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‘Making Sense of Ker’s Dates: The Origins of *Beowulf* and the
Palaeographers’

MAKING SENSE OF KER'S DATES: THE ORIGINS OF *BEOWULF* AND THE PALAEOGRAPHERS

Ever since the Nowell Codex began to attract serious interest, almost two hundred years ago, scholars have debated the antiquity of its fourth text, referred to since J. M. Kemble's edition of 1833 as *Beowulf*.¹ The question continues to engage Anglo-Saxonists because, as Roy Liuzza points out, it 'foregrounds the most important questions of Old English poetry – creation and tradition, transmission and reception, context and the limits of interpretation'.² Judging by the wealth of publications in the last thirty or so years we are now further away than ever before from reaching a consensus save that the poem was composed at some time between the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons and the date of the manuscript.³ Scholars are divided over the significance of the manuscript for the dating of the composition of the poem: while Michael Lapidge and Kevin Kiernan have used the manuscript to argue for eighth and eleventh century composition respectively,⁴ R. D. Fulk claims that the manuscript has nothing to tell us about the poem's date.⁵ Considerable disagreement has surrounded the interpretation of Neil Ker's system of dating Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, accepted as standard since the publication of his invaluable *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* in 1957.⁶ In this paper I hope to clarify some of the issues surrounding Ker's dating system, and in particular his dating of the *Beowulf* manuscript, before discussing some related questions concerning the literary, historical and political context of the poem's copying and composition.

The palaeographical evidence

The sole surviving manuscript of *Beowulf* was transcribed as the fourth text of a larger project undertaken by two Anglo-Saxon scribes, referred to as scribes A and B, which incorporated three prose texts, *The Passion of Saint Christopher* (missing its beginning), *The Wonders of the East* (illustrated), and *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, as well as a verse life of Judith, of which only a fragment now survives. Scribe A was responsible for the copying of the three prose texts, and began the copying of *Beowulf*.⁷ Scribe B took over midway through *Beowulf*, after the word *scyran* at line 1939, and the fragment of *Judith* is also in his hand.⁸ Collectively this codex is now referred to as the Nowell Codex, after Laurence Nowell, a sixteenth-century antiquarian, who signed his name, dated 1563, on

¹ J. M. Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of 'Beowulf', 'The Traveller's Song', and 'The Battle of Finnsburh'* (London, 1833; 2nd ed. 1835, issued with Vol. 2, *Translation*). G. J. Thorkelin, 'Greetings to the Reader', transl. T. Corse and R. E. Bjork in *Scandinavian Studies* 68.3 (1996), from his *De Danorum Rebus Gestis Seculi III et IV: Poëma Danicum Dialecto Anglo-Saxonica* (Copenhagen 1815), thought *Beowulf* was an Old English translation of a fourth-century Danish poem, but this suggestion was immediately rejected by an anonymous reviewer. See *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. T. A. Shippey and A. Haarder (London and New York, 1998), pp. 91-107. See further R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: an Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*, 3rd ed. with a supplement by C. L. Wrenn (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 98-104.

² R. M. Liuzza, 'On the Dating of *Beowulf*', in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, ed. P. S. Baker, Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England (New York and London, 1995), pp. 281-302, at 284. See also R. E. Bjork and A. Obermeier, 'Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences', in *A 'Beowulf' Handbook*, ed. R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles (Exeter, 1997), pp. 13-34; H. L. C. Tristram, 'What's the Point of Dating *Beowulf*?', in *Medieval Insular Literature between the Oral and the Written II: Continuity of Transmission*, ed. H. L. C. Tristram, ScriptOralia 97 (Tübingen, 1997), pp. 65-80.

³ For a sample of the disparity of opinions see *The Dating of 'Beowulf'*, ed. C. Chase (Toronto, 1981).

⁴ M. Lapidge, 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', *ASE* 29 (2000), 5-41; K. S. Kiernan, *'Beowulf' and the 'Beowulf' Manuscript* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1981; revised and reprinted Michigan, 1996); reviewed by J. D. Niles, *Speculum* 58 (1983), 765-7; and A. C. Amos, 'An Eleventh-Century *Beowulf*?', *Review* 4 (1982), 335-42. See also K. S. Kiernan, 'The Legacy of Wiglaf: Saving a Wounded *Beowulf*', in Baker (1995), pp. 195-218; J. Gerritsen, 'A Reply to Dr. Kiernan's Footnote', *English Studies* 72 (1991), 497-500.

⁵ R. D. Fulk, 'Review Article: Dating *Beowulf* to the Viking Age', *Philological Quarterly* 61 (1982), 341-59, at 357.

⁶ N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957).

⁷ See *Beowulf and Judith*, ASPR IV, ed. E. V. K. Dobbie (New York, 1954), p. xvii, n. 26.

⁸ See J. Zupitza, *Beowulf: Autotypes of the Unique Cotton MS. Vitellius A. XV in the British Museum, with a Transliteration and Notes*, EETS 77 (London, 1882); 2nd ed. containing a new reproduction of the manuscript, with an introductory note by N. Davis (1959); reprinted EETS 245 (London, 1967), p. 89.

the first leaf. At some point between the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, during which time the manuscript was in the library of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton, the Nowell Codex was bound together with an unrelated twelfth-century collection known as the Southwick Codex.⁹ Together these codices make up British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv. As with all the extant Old English verse contained in the four poetic codices, our manuscript of *Beowulf* is generally considered a late copy of an earlier poem. The nature of copying errors suggests that the scribes worked from an exemplar containing unfamiliar letterforms. For example, they frequently confuse the letter *d* for *ð*: thus, at line 1278b the manuscript reads *sunu ðeod wrecan*, usually emended to *sunu deoð wrecan* or *sunu deað wrecan*.¹⁰ Noting that this type of copying error did not occur after the end of the eighth century, Charles Wrenn proposed in 1943 that we could thereby date the first written stage in the poem's transmission to before 800.¹¹ In a recent study Michael Lapidge makes a more concerted case for dating the composition of the poem through palaeography. He argues that in addition to *d* and *ð* the scribes regularly confused the letters *a* for *u*, *r* for *n*, *p* for *þ* and *c* for *t*. For example in the description of Hrothgar at line 357a, the manuscript reads *eald ond unhar*, 'old and unhoary (?)',¹² usually emended to *eald ond anhar*, 'old and singularly hoary':¹³ the error suggests that 'the archetype of *Beowulf* was written in a script which made use of the open *a*'.¹⁴ Zupitza had noticed that the open

⁹ An inscription on folio 2r. of *The Soliloquia of Saint Augustine* reads 'Hic liber est ecclesie beate Marie de Suwika'. This is assumed to be a reference to the priory of St. Mary in Southwick, Hampshire. See K. Malone, *The Nowell Codex: British Museum Cotton Vitellius A. xv, Second MS*, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 12 (Copenhagen, 1963); Dobbie, ASPR IV, p. ix; K. Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953; reprinted 1998), p. 61; and Kiernan, 'Beowulf' Manuscript, pp. 111-12. The Southwick Codex contains Alfred's *Soliloquies of Saint Augustine* (folios 1-56), see *King Alfred's Version of St. Augustine's Soliloquies*, ed. T. A. Carnicelli (Cambridge, 1969); *The Gospel of Nicodemus* (folios 57-82); the prose text of *The Debate of Solomon and Saturn* (folios 83v-89), see *The Prose Solomon and Saturn and Adrien and Ritheus*, ed. J. E. Cross and T. D. Hill, James E. McMaster Old English Studies and Texts 1 (Toronto, 1982); and an eleven-line fragment of *Saint Quintin's Homily* (folio 90v). See Ker, *Catalogue*, pp. 279-81, MS no. 215. Ker dates the Southwick Codex to *s. xii med.* For a detailed description of the Southwick Codex see R. Torkar, 'Cotton Vitellius A. xv (pt. I) and the Legend of Saint Thomas', *ES* 67 (1986), 290-303. Kiernan, 'Beowulf' Manuscript, p. 70, argues that each codex represents at least two originally distinct books, while P. B. Taylor and P. H. Salus, 'The Compilation of Cotton Vitellius A xv', *NM* 69 (1968), 199-204, suggest that the two codices were bound together to make 'a larger religious miscellany.'

