

An ethnic dating of *Beowulf*

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ABSTRACT

An interest in Danish legend first appears at the West Saxon court in the 890s when King Alfred traced his father's lineage to Scyld. Alfred traced his mother's ancestry through the Jutish kings of Wight to Goths and Geats, suggesting a motive for the particular view of the ethnic past we find in *Beowulf*, especially the friendship the poet constructs between a Geatish ætheling and a Danish monarch. A modification of Michael Lapidge's paleographical dating of the archetype of *Beowulf* (2000) indicates a West Saxon exemplar before c. 900, confirming the mature king's court as a plausible context for *Beowulf*'s composition.

Many of the most promising approaches to the dating of *Beowulf* can be found in Colin Chase's 1981 collection of essays on the subject: codicological, palaeographical, linguistic, onomastic, metrical and others.¹ These efforts were searchingly reviewed by Robert Fulk at the time, who challenged arguments for dates in the ninth or tenth centuries by Alexander Murray, Roberta Frank and E. G. Stanley, as well as Kevin Kiernan's case for a very late, eleventh-century, date based upon the condition of the manuscript.² Fulk presented his own method of dating the poem on metrical and linguistic grounds in 1992, arguing for two possible earlier dates: before 725 if the poem is Mercian in origin, before 825 if Northumbrian.³ However, in 1995 Roy Liuzza rejected all such attempts at dating *Beowulf* based upon the language of the sole surviving text in London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv.⁴ He found significant scribal interference in 21.6 per cent of the lines of other vernacular poems for which we can compare two or more extant versions.⁵ Liuzza concluded from this result that 'the only meaningful date for the *effective composition* of *Beowulf* is that of the manuscript, since any version previously existing would be different to an unknowable degree from the surviving text'.⁶

¹ *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. C. Chase (Toronto, 1981).

² R. Fulk, 'Dating *Beowulf* to the Viking Age', *PQ* 61 (1982), 341–59.

³ R. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia, 1992), pp. 164–8 and 381–91.

⁴ R. Liuzza, 'On the Dating of *Beowulf*', *The Beowulf Reader*, ed. P. Baker (New York, 1995), pp. 281–302. ⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 292–3.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 294–5 (his italics). For other reviews of the subject, cf. R. Bjork and A. Obermeier, 'Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences', *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. R. Bjork and J. Niles (Lincoln, NB, 1997), pp. 13–34, and H. Tristram, 'What's the Point of Dating *Beowulf*?', *Medieval Insular*

Few would now disagree with this conclusion, but some scholars still persist in looking for other clues in the text of Cotton Vitellius A. xv which would indicate a possible context for the creation of its archetype. David Howlett has found numerical patterns in the organization of the text which he believes are consistent with the 'Biblical style' of certain works which issued from King Alfred's court.⁷ Michael Lapidge has most recently attempted to date the archetype of *Beowulf* through a study of scribal errors involving single letters in the manuscript text.⁸ He proposes that the original version of the poem had been written in Anglo-Saxon set minuscule, a script which was unfamiliar to the two copyists of the poem in Cotton Vitellius A. xv. A younger Scribe I used English vernacular minuscule through line 1939, a script which came into use *c.* 1000, while an older Scribe II completed the poem in Anglo-Saxon Square minuscule which had been introduced early in the tenth century. Four of the five 'literal' confusions Lapidge finds would thus suggest a date before Anglo-Saxon set minuscule fell out of use *c.* 900. A fifth kind of error, confusion between *d* and *ð*, would by itself push the date over a hundred and fifty years earlier, since after *c.* 750, Lapidge asserts, 'scribes consistently used the letter eth [*ð*] to distinguish the interdental fricative from the alveolar stop (represented as always by *d*), a practice which had become invariable by the time of King Alfred in the late ninth century'.⁹ Lapidge thus imagines at least three stages of transmission: 1) an original version of the earlier eighth century written in set minuscule, 2) a version copied *c.* 900, again in set minuscule, which admitted the many Early West Saxon linguistic forms that remain in the surviving text, and 3) 'the final act of copying *c.* 1000 which produced Cotton Vitellius A. xv and introduced many of the features of Late West Saxon'.¹⁰ This is a compelling scenario, though few scholars perhaps will be able to follow Lapidge's insistence on the impossibility of confusion between the similar letters *d* and *ð* by the late ninth century, whatever the earlier scribes' normal practice in distinguishing the sounds they are intended to represent.¹¹ A modified version of Lapidge's results, then, leaving aside this anomalous fifth criterion, would yield a simple *terminus ante quem* of *c.* 900.

Literature between the Oral and the Written, II: *Continuity of Transmission* (Tübingen, 1997), pp. 65–80.

⁷ D. Howlett, *British Books in Biblical Style* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 504–40. By 'a process of elimination', Howlett suggests 'that Æthelstan, Alfred's learned Mercian priest and chaplain, presented *Beowulf* to Æthelstan ætheling on the occasion of his ceremonial investiture by Alfred' in 897, a possibility which would 'help explain the Anglian non-West-Saxon elements of the language of the poem' (p. 537). ⁸ 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', *ASE* 29 (2000), 5–41.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 34. ¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 36.

¹¹ E. G. Stanley, 'Paleographical and Textual Deep Waters: <a> for <u> and <u> for <a>, <d> for <ð> and <ð> for <d> in Old English', *ANQ* 15 (2002), 64–72.

In this essay I should like to propose yet another way of trying to date the archetype of *Beowulf*, one which builds gratefully upon these earlier attempts and replicates some of their conclusions, but is more immediately inspired by the recent debate over the ‘ethnogenesis theory’ of Reinhard Wenskus, Herwig Wolfram, Walter Pohl and others to describe how barbarian peoples in early medieval Europe first formed a sense of national identity.¹² Several historians, led by Walter Goffart, have challenged some of the assumptions and applications of this theory,¹³ but consensus seems to have emerged on one basic point: poets, storytellers and genealogists often work to conserve a certain core of archaic ethnic tradition – or at least think they are doing so – while they simultaneously correct, manipulate and enhance that tradition in order to explain contemporary political relations. In particular, poets constantly rationalize accounts of dynastic origins to justify the power structures of their own day, whether actual or merely desired.¹⁴ They appropriate from non-traditional sources, or invent on their own, new traditions of a collective past. And these new traditions, whether oral or literary, vernacular or learned, are presented with great confidence, in a familiar but potent register of time-honoured truth. Of course, a search for the political moment in Anglo-Saxon England which would explain the various ethnic and dynastic manipulations of *Beowulf* is only one among the many other possible ways of trying to date the poem’s original composition. But this approach does enjoy one advantage over most alternative methods – or one liability, depending on our confidence in it. An ethnic dating of *Beowulf* yields a surprisingly precise result.

