

BEOWULF

Only one copy of the Old English poem that modern editors call *Beowulf* has survived, and it is likely that it has survived only by accident. A manuscript containing *Beowulf* and a small collection of other texts—a poetic treatment of the deuterocanonical Old Testament story of Judith, a prose life of St Christopher, and two treatises of fantastical geography now known as *The Wonders of the East* and *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*—was copied by two scribes, probably in the decade after 1000, in a monastic center somewhere in the south of England. It is an eclectic anthology containing prose and verse, hagiography and secular heroism, oriental and biblical and Germanic lore; its contents baffle our modern expectations of genre. The texts are from different sources, and the prose pieces are all translations of Latin works. What unites them, apparently, is an interest in monsters and marvels, faraway places and long-distant ages, and fantastic beings of extraordinary size; in his 1995 book, Orchard described its contents as “Pride and Prodigies.” Whatever its original purpose or audience, the book fell into obscurity in the centuries after the Norman Conquest in 1066, and its later history is unknown until 1563, when the English antiquary Laurence Nowell (c. 1515–71) signed his name on the first page of *St. Christopher*. The Nowell Codex, as it is sometimes called, later came into the library of the collector Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631); the present-day shelfmark of the manuscript (British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv) recalls the arrangement of Cotton’s library, in which books were stored in shelves surmounted by busts of Roman emperors. Cotton bound the manuscript with an unrelated twelfth-century copy of Augustine’s *Soliloquies* and other works. In 1731, while Cotton’s collection was stored at Ashburnham House in Westminster awaiting donation to the future British Museum, a disastrous fire damaged or destroyed hundreds of volumes and nearly consumed the *Beowulf* manuscript as well.

Apart from a notice in an early manuscript catalog by Humphrey Wanley in 1705, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that scholars began to appreciate the contents of this scorched and charred manuscript. The romantic nationalism of the time expected—indeed, more or less required—that at the beginning of every great nation’s literature would stand a national epic analogous to the Greek *Iliad*. The French had the *Chanson de Roland*, the Germans the *Nibelungenlied*; *Beowulf*, the earliest full-length heroic poem in any Germanic language, was claimed by the English (because of its language), the Danes (because of its subject), and the Germans (because of its setting in the pre-Christian north). The first printed notice of the poem, along with some badly translated passages, was in Sharon Turner’s second edition of his *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (1805), where it is called “a composition most curious and important. . . . [I]t may be called an Anglo-Saxon epic poem.” In 1787 a copyist who was probably commissioned by the scholar Grímur Thorkelin (1752–1829), an Icelander in the service of Denmark, made a transcription of the poem; later Thorkelin himself went to the British Museum to make another. Like Turner, Thorkelin’s inability to read Old English did not prevent him from admiring *Beowulf*. He was convinced that the poem was originally composed in Danish, even though it survived in an English translation, and that its author had been an eyewitness to the funeral of the hero Beowulf, which he placed in the year 340. These theories are nonsense, but Thorkelin’s transcripts are still invaluable evidence for many readings now lost from the crumbling edges of the manuscript’s pages.

Although, like other Old English poems, *Beowulf* is copied on its manuscript pages from margin to margin like prose, the poem consists of 3,182 extant lines of alliterative verse, divided into 43 numbered sections of varying length with an unnumbered prologue. Its language is allusive and embellished and its plot complex and digressive, but its story is relatively straightforward. The Danish king Hrothgar, descendant of the legendary Scyld, has built a magnificent hall Heorot, but the hall

is invaded night after night by a marauding beast named Grendel (sec. 1–2). A young warrior of the tribe of the Geats named Beowulf hears of Hrothgar’s troubles and comes to his rescue; after a series of challenges and boasts he faces Grendel unarmed, and tears off the monster’s arm in a wild wrestling match (3–12). Celebration is lively but short-lived; the next night the monster’s mother attacks the hall in revenge for the death of her son, killing one of Hrothgar’s most trusted retainers (13–19). Undaunted, Beowulf follows her tracks to an underwater lair and, after a difficult fight, kills her with an extraordinary sword that he finds in her cave (20–23). He returns to the Danish hall to much praise, celebration, and gift-giving; soon he returns to his native land and recounts his adventures to his own king and uncle Hygelac (24–31).

