

Leonard Neidorf (ed.). *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment.* Anglo-Saxon Studies 24. Cambridge: Brewer, 2014, x + 250 pp., 3 illustr., 4 tables, £ 60.00.

Amos (1980) questioned the validity of techniques that had long been used for dating Old English poems. Reconsideration of dating criteria was further elaborated in a 1980 Toronto conference and some contributors published their conclusions in Chase (1981). Fulk (1992), while conceding the value of Amos's challenge, systematically clarified and defended the traditional criteria. Since then questions of dating have created a conspicuous rift within *Beowulf* scholarship. Some accept Fulk's arguments and would date *Beowulf* to the late seventh or early eighth century. Others argue for a much later date or regard the poem as undatable. *Beowulf* scholars have by no means agreed to disagree about these matters. Frank (2007) attacked Fulk's rehabilitated criteria and research that endorsed them. Scholars on Fulk's side of the rift predominated in a conference held at Harvard University on September 23–24, 2011. In the work under review, as its title promises, contributors to the Harvard conference respond to Chase (1981) and Frank (2007) with arguments for an early *Beowulf*.

Neidorf's introductory chapter (4–18) provides background on the dating controversy and summarizes recent work by the 'early daters'. The root of the controversy, Neidorf thinks, was a tendency to prioritize literary-historical over linguistic considerations in the era of R. W. Chambers and Dorothy Whitelock. Consigned to an obscure corner of Old English studies, the linguistic dating techniques were not well expressed and were not widely understood. The consensus favoring an early *Beowulf* was vulnerable to attack by the first reputable specialist who preferred a later date. Since Fulk (1992), early daters have developed additional language-based dating criteria. Leonard Neidorf, Patrick Wormald, and Tom Shippey found that the heroic names in *Beowulf* were typically obsolete by the ninth century. Dennis Cronan argued for an early date in a study of words restricted primarily to *Beowulf* and *Genesis A*. Paleographic dating criteria had occupied another obscure corner of the field but have attracted much interest after responses to Kevin Kiernan's work by David N. Dumville, Johan Gerritsen, Peter Clemons, Michael Lapidge, A. N. Doane, and George Clark.

In chapter 1 (19–36), R. D. Fulk provides an accessible overview of his criteria. Evidence for an early *Beowulf* comes from morphological archaisms like *Denig(e)a* 'of the Danes' and from phonological archaisms that interact with rules of poetic meter, such as non-parasiting and conformity to Kaluza's law. Syntactic archaisms include conformity to Kuhn's laws and employment of weak adjectives without a preceding demonstrative. Late daters who do not simply ignore such criteria typically attack them one at a time, suggesting alternative interpretations of the evidence. The cumulative force of Fulk's arguments must be considered as

well, however, as even the slightest acquaintance with statistics makes clear. Evaluated in isolation, predicting the correct outcome of a coin toss is unimpressive. Predicting the correct outcome ten times out of ten is quite a different matter. The odds of that happening by chance are $1/1024$: the number of outcomes fulfilling the prediction (one) divided by the number of possible outcomes (2^{10}). The analogy with Fulk (1992) would be weakened if Fulk had ignored any usable linguistic criteria, but this seems quite clearly not to be the case. The hypothesis that *Beowulf* is early makes a variety of linguistic predictions with significant cumulative weight.

In chapter 2 (37–57), Neidorf presents new work on misspelling of heroic names in the late Old English manuscript of *Beowulf*, where for example *Eomer* becomes *geomor* ‘sad’ and the Heathobards become *Heaðobearn* ‘battle-children’. Other heroic names are subdivided into units suggesting incomprehension, as when archaic *Deniga* becomes *de ninga*. Dozens of such errors point toward “a systematic problem affecting both scribes” (39). Neidorf then considers when heroic names were known in Anglo-Saxon England and when this knowledge was lost, gathering evidence systematically from a corpus of early Anglo-Latin texts, Old English poetry, the onomastic record, and royal genealogies. He concludes that legends transmitted orally to England by early Germanic migrants circulated vigorously before the ninth century but then declined sharply in prominence and ceased to be widely known in the tenth century (54). Detailed knowledge of those legends places the *Beowulf* poet before the ninth century and loss of that knowledge by scribes explains the misspellings in the manuscript (ca. 1000).