¹² R. Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* (Cologne, 1961); H. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, trans. T. Dunlap (Berkeley, CA, 1988); *idem*, ‘*Origo et religio*: Ethnic Traditions and Literature in Early Medieval Texts’, *EME* 3 (1994), 19–38; and *Strategies of Distinction: the Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800*, ed. W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (Leiden, 1998).

¹³ C. Bowlus, ‘Ethnogenesis Models and the Age of Migrations: a Critique’, *Austrian Hist. Yearbook* 26 (1995), 147–64; W. Goffart, ‘Two Notes on Germanic Antiquity Today’, *Traditio* 50 (1995), 9–30, and ‘Jordanes’s *Getica* and the Disputed Authenticity of Gothic Origins from Scandinavia’, *Speculum* 80 (2005), 379–98; and A. Gillett, *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2002).

¹⁴ D. Dumville, ‘Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists’, *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. P. Sawyer and I. Wood (Leeds, 1977), pp. 72–104, has studied the political subtext of the surviving Anglo-Saxon royal pedigrees and there are any number of similar studies of African and other genealogical constructions and rationalizations, e.g. D. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford, 1974); B. Blount, ‘Agreeing to Agree on Genealogy: a Luo Sociology of Knowledge’, *Sociocultural Dimensions of Language Use*, ed. B. Blount and M. Sanches (New York, 1975), pp. 117–36; and J. Irvine, ‘When is Genealogy History? Wolof Genealogies in Comparative Perspective’, *Amer. Ethnologist* 5 (1978), 651–74.

So, in spite of our continued uncertainty as to when, where, by whom or for whom *Beowulf* was first composed in Anglo-Saxon England, the surviving text evinces many of the impulses which motivate the construction of legendary narratives in other milieus, including the promotion of the political agenda of a ruling elite and the corresponding manipulation of the ethnic affinities of its audience. John Niles has illustrated these and a number of other social functions of traditional narrative with special reference to *Beowulf*.¹⁵ On the political purpose of the poem, Roberta Frank believes that the *Beowulf*-poet intends to establish 'an ideological basis for national unity' in his vision of a multiracial polity ruled by 'þeod-cyningas' (great or national kings).¹⁶ The poem opens with an evocation of this political ideal among the ancient Danes (lines 1–3).¹⁷ According to Frank, the *Beowulf*-poet is seeking to legitimize the kind of government to which his own kings aspired by projecting some archetypal form of it upon the founders of the Danish royal line.

The poet particularly admires Scyld Scefing and his unification of the mutually hostile tribes inhabiting the shores and islands of southern Scandinavia:

Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah,
egsode eorl[as], syððan ærest wearð
feascraft funden; he þæs frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah,
oð þæt him æghwylc ymsittendra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
gomban gyldan; þæt wæs god cyning!¹⁸ (lines 4–11)

The poet alludes here to the legend, intimated again in his description of the king's funeral, that Scyld had originally appeared alone in a boat as a child (lines 43–6). From this unpromising start, the story apparently went, the young parvenu founded a great people.

The creation of the Danish nation by a single powerful war-leader who appears out of nowhere bears a precocious resemblance to the ethnogenesis theory of the 'Vienna School' mentioned above. According to this model, an otherwise unknown chieftain successful in war imposes his authority upon a

¹⁵ J. Niles, *Homo Narrans: the Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (Philadelphia, 1999), pp. 66–88 and 120–45.

¹⁶ 'The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History', *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. L. D. Benson and S. Wenzel (Kalamazoo, 1982), pp. 53–65, at 60.

¹⁷ '*Beowulf*' and '*The Fight at Finnsburg*', ed. F. Klaeber, 3rd ed. (Lexington, MA, 1950).

¹⁸ 'Many times Scyld son of Scaef took away the mead-benches from bands of enemies, from many tribes, terrified their leaders, after he was first found destitute; he had comfort for that, grew great under the clouds, throve in victories, until everyone of those living around him over the whale-road had to obey, pay tribute; that was a good king!'

multiplicity of individuals and groups of various origins. He thus forges among them a new sense of ethnic identity under the leadership of his new royal clan. In *Beowulf* the poet symbolizes this centralization of political power and corresponding expansion of ethnic inclusiveness in his image of Scyld's confiscation of mead-benches from tribal chieftains whom he has defeated in battle or intimidated into submission. The benches represent the autonomy these leaders had once enjoyed, sharing out drink to their fellow-tribesmen and other followers in their own mead-halls. As the poet realizes, mead-benches are the very spot on which a group's collective identity was most assiduously enculturated through drinking, gift-giving and the performance of heroic verse celebrating the supposed ancestors of the chieftain and his people. Through this process of poetic ethnogenesis, even warriors of alien or enemy extraction could be adopted into the militarized kindred formed around the successful war-leader and his family.

The *Beowulf*-poet extrapolates from this traditional locus of tribal identity formation to the vision of a supratribal, national kingdom whose centre of power is imagined architecturally as the great mead-hall Heorot built by Scyld's great-grandson Hrothgar (lines 71–2). In this gigantic hall, one might say, the confiscated mead-benches on which many a warrior had once found his former identity are relocated. Hrothgar now liberally dispenses mead to chiefs who have relinquished their own prerogative to do the same and generously redistributes treasure to warriors from whom he has just impounded it as tribute. The poet makes no bones about the coercion involved, but believes that such force is not only necessary, it is good. And from the *Beowulf*-poet's point of view, Hrothgar's thegns receive more valuable recompense than flowing drink and expensive presents for their subordination. What they get is a proud new identity: they are now life members of the 'mægen Deniga' (host of Danes, line 155b), with all the rights, honours, privileges (and responsibilities) appertaining thereto. The Scyldings' tough but generous treatment of their former enemies is just the right way to rule according to the *Beowulf*-poet, that is, the right way to create a strong national kingdom where there was only incessant tribal warfare before. God had sent Scyld an heir precisely because 'fyrenþearfe ongeat, / þe hie ær drugon / aldorlease'.¹⁹

Like other traditional poets, then, the *Beowulf*-poet is reimagining the past in terms of his own experience and priorities, his approval of broad national monarchy. But how did an English-speaking poet hear of these Danish Scyldings in the first place and why would he be inspired to project his own political ideals upon them? Where did the poet get this story and why would he expect his retelling of it to receive a sympathetic or 'patient hearing', as

¹⁹ 'He had seen the wicked violence they suffered for so long without a king' (lines 14b–16a).