¹⁰ See Zupitza, p. 60. See F. Klaeber, *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg* (3rd ed. Boston, 1936; supplemented 1941 and 1950), p. 48: *deoð*, C. L. Wrenn, *Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment*, 3rd ed. fully revised by W. F. Bolton (New York, 1973), p. 147: *deoð*, B. Mitchell and F. C. Robinson, *Beowulf: An Edition with Relevant Shorter Texts* (Oxford, 1998), p. 90: *deoð*, B. Kelly, 'The Formative Stages of *Beowulf* Textual Scholarship: Part I', *ASE* 11 (1982), 247-74, at 266, and B. Kelly 'Part II', *ASE* 12 (1983), 239-75, at 245: *deað*. See further S. O. Andrew, *Postscript on 'Beowulf'* (New York, 1948), p. 145; E. G. Stanley, 'Unideal Principles of Editing Old English Verse', *PBA* 70 (1984), 232-73, at 266; Lapidge, 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', p. 29; S. Newton, *The Origins of 'Beowulf' and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 10.

¹¹ C. L. Wrenn, 'The Value of Spelling as Evidence', *Transactions of the Philological Society, London* (1943), 14-27, at 18. See further A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959; reprinted with corrections Oxford, 1962), pp. 24-5, § 57. D. N. Dumville, 'Beowulf and the Celtic World: The Uses of Evidence', *Traditio* 37 (1981), 109-60, at 142: 'If Wrenn's theory is acceptable, it requires the supposition of a written copy of the poem not later than the eighth century.' See further Ker, *Catalogue*, p. xxxi; Newton, *The Origins of 'Beowulf'*, p. 9. For examples see Lapidge, 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', pp. 29-34. *Ibid.*, p. 34: 'after 750 and especially perhaps in Mercia, scribes consistently used the letter eth to distinguish the interdental fricative from the alveolar stop (represented as always by *ð*), a practice which had become invariable by the time of King Alfred in the late ninth century. Accordingly, if the text of *Beowulf* derives ultimately from an archetype in set minuscule in which the letter *ð* was used (even if randomly) to represent both the interdental fricative and the alveolar stop, that archetype must have been written earlier than c. 750.' But see 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, No. 2 (2002), 64-72, at 64-5. See further below.

¹² See Zupitza, p. 17.

¹³ Lapidge, 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', pp. 10-11. Of course, the manuscript reading could be retained, with the meaning that he was 'old but not hoary'. Lapidge, *ibid.*, pp. 10-12, cites two further examples of *a/u* confusion where sense has been restored at lines 581a (manuscript *wudu weallendu*, 'tossing ship', in Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*, p. 67, usually emended to *wadu weallendu*, 'welling water', e.g. Klaeber, *Beowulf*, p. 22; Wrenn-Bolton, p. 120), and 3073b, (manuscript *se done wong strade*, 'he who ? the hoard', emended to *se done wong strude*, 'he who plunders the hoard', by Klaeber, *Beowulf*, p. 115; Wrenn-Bolton, p. 208; and Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*, p. 157) and four examples 'where the scribes, both of them, have written a *u* with a stroke over it, which should properly be a suspension mark for *-um*, but where what is needed grammatically is the termination *-a(n)*', at lines 158b, 2821b, 2860a and 2961b.

¹⁴ Lapidge, 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', p. 20. See further D. N. Dumville, 'English Square Minuscule Script: The Background and Earliest Phases', *ASE* 16 (1987), 147-79, at 153.

a is not found in late Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, and took this as an indication that the exemplar should not be dated close to the time of the transmitting manuscript;¹⁵ Lapidge argues that the confusion of *r* and *n* points to the use of ‘an archetype in set minuscule with cursive features.’¹⁶ Confusion of *p* and the character ‘wynn’ occurs at lines 2814b (manuscript *forspeof* emended to *forsweop*).¹⁷ Sisam comments: ‘I have noticed no example of *wyn* in English manuscripts that can be assigned to the first half of the eighth century with confidence. It appears increasingly, though irregularly, in the latter part of the eighth century’.¹⁸ If Sisam is correct in his estimate, it follows that the exemplar was therefore probably written after the mid-eighth century. However, Lapidge notes the use of ‘wynn’ in the Epinal Glossary (Epinal, BM, 72), dated to *c.* 700.¹⁹ Lapidge considers the congruence of these features as a strong indication that the scribes worked from an ‘archetype’ written in set minuscule before 750.²⁰

However, Eric Stanley counters that many of the instances of scribal error which Lapidge credits to ‘faulty transliteration from an unfamiliar form of script’²¹ may in fact be simple copying and writing mistakes with no common underlying cause, and is therefore sceptical whether such errors can be considered reliable criteria for dating the composition of the poem in its original state.²² Indeed, Lapidge acknowledges the possibility that there were three or more intermediate stages of transmission between his hypothetical early eighth century archetype and our manuscript, during which time some text may have been added through interpolation.²³ Since Sisam’s study of 1946 it is generally accepted that Anglo-Saxon scribes freely modernized the forms contained in their exemplars, a practice which, he comments, ‘was obviously dangerous for the wording’.²⁴ More recently, Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe has demonstrated how at least some Old English poetic texts were substantially altered by scribes during the course of transmission, to the extent that new words and phrases were on occasion substituted for the ‘original’ text.²⁵ Therefore, without the control of another manuscript, such errors cannot be regarded as reliable indications of the antiquity of a hypothetical literary ‘archetype’.²⁶

¹⁵ Zupitza, p. 28, for l. 581, notes: ‘*wudu*, not *wadu*, without the least doubt; an open *a* at the top does not occur so late in English MSS.’ J. Gerritsen, ‘Have with you to Lexington! The *Beowulf* Manuscript and *Beowulf*, In Other Words: Transcultural Studies in Philology, Translation and Lexicology Presented to Hans Heinrich Meier on the Occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday’, ed. J. L. Mackenzie and R. Todd (Dordrecht, 1989), pp. 15-34, at 24, concludes: ‘if open-headed *a* was in the transmission history of *Beowulf* we should at least think back to the ninth century.’

¹⁶ Lapidge, ‘The Archetype of *Beowulf*’, p. 23. Lapidge, *ibid.*, p. 20, cites an example of *r/n* confusion at line 250b (manuscript *nafræ him his wlite leoge*, ‘never his appearance belied him’, retained in Wrenn-Bolton, p. 107, and Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*, p. 56, but emended to *nafræ him his wlite leoge*, ‘unless his appearance belied him’, in Klaeber, *Beowulf*, p. 10). For further examples see lines 1520b, 2251b, 2755b and 3154a, cited by Lapidge, *ibid.*, pp. 20-1.

¹⁷ See Zupitza, pp. 130-1. For the emendations see Klaeber, *Beowulf*, pp. 106 and 107; Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*, pp. 146 and 148. Wrenn-Bolton, p. 198, retains manuscript reading *forspeon* but emends *speop* to *speow* at line 2954b, p. 200. Lapidge, ‘The Archetype of *Beowulf*’, p. 26, argues that this supports his theory of an archetype written in set minuscule. See further Andrew, *Postscript on ‘Beowulf’*, pp. 151-2.

¹⁸ K. Sisam, ‘Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies’, *PBA* 39 (1953), 287-346, at 310-11.

