandinavian past as an early Anglo-Saxon poet relying entirely upon oral sources could possibly achieve. The poet placed his fictional hero and his fantastic adventures firmly—and, as Shippey stresses, carefully—within the tradition of the heroic legends he inherited from his sources. In addition to discussing *Beowulf* itself as history and asserting its value as a historical source, this book also explores the historical contexts of the poem: both the period of its setting in migration-age Scandinavia, and the possible connections between England and Scandinavia that may have led to the composition of the poem in England. Shippey argues in conclusion that more of the sixth-century invaders of England came from Scandinavia than we have so far recognized, and that the original audience of the poem would have viewed the history the poem presents as their own history as well. Although few today would accept these heroic legends as history, they were shaped in response to historical events, and they would have been accepted as history by the original audience of the poem. Oral poems and poems derived from oral tradition such as *Beowulf* provided the only information about the Scandinavian past that this audience possessed.

Prof. Shippey presents this book as a challenge to the scholarly consensus which emerged in response to Tolkien's British Academy lecture published as *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* in 1936 (vii). Tolkien was reacting against the earlier tendency among scholars to overlook the actual story of the poem in favor of the heroic history and legends that surround the hero's adventures. By ridiculing this approach and arguing that the poem should be accepted on the merits of the story it presents, Tolkien initiated a new consensus that has viewed the poem primarily as a work of art that needs to be interpreted and evaluated in terms of its own literary virtues. Although this consensus has been highly productive, an unfortunate side-effect has been the neglect of the historical elements of the work. Everyone, of course, accepts that the repeated references to Hygelac's ill-fated expedition to Frisia are based upon a historical event recorded in Book 3, ch. 3 of Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, and elsewhere. But by and

large the other potential historical connections of the poem have received little attention since the middle of the last century. Shippey reminds us that Tolkien himself continued to take the historical and legendary side of the poem seriously, as can be seen in the notes from his lectures on the Finn story and *Beowulf* published as *Finn and Hengest* (ed. Alan Bliss) and *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary* (ed. Christopher Tolkien). Indeed, he cites Tolkien's chronologies in these two books when he presents his own, somewhat broader chronology of events on 117–19.

Tolkien presented his British Academy lecture as a correction of what he saw as an over-emphasis on legendary history to the detriment of the poem as poem. Perhaps, if we are fortunate, Shippey's book will contribute to a similar correction and return the historical dimensions of the poem to the center of our critical concerns. To this end, he explores these dimensions from as many perspectives as possible. There is, first of all, the question of the value of *Beowulf* for the study of history. Here, as elsewhere in his discussion, Shippey has the advantage of writing during a period of extensive archaeological excavations in Denmark and Sweden. The best-known excavations among students of *Beowulf* are those at Lejre, the probable site of Heorot, which confirm the importance of the site, and thus of the Scyldings, during the sixth century. Less well-known are the implications of a brief passage at the beginning of the poem:

Oft Scyld Scefing      sceapena þreatum,  
 monegum mægþum,      meodosetla ofteah . . . (lines 4-5)  
 "Scyld Scaefing often deprived troops of enemies, many tribes, of mead-seats".

The *meodosetla* are a synecdoche for the hall and for the reciprocal relationship between a leader and his retainers. Along with the immediately following lines (6–10), these verses summarize Scyld's expansion of his kingdom and the resulting displacement of warriors and their allegiance from other leaders and their halls to his own, a process which ultimately culminates in Hroðgar's construction of Heorot. Shippey connects the lines above to the archaeological traces of "smashed halls", a phenomenon which was quite common throughout southern Scandinavia, and which appears to be evidence of political conquest and expansion as opposed to economic raids carried out for cattle and other plunder. He further correlates the Scylding expansion with a conclusion by Prof. Ulf Näsman based on archaeological excavations: through warfare and diplomatic marriage the Danes had achieved by the year 500 hegemony over the eastern North Sea basin and the southwestern Baltic.

The opening lines of the poem, up until the first appearance of Grendel, present a clear account of legendary history that corresponds quite closely with the archaeological record. If we put the eponymous, mythical Scyld ("Shield son of Sheaf") and his son Beow ("Barley") to one side, and take Healfdene as a probable founder of the Scylding line, as Shippey suggests, then we have a passage which appears to be reasonably close to the historical sequence as it is reconstructed through archaeology.

With the appearance of Grendel (line 86), of course, we first encounter the fantastic elements of the poem, and shortly after that the fiction of the hero himself. As Shippey emphasizes, the actual fights between the hero and Grendel, where fantasy and fiction merge, account for only some 30% of the narrative. However, his estimate of the portion devoted to the historical background at 70% strikes me as a bit high. True, the Finnsburg

episode and the hero's prophecy of the reawakening of feud between the Danes and the Heaðobeards do belong to the historical background, but a good portion of the sequences apart from the actual fights involve either Beowulf's conversation with others, the preparations for his funeral, or other fantastic or fictional content such as the dragon's occupation of the barrow, the Lament of the Last Survivor and the passage about the curse on the treasure. Nonetheless, the point the author makes is important: the background of heroic legend and history against which the poem presents Beowulf's deeds is a substantial and an essential part of the poem.