Dorothy Whitelock asked?²⁰ If we use the analogy of other legendary traditions, we would assume that the *Beowulf*-poet recognized some special affinity between the people he celebrates in the poem and his own audience. What was that connection? In fact, a good number of questions about the poet's purpose in retelling the history of the Danes and their relations with neighbouring peoples might fairly be asked:

1. What is the ethnic thrust of *Beowulf*? What ethnic affinities were felt to obtain between the members of the poet's audience and the various hero-peoples of the poem?
2. Why does the poet choose to valorize the royal family of a foreign, sometimes enemy nation? *Beowulf* is permeated with pro-Danish sentiment, in spite of the manifold difficulties which the Scylding dynasty is represented to have suffered. Why not celebrate the heroic founders of some native Anglo-Saxon royal family – their victories over the Britons or other enemies, for instance – as would have poets of most other epic traditions?²¹
3. Why does the poet make his hero a Geat of all ethnicities he might have chosen? What would Beowulf's Geatish identity have meant to the poem's audience? Did any of them consider themselves to be Geats or of Geatish extraction or heritage?
4. What other ethnic derivations did the different members of the audience of *Beowulf* perceive between themselves and the peoples in the poem? Did the poet make sure there was at least one group with whom everyone present could proudly identify? What relative status does the poet accord to the different ethnic groups in the poem and how does that status reflect or restructure the standing of the various ethnicities with which members of the poem's audience might have identified themselves?
5. What was the primary source of the legendary lore which the poet adapts in *Beowulf*? When and in what form did it come to his knowledge? To what extent did it derive from native vernacular tradition cultivated in oral poetry from earlier times, learned traditions derived from biblical and historiographical sources written in Latin, or from foreign vernacular sources adapted more recently to the poetic conventions of traditional verse in Old English, perhaps by the poet himself?

²⁰ D. Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 24–5.

²¹ Cf. B. Phillpotts, 'Wyrd and Providence in Anglo-Saxon Thought', *Essays and Stud.* 13 (1928), 7–27, at 12.

And finally, our main question:

6. At what historical moment would the poet's manipulation of these ancient ethnic relations have made the most sense to an Anglo-Saxon audience, especially the friendship he constructs between a Geatish ætheling and a Danish monarch? At what point in time would such a friendship have had the most interest or appeal to the hearers of an heroic poem in Old English? When would it have been the most useful in cultivating desirable affiliations or quelling potential animosities between groups?

DANES

To begin with the second and fifth questions first, on the valorization of the Scylding dynasty and a plausible context for the poet's interest in Danish legend. In the last decade of the ninth century the West Saxon royal family constructed an extended genealogy for itself tracing its ancestry back to the Scyld Scefig celebrated in the opening lines of *Beowulf*.²² This genealogy of Æthelwulf, King Alfred's father, is included in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s. a. 855 (= 857).²³ It is the very earliest reference we have to the figure of Scyld Scefig or to the Scylding dynasty, if that honour does not belong to the lost archetype of *Beowulf* itself.²⁴ In 893, King Alfred's biographer Asser traces a variant of the West Saxon royal pedigree to 'Sceldwea';²⁵ there is another version in the late-tenth-century *Chronicon* of Æthelweard.²⁶ The Danes themselves do not appear at all in the earliest northern ethnographies – the *Germania* of Tacitus at the end of the first century or the *Geography* of Ptolemy in the second – which mention some of their neighbours.²⁷ In the sixth century the Byzantine writer Procopius mentions 'Δανῶν τὰ ἔθνη' (the tribes of Danes) once, in passing, without noticing any kings or broader political unity among them.²⁸ This brief note is followed in the same century by similarly slight references in the *Getica* of Jordanes²⁹ and the

²² A. Murray, 'Beowulf, the Danish Invasions, and Royal Genealogy', *Dating*, ed. Chase, pp. 101–11.

²³ *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, ed. C. Plummer, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1892–9) I, 66. For a recent discussion of the Alfredian context of this genealogy, see D. Anlezark, 'Secef, Japheth and the Origins of the Anglo-Saxons', *ASE* 31 (2002), 13–46.

²⁴ R. Frank, 'Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*', *Dating*, ed. Chase, pp. 123–39, at 126; A. Meaney, 'Scyld Scefig and the Dating of *Beowulf* – Again', *Textual and Material Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. D. Scragg (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 23–73.

²⁵ *Asser's Life of Alfred*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1904), ch. 1, p. 3.

²⁶ Ed. A. Campbell (London, 1962), p. 33.

²⁷ *Germania*, in *Cornelii Taciti Opera Minora*, ed. M. Winterbottom and R. Ogilvie (Oxford, 1975), pp. 37–62; *Claudii Ptolemaei Geographia*, ed. C. F. A. Nobbe (Hildesheim, 1966).

²⁸ *History of the Wars*, ed. and trans. H. Dewing (London, 1924) IV, pp. 414–15.

²⁹ In *Iordanis Romana et Getica*, ed. T. Mommsen, MGH Auct. antiq. 5 (Berlin, 1882), 53–138, at ch. 3, sec. 23, p. 59, line 14.

Historia Francorum of Gregory of Tours.³⁰ Gregory, however, does speak in the same passage of one raiding Danish ‘rex’, a ‘Chlochilaichus’, whom the *Beowulf*-poet understands to be ‘Hygelac’, a king not of the Danes, but of the Geats.³¹ In the eighth century, Bede still knows of no Scyldings, nor of any Danish kings to speak of. He simply mentions ‘Dani’ among the other pagan ‘gentes’ of ‘Germania’.³²

Yet the *Beowulf*-poet thinks he knows all about these early kings of the Danes and seems to assume that his audience knows a lot, too. In fact, there is no evidence – textual, archaeological or otherwise – to suggest any historicity to this legend of a united Danish kingdom in the period in which the poem is set: the late fifth, early sixth centuries.³³ Post-holes of a very large hall – 48.5 metres long, 11.5 metres wide at the centre – dating from c. 660 have been discovered at Lejre at the end of Roskilde Fjord.³⁴ The use of this structure through two rebuildings during the next three centuries suggests some significant centralized power on Zealand beginning in the second half of the seventh century. The first phase of the ‘Danevirke’ (Defence of the Danes), dated by dendrochronology to 737, and its refortification and extension in 808 against the Franks, is our first indication of an effective national authority in Denmark capable of mobilizing major resources of manpower and materiel.³⁵ The Scylding legend was presumably developed in this context by aspirants to national power in Denmark as they sought to mount a unified resistance to attacks from the south.³⁶ A unifying narrative of national origins would have provided the rulers of Denmark with a strong ideological counterbalance to the power and prestige of the Carolingian empire. But any such account of a

³⁰ *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Historia Francorum*, ed. W. Arndt, in MGH SS. rer. Merov. 1 (Hanover, 1885), 1–450, bk 3, ch. 3, at p. 110, line 18.