¹⁹ Lapidge, ‘The Archetype of *Beowulf*’, pp. 24-5. See *ibid.*, p. 25, n. 66, for nine examples of ‘wynn’ in this manuscript. The letters *c* and *t* are confused at lines 1602b (manuscript *secan*, emended to *setan*), 2771a (manuscript *wraœ*, emended to *wraete*) and 3060a (manuscript *wraœ*, emended to *wraete*). See Zupitza, pp. 74, 128 and 139. See further, Klaeber, *Beowulf*, pp. 60, 104 and 114; Wrenn-Bolton, pp. 158, 197 and 207; Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*, pp. 101, 145 and 157. Lapidge, ‘The Archetype of *Beowulf*’, p. 28: ‘The crucial point is that in the three examples from the transmitted text of *Beowulf* in which *t* has been mistaken for *c*, in each case the letter follows an *e* ... This implies fairly clearly that the archetype of *Beowulf* contained *et* ligatures, and that on three occasions at least they were written ambiguously enough to cause confusion to subsequent scribes’.

²⁰ See also M. Lapidge, ‘*Beowulf*, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex’, *Studi Medievali* 3rd ser. 23 (1982), 151-92.

²¹ Lapidge, ‘The Archetype of *Beowulf*’, p. 7.

²² Stanley, ‘Paleographical and Textual Deep Waters’, p. 66.

²³ Lapidge, ‘The Archetype of *Beowulf*’, p. 36. See also Dumville, ‘*Beowulf* and the Celtic World’, pp. 150-1.

²⁴ Sisam, *Studies*, p. 273.

²⁵ K. O’Brien O’Keeffe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 4 (Cambridge, 1990). See also Liuzza, ‘On the Dating of *Beowulf*’, pp. 292-3.

²⁶ Newton, *The Origins of ‘Beowulf’*, pp. 9-10.

Taking a radically different approach to the manuscript evidence, Kevin Kiernan believes that we have before us in the extant manuscript the author's original, assigning both the copying and the composition of *Beowulf* to the reign of Cnut (1016 – 35). He interprets the damage to folio 179 as evidence that scribe B rewrote and restructured the poem after the initial copying at a juncture where, Kiernan believes, the Danish and Geatish sections of the poem are linked.²⁷ As scribe B also corrected some of the mistakes of scribe A, Kiernan proposes that we should consider scribe B as the final poet in the chain of transmission.²⁸ But others have argued that folio 179 was partially erased in an attempt to freshen up the text.²⁹ Damage to the manuscript in the years following its initial copying could have prompted an attentive scribe to attempt to recopy a section of the text. If the exemplar used for the initial copying was no longer available then he may have been forced to improvise or work from memory. Furthermore, scribe B may have come into possession of a second exemplar of *Beowulf* some years after completing his first version and for whatever reason elected to revise his work. Kiernan's supposition that folio 179 is a newly-written linking section between the Grendel episode and the dragon episode is demolished by the fact that, as Amos observes, 'the dragon episode does not begin on this folio with line 2207, as Kiernan claims (p. 249), but on line 14 of the preceding folio with line 2200'.³⁰ As we shall see, the difference between the two hands suggest that scribe B was the more senior copier, and it is therefore unsurprising that he took care to correct the mistakes of his junior.

As early as 1815 an anonymous reviewer of Thorkelín had rejected the possibility of composition during the reign of Cnut on the grounds of the 'age of the manuscript'.³¹ Similarly, in her influential 1951 monograph *The Audience of Beowulf*, Dorothy Whitelock argued that if the poem was composed later than the beginning of the Viking Age 'it could hardly be located in English England until the reign of Cnut, and that is later than our surviving manuscript'.³² But at the outset of his detailed discussion of the manuscript evidence, Kiernan states: 'Assuming that the palaeographers are right in their estimates, it is virtually certain that the poem was copied sometime after 1016'.³³ Clearly the date of the manuscript itself must be established before we can begin the search for a literary and historical context for the composition of the poem.

Ker's dating system

Ker dates the copying of the four great poetic codices towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, some time between the mid-tenth century and the early-eleventh century.³⁴ Scribe A uses a new form of Insular minuscule script, displaying evidence of Caroline influence, which Dumville argues had replaced Square minuscule as a vernacular hand c.1000.³⁵ This is clearly visible in his use of pronounced, often pointed ascenders on the letters *b*, *d*, *h*, *l*, and *p*, and descenders on the letters *f*, *g*,

²⁷ Kiernan, *Beowulf Manuscript*, pp. 250-62.

²⁸ Kiernan, *Beowulf Manuscript*, p. 278.

²⁹ See L. E. Boyle, 'The Nowell Codex and the Poem of *Beowulf*', in Chase (1981), pp. 23-32, at 24 and 31-2; Gerritsen, 'Have with you to Lexington! The *Beowulf* Manuscript and *Beowulf*', pp. 27-30; Fulk, 'Dating *Beowulf* to the Viking Age', p. 355; R. D. Fulk, 'On Argumentation in Old English Philology, with Particular Reference to the Editing and Dating of *Beowulf*', *ASE* 32 (2003), 1-26, at 15-16.

³⁰ Amos, 'An Eleventh-Century *Beowulf*?', p. 342.

³¹ See Shippey and Haarder, p. 101.

³² D. Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951; reprinted 1964), pp. 24-5; L. L. Schücking, 'Wan entstand der *Beowulf*? Glossen, Zweifel und Fragen', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 42 (1917), 347-410.

³³ Kiernan, *Beowulf Manuscript*, p. 15.

³⁴ Ker, *Catalogue*, p. xv, dates the Junius Manuscript to *s. x/xi, xi'*, and the Exeter and Vercelli Books to *s. x²*.

³⁵ See D. N. Dumville, '*Beowulf* Come Lately: Some Notes on the Palaeography of the Nowell Codex', *Archiv für das Studium der Neuren Sprachen und Literaturen* 225:1 (1988), 49-63, at 50 and 58; M. P. Brown, *A Guide to Western Historical Scripts from Antiquity to 1600* (London, 1990), pp. 58-65.

h, *r*, *x* and *y*. Scribe A's hand is distinguishable from the Anglo-Caroline hybrid of the 960s in the manner in which he forms the letter *a*. While Caroline script usually has a hook at the top of the *a*, scribe A makes his *a* with a single rounded bow and a straight down-stroke on the right. Scribe B uses a late form of Square minuscule, where Caroline influence is again evident; the use of ascenders and descenders is similar to the hand of scribe A, although here they are often somewhat reduced in length. This gives them a 'square' appearance: for example the descender on scribe B's letter *r* is shorter than that used by scribe A. The use of heavy shading on the vertical strokes and the distinctive flat cross-stroke closing the open *a* make scribe B's hand noticeably squarer and broader than the Caroline-influenced hand of his counterpart.³⁶ Scribe B uses the rounded *s*, which is also found occasionally in the hand of A; high *e* ligatures and low *s* are found only in scribe B's stint. The crossover of hands mid-sentence in the text of *Beowulf* led Ker to conclude that the scribes were 'contemporary with one another, but dissimilar in character', thus enabling him to date the manuscript to *s. x/xi*.³⁷ However, in 1988 David Dumville complained that: 'An extraordinary amount of ink has been spilt in interpretation of [Ker's] dating'.³⁸ Rather than relying on conflicting interpretations of his system, it will be more helpful to refer to Ker's own explanation in the *Catalogue*:

Approximate year numbers, e.g. c.1060, are not satisfactory dates for manuscripts datable only by their script and decoration unless we remember how approximate they must be. It is easy to forget this and to interpret c.1060 as meaning 'in or within a few years of 1060'. I have preferred to give the dates in this catalogue as a rule at quarter-century intervals in the form of [emphasis added] *s. x/xi*, *s. xi¹*, *s. xi^{med}*, and *s. xi²*. In itself *s. xi¹* means in the first half of the eleventh century, but in relation to other dates in the scale it means 'about the middle of the first half of the eleventh century', since a date either at the beginning or at the end of the half century would be expressed as *s. x/xi* or *s. xi^{med}*. The ambiguity of this method of dating is not perhaps too grave a fault. All my dates are certainly not right within the limits of a quarter-century. I can only hope that not too many of them are wrong within the limits of a half-century.³⁹

The following table should help to clarify Ker's system:

Mid-point	Ker's date	Quarter-century interval
c.975	<i>s. x²</i>	960/65 – 985/90
c.1000	<i>s. x/xi</i>	985/90 – 1010/15
c.1025	<i>s. xi¹</i>	1010/15 – 1035/40
c.1050	<i>s. xi^{med}</i>	1035/40 – 1060/65
c.1075	<i>s. xi²</i>	1060/65 – 1085/90
c.1100	<i>s. xi/xii</i>	1085/90 – 1110/15

In addition, palaeographers use the designations *ineunte* and *exeunte* in abbreviated form to denote the beginning and ending of a century. Thus *s. xiⁱⁿ* denotes approximately the period from 1000 – 1020, while *s. xi^{ex}* means roughly 1080 – 1100.⁴⁰ Ker uses these less specific designations to

³⁶ ASPR IV, pp. xvi-xvii. See also Gerritsen, 'Have with you to Lexington!', esp. p. 16.

