

Dishonouring the Dead: *Beowulf* and the Staffordshire Hoard

'Beowulf' and archaeology

The discovery of a seventh-century princely ship burial at Sutton Hoo in 1939 was immediately heralded as a major breakthrough in the understanding of *Beowulf*.¹ During the late twentieth century, however, as the old consensus that *Beowulf* was a product of 'the age of Bede' or 'the age of Sutton Hoo' began to crumble, scholars became increasingly sceptical about the use of archaeological evidence in discussions of the poem. In his contribution to the 1981 volume *The Dating of 'Beowulf'*, for instance, Eric Stanley cautioned:

Whenever a piece of dark-age Britain is lit up by knowledge, Sutton Hoo, Bede, Aldhelm, Offa, Alcuin, Alfred, Athelstan, it is tempting to connect with it our unique poem. [...] The connection of *Beowulf* with Sutton Hoo is attractive, yet it remains unproven.²

¹ See esp. Sune Lindquist, 'Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf*', *Antiquity*, 22 (1948), 131–40; Charles L. Wrenn, 'Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf*', in *Mélanges de Linguistique et de Philologie* (Fernand Mossé in Memoriam) (Paris: Dider, 1959), pp. 495–507, repr. in *An Anthology of 'Beowulf' Criticism*, ed. by Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), pp. 311–30; J. L. N. O'Loughlin, 'Sutton Hoo—The Evidence of the Documents', *Medieval Archaeology*, 8 (1964), 1–19; Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, 'Archaeology and *Beowulf*', in *'Beowulf' and its Analogues*, ed. and transl. by G. N. Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1971), pp. 350–64; Rupert Bruce-Mitford, 'Sutton Hoo and the Background to the Poem', in Ritchie Girvan, *'Beowulf' and the Seventh Century: Language and Content*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 85–98; Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (London: Gollancz, 1974), esp. pp. 55–60, 258–59; Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *et al.*, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial* (London: British Museum, 1975–83). See also J. D. Mosteller, Jr., 'A Case for the East Anglian Provenance of *Beowulf*', *Medieval Perspectives*, 7 (1992), 124–40; Barbara Raw, 'Royal Power and Royal Symbols in *Beowulf*', in *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. by Martin Carver (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992), pp. 167–74; Sam D. Newton, *The Origins of 'Beowulf' and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993). For a recent study of the burial, see Georgina Pitt, 'The Enigmatic Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial: Fresh Insights from Assemblage Theory', *Parergon*, 36 (2019), 1–29. See further Catherine M. Hills, 'Beowulf and archaeology', in *A 'Beowulf' Handbook*, ed. by Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), pp. 291–310.

² Eric G. Stanley, 'The Date of *Beowulf*: Some Doubts and No Conclusions', in *The Dating of 'Beowulf'*, ed. by Colin Chase (Toronto: UTP, 1981), pp. 197–212 (p. 202).

Stanley's views were echoed by Roberta Frank in a celebrated 1992 essay, which memorably characterised *Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo as an 'odd couple', hurriedly flung together with little in common, and in need of some time apart.³ Frank stressed that *Beowulf* is a 'work of the imagination', a poem whose material culture 'is that of the conventional apparatus of heroic poetry' and whose archaeological horizon stretched 'from late Roman times to the Norman Conquest'.⁴ Nevertheless, in 2005 Gale Owen-Crocker reminded us that *Beowulf*-scholarship still has much to learn from archaeological discoveries such as Sutton Hoo, regardless of when or where we think the poem was composed:

It would be as wrong-headed to refuse admission of the Sutton Hoo evidence to *Beowulf* as it would be to over-stress it or to blinker oneself to the possibility of evidence from other sources and other dates.⁵

In 2009 the largest ever haul of Anglo-Saxon treasure was unearthed in a field near Hammerwich, Staffordshire by Terry Herbert, a local metal-detectorist. The hoard comprises over 4000 fragments, the vast majority of which are silver and gold fittings taken from the hilts of high-status weapons.⁶ Over 200 sword-hilts and over 80 pommels were recovered, many of them finely decorated with inlaid garnets and intricate zoomorphic designs, as well

³ Roberta Frank, 'Beowulf and Sutton Hoo: The Odd Couple', in *Voyage to the Other World: The Legacy of Sutton Hoo*, Medieval Cultures, 5, ed. by Calvin B. Kendall and Peter S. Wells (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 47–64 (pp. 324–25). Frank had earlier argued for dating *Beowulf* to ninth or tenth century: 'Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*', in Chase (1981), pp. 123–49.