The story of Beowulf follows the narrative patterns of a folktale: a hero who quests and fights in isolation from friends and family, fabulous battles against monstrous foes, the theme of a young man who was thought to be lazy (lines 2183–89) but later becomes a mighty hero, even the concatenation of three challenges in ascending order of difficulty. The fabulous outlines of the story equally recall the broad brushstrokes of myth: the mighty Beowulf may be a distant echo of Thor; his descent into the mere may dimly depict a shamanistic initiation; his death may contain a hint of Ragnarok, the northern apocalypse. *Beowulf*, then, appears to be a reflex of an ancient and universal plot.

Whatever its underlying structural patterns, *Beowulf* is neither myth nor folktale; its stories of dragon-slaying and nocturnal struggles are set against a complex background of legendary history. The action of the poem unfolds on a roughly recognizable map of Scandinavia: Hrothgar’s hall Heorot has been plausibly placed in the village of Lejre on the Danish island of Zealand, and we may tentatively identify Beowulf’s tribe of Geats with the historical Gautar of southern Sweden. The mythical figure of Scyld soon yields to the historical figure of Hrothgar, and a number of the poem’s characters—among them Heremod, Hrothgar, Ingeld, and Hygelac—are mentioned in other sources and were certainly regarded as figures of history rather than fable. The Frankish historian Gregory of Tours (d. 594) mentions the disastrous raid of Hygelac (whom he calls Chlochilaicus and describes as a Danish king) and dates it around the year 520. And, like its characters and setting, the concerns of the poem are historical. Behind the drama of isolated hand-to-hand encounters against monstrous adversaries, *Beowulf* is an intensely political poem; the poet is as intrigued by Danish diplomacy and the bitter feud between the Geats and Swedes as he is by the hero’s battles. Kingdoms and successions, alliances and truces, loyalties and the tragically transient stability of heroic society are the poem’s somber subtext, a theme traced less in the clashes of the battlefield than in the patterns of marriage and kin, in stories remembered and retold, in allusion and digression and pointed foreshadowing.

Whatever historical interests may be found in *Beowulf*, however, it is difficult to read the poem with anything like a modern expectation of historical accuracy. Like many medieval works, *Beowulf* is frustratingly ambivalent—it is not quite mythical enough to be read apart from the history it purports to contain, nor historical enough to furnish clear evidence for the past it poetically recreates. The action of the poem is set in a somewhat vague heroic *geardagum* (“bygone days,” line 1), an age not meant to be counted on a calendar, nor its kingdoms and tribes marked on a map; nor, undoubtedly, were the monstrous races of Grendels and dragons so clearly distinct in the poet’s mind from the real dangers of the real world just beyond the margins of the known. While medieval authors certainly made distinctions between *historia* and *fabula*, the boundaries between these terms are not nearly as impermeable as those of our modern categories “history” and “fable.”

Both the ultimate and the proximate origins of *Beowulf* are unknown. Most scholars assume that the surviving manuscript is a copy of an earlier written text and is probably the last in a long chain of copies. Moreover, the poem begins with the assumption that we are hearing a familiar story, or at least a story from a familiar milieu: “We have heard of the glory ... of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes” (*We Gar-Dena ... þeodcýninga þrym gefrunon*), the poet asserts, and his cryptic allusions

throughout the poem suggest that his audience was already familiar with a larger repertoire of songs and stories of kings and heroes.