³⁷ Ker, *Catalogue*, pp. 281-2. The first serious study was M. Förster, *Die Beowulf-Handschrift* (Leipzig, 1919). See also J. Gerritsen, 'British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv – A Supplementary Description', *English Studies* 69 (1988), 293-302. For discussion of the crossover of hands see Boyle, 'The Nowell Codex and the Poem of *Beowulf*', p. 32.

³⁸ Dumville, '*Beowulf* Come Lately', p. 50.

³⁹ Ker, *Catalogue*, p. xx.

⁴⁰ See A. R. Rumble, 'Using Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts', *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: Basic Readings*, ed. M. P. Richards (New York and London, 1994), pp. 3-24, at 13; Brown, *A Guide to Western Historical Scripts from Antiquity to 1600*, pp. 2-3.

date manuscripts where the palaeographical evidence appears to clash with historical evidence.⁴¹ By dating the hands responsible for the copying of *Beowulf* to *s. x/xi* Ker is clearly stating that the manuscript is a product of the quarter-century interval around the turn of the millennium (i.e. *c.* 985/90 – 1010/15), rather than Kiernan’s proposed period of 1016 – 35.⁴² Dumville comments that by *s. x/xi* Ker means ‘the late tenth or early eleventh century, and given that Ker provided datings within a span of fifty years his formula would naturally be taken as meaning *ca* 975 x *ca* 1025.’⁴³ However, despite his modest hope that ‘not too many of them [i.e. his dates] are wrong within the limits of a half-century’, Ker nevertheless makes it clear that the intervals are in fact ‘quarter-century intervals’ rather than half-century intervals. By dating the manuscript to 1016 – 35, the middle period of the first half of the eleventh century, Kiernan assumes a mid-point of *c.*1025 rather than *c.*1000. A manuscript dating from this period would in fact be dated *s. xii* in Ker’s system. Therefore, the acceptance of Kiernan’s dates would throw the entire system off balance. In defence of his interpretation of Ker’s dates, Kiernan refers to Ker’s statement that the list of the 189 most fully described manuscripts in his catalogue is ‘in three parts, in order to show how many of these principal manuscripts were written (1) before, (2) in, and (3) after the eleventh century’.⁴⁴ As Ker includes manuscripts dated *s. x/xi* in section (2), Kiernan argues that *s. x/xi* means the early eleventh century, rather than the quarter century period either side of the year 1000, but we have seen that *s. x/xi* means the quarter-century period before and after the turn of the millennium.

In the first edition of his book *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, published in 1981, Kiernan interprets Ker’s dates *s. x/xi* as the period 975 – 1025, yet in his 1996 ‘Revisions’ he claims that ‘Ker unambiguously dated the *Beowulf* manuscript between 990 and 1040’.⁴⁵ This apparent contradiction arises from the interpretation of remarks made by Ker in his 1968 commentary to *The Will of Æthelgifu*, wherein Ker states that between 990 and 1040 ‘great differences are to be seen between the hands of scribes writing at the same time and in the same place, between, for example, the first and second hand of *Beowulf*’.⁴⁶ However, Ker’s dating of the hands of *Beowulf* within this fifty-year period does not necessarily entail a revised date of the MS. Indeed, the date Ker had already given in his *Catalogue*, *s. x/xi*, falls within the broader limits 990x1040.⁴⁷

Was Square minuscule, then, such as that used by scribe B of *Beowulf* still in use during the reign of Cnut? During the 980s Square minuscule was replaced by Caroline minuscule for the copying of Latin texts, and by *c.*1000 it seems to have fallen from use as a script used for vernacular texts.⁴⁸ We find in its place a hand influenced by Caroline minuscule which Lapidge categorises as ‘English vernacular minuscule’, distinct from both the earlier standard Square minuscule and the Anglo-Caroline minuscule of the 960s.⁴⁹ According to Ker, by *c.*1050 all vernacular scripts had

⁴¹ Ker, *Catalogue*, pp. xx-xxi. Ker provides the example of several early eleventh century Ælfrician texts which, if judged from a purely palaeographical basis, could be dated to before 1000.

⁴² See R. L. Collins, ‘Blickling XVP’, *Medieval Studies Conference, Aachen, 1983: Language and Literature*, ed. W. D. Bald and H. Weinstock (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1984), pp. 61-9, at 67: ‘The manuscript of the Blickling Homilies and the manuscript of *Beowulf* have been dated the same by N. R. Ker. Each is marked “S.x/xi” or, in Ker’s scheme, in the quarter century surrounding the year 1000, that is about 987 to about 1013’.

⁴³ D. N. Dumville, ‘The *Beowulf* Manuscript and How Not to Date it’, *Medieval English Student’s Newsletter* 39 (1998), 21-7, at 21.

⁴⁴ Ker, *Catalogue*, p. xv. See Kiernan, *Beowulf Manuscript*, p. 13, n. 2.

⁴⁵ Kiernan, *Beowulf Manuscript*, pp. 13, xviii.

⁴⁶ N. R. Ker, ‘The Manuscript’, *The Will of Æthelgifu* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 45-6.

⁴⁷ Dumville, ‘The *Beowulf*-Manuscript and How Not to Date it’, p. 23: ‘[this] does not mean that Ker was dating it by the range 990x1040; he was merely giving an example of what happened within that period’.

⁴⁸ See T. A. M. Bishop, ‘An Early Example of the Square Minuscule’, *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 4 (1964-8), 246-52; T. A. M. Bishop, *English Caroline Minuscule*, Oxford Palaeographical Handbooks (Oxford, 1971); Dumville, ‘English Square Minuscule Script: The Background and Earliest Phases’; D. N. Dumville, *English Caroline Script and Monastic History: Studies in Benedictinism, A.D. 950-1030*, Studies in Anglo-Saxon History 6 (Woodbridge, 1993); D. N. Dumville, ‘English Square Minuscule Script: the Mid-Century Phases’, *ASE* 23 (1994), 133-64; J. Crick, ‘The Case for a West Saxon Minuscule’, *ASE* 26 (1997), 63-75.