⁴ Frank's views are echoed in Klaeber's 'Beowulf' and 'The Fight at Finnsburg', *Fourth Edition*, ed. by R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Toronto: UTP, 2008), pp. clxviii–clxix. All quotations from *Beowulf* are taken from this edition (henceforth K4), though I have silently deleted editorial markers and hyphenated compounds. All other Old English poems are cited from *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: A Collective Edition*, 6 vols, ed. George Phillip Krapp and Elliot van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–52). Translations are my own.

⁵ Gale Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in 'Beowulf' and the Structure of the Poem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 30. Owen-Crocker fruitfully explores links between Sutton Hoo and the funerals of Scyld Scefing, Hildeburh's kin and Beowulf, as well as the Lay of the Last Survivor (pp. 114–32).

⁶ Chris Fern, 'Characterizing the Objects', in *The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure*, ed. by Chris Fern, Tania Dickinson and Leslie Webster (London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 2019), pp. 30–121 (p. 30).

as parts of what may once have been a spectacular and probably royal helmet. There are also several Christian objects, including eight gold crucifixes and a strip with a Latin biblical inscription.⁷ The absence of female jewellery, brooches or coins, combined with the strongly martial character of the other items, suggests that we are looking at the looted property of a small army. Dated to *c.* 650–750, the Staffordshire Hoard provides an unparalleled window onto the aristocratic warrior culture of this period. More specifically, as Chris Fern has recently commented, the items within the hoard were probably ‘part the proceeds’ of the dynastic wars between Mercia and its powerful neighbours to the east, East Anglia, Kent and Northumbria.⁸

The discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard presents new opportunities—and challenges—for *Beowulf* scholarship. Recent research on the dating and provenance of *Beowulf* indicates that we might tentatively place the poem within the same cultural milieu. Most significantly, in his 1992 *History of Old English Meter*, R. D. Fulk concluded that *Beowulf* was probably composed before *c.* 725 if the poet was Mercian, or before *c.* 825 if Northumbrian in origin, adding: ‘although the evidence for a Mercian origin for *Beowulf* is not incontestable, neither is it inconsiderable’.⁹ Since then, a number of studies of the poem’s language, metre, and cultural have strengthened the case for situating *Beowulf* in an Anglian kingdom before the Viking age.¹⁰ The Mercian royal house traced its ancestry back to the line of King Offa of Angeln, a hero celebrated in *Beowulf* (1944a–62) and *Widsith* (35–44),¹¹ and

⁷ For full description and analysis of all the items, see Fern, Dickinson and Webster (2019). See also Chris Fern and George Speake, *Birds, Beasts and Gods: Interpreting the Staffordshire Hoard* (Warwickshire: West Midlands History, 2014). Individual items can be viewed online at <http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk>.

⁸ Chris Fern, ‘Date and Origin’, in Fern, Dickinson and Webster (2019), pp. 258–80 (p. 279).

⁹ R. D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 385–91.

¹⁰ For the case for early East Anglian provenance, see Newton, *Origins*. See further *The Dating of ‘Beowulf’: A Reassessment*, ed. by Leonard Neidorf, Anglo-Saxon Studies 24 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014).

¹¹ See George Bond, ‘Links Between *Beowulf* and Mercian History’, *Studies in Philology*, 40 (1943), 481–93; Richard North, *The Origins of ‘Beowulf’: From Vergil to Wiglaf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Francis Leneghan, ‘The Poetic Purpose of the Offa Digression in *Beowulf*’, *Review of English Studies*, 60 (2009), 538–60.

