

Reconstructing the Politics of the Dark Age

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I've written elsewhere – see <http://www.lotrplaza.com/showthread.php?18483>, and note the complementary essay by Michael Drout, same reference but the number is 17739 – that what I regret about Tolkien's famous 1936 essay on "The Monsters and the Critics" is that he discredited and put a stop to any discussions about the historical value of *Beowulf*, by warning everyone that "[The poem's] illusion of historical truth and perspective ... is largely a product of art", and that "the seekers after history must beware lest the glamour of Poesis overcome them". The seekers took the warning, and it's been axiomatic ever since that the poem is "valueless as history". It's also been very generally accepted – here contradicting what Tolkien called "one of the firmer conclusions of research" – that while we don't and can't know when the poem was composed, there's no strong reason to suppose it was very far from the date of the one surviving manuscript, which can be dated securely to close on the year 1000. Which means that since the events of the poem took place centuries before that (if they did at all), there is all the more reason for not taking the poem's complex political and historical narrative seriously, even as a memory.

Things are changing, if slowly, as shown by the volume of *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, which will be reviewed in a future Mallorn by Nelson Goering (aka "Mandos", and very rightly, for he is a strict and impartial judge). The whole issue of historicity has also been revived by embarrassing archaeological discoveries at the village of

Gamle Lejre in Denmark. This was long equated with the *Hleithra* of old texts, the legendary home of the Skjöldung dynasty, the Scyldings of *Beowulf*, but it was again generally accepted that the legends had no basis. Apart from its giant mounds (which is actually quite a big "apart"), it did not look like an important place. But in digs carried out up to the summer of 2009, archaeologists again and again unearthed the remains of enormous halls, six of them so far. The insignificant village really had been a power-centre for centuries, and the legends really did have a basis. For all this, see *Beowulf and Lejre*, ed. John Niles (2007), which gives a great deal of evidence for fact and for legend – accompanied, I have to say, by a good deal of squirming from people who really *don't* want to have to eat their hats.

Finn and Hengest

Something else we now know, however, is that Tolkien *did not really mean* all that he said about the poem and history back in 1936. He took it as history very seriously indeed. This would have been evident to anyone who read *Finn and Hengest* when it was eventually published in 1982. Unfortunately, almost no-one did, at least among the ranks of *Beowulf* scholars. I have seen no more than a couple of references to it in the voluminous literature of comment on the poem. Tolkien 1936 was too firmly established in the academic mainstream for Tolkien 1982 to be able to force its way in.

But now we have Tolkien 2014 as well, which in a way



complements Tolkien 1982, for its extensive “Commentary” on the poem omits the whole central section of which the “Finn and Hengest” story forms a part. Getting to my main and only point in this piece, what I appreciate most about that “Commentary” is Tolkien’s very careful attempt to establish a working chronology for the events of the poem, and to show that the poem’s many allusions and apparently random remarks about the past can be fitted together remarkably well. Now, that could be “the product of art”, and art certainly comes into it, for Beowulf himself (who is probably completely fictitious) has been fitted in to just the right moment in several overlapping cycles of legend. But if one does take the poem seriously – and Tolkien wholeheartedly believed in taking ancient works seriously, however hard they were to understand – then it gives a remarkably consistent and coherent geo-political picture, of a place and time for which we have almost no other documentary evidence at all.

Briefly, it seems to me that Tolkien makes several points, or arguments, about what lay behind the central events of the poem.

Danes’ Disaster

First, the poem starts off by telling us that the Danes suffered from a disastrous interregnum before the coming of the mysterious foundling Scyld. Scyld himself does not make a lot of sense. Does his description “Scyld Scaefing” mean “Scyld-with-a-sheaf” or “Scyld-son-of-Sheaf”? It can hardly be the latter, for he arrives as a baby, unable to talk or say who his father is. But if he just *has* a sheaf of corn with him, and his son is called (as Tolkien argued, see p. 145) Beow = “barley”, then he looks like some kind of culture-deity, while his own name is readily explained as a back-formation from what the Danes called themselves, “the shieldings, the warrior-people”. But the interregnum? Well, declared Tolkien (p. 143), and it makes simple and evident sense, the poem twice mentions a king of the Danes who was driven out for his cruelty, a king called Heremod. That caused the interregnum, the new dynasty started with Healfdene – and though Tolkien doesn’t go on to state this, new kings have a habit of inventing illustrious or even semi-divine ancestry to authorise their power-grab.