⁴⁹ Lapidge, ‘The Archetype of *Beowulf*’, p. 7. See further Dumville, ‘*Beowulf* Come Lately’, esp. pp. 50 and 58.

become ‘thoroughly Caroline’.⁵⁰ Dumville argues that the last group of texts which can be satisfactorily referred to as Square minuscule are manuscripts of works by Ælfric dated to the end of the tenth century, and five mixed-script manuscripts: these are two versions of Alfred’s translation of Gregory’s *Cura Pastoralis*, the Old English *Martyrology*, *The Blickling Homilies*, and The Nowell Codex, which contains *Beowulf*.⁵¹ By suggesting that some of these Ælfrician works are datable to *s. xiⁱⁿ*, Ker extends the limits for the use of Square minuscule into the early-eleventh century. However, on this point Dumville questions Ker’s authority, suggesting that although these manuscripts were circulated in the early part of the eleventh century, their copying might be more accurately dated to *s. x/xi*, pushing the date for the latest sighting of Square minuscule back slightly but nonetheless significantly towards the quarter century either side of the millennium.⁵² Kiernan claims that a chirograph in a charter of Bishop Byrhteh of Worcester, datable to 1033x1038, or *s. xiⁱ* in Ker’s system, provides an example of Square minuscule comparable with that of the second hand responsible for *Beowulf*.⁵³ But Gregory F. Rose accuses Kiernan of making ‘a serious palaeographic mistake’ here,⁵⁴ demonstrating that the hand in this chirograph in fact has more in common with scribe A’s Anglo-Caroline hand than with the late Square minuscule of scribe B, despite the squareness of the *a*.⁵⁵ The hand of the chirograph is an example of what Dumville refers to as the ‘laterally compressed form of Insular minuscule seen in so many eleventh-century English vernacular manuscripts, lacking both the proportions and the characteristic forms of Square minuscule.’⁵⁶ Despite Kiernan’s claims to the contrary, the palaeographers’ findings indicate that the second scribe of *Beowulf* was unlikely to have been working after the accession of Cnut in 1016. Both Dumville and Ker agree on the displacement of Square minuscule within the first decade of the eleventh century.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, we must allow for the possibility that some older scribes may have continued to employ this type of script for at least the first decade or so of the eleventh century, overlapping with the introduction of Caroline-influenced script in the last decade of the tenth century.

The Scildingid?

Beowulf opens with a celebration of the foundation of the ancient Danish Scylding dynasty and its former glories (ll. 1-17).⁵⁸ Beowulf’s fights with Grendel and Grendel’s mother also take place in the

⁵⁰ Ker, *Catalogue*, pp. xxxii-iii.

⁵¹ Dumville, ‘English Square Minuscule Script: the Background and Earliest Phases’, p. 148; *idem.*, ‘The *Beowulf*-Manuscript and How Not to Date it’, esp. p. 23; Dumville, ‘*Beowulf* Come Lately’, pp. 54-63. For the mixed-script manuscripts see Ker, *Catalogue*, nos 87, MS Cambridge, Trinity College R. 5. 22 (717) folios 72-158 (*Regula Pastoralis*); 175, MS British Museum, Cotton Otho B. x. folios 61, 63, 64 (*Pastoral Care*); 161, MS British Museum, Cotton Julius A. x. folios 44-175 (*Martyrology*); 216, MS British Museum Cotton Vitellius A. xv. The Nowell Codex, (*Beowulf Manuscript* in Ker) and 382, MS Collection of William H. Scheide, Titusville, USA (*Blickling Homilies*).

⁵² Dumville, ‘*Beowulf* Come Lately’, pp. 59-60.

⁵³ London, BL, Additional Charter 19797 (Sawyer 1399); Ker, *Catalogue*, n. 1399; E. A. Bond, *Facsimiles of Ancient Charters in the British Museum*, 4 vols (1873-78), p. iv, 19; Kiernan, ‘*Beowulf* Manuscript’, pp. xvii-xviii.

⁵⁴ G. F. Rose, ‘A Look Back at Kevin S. Kiernan’s *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*. The Kiernan Theory Revisited: *Beowulf* at the Court of Cnut?’, *Envoi* vol. 6, no. 2 (Fall 1997), 135-45, at 136.

⁵⁵ Rose, ‘A Look Back at Kevin S. Kiernan’s *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*’, pp. 137-9, compares areas such as the use of tagging on ascenders and curves on downstrokes, the length of minim strokes on the letters *r* and *i*, and the general roundness of script. See the MANCASS C11 Spelling Database for examples of the letterforms used by the scribe.

⁵⁶ Dumville, ‘*Beowulf* Come Lately’, p. 54.

⁵⁷ Ker, *The Will of Æthelgifu*, p. 45; Ker, *Catalogue*, pp. xx-xxi; Dumville, ‘The *Beowulf*-Manuscript and How Not to Date it’, p. 24.

⁵⁸ It has been suggested that the prologue, containing the most unequivocal praise of the Scyldings, is somewhat at odds with the rest of the poem. This view has its roots in the *liedertheorie* of the nineteenth century. See, for example, K. Müllenhoff, *Beowulf: Untersuchungen über das angelsächsische Epos* (Berlin, 1889), ch. 3, transl. in Shippey and Haarder, pp. 346-54, at 348; L. L. Schücking, *Beowulfs Rückkehr: Eine kritische Studie*, Studien zur englischen Philologie 21 (Halle, 1905), p. 72; H. Bradley, ‘Beowulf’, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (London & New York, 1910), vol. 3, pp. 758-61. Sisam, ‘Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies’, pp. 315 and 339, suggests that the prologue, due to its apparently ‘late’ genealogical context, may be an addition to an earlier poem, and as recently as 1989, A. L. Meaney, ‘Scyld Scefig and the Dating of *Beowulf*-Again’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 71 (1989), 7-40, at 39,

land of the Danes or Scyldings. It is, therefore, unsurprising that some of the poem's early readers assumed that *Beowulf* was essentially a Danish artefact that had gone astray in Anglo-Saxon England. The great Icelandic scholar Thorkelín confidently declared in 1815 that this *Scyldingid* was 'truly Danish',⁵⁹ and in 1917 Levin Schücking felt that 'the fleeting mention of the Offa-legend' and 'the dithyramb on the old Danish kings with which the poem opens' were in accord with the poem's 'outspoken glorification' of the Danes.⁶⁰ Assuming an Anglo-Saxon audience would equate the ancient Scyldings, Scylfings and Hrethlings of the poem with the Vikings attacking their shores, Dorothy Whitelock argued that a poem which 'celebrates' the Danes could not have been composed or tolerated by Englishmen during the Viking Age when Danes were 'burning their homes, pillaging their churches, ravaging their cattle and crops, killing their countrymen or carrying them off into slavery'.⁶¹ During the reign of Æthelred the Unready, the period when most scholars agree that the manuscript was copied, there is ample evidence of anti-Danish sentiment.⁶² The *Maldon* poet refers to the heathen Vikings as Danes,⁶³ as do the *Chronicle* entries for the years 983 to 1016.⁶⁴ Hostilities reached a peak when Æthelred ordered the execution of all Danes living in England on 13 November 1002.⁶⁵ Equating the final copying of the poem with the act of composition, Kiernan therefore finds it improbable that the poem is a product of Æthelred's reign:

By 1016, however, the political situation had changed completely. England had by then become the centre of the Scylding dynasty, under the strong and peaceful rule of Knut the Great (1016 – 35), son of Sweinn and the descendant of the legendary Scyld. The most probable time of the manuscript, *then* [emphasis added], is sometime after 1016, when the genealogical panegyric was a compliment, rather than an insult, to the reigning king. Knut's reign is also an eminently appropriate time for the composition of *Beowulf*, providing as it does a splendid confluence of Anglo-Saxon poetry and Scandinavian lore.⁶⁶

Despite the general lack of support for Kiernan's interpretation of the palaeographical evidence, the possibility of an eleventh-century *Beowulf* continues to attract attention. In 1997 Hildegard Tristram argued that the genealogical material incorporated into the prologue (ll. 1-52) might have been composed in order to justify Cnut's claim to the throne to his new English subjects by 'using the time honoured principle of taking recourse to an ancient ancestry shared by winners and losers'.⁶⁷

proposed that the prologue may have been among the last additions to the poem in the tenth century prior to the final copying. However, A. Bonjour, *The Digressions in 'Beowulf'* (Oxford, 1950; reprinted 1965), pp. 1-11, has convincingly demonstrated that the prologue cannot be detached from the main text without unbalancing the essential structure of the poem. See also G. R. Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in 'Beowulf'* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 11-42 and 178-201.