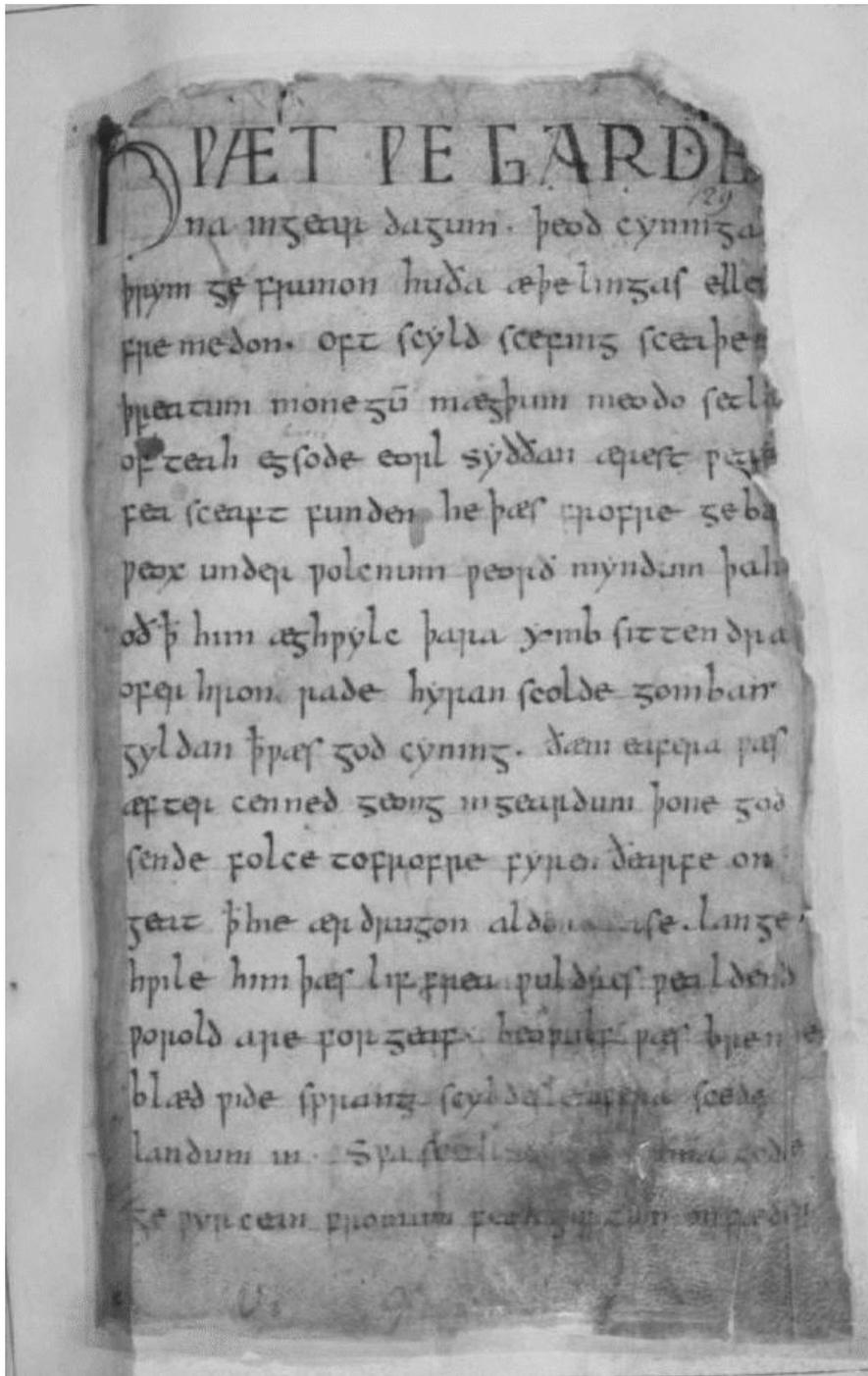
There is a great deal at stake in the arguments over the poem's origins. *Beowulf* will be read differently if it is imagined to have been produced in the time of Bede (c. 725) or Alfred (c. 880) or Ælfric (c. 1000). The earlier we think the poem to be, the more potentially authentic its historical material; a later *Beowulf*, more openly fictional, is a more complex and "literary" work. Moreover, the more closely we try to assign a date and place of origin to the poem, the more closely we must read it as a text, the intention of a single author or a reflection of a particular ideology, rather than a product of an oral poetic art whose composition may have been collective and whose traditional roots are beyond discovery.

Most critics agree that the heroic action of the poem is thoroughly accommodated to a Christian paradigm; they disagree, however, on the meaning and purpose of that accommodation. *Beowulf* is a secular Christian poem about pagans that avoids the easy alternatives of automatic condemnation or enthusiastic anachronism. While early scholars tried to find a single source for the poem's complex and peculiar texture—whether in pure Germanic paganism or orthodox Augustinian Christianity—more recent work recognizes that *Beowulf*, like the culture of the Anglo-Saxons themselves, reflects a variety of interdependent and competing influences and attitudes, even a certain tension inherent in the combination of biblical, patristic, secular Latin, and popular Germanic material. The search for a single "audience" of *Beowulf*, and with it a sense of a single meaning, has given way to a recognition of a plurality of readers and interests in Anglo-Saxon England.