³¹ The Anglo-Latin *Liber monstrorum* (c. 700) also states: ‘rex Higlacus . . . imperavit Getis et a Francis occisus est’ (‘King Hygelac . . . ruled the Geats and was killed by the Franks’); ed. and trans. Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 254–317, bk 1, ch. 2, at p. 258. Cf. N. F. S. Gruntvig, ‘Om Bjovulfs Drape eller det af Hr. Etatsraad Thorkelin 1815 udgivne angelsachsiske Digt’, *Danne-Virke, et Tids-Skrift* 2 (1817), 207–89, at 284–8; and W. Goffart, ‘*Hetware* and *Hugas*: Dateable Anachronisms in *Beowulf*, *Dating*, ed. Chase, pp. 83–100; *idem*, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (AD 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988), p. 207.

³² *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), V.9 (p. 476).

³³ C. Anderson, ‘Formation and Resolution of Ideological Contrast in the Early History of Scandinavia’ (unpubl. PhD dissertation, Cambridge Univ., 1999), pp. 90–143.

³⁴ T. Christensen, ‘Lejre Beyond Legend – The Archaeological Evidence’, *Jnl of Danish Archaeol.* 10 (1991), 163–85, at 167–75.

³⁵ E. Roesdahl, *Viking Age Denmark*, trans. S. Margeson and K. Williams (London, 1982), pp. 139–46.

³⁶ R. Page, ‘The Audience of *Beowulf* and the Vikings’, *Dating*, ed. Chase, pp. 113–22.

collective Danish past may have adapted traditions from earlier, less extensive phases of royal authority in Denmark.

It is possible, then, that some intimation of Danish dynastic legend could have found its way to an Anglo-Saxon court during the later eighth or early ninth centuries. Alcuin complains of the interest taken by some people in heroic stories about old kings like Hinielcus, the Ingeld of *Widsith* and *Beowulf*, a Heathobeardic king who is depicted in these poems as a treacherous ally of the Danes.³⁷ The conduit for such legendary lore may have been through Frankish versions of heroic tradition, since Matthew Townend's exhaustive recent study has produced very slight, even 'negligible' evidence for linguistic contacts between England and Scandinavia before the Viking invasions of the ninth century.³⁸ In fact, it is not at all clear how such detailed knowledge of the Scylding legend could have come to a West Saxon genealogist or a Welsh cleric in the late ninth century, or to the *Beowulf*-poet himself at some other unknown point in time, if not from those very Danish Vikings who brought the story to England believing that they themselves had descended from Scyld.³⁹ The sons of Ragnarr Lothbrók – Ívarr the Boneless and his brother Hálfðanr – set up a Danish kingdom at York in 867. They called themselves 'Scaldingi', according to the (tenth- or eleventh-century) *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*; and they are cited as 'Skjöldungar' in Norse skaldic poetry.⁴⁰ These are the first 'historical' Scyldings we know of.

The settlement of the Danelaw after 878, with the baptism of the Danish leader Guthrum as King Alfred's godson and the recognition of Guthrum as king of the East Angles, is thus the most likely moment for the interest of the West Saxon royal family in the dynastic traditions of their defeated attackers and new neighbours. Townend concludes that an 'adequate' or 'pragmatic mutual intelligibility' obtained between speakers of Old English and Old Norse at this time (and for the rest of the Anglo-Saxon period) without 'widespread bilingualism or the use of interpreters'.⁴¹ A Norwegian traveller could

³⁷ In *Monumenta Alcuiniana*, ed. W. Wattenbach and E. Dümmler, Bibliotheca Rerum Germanicarum 6 (1873; rpt Darmstadt, 1964), p. 357. Cf. *Widsith*, ed. K. Malone (Copenhagen, 1962), line 48a, and *Beowulf* 2064b. For the context and significance of Alcuin's remark, see D. Bullough, 'What has Ingeld to do with Lindisfarne?', *ASE* 22 (1993), 93–125.

³⁸ M. Townend, *Language and History in Viking Age England: Linguistic Relations between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English* (Turnhout, 2002), p. 31.

³⁹ R. Frank, 'Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*', *Dating*, ed. Chase, pp. 123–39.

⁴⁰ References cited in Frank, 'Skaldic Verse', p. 127, nn. 15–18; and in her 'King Cnut in the Verse of his Skalds', *The Reign of Cnut: King of England, Denmark and Norway*, ed. A. Rumble (London, 1994), pp. 106–24, at 110–13. Although often dated to the mid-tenth century, the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* may not in fact have been written until the mid-eleventh century: see *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto: a History of Saint Cuthbert and a Record of his Patrimony*, ed. T. Johnson South, AS Texts 3 (Cambridge, 2002).

⁴¹ M. Townend, *Language and History*, pp. 183 and 210.

thus recount at the court of King Alfred his itinerary to the White Sea in simple but intelligible sentences.⁴² Other Norse-speakers might have communicated the main figures and stories of Danish legend to an English-speaking interlocutor in such a way that the names were effectively Anglicized, like the Norwegian Óttarr's, upon reception. In fact, the English form of the name of Alfred's informant, Ohthere, appears five times in *Beowulf* in precisely this or a very similar form (Ohtere) where it is used of a son of the Swedish king Ongenþeow (lines 2380, 2394, 2612, 2928 and 2932). In addition, Óttarr/Ohthere is made to call the country of the Swedes 'Sweo-land', a geographical term not too different in form from the *Beowulf*-poet's focus upon the political and ethnic identity of this people in his terms, 'Sweo-ricē' (kingdom of the Swedes, lines 2383 and 2495) and 'Sweo-ðeod' (nation of the Swedes, line 2922).⁴³ These close onomastic correspondences are consistent with an Alfredian context for the acquisition of Scandinavian lore by an English-speaking poet.

It is conceivable, therefore, that the baptism of Guthrum provided an opportunity for the invention of a Scylding pedigree for the West Saxon royal family. With it King Alfred could demonstrate to his new Danish clients, allies and rivals his direct patrilineal descent from their own royal ancestors. He could legitimize, by ancient precedent, the superiority over them he claimed. This genealogy serves further to unite in a single race both Alfred's own subjects and foreign Danes, since the genealogist makes Scyld's father Scaef a fourth son of Noah born in the Ark. The descendants of Scaef are thus distinct from those of Ham, Shem or Japheth from whom the other races of the world descend. Most new ethnic distinctions are constructed in just this way: by redrawing the boundaries of 'us' and 'them', uniting formerly disparate groups more closely by distinguishing them from all others. This is a standard technique of ethnogenesis.

GEATS

But why the Geats?⁴⁴ What would the audience of *Beowulf* have known of this people? What was the character of the legends associated with them? The first historical mention of this Scandinavian people is in the *Geography* of Ptolemy

⁴² *Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred: the Ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan, together with the Description of Northern Europe from the Old English Orosius*, ed. N. Lund, trans. C. E. Fell (York, 1984).