I have argued elsewhere that the wars between Mercia and Northumbria in this period form an attractive context within which to read the poem's tales of dynastic strife among the Scyldings, Scylfings and Hrethlings.¹² In addition to these broad cultural links are a number of more specific points of contact between the hoard and *Beowulf*, including the absence of money and the prevalence of gold over other precious metals.¹³ Such commonalities certainly invite further investigations into links between the hoard and *Beowulf*.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the hoard is the dismembered state of the items it contains. By contrast with princely burials such as Sutton Hoo, Taplow and Prittlewell, in which intact grave-goods were symbolically arranged to accompany the deceased on their journey to the next life, the items in the Staffordshire Hoard were crudely dismantled and effectively 'de-commissioned'.¹⁴ The hilt-fittings, mounts and pommels, in particular, were prised from the sword-handles which they had once adorned, in some cases with tongs; no trace remains of the blades themselves, or indeed of any other weapons.¹⁵ Similarly, the crucifixes and other items have all been crushed or folded, as if they had been hurriedly stuffed into a bag. Moreover, while the treasures at Sutton Hoo, Taplow and Prittlewell were

¹² Francis Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 39 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), pp. 237–40.

¹³ Rory Naismith has recently noted that the two references to *sceattas* in *Beowulf* (378a, 1686b) are just as likely to refer to wealth or goods in a general sense as to coins: 'The Economy of *Beowulf*', in *Old English Philology: Studies in Honour of R. D. Fulk*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 31, ed. by Leonard Neidorf, Rafael J. Pascual and Tom Shippey (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016), pp. 371–91 (p. 373, n. 4). See further Ernst Leisi, 'Gold und Manneswert im *Beowulf*', *Anglia*, 71 (1952), 259–73, trans. John D. Niles with the assistance of Shannon A. Dubenion-Smith, in John D. Niles, *Old English Literature: A Guide to Criticism, with Selected Readings* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 173–83. Viking-age Anglo-Saxon deposits such as the Watlington and Cuerdale hoards comprise mostly silver items, but the Staffordshire Hoard is dominated by gold. On the absence of silver in *Beowulf*, see K4, p. 137; and Naismith, 'Economy', pp. 380–82. The word *gold* appears in *Beowulf* as a simplex 29 times, and as the first element of a compound a further 20 times. The importance of hoards in the poem is similarly borne out by lexical evidence: *hord* appears as a simplex 24 times and as the first or second element of a compound a further 22 times.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the deliberate bending and destruction of swords in Viking culture, see Hanne Lovise Aannestad, 'Charisma, Violence and Weapons: The Broken Swords of the Vikings', in *Charismatic Objects: From Roman Times to the Middle Ages*, ed. by Marianne Vedeler, Ingunn M. Røstad, Elna Siv Kristoffersen and Zanette T. Glørstad (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2018), pp. 147–66.

¹⁵ For a recent discussion of Anglo-Saxon sword-pommels and hilts, including those found in the Staffordshire Hoard, see Sue Brunning, *The Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe: Experience, Identity, Representation*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 36 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019). The classic study is Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England: Its Archaeology and Literature* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1962; repr. 1998).

interred in prominent barrows, the Staffordshire Hoard, as Tom Shippey notes, ‘seems to have been buried secretly, in an unmarked field’.¹⁶ Taken together, these features are more indicative of an act of practical hoarding or concealment than a votive offering.¹⁷

In a recent study, Barbara Yorke outlines three possible scenarios which might have resulted in the burial of this hoard: (1) the so-called ‘Restoration of the *Iudeu*’, when King Penda of Mercia shared out tribute from King Oswiu of Northumberland to the Welsh kings prior to the Battle of the Winwæd in 655; (2) the hiding of Mercian treasure after Penda’s defeat at the Winwæd; and (3) an attempt by the descendants of Eowa, brother of Penda, ‘to obliterate traces of their rivals’ after the deaths of Penda’s last descendants, Ceolred and Ceolwold, in 716.¹⁸ While acknowledging that there are interesting parallels between the archaeological evidence and *Beowulf*, Yorke highlights one particular aspect of the hoard that, in her view, sets it apart from the world of Old English heroic poetry:

The Staffordshire assemblage appears to reflect some aspects of the heroic culture presented in *Beowulf* and Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, but also provides some challenges to the impression they can give. [...] The honour paid in heroic verse to swords and their personal biographies can make them seem akin to warriors themselves. *But the dismembered state of the sword-fittings in the Staffordshire assemblage may lead us into an area that the heroic verse does not dwell upon,*

¹⁶ Tom Shippey, Review of *The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure*, ‘In an Unmarked Field’, *London Review of Books*, 22.5 (5th March 2020), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n05/tom-shippey/in-an-unmarked-field>, accessed 8th April 2020.