The author of the poem (for the sake of argument, let us say the person who was responsible for its commitment to parchment) was certainly a Christian: the technology of writing in the Anglo-Saxon period was almost entirely confined to monastic scriptoria. The manuscript in which *Beowulf* is preserved contains a saint's legend and a versified Bible story. Moreover the poet indicates a clear familiarity with the Bible and expects the same from his audience. Though the paganism of *Beowulf*'s world is downplayed, however, it is not denied; his world is connected to that of the audience but separated by the gulf of conversion as much as by the seas of migration.

Beowulf seeks to explore both the bridges and the chasms between the pagan past and the Christian present; it teaches secular readers how to be pious, moral, and thoughtful about their own history, mindful of fame and courage while aware of its limitations and dangers. The poem is a Christian author's imaginative recreation of a pagan mentality, similar in some respects to Bede's eloquent simile of the sparrow, which he places in the mouth of one of King Edwin's retainers in the *Ecclesiastical History* I.30—the warm but fleeting pleasures of life are placed against the somber background of its ultimate meaninglessness, and without the hope of conversion or salvation all that is available to make sense of the world are courage, honor, and a stoical acceptance of one's fate, whether good or bad.





Beowulf, lines 1–21

(British Library, Ms Cotton Vitellius A.xv, fol. 129r).

*Beowulf*¹

PROLOGUE

Listen!
We have heard of the glory in bygone days
of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes,²
how those noble lords did lofty deeds.

Often Scyld Scefing³ seized the mead-benches
5 from many tribes, troops of enemies,
struck fear into earls. Though he first was
found a waif, he awaited solace for that—
he—grew under heaven and prospered in honor
until every one of the encircling nations
10 over the whale's-riding⁴ had to obey him,
grant him tribute. That was a good king!
A boy was later born to him,
young in the courts, whom God sent
as a solace to the people—he saw their need,
15 the dire distress they had endured, lordless,
for such a long time. The Lord of Life,
Wielder of Glory, gave him worldly honor;
Beowulf,⁵ the son of Scyld, was renowned,
his fame spread wide in Scandinavian lands.
20 Thus should a young man bring about good
with pious gifts from his father's possessions,
so that later in life loyal comrades
will stand beside him when war comes,
the people will support him—with praiseworthy deeds
25 a man will prosper among any people.

Scyld passed away at his appointed hour,
the mighty lord went into the Lord's keeping;

¹ *Beowulf* This translation is by R.M. Liuzza from the edition published by Broadview Press.

² *spear-Danes* The Danes are described by many different epithets in the poem; see the Glossary of Proper Names for further instances.

³ *Scyld Scefing* The name means "Shield, Son of Sheaf (i.e., of grain)." The mysterious origins of Scyld, who seems to arrive providentially from nowhere and is returned to the sea after his death, have occasioned much critical speculation.

⁴ *whale's-riding* A condensed descriptive image of the sea—the riding-place of whales. Elsewhere the sea is the "gannet's bath" and the "swan's riding."

⁵ *Beowulf* Not the monster-slaying hero of the title, but an early Danish king. Many scholars argue that the original name was Beow.

they bore him down to the brimming sea,
his dear comrades, as he himself had commanded
30 while the friend of the Scyldings⁶ wielded speech—
that dear land-ruler had long held power.
In the harbor stood a ring-prowed ship,
icy, outbound, a nobleman's vessel;
there they laid down their dear lord,
35 dispenser of rings, in the bosom of the ship,
glorious, by the mast. There were many treasures
loaded there, adornments from distant lands;
I have never heard of a more lovely ship
bedecked with battle-weapons and war-gear,
40 blades and byrnies.⁷ In its bosom lay
many treasures, which were to travel
far with him into the keeping of the flood.
With no fewer gifts did they furnish him there,
the wealth of nations, than those did who
45 at his beginning first sent him forth
alone over the waves while still a small child.⁸
Then they set a golden ensign
high over his head, and let the waves have him,
gave him to the sea with grieving spirits,
50 mournful in mind. Men do not know
how to say truly—not trusted counselors,
nor heroes under the heavens—who received that cargo.