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 105. It should be noted that Townend takes *Beowulf* to be a pre-Viking Age poem, since it includes no mention of *Norðmenn*, the ninth-century Ohthere's name for 'Norwegians'.

⁴⁴ Cf. T. Andersson, 'The Dating of *Beowulf*', *Univ. of Toronto Quarterly* 52 (1983), 288–301, at 300–1.

in the second century: he says that ‘Γούται’ (*Gutae* or *Gautae* in Latin translations) occupy southern ‘Σκανδία’ (Scandia).⁴⁵ These are presumably the ‘Gautar’ of later Norse tradition, a people who lived in south-central Sweden and whose presence there is preserved in the place-names Väster- and Östergötland. The Gautar were eventually dominated by the Swedes, apparently in the eighth century, though kings of Sweden still claimed descent from this people through the twelfth.⁴⁶

The Gautar thus maintained some kind of ethnic distinctiveness in southern Scandinavia for many centuries, but they came to be identified with other peoples, in particular, it seems, the Goths. Jordanes, epitomizing the lost work of Cassiodorus, locates the aboriginal homeland of the continental Goths in the ‘insula Scandza’,⁴⁷ a tradition which Walter Goffart has shown may not be native to the Goths themselves at all.⁴⁸ It is a learned rationalization. Earlier historians had already conflated the ‘Gothi’ of their own day with another northern people, the *Getae* or *Getes*, whom Herodotus and other ancient ethnographers had located in Dacia or Scythia.⁴⁹ The relocation of these ancestral Goths or *Getae* to the ‘insula Skandza’ is a further conflation in Jordanes suggested by the consonantal homophony of *Getae* and ‘Γούται’. Ptolemy’s work was not apparently known in Anglo-Saxon England, but Alcuin reveals an acquaintance with Jordanes, or at least a notion of the contents of the *Getica*, early in the ninth century.⁵⁰

But already in the late eighth century, we begin to see a desire for Geatish ancestry appearing in Anglo-Saxon England, which was almost certainly based upon the association of the Scandinavian *Gautar* with the continental *Gothi* under the name of *Getae* after Jordanes. *Geat*, the Old English form of the name of the eponymous progenitor of this people, is listed as the founder of several, mainly Anglian, royal houses: Lindsey first, followed by Northumbria,

⁴⁵ *Claudii Ptolemaei Geographia*, ed. C. F. A. Nobbe (Hildesheim, 1966), bk 2, ch. 11, sec. 35, p. 124.

⁴⁶ B. and P. Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800–1500* (Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 58–60.

⁴⁷ *Jordanis Romana et Getica*, ed. T. Mommsen, MGH Auct. antiq. 5 (Berlin, 1882), 53–138, ch. 3, sec. 16, at pp. 57–8.

⁴⁸ W. Goffart, ‘Jordanes’s *Getica* and the Disputed Authenticity of Gothic Origins from Scandinavia’, *Speculum* 80 (2005), 379–98, and *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988), pp. 84–96.

⁴⁹ E.g., Orosius in *Pauli Orosii historiarum adversum paganos libri VII*, ed. C. Zangemeister, CSEL 5 (Vienna, 1882): ‘Getae illi qui et nunc Gothi’ (bk 1, ch. 16, sec. 2, p. 68).

⁵⁰ *Alcuini Epistolae*, ed. E. Dümmler, MGH, Epist. 4 (Berlin, 1895), 1–493, at 365 (no. 221); cf. J. Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English, 597–1066* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), p. 185. Orosius was known to Aldhelm, Bede, Alcuin, and of course Alfred, though he does not place the Gothic homeland in Scandinavia *per se* (*ibid.* p. 210).

Mercia, East Anglia and Kent.⁵¹ Woden, who had once headed the genealogies of these dynasties, was supplanted in priority through several generations by Geat. This new ethnic fashion followed the burgeoning Frankish interest in things Gothic, especially in the great Gothic kings of late antiquity and their enemies and allies: Theoderic, Ermanaric, Odoacer and Attila the Hun. Goths had become chic to the Franks.⁵² In the words of Roberta Frank:

it was not until the Franks under Charlemagne had forged a new empire, stretching from [Visigothic] Barcelona and [Ostrogothic] Rome in the south up to Saxony and the frontiers of Denmark in the north, that Goths, Burgundians and Lombards were understood to be of the same people as the Franks . . . Interest in Gothic language, legend and ancestry was something new and almost certainly a response to the multi-cultural empire of Charles and his successors.⁵³

Charlemagne had the supposed statue of Theoderic in Ravenna removed to his own court at Aachen, presumably to signify the proud inheritance of the Gothic *imperium* by the Franks. A whole cast of Gothic heroes poured into Frankish legend and, unlike the fairly negative portrayal of these figures in Latin literature before Jordanes, vernacular tradition revelled in their conflicts, prowess and courage, reflected in such poems as the *Hildebrandslied* of the early ninth century, associated with the Anglo-Saxon foundation at Fulda. John Niles notes the superior prestige accorded the Goths by the Old English poet of *Widsith* whose construction of a marriage between an Anglian princess Ealhild and the Gothic king Eormenric (Ermanaric) in that poem is intended to 'raise the status of the Angles by marrying them into the Goths, whose stature they thereby approximate'.⁵⁴

Geatish ancestry seems thus to have acquired a certain distinction to the English dynasties bold enough to claim it. And these supposed original Goths were also popular at the court of King Alfred in the late ninth century, along with a third people with whom they had come to be identified there: the Jutes.

⁵¹ K. Sisam, 'The Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies', *PBA* 39 (1953), 287–348, at 308–21; D. Dumville, 'The Anglian Collection of Royal Genealogies and Regnal Lists', *ASE* 5 (1976), 23–50.

⁵² M. Innes, 'Teutons or Trojans? The Carolingians and the Germanic Past', *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Y. Hen and M. Innes (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 227–49.

⁵³ R. Frank, 'Germanic Legend in Old English Literature', *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. M. Godden and M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 88–106, at 93–4. Old Saxons eventually joined the Lombards and others in claiming descent from the Gothic progenitor Gaut. H. Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Inhabitants*, trans. T. Dunlap (Berkeley, CA, 1997), writes: 'The great Longobard kings Audoin and Alboin called themselves Gausi (Gauti). Hathugaut-Hathagat, the founding father of the Saxon tribe on the continent, had a name in which Gaut formed the root' (p. 26).

⁵⁴ J. Niles, 'Widsith and the Anthropology of the Past', *PQ* 78 (1999), 171–213, at 187. Cf. *Widsith* 5–9 and 97–108.