¹⁷ On the distinction between votive and practical hoarding, see Wade Tarzia, ‘The Hoarding Ritual in Germanic Epic Tradition’, *Journal of Folklore Research*, 26 (1989), 99–121 (pp. 99–101). For a survey of the various different models of hoarding practised across early medieval Europe, see Leslie Webster, Tania Dickinson, Peter Guest, Matthias Hardt and Svante Fischer, ‘Hoards and Hoarding’, in Fern, Dickinson and Webster (2019), pp. 322–49.

¹⁸ Barbara Yorke, ‘Historical Background’, in *The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure*, ed. by Chris Fern, Tania Dickinson and Leslie Webster (London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 2019), pp. 286–92 (pp. 289–92).

namely, that which can bring honour can also be used to dishonour; just as a warrior can be killed, so can their weapons.¹⁹ (Emphasis added).

Certainly, the *Beowulf*-poet displays a great reverence for swords, weapons and treasure more generally, employing a rich array of lexical terms to describe them.²⁰ Weapons are closely identified with their owners and, on several occasions, given personal names.²¹ As a number of studies have demonstrated, the bestowal of treasure confers honour on the recipient.²² Yet, the poet does not turn a blind eye to the violent manner in which such valuable items were typically acquired. Indeed, *Beowulf* contains numerous references to the dishonouring of the dead and their weapons, the looting of corpses and the denial of a proper burial to the defeated.²³ This article reappraises these passages in the light of the new archaeological evidence presented by the Staffordshire Hoard and, concurrently, asks whether the poem might prove useful in unlocking some of the mysteries of the hoard.

¹⁹ Yorke, 'Historical Background', p. 292.

²⁰ See Caroline Brady, 'Weapons in *Beowulf*: an analysis of the nominal compounds and an evaluation of the poet's use of them', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 8 (1979), 79–141.

²¹ On the poet's frequent punning on *se ecg*, 'the sword', and *secg* 'man', see Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to 'Beowulf'* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 76

²² See Elizabeth M. Tyler, *Old English Poetics: The Aesthetics of the Familiar in Anglo-Saxon England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2006), pp. 9–100; Peter S. Baker, *Honour, Exchange, and Violence in 'Beowulf'*, *Anglo-Saxon Studies*, 20 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013), p. 38; Richard North, 'Gold and the Heathen Polity in *Beowulf*', and Winfried Rudolf, 'The Gold in *Beowulf* and the Currencies of Fame', both in *Gold in der europäischen Heldensage*, *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, Ergänzungsband, ed. by Wilhelm Heizmann, Victor Millet und Heike Sahm (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 72–114, 115–41; Naismith, 'Economy'; Amy Faulkner, 'The Language of Wealth in Old English Literature: From the Conversion to Alfred', Unpubl. doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, 2019; Denis Ferhatović, *Borrowed Objects and the Art of Poetry: Spolia in Old English Verse* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 143–63. See also Leisi, 'Gold und Manneswert im *Beowulf*'; Taylor Cuthbert, 'The Narrative Function of *Beowulf*'s Swords', *JEGP*, 59 (1960), 13–20; Robert P. Creed, 'Beowulf and the Language of Hoarding', in *Medieval Archaeology: Papers of the Seventeenth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, MRTS 60, ed. by Charles L. Redman (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York, 1989), pp. 159–64; David C. Van Meter, 'The Ritualized Presentation of Weapons and the Ideology of Nobility in *Beowulf*', *JEGP*, 95 (1996), 175–89; Paul Beekman Taylor, 'The Dragon's Treasure in *Beowulf*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 98 (1997), 229–40; William Cooke, 'Three Notes on Swords in *Beowulf*', *Medium Ævum*, 72 (2003), 302–07; Joseph E. Marshall, 'Goldgyfan or Goldwlançe: A Christian Apology for *Beowulf* and Treasure', *Studies in Philology*, 107 (2010), 1–24. On the poet's 'delight in material things', see further K4, pp. c–ci.