⁵⁹ Thorkelín, *De Danorum Rebus Gestis Seculis III et IV*, transl. in Shippey and Haarder, pp. 91-2: 'Of all the monuments of the ancient Danish world which devouring time has left us, the epic of the Scyldings now published is preeminently admirable. ... As far as our Scyldingid is concerned, that it is truly Danish everybody will agree who has observed that the author of the history was an eye-witness to the deeds of the kings Hrodgar, Beowulf and Higelac, and present as encomiast at Beowulf's funeral.' This assertion in itself is indebted to Jacob Langebek's discovery in 1772 that the Scyld of the poem was equivalent to the Skjold of Danish legend. See *Langfædgatal*, in *Scriptores Rerum Danicarum Medii Ævi*, vol. 1 (1772-1878; reprinted Nendeln, 1969), ed. J. Langebek, pp. 1-6; summarised and transl. in Shippey and Haarder, pp. 5-6. Grundtvig also believed in a Danish *Beowulf*; see Shippey and Haarder, pp. 108-13.

⁶⁰ Schücking, 'Wann entstand der Beowulf: Glossen, Zweifel und Fragen', transl. in Shippey and Haarder, pp. 536-42, at 539-40. Schücking suggests that composition in an Anglo-Danish court in the Danelaw might explain the poem's Danish interest.

⁶¹ Whitelock, *Audience*, pp. 24-5. See also Klaeber, *Beowulf*, p. cvii.

⁶² It is, of course, dangerous to assume a uniform level of anti-Danish or anti-Scandinavian sentiment across Anglo-Saxon England, particularly in inland regions relatively unaffected by the Viking attacks.

⁶³ See S. Keynes, 'The Historical Context of the Battle of Maldon', in *The Battle of Maldon AD 991*, ed. D. G. Scragg (Oxford, 1991), pp. 81-113.

⁶⁴ See *Tvo of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, ed. C. J. Earle and C. Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford, 1892-99), I, pp. 124-53.

⁶⁵ S. Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'the Unready' 978-1016* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 202-5, questions the level of popular support for the massacre. See also Keynes, 'The Historical Context of the Battle of Maldon', p. 93; E. G. Stanley, 'A West-Saxon's Sympathy for the Danes During the Reign of Æthelred the Unready', *N and Q* 244 [New Series, vol. 46], no. 3 (1999), 309-10.

⁶⁶ K. S. Kiernan, 'The Eleventh Century Origin of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* Manuscript', in Chase (1980), pp. 9-22, at 10.

⁶⁷ Tristram, 'What's the Point of Dating "Beowulf"?', p. 73.

But is it likely that an Anglo-Saxon scribe or poet working at this time would have associated Viking rulers like Olaf Tryggvason, Swein Forkbeard, Cnut Sweinnson and Thorkell the Tall with ancient Danish kings such as Scyld Scefing and Hrothgar?

The earliest datable appearance of the title Scylding (Lat. *Scaldingi*) is in the anonymous *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* (c. 950), where it is used to refer to the Danish ruler Ívarr, who conquered York and Northumbria in 867, and his brother Halfdan.⁶⁸ Roberta Frank observes that Norse skalds used the title *skjoldungr* ‘as a general poetic term for king, and never as a dynastic title the way the *Beowulf* poet does, as in ‘the old Scylding’ (1792, 2105).⁶⁹ While the *Beowulf* poet traces the Scylding line of Hrothgar back through Healfdene and Beow to the dynastic founder Scyld Scefing, Cnut’s skalds asserted their king’s descent from ninth-century Danish settlers, most notably Ívarr, and the dynasty of Gormr the Old.⁷⁰ Although his rule extended over England, Denmark and Norway, rather than drawing attention to his Danishness, King Cnut seems to have gone to great trouble to present himself as an English king.⁷¹ In 1017 he married the Norman/ Danish queen Emma, widow of the former Anglo-Saxon King Æthelred II, a move which, as Rose notes, was ‘as much related to creating a tie to the previous dynasty as to concerns with Normandy and the exiled æthelings’.⁷²

It is now widely recognised that Whitelock’s assessment of Anglo-Scandinavian relations during the Viking Age is overly simplistic, and it is no longer fashionable to rule out the possibility of Viking Age composition or copying on solely cultural grounds.⁷³ The close resemblance between the Scylding genealogy in the prologue to *Beowulf* and the remote stages of the genealogy of Alfred’s father, Æthelwulf, has led some scholars to argue that the poem reflects the political situation of the late-ninth or early-tenth centuries, when West Saxon kings claimed authority over Anglo-Saxon and Dane alike. Alexander Callendar Murray, for example, argues that a ‘poem beginning in the manner of *Beowulf* would be bound, and surely would be intended, to catch the attention of an audience or patron with West Saxon connections’, and considers the Scyld episode ‘a viking age allusion to the descent of the West Saxon kings’.⁷⁴ But the view that *Beowulf* was composed to honour the Danes or indeed the West Saxon kings who claimed allegiance with them fails to consider the complexity of the poet’s presentation of the Danes. After the account of the construction of Heorot (ll. 67b – 82a)

⁶⁸ *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* in *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, ed. T. Arnold, Rolls Series, 75, 2 vols (1882-5), I, 196-214, at 202. For the date of the *Historia* see E. Craster, ‘The Patrimony of St Cuthbert’, *EHR* 69 (1954), 177-99, at 177-8. See further Meaney, ‘Scyld Scefing’, pp. 17-18; R. Frank, ‘King Cnut in the Verse of his Skalds’, in *The Reign of Cnut: King of England, Denmark and Norway*, ed. A. R. Rumble (London, 1994), pp. 106-24, at 110-12.

⁶⁹ Frank, ‘Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*’, p. 126. See also Frank, ‘King Cnut in the Verse of his Skalds’, p. 111. Meaney, ‘Scyld Scefing’, p. 18, n. 49: ‘However, since Hrothgar was both a member of the dynasty and king this is surely only a minor extension of usage. Early eleventh-century Norse skalds used the term for Cnut and contemporary Norwegian kings, particularly in connection with their “English adventures”, but this could have been an idiosyncratic usage by non-Danish poets’.

⁷⁰ Frank, ‘King Cnut in the Verse of his Skalds’, p. 112: ‘[The verse of Cnut’s poets] tells us ... that – by 1030 at the latest – Cnut’s descent from Ívarr and his ninth century settlers was the official party line.’

⁷¹ Cnut patronised the English church extensively, spent most of his reign in England and is buried at Winchester. See G. Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (London, 1968; reprinted 1975), pp. 372-4; *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England* ed. M. Lapidge, J. Blair, S. Keynes and D. Scragg (Oxford, 1999), pp. 108-9.

⁷² Rose, ‘A Look Back at Kevin S. Kiernan’s *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*. The Kiernan Theory Revisited: *Beowulf* at the Court of Cnut?’, p. 140.

⁷³ See M. Ashdown, ‘The Attitude of the Anglo-Saxons to their Scandinavian Invaders’, *The Saga Book of the Viking Club* 10 (1928-9), 75-99; N. F. Blake, ‘The Dating of Old English Poetry’, in *An English Miscellany Presented to W. S. Mackie*, ed. B. S. Lee (London, 1977), pp. 14-27, at 25; N. Jacobs, ‘Anglo-Danish Relations, Poetic Archaism and the Date of *Beowulf*. A Reconsideration of the Evidence’, *Poetica* 8 (Tokyo, 1977), 23-43; R. I. Page, ‘The Audience of *Beowulf* and the Vikings’, in Chase (1981), pp. 113-22; A. C. Murray, ‘*Beowulf*, the Danish Invasions, and Royal Genealogy’, in Chase (1981), pp. 101-11; J. D. Niles, ‘Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History’, *Exemplaria* 5 (New York, 1993), 79-109; P. Poussa, ‘The Date of *Beowulf* Reconsidered. The Tenth Century?’, *NM* 82 (1981), 276-88.