I find myself less in tune with some of Shippey's arguments than with others, but this is mainly because I am skeptical of some of the central aspects of the rather pessimistic consensus view of the poem that he accepts. So, for example, I view the interpretation of Hroþulf as a traitor in-waiting as a construction of twentieth-century criticism. It is true, as Shippey emphasizes, that *Beowulf* frequently relies on hints and allusions to evoke stories of the heroic world, but this tendency strikes me as a reason for the exercise of caution when we interpret such passages. Especially in this case: unlike Hroðgar's two sons, Hroþulf fits the Anglo-Saxon qualifications for kingship very well. He is a mature warrior of royal blood and his seat next to the king indicates that he already shares, in some unspecified degree, the royal power and responsibilities. Indeed, the poem refers to Hroðgar and Hroþulf as a single unit: *þær þa godan twegen sæton suhtergefædran* "where the two good ones sat, nephew and paternal uncle" (lines 1164–1165), and like *Widsith* (lines 45–46), it emphasizes how faithful and loyal they are to each other.

I am similarly skeptical of the reading of the Messenger's speech as a prediction of the conquest of the Geats by the Swedes. The Geats do face a much harsher future, since the return of warfare with their neighbors the Swedes is all but certain now that Beowulf is gone. But the centerpiece of this speech is the Battle of Ravenswood, an especially bloody and horrific struggle in which two kings perish, one from each kingdom, and yet both kingdoms continue as before. Moreover, if the stories of the Geats and their kings in part II are reliably based on historical legend, as both Shippey and I believe, then the presentation of a story from the distant past to convey the hardships of the approaching future of the Geats instead of one that actually addresses the supposed coming fall of the kingdom strongly suggests that the poet did not know of any such event or story. In any case, taking the account of the Battle of Ravenswood as a prediction of the destruction of the Geats is to respond only to the strong *affective* (i.e. emotional) elements of the narrative while overlooking the text itself. The future of the Geats is left open at the end of the poem. Although this future is clearly not going to be as good or secure as the long years of Beowulf's rule, Wiglaf's exercise of authority in the poem after the hero's death provides a reason for optimism, since he is presented as an embodiment of Beowulf's heroic virtues transposed down into a more human, realistic scale.

Thus, although I am fascinated by Shippey's account of the migration-period crisis in Scandinavia in chapter 3, I do not see an immediate connection to the poem, in part because I do not anticipate, as he does, an impending fall of the Geats. But I also have trouble understanding how the impact of an economic collapse in Scandinavia beginning in the middle of the sixth century would have been transmitted through the heroic legends that the poet inherited and reworked. On the other hand, I am impressed by his argument that the opening lines of the Messenger's speech addressing the hostility of the

Franks and Frisians toward the Geats (lines 2911–2921) reflect the way the Frankish kings controlled and often cut off the flow of gold to the north. But I am not convinced, primarily because this passage begins with the lines *Nu ys leodum wen / orleghwile* “now I expect a time of war for [our] people” (lines 2911–2912)—as if the speaker is expecting the Franks to mount a naval expedition against them! Nonetheless, Shippey’s argument is the best explanation for taking this peculiar passage seriously that I have yet encountered.

Returning to broader issues of the book, I think it would have been helpful if Prof. Shippey had distinguished more sharply between what we today are willing to accept as history and what the poet and his original audience would have accepted, for we are talking about two very different kinds of history here: our modern notion of history, on the one hand, and on the other the heroic, legendary history that has been passed down in the poetic tradition. Given the correspondences between the poem’s genealogies of the Scylding and the Scylfing dynasties and those that can be reconstructed from Saxo and early Norse sources, we can view the poem’s presentation as a solid record of heroic legend, and we can therefore have a fair amount of confidence in the genealogy and history, such as it is, of the kings of the Geats, which are unrecorded elsewhere. But the relationship between the heroic history we encounter in the poem and the actual course of historical events seems to me to be general enough for historians to be cautious in using the poem as an entirely reliable source, although it is their own loss when they dismiss it entirely. But it is a different matter for those of us who are students of literature: because the poem presents itself as a record of legendary history that stretches well over half a century, we need to unite this historical perspective with the more obvious fantastic and fictional elements in our interpretations and understanding of the poem. What, precisely, is this work that combines fiction, fantasy, and a conscientious recording of heroic history into a single work? Ignoring the fantasy and fiction in favor of the heroic history, as so many of Tolkien’s predecessors did, is to ignore the poet’s creation, but treating the entire poem as a fictional work silently assimilates it to our modern notions of historical fiction. Fortunately, no one (or at least no one that I have encountered) has argued for the poem as a forerunner of the historical novel. But what then is *Beowulf*? What can the remarkable mixture of fantasy, fiction and legend in the poem tell us about the possible purposes and goals of the poet when he composed this work? And what guidance, if any, does the presence of this mixture give us in our readings of the poem?

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