I

Then Beowulf Scylding, beloved king,
was famous in the strongholds of his folk
55 for a long while—his father having passed away,
a lord from earth—until after him arose
the great Healfdene, who held the glorious Scyldings
all his life, ancient and fierce in battle.
Four children, all counted up,
60 were born to that bold leader of hosts:
Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga the Good,

⁶ *Scyldings* The Danes, "sons of Scyld."

⁷ *byrnies* Coat of ring-mail.

⁸ *With no fewer ... small child* Scyld was found destitute—this statement is an example of litotes, or ironic understatement, not uncommon in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

I heard that ...¹ was Onela's queen,
 dear bedfellow of the Battle-Scylfing.

65 Then success in war was given to Hrothgar,
 honor in battle, so that his beloved kinsmen
 eagerly served him, until the young soldiers grew
 into a mighty troop of men. It came to his mind
 that he should order a hall-building,
 70 have men make a great mead-house
 which the sons of men should remember forever,²
 and there within he would share everything
 with young and old that God had given him,
 except for the common land and the lives of men.
 Then the work, as I've heard, was widely proclaimed
 75 to many nations throughout this middle-earth,
 to come adorn the folk-stead. It came to pass
 swiftly among men, and it was soon ready,
 the greatest of halls; he gave it the name "Heorot,"³
 he whose words were heeded far and wide.
 80 He remembered his boast; he gave out rings,
 treasure at table. The hall towered
 high and horn-gabled—it awaited hostile fires,
 the surges of war; the time was not yet at hand
 when the sword-hate of sworn in-laws
 85 should arise after ruthless violence.⁴

A bold demon who waited in darkness
 wretchedly suffered all the while,
 for every day he heard the joyful din
 loud in the hall, with the harp's sound,
 90 the clear song of the scop.⁵ He who knew
 how to tell the ancient tale of the origin of men

¹ ... A name is missing from the manuscript here; it has been conjectured from parallel sources that it should be Yrse, or Ursula. The Swedish ("Scylfing") king Onela appears later in the story, causing much distress to Beowulf's nation.

² *a great ... forever* Or "a greater mead-hall / than the sons of men had ever heard of." The reading adopted here is that of Mitchell and Robinson.

³ *Heorot* "Hart." An object recovered from the burial-mound at Sutton Hoo, perhaps a royal insignia, is surmounted by the image of a hart.

⁴ *it awaited ... violence* The hall Heorot is apparently fated to be destroyed in a battle between Hrothgar and his son-in-law Ingeld the Heathobard, a conflict predicted by Beowulf in 2024–69. The battle itself happens outside the action of the poem.

⁵ *scop* Poet-singer. This is the first of several self-reflexive scenes of poetic entertainment in the poem.

said that the Almighty created the earth,
 a bright and shining plain, by seas embraced,
 and set, triumphantly, the sun and moon
 95 to light their beams for those who dwell on land,
 adorned the distant corners of the world
 with leaves and branches, and made life also,
 all manner of creatures that live and move.
 —Thus this lordly people lived in joy,
 100 blessedly, until one began
 to work his foul crimes—a fiend from hell.
 This grim spirit was called Grendel,
 mighty stalker of the marches, who held
 the moors and fens; this miserable man
 105 lived for a time in the land of giants,
 after the Creator had condemned him
 among Cain's race—when he killed Abel
 the eternal Lord avenged that death.⁶
 No joy in that feud—the Maker forced him
 110 far from mankind for his foul crime.
 From thence arose all misbegotten things,
 trolls and elves and the living dead,
 and also the giants who strove against God
 for a long while⁷—He gave them their reward for that.

2

115 When night descended he went to seek out
 the high house, to see how the Ring-Danes
 had bedded down after their beer-drinking.
 He found therein a troop of nobles
 asleep after the feast; they knew no sorrow
 120 or human misery. The unholy creature,
 grim and ravenous, was ready at once,
 ruthless and cruel, and took from their rest
 thirty thanes;⁸ thence he went
 rejoicing in his booty, back to his home,
 125 to seek out his abode with his fill of slaughter.

⁶ *Cain's race ... that death* The story of Cain and Abel is told in Genesis 4.1–16.