⁷⁴ Murray, ‘*Beowulf*, the Danish Invasions, and Royal Genealogy’, pp. 107 and 110. See also J. D. Niles, ‘*Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition*’ (Cambridge MA, 1983), pp. 96-117; R. L. Kellogg, ‘The Context for Epic in Later Anglo-Saxon England’, in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.*, ed. H. Damico and J. Leylerle (Kalamazoo, 1993), pp. 139-56, at 154

the Danes are not depicted in any actions which might be considered glorious.⁷⁵ Paralysed by Grendel's magic, their helplessness is typified by Unferth's empty boasting, while in the so-called 'Christian excursus' the poet laments their recourse to idol-worship in the face of Grendel's attacks (ll. 171b-83a).⁷⁶ Moreover, the hero of the poem is not Danish, but a member of the obscure Wægmunding tribe who is adopted by the Geatish king Hrethel.⁷⁷ Indeed, the poet's tribal interests range far across the northern world, leading Roberta Frank to suggest that the poet 'does his best to attach his pagan champion to as many peoples as possible – Danes, Geats, Swedes, Wulfings, and Wægmundings – as if to make him the more authentically representative of the culture and traditions of central Scandinavia: an archetypal Northman'.⁷⁸ As early as 1815 an anonymous reviewer of Thorkelín commented: 'An Anglo-Saxon court skald with the descendants of Canute would not have adapted this kind of poem, where a Goth [i.e. Geat] is the most prominent hero'.⁷⁹ There is nothing in Kiernan's argument to make us question this view.

Conclusion

By dating the hands of the Nowell Codex to *s. x/xi*, Ker meant to indicate the period 985/90 – 1010/15. There is no compelling reason why a poem such as *Beowulf*, with its evocation of the former glory of ancient Danish, Swedish and Geatish royal families, could not have been copied during the reign of Æthelred. But the decision to include *Beowulf* in the Nowell Codex was probably inspired by the exotic blend of far-flung locations and marvellous beasts which it shares with its accompanying texts rather than by any immediate political motivation.⁸⁰ Saint Christopher was often

⁷⁵ See E. M. L. Etmüller, *Beowulf: Heldendicht des achten Jahrhunderts, zum ersten Male aus dem Angelsächsischen in das Neuhochdeutsche stabreimend übersetzt und mit Einleitung und Anmerkungen versehen* (Zürich, 1840), transl. in Shippey and Haarder, p. 232; Chambers, *Beowulf*, pp. 327-8; Niles, *Beowulf*, pp. 107-17; Niles, 'Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History', p. 95; Fulk, 'Dating *Beowulf* to the Viking Age', pp. 342-4. But see also Jacobs, 'Anglo-Danish Relations', p. 29, n. 33.

⁷⁶ Whitelock, *Audience*, p. 78, suggests that the lines were added during the Viking Age by someone 'who could extract some comfort from the thought that, while the Danes were ravaging his country, they were bound straight for hell'. See also J. R. R. Tolkien, 'The Monsters and the Critics', *PBA* 22 (1936), 245-95; reprinted in *An Anthology of 'Beowulf' Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame IN, 1963), pp. 51-103, at 101-3. A. J. Bliss, *The Metre of 'Beowulf'* (Oxford, 1958), p. 77, finds two anomalous half-lines in this passage (l. 183b and 186b), both of which feature the formula *wel bið*, and A. Orchard, *A Critical Companion to 'Beowulf'* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 153, comments: 'the same structure is quite widely attested in Old English homiletic prose, and may ultimately derive from the Beatitudes.' However, most scholars now accept the passage as authentic. See, for example, A. G. Brodeur, *The Art of 'Beowulf'* (Berkeley, 1959), pp. 199-215; and E. Carrigan, 'Structure and Thematic Development in *Beowulf*', *Proceedings of the Irish Academy* 66C (1967), 1-51, at 6.

⁷⁷ *Beowulf* is generally thought of as a fictional character inserted into Geatish tradition by the poet. See L. D. Benson, 'The Originality of *Beowulf*', in *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*, Harvard English Studies 1, ed. M. W. Bloomfield (Cambridge MA, 1970), pp. 1-43; reprinted in his *Contradictions: From 'Beowulf' to Chaucer: Selected Studies of Larry D. Benson*, ed. T. M. Andersson and S. A. Barney (Aldershot, Hants, and Brookfield VT, 1995), pp. 32-69, at 50. For speculation as to *Beowulf*'s tribal affiliations see Klaeber, *Beowulf*, p. xlv; W. F. Bryan, 'The Wægmundings – Swedes or Geats?', *Modern Philology* 34 (1936), 113-18. R. P. M. Lehmann, 'Ecgþeow the Wægmunding: Geat or Swede?', *ELN* 31 (1994), 1-5; N. E. Eliason, 'Beowulf, Wiglaf and the Wægmundings', *ASE* 7 (1978), 95-105.

⁷⁸ R. Frank, 'The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History', *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honour of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. L. D. Benson and S. Wenzel (Kalamazoo, 1982), pp. 53-65, at 64. See further N. Howe, *Migration and Myt-making in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, 1989), pp. 143-80.

⁷⁹ Shippey and Haarder, p. 102. It has also been argued on archaeological and genealogical grounds that the poet's interest in the Swedish royal family points to connections with East Anglia. See J. L. N. O'Loughlin, 'Sutton Hoo – The Evidence of the Documents', *Medieval Archaeology* 8 (1964), 1-19; R. Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (London, 1974), pp. 55-60, 258-9; Newton, *The Origins of 'Beowulf'*; J. D. Mosteller Jr., 'A Case for the East Anglian Provenance of *Beowulf*', *Medieval Perspectives* 7 (1992), 124-40.

⁸⁰ The theory that the Nowell Codex was conceived as a 'book of monsters' was first advanced by Sisam, *Studies*, pp. 65-94. Taylor and Salus, 'The Compilation of Cotton Vitellius A xv', suggest the codex is a collection of wonders and marvels, perhaps made for someone with antiquarian interests. See further Dumville, '*Beowulf* and the Celtic World', p. 140; Lapidge, 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', pp. 40-41; A. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the 'Beowulf' Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1995); P. Wormald, 'Beowulf: The Redating Reassessed', *Old English Newsletter* 30.3 (1997), A-55-7. *Beowulf* is the only secular heroic poem drawing on Germanic legend contained in the major poetic codices. *Finnsburh* survived in a fragment contained in MS London, Lambeth Palace Library 487 (now

regarded as a giant and associated with beasts in the early Middle Ages; in the *Old English Martyrology* he is represented as half-canine,⁸¹ while in the Nowell Codex he is described as being of monstrous proportions.⁸² *The Wonders of the East* is an illustrated anthology,⁸³ featuring thirty-two examples of mythical and legendary lore, and *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* recounts Alexander's exploits in the East, where he encounters monsters of all shapes and sizes.⁸⁴ In addition to Grendel, his mother and the dragon, *Beowulf* features a number of other monstrous and marvellous creatures, including *eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas*, 'giants, elves and orcs' (l. 112), and *niceras*, 'water-monsters' (ll. 422, 575, 845-1427).⁸⁵ The hero possesses the strength of thirty men, fights underwater and is described as 'hugging' an opponent to death in Frisia.⁸⁶ His uncle Hygelac is recorded in the *Liber Monstrorum* as a figure of great size and strength.⁸⁷

The other Anglo-Saxon poetic codices appear to have been compiled with spiritual themes in mind. The Junius Manuscript contains three Old English versions of biblical narratives, *Genesis*, *Exodus* and *Daniel* and a fourth text of a generally biblical character, *Christ and Satan*.⁸⁸ Although the thematic principle behind the compilation of *The Exeter Book* is less obvious,⁸⁹ there is some evidence of an anthologist's consideration. For example, the eight longer poems, all of which deal with the theme of a model Christian life, are placed at the beginning of the codex.⁹⁰ *The Vercelli Book* contains homilies, saints' lives and other poems, united by a general concern with mortality and salvation.⁹¹

The main obstacle to Sisam's suggestion that the Nowell Codex was conceived as a 'book of monsters' is the presence of *Judith*, a poem which shares the heroic theme with *Beowulf*, but lacks the monstrous and supernatural elements of all the other texts.⁹² However, it is now recognised that *Judith* was not originally the last text in the codex.⁹³ The absence of *io* spelling in *Judith* and *Saint Christopher*, as well as their shared Old Testament or early Christian setting, may indicate that they were derived from the same exemplar, and Peter Lucas has suggested these texts were originally at the beginning of the codex.⁹⁴ Orchard comments that, if we accept Lucas's revised 'original'

lost); see Klaeber, *Beowulf*, pp. 231-53. *Waldere* survives in two fragments in MS Copenhagen, Royal Library, Ny kongelige Samling 167b. See further Niles, *Beowulf*, pp. 36, 47, 61-4, 115, 150.