²³ See further Gale Owen-Crocker, 'Horror in *Beowulf*: Mutilation, Decapitation, and the Unburied Dead', in *Early Medieval English Texts and Interpretations: Studies Presented to Donald G. Scragg*, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, ed. by Elaine Treharne and Susan Rosser (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002), pp. 81–100.

The looting of the slain in Old English heroic verse

The practice of plundering corpses in the aftermath of battle implied by the Staffordshire Hoard was commonplace throughout the early medieval period and is frequently depicted in Old English heroic poetry.²⁴ In *The Battle of Maldon*, for example, a Viking attempts to strip the wounded hero, Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, of his *bēagas* [...] *rēaf and hringas and gerenod swurd*, ‘ringed ornaments [...], booty and rings and decorated sword’ (159–60).²⁵ If, as seems likely, the English *fyrð* similarly plundered the corpses of fallen Vikings, the *Maldon*-poet chooses to remain silent on the matter.²⁶ In Old English biblical verse, by contrast, both by the enemies of God and His chosen people engage in the act of looting the slain. Hence, while *Daniel* describes how Nebuchadnezzar plundered the Temple (56–74), in *Judith* it is the Bethulians who return to the battlefield to strip trophies from the corpses of the defeated Assyrians:

Rūm wæs tō nimanne
 lond-būendum on ðām lāðestan,
 hyra eald-fēondum unlyfigendum
 heolfrig here-rēaf, hyrsta scýne,
 bord ond brād-swyrð, brūne helmas,
 dýre mādmas.

²⁴ For a survey of looting in Old English verse and a range of late antique and early medieval Latin texts, as well as discussion of images of corpses being stripped of their armour on the Bayeux Tapestry, see Baker, *Honour*, pp. 35–76.

²⁵ *The Book of Ely*, from the twelfth century, records that the Vikings decapitated Byrhtnoth and took his head from the battlefield. For a translation, see Michael Allen and Daniel Calder, eds and trans., *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry, vol. 1: The Major Latin Texts in Translation* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 191–92.

²⁶ This silence may reflect the poet’s clear bias against the Vikings, who are referred to as *lāðe gystas*, ‘hateful visitors’ (86b) and *wæl-wulfas*, ‘slaughter-wolves’ (96a).

(*Judith* 313b–18a)

[There was room for the land-dwellers to take from those hated ones, their unliving ancient foes, bloodstained battle-plunder, shining ornaments, shield and broad sword, bright helmets, beloved treasures.]

After they have finished looting the Assyrians, the Bethulians return home in triumph bearing the helmets, swords and mail coats of their enemies, as well as the head and helmet of their leader, Holofernes (323b–41a). In the biblical source we simply read that the Bethulians ‘went into the camp of the Assyrians, and took away the spoils which the Assyrians in their flight had left behind them’, carrying away with them cattle, beasts and *mobilibus eorum*, ‘their moveables’ (Jud. 15.7–8). As Peter Baker comments, the poet has transformed the biblical passage to make it resemble scenes of looting after a battle that we find in other Old English heroic poems such as *Beowulf*.²⁷ *Genesis A* describes how first the Elamites plundered Sodom and Gomorrah (1999b–2017), before Abraham recovered the treasures and womenfolk of Sodom by force (2092–95). In another expansion of the biblical source (Gen. 14.16–22), the poet depicts Abraham granting to Melchizedek *þæs here-tēames/ ealles tēoðan sceat*, ‘the tenth part of all that war-booty’ (2121b–22a). In *Elene*, Cynewulf depicts Constantine’s army *hūðe hrēmig*, ‘rejoicing in plunder’ (149a) after their victory over the Huns, a detail absent from the *Acta Cyriaci* but which echoes Grendel’s attack on Heorot (*Beowulf* 124a).²⁸ Similarly, the final lines of *Exodus* describe the Israelites seizing *here-rēaf*,

²⁷ Baker, *Honour*, pp. 47–8.

²⁸ The *Acta Cyriaci* simply records that Constantine massacred the Huns; for a translation, see Allen and Calder, pp. 60–69 (p. 61).