The Old English translator of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* rationalizes the *Iuti* or *Iutae* (Jutes) of Bede's Latin – a people whom the historian says occupied Kent, the Isle of Wight and parts of southern Hampshire in the fifth century – as *Geatas* (Geats).⁵⁵ Geats are thus conflated with Jutes as one of the three very great tribes of ancient *Germania* from whom the insular *gens Anglorum* was understood to have derived. In fact, later in the translation of Bede, when the ancestry of the English nation is no longer at issue, the *Iuti* of southern England are simply rendered in the usual way, as *Eote*, Jutes proper, rather than *Geatas*, Geats.⁵⁶ This inconsistency is telling: it means that the translator knew that *Iuti* meant *Eote*. *Eote* was the normal form of the name of the people living in Hampshire, since a regular development of it in late West Saxon, *Yte*, is recorded in the *Worcester Chronicle* in association with New Forest: 'Nova Foresta, quae lingua Anglorum Ytene nuncupatur'.⁵⁷ The point is that the English Jutes had never been called Geats. This is an ethnic invention or rationalization by Bede's translator which can be traced directly to the milieu of King Alfred. Once the translator moved on to passages deeper in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, and of less relevance to the origin of the *gens Anglorum*, he simply rendered *Iuti* in the more familiar way.

But why change from Jutes to Geats at all? Asser provides the key to this particular ethnic manipulation when writing about King Alfred's mother's side of the family. Alfred understood his maternal grandfather Oslac not only to descend from the Jutish kings of Wight, but also to have been of 'Gothic' ancestry: 'Qui Oslac Gothus erat natione; ortus enim erat de Gothis et Iutis' ('which Oslac was a Goth by race; for his origin was from Goths and Jutes'), or 'Geats', if we follow the precedent of Bede's translator.⁵⁸ Asser later tells of the interest King Alfred's mother Osburh took in traditional poetry, including presumably that which reflected well upon her own ancestry. It was Osburh who supposedly challenged Alfred and his brothers to memorize 'poemata Saxonica' (vernacular poems), which contained the kind of traditional lore she felt to be of special value.⁵⁹ Perhaps she can be seen as choosing this method

⁵⁵ Bede, *HE* I.15 (p. 50); *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. T. Miller, 2 vols. (London, 1959–63) I, bk 1, ch. 12, p. 52.

⁵⁶ Bede, *HE* IV.16 (pp. 382–5); *Old English Bede* II, bk 4, ch. 18, pp. 308–9.

⁵⁷ 'New Forest, which is called in English "of the Jutes"', in *Florentii Wigorniensis Monachi Chronicon ex Chronicis*, ed. B. Thorpe, 2 vols. (London, 1848–9) II, 44–5, and *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, ed. R. R. Darlington and P. McGurk, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1995–) III, 92.

⁵⁸ W. H. Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred* (Oxford, 1904), ch. 2, p. 4. Stevenson thought Asser's association of Goths with Jutes was a simply a linguistic confusion made by the non-native-English-speaker Asser, rather than an accurate reflection of King Alfred's own view of his maternal ancestry (pp. 166–70).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* ch. 23, p. 20. Asser's identification of the language of Osburh's *poemata* as *Saxonica* reflects a Welsh designation of the English language as *Saesneg* (Saxonish) and English-speakers as *Saeson* (Saxons).

of cultivating in her West Saxon sons an appreciation for her own distinguished ancestors, that is, her own Jutish/Gothic/Geatish heritage. There are, in fact, only two Anglo-Saxons whom we are told *by name* valued these old legends in traditional poetry: King Alfred and his mother Osburh.⁶⁰

Further indication of the positive regard King Alfred may have felt towards his supposed Gothic ancestry can be seen in the remarkable characterization of Alaric the Visigoth which concludes the *Old English Orosius*.⁶¹ As in the original Latin, that king's sack of Rome is depicted as divine vengeance upon a sinful people through the instrument of their enemies. But Alaric himself is changed from a mere scourge of God, a barbarian heretic as bad as the punishing Assyrians of the Old Testament, to 'se cristenra cyning 7 se mildesta' ('the mildest Christian king') who, in direct contradiction of the Orosian account,

mid swa lytle niþe abræc Romeburg þæt he bebead þæt mon nænne mon ne sloge, 7 eac þæt man nanuht ne wanade ne ne yfelade þæs þe on þæm ciricum wære, 7 sona þæs on þæm þriddan dæge hie aforan ut of þære byrig hiora agnum willan, swa þær ne wearð nan hus hiora willum forbærned.⁶²

We might compare the character of the Geatish hero Beowulf, described by his people in the penultimate line of the poem with a similar superlative phrase: 'manna mildust' ('mildest of men', line 3181). It seems clear, then, that Goths – or some of them – were very much admired in King Alfred's court and that the Geats of southern Sweden, the Goths of southern Europe and the Jutes of southern England had all come to be considered the same noble people from whom the king traced his descent on his mother's side.⁶³

⁶⁰ It is curious that the companion poem of *Beowulf* in Cotton Vitellius A. xv, *Judith*, takes as its heroine the Hebrew namesake of King Alfred's Frankish step-mother, daughter of Charles the Bald. The two poems present two models of protective courage – one male, one female – both honouring in some way the heritage of the two most important women in the younger Alfred's life. According to R. M. Trask, 'Why Beowulf and Judith Need Each Other', *In Geardagum* 20 (1999), 75–88, Judith can be seen as Beowulf's 'alter ego in female spirit' (p. 88). Scribe II, who completed *Beowulf* from line 1940 and went on to copy *Judith*, allows this character to save her people triumphantly, to 'finish what Beowulf had begun – thus achieving the lasting final victory that earthly endurance aspires to' (p. 87).

⁶¹ Cf. S. Harris, 'The Alfredian *World History* and Anglo-Saxon Identity', *JEGP* 100 (2001), 482–510.

⁶² Ed. J. Bately, EETS ss 6 (London, 1980), VI.38 (p. 156, lines 13–18): 'captured Rome with so little violence that he ordered that no one should kill anyone, and also that nothing at all should be destroyed or harmed which was in the churches, and soon on the third day they left the city of their own will, so that no house there was burned on purpose'; cf. *Pauli Orosii historiarum adversum paganos libri VII*, ed. K. Zangemeister (Vienna, 1882), VI.38 (p. 156).

⁶³ M. R. Godden, 'The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths: Rewriting the Sack of Rome', *ASE* 31 (2002), 47–68. He concludes: 'The transformations and interpretations of the sack of Rome suggest an ambivalent view of the Goths and Romans in the Alfredian world. The Old English *Orosius* presents a favourable view of the Goths, or at least those under Alaric, whereas the Old English versions of *Boethius* consistently present Theoderic as a tyrant (in

In fact, King Alfred wanted Geatish ancestors on his father's side as well. He borrowed the Anglian genealogies to trace the West Saxon royal pedigree back to Geat.⁶⁴ But this is precisely where the king found room for improvement over his neighbours and went on to trace his patriline beyond Geat to Scyld Scefing, subordinating all prior pedigrees to this new sequence of distinguished forefathers. By the late ninth century, Danes had surpassed Geats in genealogical prestige, at least at the court of King Alfred.