Next, what Healfdene did was start the process of nation-formation which led to modern Denmark, by rolling up the many contending tribes into a coalition. Critical in Tolkien’s view was the seizure of the site of Heorot, at what is now Lejre. This, he argued (p. 157), was a cult-centre of the non-Aesir gods Frey and Ing (p. 179), and it was seized in his view, by Healfdene, from the almost-forgotten tribe of Heatho-Bards (“Battle-Bards”). But the Bards under their king Froda came back and re-occupied it, in the process killing Heorogar, eldest son of Healfdene and brother of Hrothgar – it’s significant that he has been completely forgotten by Scandinavian tradition, though there is a gaping hole where he ought to be, while Scandinavian tradition is also graphic on the determined attempt by Froda to finish off his (Heorogar’s) two younger brothers. Those two brothers survived

and in their turn killed Froda and re-occupied Lejre: this is the *heresped*, “success in war”, with which Hrothgar is credited in the poem, and which he celebrated by building Heorot.

All this is in the past at the time of Beowulf’s arrival at the now-haunted hall in the poem, but in the near future is Hrothgar’s attempt to settle this long feud by a diplomatic marriage of his daughter Frea-waru (note the name: Frey-names are very rare in Old English) to Froda’s son Ingeld, who has been growing up all the time since Heorot was built, twelve years according to the poem, time enough to reach maturity. The marriage will fail, Ingeld will be killed in battle, and Heorot burned to the ground: Tolkien thought this would be as the result of a Bardic campaign, but it would be more dramatic, as has been suggested, if the old feud was rekindled at the marriage itself, at the bride’s home of Heorot – not quite what Beowulf predicts, but then he’s predicting! The irony is he guesses right, the marriage isn’t going to work, but he guesses wrong, in that the situation known to legend is *even worse* than he predicts. It’s not some anonymous Danish youth who starts the brawl, as Beowulf imagines, it will be Ingeld personally.

Focus on the Geats

Meanwhile other things have been happening. One of the most striking and unpredictable ways in which *Beowulf* differs from the much later-recorded Scandinavian legends of this time and place is that it centres on the Geats, the inhabitants of East- and West-Götaland in what is now southern Sweden. The Geatas or Gautar never vanished, but they lost their independence, to the Swedes – well, some time way back when. In *Beowulf*, this hasn’t happened. Actually, the Geats are on the up. In the poem their king, Beowulf’s maternal uncle Hygelac, has fairly recently killed the Swedish king Ongentheow, who must have been succeeded by his elder son Ohthere – king, says Tolkien, of a reduced and defeated kingdom (pp. 219-20). It’s also clear from the poem that the Danes and the Geats have not been on good terms, and that Hrothgar, looking as with the Bards for a diplomatic solution, has sent gifts to the Geats to try to heal the breach: a good time to have done that would be just after Hygelac had killed Ongentheow and succeeded himself to the Geatish throne (see pp. 217-20). Tolkien notes, however, that the arrival of Beowulf creates a bit of a problem of tact for Hrothgar, for Hrothgar’s sister-in-law (also his niece, as a result of incest, but let’s not go into that, the poem’s scribe A seems to have been embarrassed by it too and done a bit of ineffective censorship) has been married off to a prince of the Swedes, the Geats’ hereditary enemies. Indeed, if you take all the connections seriously (as Tolkien did), Hrothgar is welcoming to his hall the nephew of the man who killed his niece/sister-in-law’s father. But just at that point, Tolkien argues (p. 220 again) her husband was only the younger brother of a weakened king, himself unlikely to succeed. Better to conciliate the rising power of the Geats.