Tom Shippey adds to his onomastic research in chapter 3 (58–78). The special focus here is on an influential suggestion of Tolkien’s: that the heroic era as represented in *Beowulf* might be an artistic illusion with little value as history. Shippey critiques this suggestion by showing what happens when it is taken seriously. References to otherwise unknown characters in the poem are typically bare mentions not associated with anything explicitly ancient. They are not likely to be invented because their names are not formed like Old English names. Some bare mentions are authentic references to historical or legendary figures known in Scandinavia, and *Beowulf*’s Frankish antagonist *Dæghræfn* has a “characteristically Frankish name” (66). Such names would serve no evident purpose if they meant nothing to the well informed. The same can be said for bare mentions of tales that are never developed (73). Shippey concludes that the author and audience of *Beowulf* were uniquely well acquainted with ancient Germanic lore.

The next two chapters refine dating criteria based on evolution of the Old English metrical system. In chapter 4 (79–96), Megan E. Hartman reviews previous work on metrical dating and contributes her own study of poetic compounds. She shows that some late Old English poets tried harder than others to

maintain purely metrical features of older poetry but made no comparable efforts to maintain the more subtle linguistic archaisms. The late *Brunanburh*, for example, achieves a high frequency of type D verses favored by the *Beowulf* poet but employs archaic word order much less often in such faux-antique constructions. Literary conservatism cannot explain away the linguistic dating criteria. In chapter 5 (97–111), Thomas A. Bredehoft summarizes and extends his research on metrical innovations, working back from datably late poems. The concept of ‘metrical’ employed here is comprehensive and includes innovative features of poetic form beyond the verse type. As it turns out, none of these features can be found in *Beowulf*. Bredehoft’s study places the poem at an early stage of a constantly evolving metrical tradition.

Several chapters aim to show that criteria proposed by the early daters are productive, guiding cultural studies to the era in which they can most plausibly be undertaken. In chapter 6 (112–137), Dennis Cronan explores politically relevant features of the West Saxon genealogies, which trace descent back to Scyld, mentioned in *Beowulf* as the founder of the Danish royal line. A claim to descent from Scyld might conceivably have been important in West Saxon relations with the Danelaw and late daters have argued that *Beowulf* shows the influence of this claim. Cronan, however, finds that the latest datable references to Scyld as a royal ancestor are in the genealogies themselves, which had no perceptible wider influence and make implausible sources for a poem like *Beowulf*. In chapter 7 (138–156), Frederick M. Biggs provides a comprehensive analysis of royal succession in *Beowulf*, arguing that the poet “explores a shift from an older ‘Germanic’ system in which many members of a kin-group are eligible for the throne to a newer ‘Christian’ one, which limits the contenders and favors the succession of sons” (138–139). As Biggs observes (156), the prominent succession theme does not precisely date *Beowulf* but does fit most plausibly with the early period when the shift was taking place. Skipping to chapter 9 (178–190), we find Joseph Harris’s introduction to a neglected ‘Other Heorot’ incorporating the name of Hrothgar’s hall: *Hereteu* ‘Heorot Island’, a monastery where Hild, the mother of English literature, once ruled as abbess. The monastery flourished between 640 and 750, a period that includes Fulk’s probable dates for composition of *Beowulf*. *Hereteu* went into decline after 750 and after 800 it disappears from the Old English archaeological record. To the list of archaic personal names in *Beowulf*, Harris observes, “we may now add the rather interesting name of an institution” (189). In chapter 10 (191–201), Thomas D. Hill considers an early Christian view that salvation was possible for some pagans who did not know Christ. Hill reviews the scholarship on this topic and applies it to resolve an apparent contradiction in *Beowulf*, where pre-Christian Germanic heroes routinely praise Jehovah. Although virtuous characters in *Beowulf* did not know Christ, Hill argues,

they knew what Noah knew about God and could be saved along with virtuous Biblical characters like Melchizedek. This view of salvation fits best in the age of Bede, when the conversion and its attendant cultural problems were still vividly remembered.