ANGLO-SAXONS

Sarah Foot has argued that the term *Angelcynn* was invented or came to be used in Alfredian circles in the later ninth century to represent his sense of a common identity among speakers of *Englisc*, 'ðæt geðiode . . . ðe we ealle gecnawan mægen'.⁶⁵ Of course, this concept found precedent in Bede's eighth-century idea of a *gens Anglorum* which was distinct from the British, Scottish and Pictish peoples of Britain. As an Anglian Northumbrian Bede had co-opted the other Germanic ethnicities he recognized in the island to the concept of a single English nation designated by God for the blessings of national salvation.⁶⁶ Bede justifies his ethnogenesis by invoking one of the highest sources of spiritual authority available to him. The *gens Anglorum* is a nation because the holy Pope Gregory perceived it so to be in that slave-market in Rome. Bede even troubles to retail the Pope's putative comments on the physical markers of an idealized English ethnicity: *candidus corpus* (white skin), *venustus vultus* (regular features), *lucidus vultus* (bright countenance), *capillorum . . . forma egregia* (extremely beautiful hair).⁶⁷ The nation of Angles for Bede was more than a convenient category of ecclesiastical organization; it was a race, a physical ethnicity, a community of blood and language and now special grace.

contrast to the much more neutral treatment of him in the Latin text)' (p. 67). Asser's story that King Alfred's maternal grandfather traced his ancestry back to the Gothic/Jutish chieftains Stuf and Wihtgar 'suggests that in the Alfredian circle at least Goths could be an honourable ancestry and that their contribution to the creation of Anglo-Saxon England was thought to go beyond the sack of Rome and the destruction of the Roman empire' (p. 68).

⁶⁴ C. R. Davis, 'Cultural Assimilation in the Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies', *ASE* 21 (1992), 23–36, and *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England* (New York, 1996), pp. 51–63.

⁶⁵ 'the language that we can all understand', in Alfred's Preface to Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis*, in *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, rev. ed. D. Whitelock (Oxford, 1967), pp. 4–7, at 5, lines 58–9. S. Foot, 'The Making of *Angelcynn*: English Identity before the Norman Conquest', *TRHS* 6th ser. 6 (1996), 25–49; cf. K. Davis, 'National Writing in the Ninth Century: a Reminder for Postcolonial Thinking about the Nation', *Jnl of Med. and Early Mod. Stud.* 28 (1998), 611–37.

⁶⁶ S. Harris, 'Bede, Social Practice, and the Problem with Foreigners', *Social Practice in the Middle Ages*, ed. T. Bestul and T. Hall (Chicago, 1997), pp. 97–110, at 103.

⁶⁷ *HE* II.1 (p.132).

Alfred, following Bede and perhaps some shrewd political instincts of his own, uses this concept of English ethnicity for his own purposes. Instead of co-opting the identity of his new subjects in western Mercia into one of Saxon nationhood (the primary ethnicity of English-speakers as perceived by their Welsh neighbours),⁶⁸ King Alfred chose instead to prioritize the Anglian component of the new national polity he hoped to create in 886 when Æthelred, ealdorman of the Mercians, formally submitted to him. Alfred's new title, *rex Angul-Saxonum* (king of the Anglo-Saxons), replaced the more limited ethnic styles of his West Saxon predecessors (*rex Saxonum*, and so on). Alfred was already king of the Saxons through ancient pedigree; it was his Mercian subjects that he had to worry about. In short, toward the end of his reign, King Alfred's expanded political horizons produced a cultural moment in which a number of traditions, from various sources – native and learned, Saxon, Jutish, Anglian and Norse – could all be coordinated into a more comprehensive historical framework – a new tradition of the past – which could then be used in turn to enhance the agenda (or at least the self-esteem) of the royal family.

Like King Alfred, the *Beowulf*-poet has reconfigured his different resources of legendary tradition in order to suggest a common noble heritage of which all his auditors can feel proud, including a positive reference to the ancient Offa of Angeln (lines 1944–62). This allusion has been understood as a compliment to members of the Mercian royal family,⁶⁹ whose great king Offa was made to descend from Geat in the Anglian genealogies of the late eighth century. King Alfred was married to a woman whose mother was said to be of Mercian royal stock. The 'half-Danish' hero 'Hengest' of the Finnsburh lay (lines 1063–1159a) is probably to be identified with the Jutish 'Hengist' whom Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* say first founded the kingdom of Kent.⁷⁰ Sam Newton has argued that the old royal family of East Anglia, the 'Wuffingas', were probably understood to be related to the 'Wylfingas' of *Beowulf*.⁷¹ The marriage between the Wylfing Wealhtheow and the Scylding Hrothgar in the poem may thus have been felt to imply an ancient affinity between the East Angles and the Danes who conquered them, as well as subordinating both groups, positively, to the direct and active heirs of Scylding authority, the West Saxon kings.

The *Beowulf*-poet, then, along with King Alfred, his biographer Asser, the West Saxon genealogist, the translator of Bede and the translator of Orosius

⁶⁸ Foot, 'Making of *Anglecynn*', p. 25.

⁶⁹ K. Sisam, 'Dialect Origins of the Earlier Old English Verse', in his *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 119–35, at 134–5.

⁷⁰ *HE* I.15 (p. 50); *ASC*, ed. Plummer, s. a. 455, p. 12.

⁷¹ S. Newton, *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 105–31.

can all be seen as participants in what John Niles calls a process of ‘creative ethnicity’.⁷² There is something for everyone in this poem, from whatever kingdom or former kingdom (Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Wessex or Kent) and from whatever ethnic extraction (Saxon, Anglian, Jutish or Danish). All English-speaking auditors of the poem could look back to a common heroic ancestry. Yet, they would have still found there some sharp ethnic distinctions as well, differences in status or priority which obtained within this collective affinity. The *Beowulf*-poet’s construction of a good Geatish hero helping a great Danish king, in appropriate repayment for past kindnesses, nicely formulates the loyal support expected by kings who could claim a direct patriline back to the rulers of ancient Denmark. In addition to his magnificent strength, stature, intelligence and good will, Beowulf is a *good* Geat: very helpful, as he should be.