⁸¹ *Old English Martyrology*, ed. G. Herzfeld, EETS (Oxford, 1900), p. 66. See Taylor and Salus, 'The Compilation of Cotton Vitellius A xv', 201.

⁸² Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, pp. 12-18.

⁸³ Sisam, *Studies*, pp. 74-5. For discussion of the sources see Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, pp. 20-5.

⁸⁴ Sisam, *Studies*, p. 84; Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, p. 26.

⁸⁵ Orchard, *Critical Companion*, pp. 33-4, discusses the recurrence of the word *nicor* in *Beowulf*, *Alexander's Letter* and Blickling Homily XVI. See also Collins, 'Blickling XVI'.

⁸⁶ See S. B. Greenfield, 'A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero or Beowulf Re-Marvellized', in his *Hero and Exile: The Art of Old English Poetry*, ed. G. H. Brown (London and Ronceverte, 1989), pp. 75-92.

⁸⁷ For discussion of the date see Lapidge, 'Beowulf, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex', pp. 163-65; L. G. Whitbread, 'The *Liber Monstrorum* and *Beowulf*', *Mediaeval Studies* 36 (1974), 434-71. For the text see Chambers, *Introduction*, p. 4. Garmonsway, *Beowulf and Its Analogues*, p. 113.

⁸⁸ ASPR I, pp. x-xi.

⁸⁹ N. F. Blake, 'Originality in *The Phoenix*', *Notes and Queries* 206 (1961), 163-4, at 2, considers *The Exeter Book* a 'miscellany' of unconnected works.

⁹⁰ See *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, I, ed. B. J. Muir (Exeter, 1994), pp. 24-7; Sisam, 'The Arrangement of *The Exeter Book*', *Studies*, pp. 291-2.

⁹¹ See D. G. Scragg, 'The Compilation of the Vercelli Book', *ASE* 2 (1973), 189-207; reprinted in *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: Basic Readings*, Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England, ed. M. P. Richards (New York and London, 1994).

⁹² Sisam, *Studies*, p. 67. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, p. 4, argues that Holofernes's 'behaviour is certainly monstrous, and ... Judith, like Beowulf, disposes of her incapacitated foe by decapitation'.

⁹³ Dobbie, ASPR IV, p. lxi, suggests that *Judith* is a fragment of a poem originally twelve or thirteen hundred lines long. The source is the Latin Vulgate text of the deuterocanonical Book of Judith, although the Old English poet is free with his interpretation of events. See further Sisam, *Studies*, p. 64, n. 1; Ker, *Catalogue*, p. 282. Malone, *The Nowell Codex*, p. 17, suggests that *Judith* was added to the book at a later date by a compiler who noticed the similarity in hands. See also Boyle, 'The Nowell Codex', p. 31; Kiernan, 'Beowulf Manuscript', p. 59, n. 70.

⁹⁴ P. J. Lucas, 'The Place of *Judith* in the *Beowulf*-Manuscript', *Review of English Studies* 41 (1990), 463-78, at 473-74.

construction, the Nowell Codex may have been compiled along thematic lines: the first two texts, *Judith* and *Christopher*, are Old Testament or early Christian in character, the next two, *Wonders* and the *Letter*, are drawn from the classical world, while the events described in the ‘final’ manuscript, *Beowulf*, are set in the heathen north.⁹⁵

There appears to have been an audience for heroic poems in the vernacular around the time of the copying of our manuscript of *Beowulf*.⁹⁶ *The Battle of Brunanburh*, composed at some point after 937, was widely circulated in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle;⁹⁷ and although the loss of the only manuscript of *The Battle of Maldon* makes it impossible to date the composition of the poem with any certainty, it was probably composed not very long after 991.⁹⁸ But unlike these topical poems, *Beowulf* draws its themes predominantly from ancient continental traditions, and is probably the product of an earlier period. The manuscript has little to tell us about the poem’s date, save that the high number of scribal errors suggest that our text was copied from an exemplar, itself probably a copy, which may have contained unfamiliar letterforms, words and spellings. This supports Richie Girvan’s assertion that the manuscript is ‘at several removes from the original’,⁹⁹ but, as Eric Stanley warns, despite the best efforts of palaeographers and textual critics, ‘[w]e cannot get back to the author’s original’.¹⁰⁰ The unstable nature of the scribal transmission of Anglo-Saxon literary texts prevents us from ruling out any date of composition from the eighth century onwards on purely palaeographical grounds. But we should be wary of attempts to attach the poem to any particular Anglo-Saxon or indeed Anglo-Danish royal house.¹⁰¹ In keeping with his presentation of the pagan heroic ethos, the poet’s interest in the rise and fall of the ancient dynasties of the north is both admiring and detached.¹⁰²

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⁹⁵ Orchard, *Critical Companion*, p. 23.

⁹⁶ K. Powell, ‘Meditating on Men and Monsters: A Reconsideration of the Thematic Unity of the *Beowulf* Manuscript’, *Review of English Studies* (forthcoming), argues that the governing principle behind the compilation of the Nowell Codex is the concern with foreign adversaries, a feature which may have interested readers during the calamitous reign of Æthelred the Unready.

⁹⁷ *Brunanburh. ASC s. a. 937*: MSS Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 173, folios 26a – 27a; Cotton Tiberius A. vi; Cotton Tiberius B. I and Cotton Tiberius B. iv.

⁹⁸ *Maldon*: MS London, British Library, Cotton Otho A. xii (now lost; transcribed by John Elphinstone in 1725). On the date of the poem see J. McKinnell, ‘On the Date of *The Battle of Maldon*’, *MÆ* 44 (1975), 121-36; C. Clark, ‘On Dating *The Battle of Maldon*: Certain Evidence Reviewed’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 27 (1983), 1-22; V. J. Scattergood, ‘*The Battle of Maldon* and History’, *Literature and Learning in Medieval and Renaissance England: Essays presented to Fitzroy Pyle*, ed. V. J. Scattergood (Blackrock, Co. Dublin, 1984), pp. 11-24; D. G. Scragg, ed. *The Battle of Maldon* (Manchester, 1981), pp. 26-7.

⁹⁹ R. Girvan, *‘Beowulf’ and the Seventh Century: Language and Content* (London, 1971), p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ Stanley, ‘Unideal Principles of Editing Old English Verse’, p. 273.

¹⁰¹ The digression on Offa of Angle and his bride (ll. 1931b – 62) has often been cited as evidence for a connection between the poem and the court of Offa of Mercia. See, for example, K. Sisam, *The Structure of ‘Beowulf’* (Oxford, 1965), p. 49; Whitelock, *Audience*, pp. 29-33, 57-64; G. Bond, ‘Links Between *Beowulf* and Mercian History’, *Studies in Philology* 40 (1943), 481-93. But see also Jacobs, ‘Anglo-Danish Relations’, p. 41.

¹⁰² See F. C. Robinson, *‘Beowulf’ and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville, 1985), p. 59; N. Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (Notre Dame, 2001), pp. 175-6. I wish to thank Daniel Anlezark, Helen Conrad O’Brian and John Scattergood for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.