In chapter 11 (202–218), Rafael J. Pascual explores the usefulness of semantic shift as a dating criterion, focusing on words for nature beings that were reinterpreted as followers of Satan without material bodies. Words like *scucca*, for example, did not have exclusively negative connotations in early usage. Place names incorporating this word refer to pleasant locales, unlike place names incorporating *deofol* ‘devil’. *Scucca* with the meaning ‘devil’ appears in the late ninth century and by the late tenth century we find purely immaterial *scuccan* who try to bring about the failure of a saint. The *scuccan* of *Beowulf*, portrayed as descendants of Cain and not yet as Satanic, seem to represent an earlier phase of semantic shift. Old English dragons can also be classified as early or late. Aldhelm’s seventh-century dragons are unlike those of his Christian sources and quite like the dragon in *Beowulf*.

Two chapters deal with the academic politics of the dating controversy. In chapter 8 (157–177), Michael D. C. Drout argues that the Toronto conference was a deliberate, thesis-driven intervention and did not respond to a consensus that the dating criteria were ambiguous, contra Chase (1981: 8). Drout’s evidence comes from a comprehensive analysis of articles on *Beowulf* published during the decades before and after the conference, carried out with Emily Bowman and Phoebe Boyd. Before the conference, scholars showed little interest in dating the poem but a substantial majority assumed an early date. After the conference, Drout found significantly more articles on *Beowulf* but significantly fewer that opted for any date at all. The new trend was to regard *Beowulf* not as late but as undatable. What the late daters accomplished with their attack on linguistics was to aggravate a wider resentment of scientific rigor. Drout traces this anti-intellectual trend in *Beowulf* studies to Tolkien (1936), who in arguing for the literary merits of the poem gave literary scholars too much of what they wanted: “a chance to escape from the seeming oppression of the (mostly German) philologists and cultural historians” (173). Drout concludes with a critique of recent publications that view uncertainty about dating as a positive development. In chapter 12 (219–234), George Clark analyzes the attack on early daters in Frank (2007). Frank chose to present her views in a witty Presidential address to the Medieval Academy of America rather than in an ordinary peer-reviewed article. In the published version, Frank’s institutional prestige seems to function as a lofty platform from which she talks to a mass audience of belletrists over the heads of obnoxious nerds. A central conceit of the address is a fable in which Sherlock Holmes is an early dater of specious intellect and his humble assistant Watson

arrives at a correct later date. Fulk's frequencies for Kaluza's law and Lapidge's spelling confusions provide the evidence in the case. Watson concludes that verses obeying Kuhn's laws are 'ye olde signs' employed by a late antiquarian poet and that the spelling confusions can be found in poems that are not early. Although Frank's ironic presentation makes it awkward to do so, Clark makes all her claims explicit and confronts them with the evidence. This exercise, he asserts, "confirms the validity of the arguments mounted by Fulk and Lapidge against a variety of piecemeal objections" (233).

In the final chapter 13 (235–247), Allen Frantzen contributes an afterword on issues raised by the book. Frantzen, a well-known literary theorist, adds a critique of anti-intellectual trends in some (not all) kinds of literary theory and in Anglophone higher education generally.

The dating criteria proposed in this volume are consistent with one another and add cumulative support for the hypothesis of an early *Beowulf*. The cultural-historical studies also fit together well and a more vivid picture of Bede's era begins to emerge from them. These studies put interesting pressure on one another in a few matters of detail outside the main lines of argument. Cronan, for example, thinks that the Scylding link to Noah, attested only in the West Saxon genealogies, was first invented for them. The effect, Cronan argues, was to replace Woden with Jehovah father of Adam as the divine royal ancestor (126). Since everyone descends from Adam, however, an ancestral Jehovah does not distinguish a king from his subjects. What a link to Noah accomplishes more directly is to place the founders of a dynasty in Hill's Noachic era, where they can be saved like Melchizedek. Equipped with this expedient, a missionary could assure a potential convert like King Radbod of Frisia that not all of his ancestors were damned. The link to Noah is probably centuries older than its first appearance in an Old English text.

Contributors to this volume present their ideas clearly and concretely. As its editor hopes (17), the volume should help scholars arrive at an informed opinion about the poem's date, whether or not dating is their central concern.

Works Cited

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