⁷ *misbegotten things ... long while* The poet lists a collection of Germanic, classical, and biblical horrors; all are ultimately traced to their biblical roots, though the characters in the poem are not aware of this.

⁸ *thanes* A "thane" is a retainer, one of the troop of companions surrounding a heroic king in Germanic literature.

When in the dim twilight just before dawn
 Grendel's warfare was made known to men,
 then lamentation was lifted up after the feasting,
 a great morning-sound. Unhappy sat
 130 the mighty lord, long-good nobleman;
 he suffered greatly, grieved for his thanes,
 once they beheld that hostile one's tracks,
 the accursed spirit; that strife was too strong,
 loathsome and long.

It was no long wait,
 135 but the very next night he committed
 a greater murder, mourned not at all
 for his feuds and sins—he was too fixed in them.
 Then it was easy to find a thane
 who sought his rest elsewhere, farther away,
 140 a bed in the outbuildings,¹ when they pointed out—
 truly announced with clear tokens—
 that hall-thane's hate; he who escaped the fiend
 held himself afterwards farther away and safer.
 So he ruled, and strove against right,
 145 one against all, until empty stood
 the best of houses. And so it was for a great while—
 for twelve long winters the lord of the Scyldings
 suffered his grief, every sort of woe,
 great sorrow, when to the sons of men
 150 it became known, and carried abroad
 in sad tales, that Grendel strove
 long with Hrothgar, bore his hatred,
 sins and feuds, for many seasons,
 perpetual conflict; he wanted no peace
 155 with any man of the Danish army,
 nor ceased his deadly hatred, nor settled with money,
 nor did any of the counselors need to expect
 bright compensation from the killer's hands,²
 for the great ravager relentlessly stalked,
 160 a dark death-shadow, lurked and struck
 old and young alike, in perpetual night
 held the misty moors. Men do not know

¹ *outbuildings* Hrothgar's hall is apparently surrounded by smaller buildings, including the women's quarters (see lines 662–65, 920–24). Under normal circumstances the men sleep together in the hall, ready for battle (1239–50).

² *bright compensation from the killer's hands* Germanic and Anglo-Saxon law allowed that a murderer could make peace with the family of his victim by paying compensation, or *wergild*. The amount of compensation varied with the rank of the victim.

whither such whispering demons wander about.

Thus the foe of mankind, fearsome and solitary,
 165 often committed his many crimes,
 cruel humiliations; he occupied Heorot,
 the jewel-adorned hall, in the dark nights—
 he saw no need to salute the throne,
 he scorned the treasures; he did not know their love.³
 170 That was deep misery to the lord of the Danes,
 crushing his spirit. Many a strong man sat
 in secret counsel, considered advice,
 what would be best for the brave at heart
 to save themselves from the sudden attacks.
 175 At times they offered honor to idols
 at pagan temples, prayed aloud
 that the soul-slayer⁴ might offer assistance
 in the country's distress. Such was their custom,
 the hope of heathens—they remembered hell
 180 in their minds, they did not know the Maker,
 the Judge of deeds, they did not know the Lord God,
 or even how to praise the heavenly Protector,
 Wielder of glory. Woe unto him
 who must thrust his soul through wicked force
 185 in the fire's embrace, expect no comfort,
 no way to change at all! It shall be well for him
 who can seek the Lord after his deathday
 and find security in the Father's embrace.

3

With the sorrows of that time the son of Healfdene
 190 seethed constantly; nor could the wise hero
 turn aside his woe—too great was the strife,
 long and loathsome, which befell that nation,
 violent, grim, cruel, greatest of night-evils.

Then from his home the thane of Hygelac,⁵

³ *Thus the foe ... love* This is a much-disputed passage; my reading follows a suggestion made by Fred C. Robinson in "Why Is Grendel's Not Greeting the *gifstol* a *wrac micel*?" and repeated in Mitchell and Robinson's *Beowulf*.

⁴ *soul-slayer* I.e., the Devil. In the Middle Ages the gods of the pagans were often regarded as demons in disguise.

⁵ *Hygelac* The hero is not named until more than a hundred lines later. Hygelac is his uncle and king. (Referred to as Chlochilaicus and described as a Danish king by Gregory Tours [d. 594], it is likely that Hygelac was a familiar historical figure.)