Rather than reflecting the common stock of Germanic tradition, then, or another ethnic variation of that tradition – insular Anglian, Saxon or Jutish, or continental Saxon, Frankish or Gothic – *Beowulf* represents fairly consistently a Danish perspective on the relations which obtained between these brave peoples in ancient times. Robert Farrell has shown that there is no particularly Geatish bias to this poem that has not been read into it by later scholars.⁷³ Geats are good to the extent to which a prince of their royal house aids a Scylding monarch in his time of need. An enemy of our hero, the Swedish king Onela, is praised in the highest terms, with the emphatic litotes reserved for Scyld Scefing himself (line 11b). Onela was a ‘good king’ (line 2390b): he was married to a Scylding princess (lines 62–3). Other peoples mentioned in the poem are praised or criticized depending on their relations with the Scyldings or their antecedents: Wylfings, allied to the Scyldings by marriage, are good; Wendels who serve the Scyldings are good. Heathobeards and Frisians, who resist or renege on the Danes’ best efforts to join with them in friendship through marriage, are treacherous. Even the death of Hygelac at the hands of the Franks is made a Geatish rather than a Danish defeat. The poet, or the tradition he is using, has put off this embarrassment on the neighbouring, now defunct people, though the poet allows his pro-Danish hero personally to redeem himself by avenging his lord and recovering thirty enemy mailshirts in compensation.

A MULTIETHNIC MONARCH

In conclusion, it seems that the Danes whom Alfred defeated had an impressive tradition of the founders of their royal family which the king coveted for

⁷² J. Niles, *Homo Narrans*, pp. 137 and 140.

⁷³ R. Farrell, *Beowulf: Swedes and Geats* (London, 1972).

his own house. *Beowulf*, too, represents the adoption of this Scylding legend into the forms of traditional verse in Old English. This new vision of the ethnic past subsumed or supplanted earlier traditions which may have been current in other kingdoms. It creates a new sense of positive but ranked relationship among the ancestors of all Alfred's people, one calculated to appeal especially to those who considered themselves to be of mixed heritage, like the Danish-Geatish-Anglo-Saxon king himself. Richard Abels has even suggested that the version of Scyld's story which the *Beowulf*-poet offers in the opening lines of his poem is intended to reflect the career of King Alfred's own grandfather, Ecgberht of Wessex, who had similarly risen from 'inauspicious beginnings to be a mighty king' as *Bretwalda* of England south of the Humber.⁷⁴

These considerations, however, are not intended to imply that King Alfred specifically commissioned the poet of *Beowulf* to compose an account of national origins which would glorify his own house and supply a unifying vision of his people's past. The turmoil predicted for the Scylding dynasty and the intimated demise of the hero's people militates against any triumphal sense of collective ethnic identity, rather the contrary. The poet's stress upon living worthily while one lives, leaving a memory of good deeds for posterity and the transience of all earthly glory comports with special closeness to King Alfred's own moral and philosophical preoccupations, expressed most poignantly in the Old English version of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*.⁷⁵ The poet's story of the last king of a lost tribe would have created interest and identification among those who believed they had come from the same noble stock, perhaps even a kind of humility. *Beowulf* is the Hector of that old northern world, Geats the Trojans whose ancient kingdom was destroyed even as their race planted its seed in distant lands. The poem supplies a stirring model of antique heroism, but illustrates the fate which awaits all kings, all heroes, all nations on earth.

In answer to question six, then, on a time and place when the poem's characterization of these old ethnic heroes might have most moved and gratified an Anglo-Saxon audience, we can narrow our search to within a generation or two, perhaps even to within a decade: the 890s at the court of King Alfred. This last decade of Alfred's reign also coincides with the probability of an Early West Saxon version of the poem in Anglo-Saxon set minuscule, the soon-to-be-superseded script which would give the two scribes of Cotton Vitellius A. xv such trouble a century later. If the Cotton Vitellius scribes' West

⁷⁴ R. Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1998), pp. 27–8. Ecgberht is listed as the eighth and final 'Bretwalda' or 'Bryten wealda' (ruler of Britain) in the *ASC*, s. a. 827, pp. 60–1.

⁷⁵ *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius 'De Consolatione Philosophiae'*, ed. W. J. Sedgefield (Oxford, 1899), p. 41.

Saxon exemplar must be before *c.* 900 on paleographical grounds and an ethnic dating of the poem would place it in a later Alfredian context, we are getting a very pointed suggestion for the time and place of *Beowulf's* composition. Nor would the 890s exclude the possibility that some earlier version of the hero's story – oral or written, in poetry or prose – had incorporated the various Anglian names and linguistic forms which appear in the extant text. I have suggested elsewhere that Beowulf may be an archaic figure from native folklore, a hero with ursine attributes who was adapted, perhaps in several stages over some considerable period of time, to the more dignified register of dynastic legend.⁷⁶ He appears unannounced in the Scylding world of ancient Denmark in the poem and leaves it just as precipitously. Even his status as a royal prince of the Geats seems something of an innovation. Beowulf's name does not alliterate with those of the other æthelings of his house: Herebeald, Hæthcyn, Hygelac, Heardred. In fact, the hero's kinship with these figures is contrived solely through his mother, an unnamed and otherwise unknown daughter of King Hrethel. Some manipulations of Beowulf's place in heroic tradition may well have occurred in earlier contexts, perhaps in the later eighth century when we first find a genealogical interest in Geats.

In the tenth century, Alfred's heirs evince no special interest at all in this old ethnic lore. King Æthelstan saw the conspicuous possession of holy relics as a better way to demonstrate the dignity of his house. Nor do the martial poems known to have been composed during the tenth century contain any reference, even by the faintest allusion, to ancestral heroes. These figures no longer inspire the poets of *Brunanburh* and *Maldon*, however much their poems preserve the forms and style of traditional verse.⁷⁷ We can conclude that, among known Anglo-Saxons, the mature King Alfred had the interest, motive, means and opportunity to encourage the particular view of the ethnic past we find in *Beowulf*, even though it is one which never achieved a broader cultural authority or enduring political appeal in Anglo-Saxon England. The latter part of Alfred's reign should thus be seriously underscored among those possible dates for the poem's composition suggested by other worthy methods.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ C. R. Davis, *Beowulf and the Demise*, pp. 91–7.

⁷⁷ 'The Battle of Brunanburh' (pp. 16–20) and 'The Battle of Maldon' (pp. 7–16), in *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. E. V. K. Dobbie, ASPR 6 (New York, 1942). Cf. C. Davis, 'Cultural Historicity in *The Battle of Maldon*', *PQ* 78 (1999), 151–69, at 169.

⁷⁸ A version of this essay was read at the eleventh conference of the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists in Arizona in August 2003. It adapts to the dating of *Beowulf* arguments which appeared on-line in 'Redundant Ethnogenesis in *Beowulf*', *The Heroic Age: a Jnl of Early Med. and Northwestern Europe* 5 (2001), n. p.

