

Review of *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. Leonard Neidorf, Anglo-Saxon Studies 24 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014). x + 250 pp. ISBN 978-1-84384-387-0. £60.

The aims of this volume of fourteen essays, which emerged from a 2011 Harvard conference, are twofold: firstly, it counters claims that *Beowulf* (like many other Old English poems) is essentially undatable; secondly, it mounts a sustained challenge to arguments in favour of ninth or tenth century composition (in particular those advanced by Roberta Frank and John D. Niles), presenting a range of reasons for assigning the poem in something close to its present form to the early Anglo-Saxon period, roughly 650-750.

The case for an 'early' *Beowulf* was so uncontroversial in the early twentieth century that in his 1936 British Academy lecture J. R. R. Tolkien accepted 'without argument' the widespread attribution of the poem to 'the age of Bede'. Despite some dissenting voices, it was only in the aftermath of the 1980 Toronto conference and its proceedings, *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. Colin Chase (Toronto, 1981), that the possibility that the poem was composed closer to the date of its only extant manuscript (c. 1000) than its sixth-century setting began to gain widespread acceptance. Since then, such a bewildering array of dates and contexts for *Beowulf* have been proposed, stretching from the seventh to the eleventh centuries, that it has become fashionable to dismiss the quest for a date a fool's errand. However, as this volume's editor Leonard Neidorf argues in his Introduction, while we may never know the precise circumstances of *Beowulf*'s composition, transmission and final copying, there is in fact a wide range of methodologies — of varying degrees of reliability — available to scholars seeking to establish a chronology of Old English verse, should they wish to make use of them.

Several chapters make significant new contributions to our understanding of the literary and historical contexts not only of *Beowulf* itself but of the corpus of Old English verse more generally. The case for an early *Beowulf* which most of these chapters advance or support is given a solid philological foundation by R. D. Fulk's opening chapter, which serves as a concise summary of his magisterial work on the language and metre of Old English verse. Emphasizing the importance of probability in philology, Fulk insists that when dealing with a range of competing hypotheses, such as those pertaining to the dating of *Beowulf*, 'the simpler hypothesis is to be preferred' (p. 24). Because *Beowulf* is demonstrably more conservative in both its metre and language than most Old English poems, it probably dates from early in the Anglo-Saxon period. Neidorf's own chapter, building on the work of Hector Munro Chadwick and Patrick Wormald, highlights the currency of Germanic heroic legends connected with the poem in early, as opposed to late, Anglo-Saxon England, citing Anglo-Latin sources, onomastic evidence, material culture and royal genealogies. Tom Shippey surveys the historicity of personal names in *Beowulf*, rejecting Tolkien's claim that the poem is essentially a work of fiction with little value as an authentic record of Germanic tradition and restating the validity of his prior argument that the presence of the unique and 'etymologically correct' form of the dynastic name 'Merovingian' at line 2921 suggests that the poem was composed before the demise of the Merovingian dynasty in 751 (p. 75). Shippey concludes with an illuminating discussion of parallels between the social conditions described in the poem and southern Scandinavian hall culture in the mid-sixth century. Taking as her starting-point the work of Thomas Cable in the Chase volume, Megan E. Hartman compares various distinctive aspects of the metre and language of *Beowulf* with that

of ‘metrically conservative’ late Old English poems such as *Brunanburh* and *Judith* and other more typically late poems such as *Maldon* in which the ratio of such features is significantly lower. Her findings suggest that *Beowulf*, with its ‘more natural blend of all these features’ (p. 88), is probably a genuinely archaic poem rather than the work of an archaising poet. Taking a similar, technical approach, Thomas E. Bredehoft catalogues metrical ‘innovations’ which affected Old English verse over the course of five or so centuries, concluding that the striking absence of such features in *Beowulf* strongly points towards its early composition. Dennis Cronan’s carefully argued contribution plays down the significance of the connection between the story of Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf* and the ninth-century West Saxon royal genealogy, sometimes cited as evidence of a late date of composition: the non-West Saxon, archaic forms of the names Sceld-*wa* and Tæt-*wa* in the royal pedigree preserved in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle are ‘suggestive of a complex and perhaps long textual history’ (p. 123) distinct from that represented by *Beowulf*; moreover, while Alfred’s family sought to diminish the significance of their Danish ancestor Scyld by making him into a descendant of Scaef and Noah, thereby ‘containing’ him within Christian tradition, in the poem Scyld is ‘uncontained in every way’ (p. 137). In a lexical study drawing on the evidence of glossaries, Rafael J. Pascual argues that the monster-terms *scucca* and *hýrs* retain their pre-Christian sense in *Beowulf*, denoting physical rather than spiritual foes. He finds closer parallels to the ‘material’ monsters of *Beowulf* in early Anglo-Saxon sources, such as Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and the Repton Stone, than in later authors such as Ælfric, for whom monsters were a purely spiritual matter. George Clark critiques the methodology of Roberta Frank’s 2007 *Speculum* article, re-affirming the validity of the post-Toronto arguments in favour of an early *Beowulf* advanced by Michael Lapidge and Fulk on palaeographical and metrical grounds respectively. Taken together these chapters make a compelling case for an early *Beowulf*.

There are also several chapters that, while not having as their primary goal the dating of *Beowulf*, nonetheless suggest interesting and plausible ways of reading the poem that fit better with the earlier Anglo-Saxon period: Thomas D. Hill explores contrasting approaches to the thorny problem of the salvation of just pagans in a range of medieval continental, Old Norse and Old Irish texts, arguing that *Beowulf* is a syncretic text whose theological concerns are probably those of a poet working not long after the conversion; Frederick M. Biggs discusses how *Beowulf* blends history and fiction in five references to Hygelac’s Frisian raid spread across the narrative in order to foreground the transition from pagan to Christian modes of succession which took place in the early Anglo-Saxon period; and Joseph Harris reviews the connection between Heorot and an early English monastery called *Heruteu* mentioned by Bede, tentatively suggesting that the monastery might have been named after the great ring-hall. Allen J. Frantzen’s Afterword highlights the important implications of the essays collected in this volume for the dating of Old English poetry more generally and echoes Neidorf (Introduction) by taking issue with dating ‘agnostics’.

This provocative and challenging volume demands the attention of all Anglo-Saxonists. In a chapter that openly courts controversy, Michael C. Drout (with Phoebe Boyd and Emily Bowman) characterizes the 1980 Toronto conference and its proceedings as an agenda-driven scholarly conspiracy which aimed to shape a false, unrepresentative ‘consensus’ for a late *Beowulf* by silencing or marginalising dissenters. Doubtless similar accusations will be levelled at this volume. But it remains to be seen whether those who still favour a later date of composition will mount a credible challenge to the impressive array of arguments for an early *Beowulf*

marshalled here. In the meantime, scholars ~~who seek to understand *Beowulf* within the context of Anglo-Saxon literature and culture~~ have never been in a stronger position to read the poem as a product of ‘the age of Bede’ or thereabouts.

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