But this wouldn’t last. Two things are clear about history as imagined in *Beowulf*. One is that things are going to go bad

for the Danes and the Scylding dynasty – not right away, but in the end. After Hrothgar is dead, his sons and nephews will wipe each other out to the last man, in civil war. The other is that things are going to go bad for the Geats. Hygelac, warlike and aggressive, will launch a major raid on the kingdom of the Franks, get cut off and killed, a disaster from which only Beowulf (very implausibly) escapes. The Swedish prince who was once the younger brother of a weakened king (see above) will take over from his nephews and kill Hygelac's only son. The poem also says that Beowulf will take revenge for this and re-establish the Geatish kingdom, but even that is only temporary (and the last bit may well be total invention). The Danes and Geats are for the chop. The poet has set the first two-thirds of his poem just before things start to go pear-shaped, and the last third, many years later according to him (making time for Beowulf to have a long and successful life) just before a final catastrophe.

It's all very subtle, very appropriate, very consistent. The only thing that doesn't fit (apart from the unlikely career of Beowulf himself) was, in Tolkien's view, the representation of Hygelac as a man with a very young wife, Hygd daughter of Haereth. But he's said already to have a daughter, old enough to be married. By a first wife? But Hygelac is also said at this point to be young, while Hrothgar – great stress on this – is really old. But they seem to be sons of approximate contemporaries. Tolkien could only suggest that Hygelac's death in his prime led to him being remembered as a young warrior, while Hrothgar's death after a long life, and perhaps in his bed, led to his image being fixed as a greybeard (p. 322).

Tolkien's Chronology

But having said all that, Tolkien actually offered a chronology of events, starting with the birth of Healfdene c. 425, taking in (along with many other events) the birth of Hygelac fifty years later, his coming to the throne c. 505, and his death in battle c. 525. If I have followed Tolkien correctly, he would put the Danish – Bardish wars approximately 490-500, with in succession Healfdene dying in his bed c. 485, the Bards killing Heorogar c. 490, the Danes killing Froda c. 495, Heorot being built c. 500, Ingeld being killed and Heorot burnt down c. 515-20 (just after Beowulf's departure back to Geatland), with major events for the dynasties of Denmark, Sweden and Geatland taking place over the next, say, twenty or thirty years.

The anchor-point of this chronology – the only one we have, but it's a good one – is the death of Hygelac at the mouth of the Rhine, recorded by (among others) the sixth-century historian Gregory of Tours. He places this in the reign of Theudebert King of the Franks (died 533/4), before the killing of Baderic King of the Thuringians (529), but after either the accession of Bishop Quintianus (515), or maybe his death (525). Tolkien guessed the date as c. 525, one might say plus or minus about four.

One might note that this chronology can readily be integrated with the one Tolkien worked out in *Finn and Hengest*, though he seems to have moved his dates

backward five years or so: in the 1982 volume he dates Hrothgar's birth c. 460-5, in the 2014 one it's given as 455, other events rescheduled to match. Meanwhile the major events in the Hengest story are early fifth century rather than early sixth – they've become history already to the characters in *Beowulf*.

Obviously the whole "reconstruction" – a loaded word for philologists like Tolkien – is open to challenge, but it's coherent, it's plausible (there are several telling details too complex to mention), and it does fit what seems to be the poet's keen interest, which he expected to have recognised, in the politics of the post-Roman Northern world. It makes several of the poem's apparently unnecessary grace-notes – like the fleeting reference to earlier Danish-Geatish poor relations – unexpectedly relevant. I'd add that it is not just the excavations at Lejre which have made this picture suddenly look not so easy to dismiss. There are also archaeological indications of serious trouble in the Northern world in the 530s, though its causes are not known. Tolkien would have been very interested.

A final point, and this one (at last) is about Tolkien: Tolkien worked very hard indeed at establishing a chronology for his own fictions, indeed many chronologies, day-by-day for the action of *Lord of the Rings*, but also extending back into time for Rohan, for Gondor, for First, Second and Third Ages. They contain many significant details, which most readers never notice: but they were not just doodling. The care which Tolkien devoted to the chronology of *Beowulf* ought to be matched by the care we devote to Tolkien's chronologies.

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