‘battle-plunder’, from the corpses of drowned Egyptians after the Crossing of the Red Sea and the subsequent redistribution of the spoils to the victors:²⁹

þā wæs ēðfynde Afrisc mēowle
 on geofones staðe golde geweorðod.
 Handa hōfon hals-wurðunge,
 blīðe wæron, bōte gesāwon,
 hēddon here-rēafes, hæft wæs onsæled.
 Ongunnon sǣ-lāfe segnum dǣlan
 on yð-lāfe, ealde mādmas,
 rēaf and randas. Hēo on riht sceōdon
 gold and god-web, Iosepes gestrēon,
 wera wuldor-gesteald. Werigend lāgon
 on dēað-stede, driht-folca mǣst.
 (*Exodus*, 580–90).

[Then it was easy to find the African woman on the shore of the water, adorned with gold. Hands lifted up neck-rings, they were happy, they saw the reward, possessed the war-booty, they were released from captivity. The survivors of the sea began to dole out treasures among the men on the beach, ancient wealth, plunder and shields. They divided up the gold and good cloth

²⁹ Cf. Ex. 14.31: *et viderunt Aegyptios mortuos super litus maris et manum magnam quam exercuerat Dominus contra eos timuitque populus Dominum et crediderunt Domino et Mosi servo eius*, ‘And they saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore, and the mighty hand that the Lord had used against them: and the people feared the Lord, and they believed the Lord, and Moses his servant.’ For debate as to the identity of the ‘African woman’, see Zacharias P. Thundy, ‘*Afrisc Meowle* and the Old English *Exodus*’, *Neophilologus*, 64 (1980), 297–306.

by rights, Joseph's treasures, the glorious possessions of men. The guards lay in the place of death, the greatest of lordly people.]

The absence of these looting-scenes from the respective Latin sources, and the participation of both God's chosen people and their enemies in this activity, suggests that these poems to some degree reflect contemporary custom. As such, these literary accounts hint at the violent social realities that might lie behind the deposit of the Staffordshire Hoard.

The Lay of the Last Survivor

The *Beowulf*-poet takes an equally sanguine view of the grim realities of the aftermath of battle, with several passages either directly describing or alluding to the looting of the slain and the dishonouring of the defeated through the denial of proper burial. As has been noted, perhaps the most immediate Beowulfian parallel with the Staffordshire Hoard is the so-called 'Lay of the Last Survivor'.³⁰ In this passage, the narrator describes the origins of great treasure-hoard now guarded over by the dragon. Having witnessed the fall of his nation in battle, an unnamed man placed his people's treasures in a barrow for safekeeping, before addressing the earth itself in a moving apostrophe:³¹

'Heald þū nū, hrūse, nū hæleð ne mōstan,
 eorla æhte. Hwæt, hyt ær on ðē
 gōde begēaton; gūð-dēað fornam,
 feorh-bealo frēcne fýra gehwylcne 2250

³⁰ See, for example, Vanessa Thorpe, 'Anglo-Saxon Hoard Casts *Beowulf* and Mercia in a New Light', 27 September 2009: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2009/sep/27/anglo-saxon-treasure-hoard-staffordshire>

³¹ There are some discrepancies between this account of the origins of the dragon's hoard and that provided in lines 3049b–57, in which the narrator alludes to a curse placed on the same treasure. See K4, pp. 238–39.

lēoda mīnra, þone ðe þis lif ofgeaf;
 gesāwon sele-drēamas. Nāh hwā sweord wege
 oððe forð bere fæted wæge,
 drync-fæt dēore; duguð ellor sceōc.
 Sceal se hearda helm hyrsted-golde, 2255
 fætum befeallen; feormynd swefað,
 þā ðe beado-grīman bȳwan sceoldon;
 gē swylce sēo here-pād, sīo æt hilde gebād
 ofer borda gebræc bite irena,
 broснаð æfter beorne. Ne mæg byrnan hring 2260
 æfter wīg-fruman wīde fēran,
 hæleðum be healfe. Næs hearpan wyn,
 gomen glēo-bēames, nē gōd hafoc
 geond sæl swingeð, nē se swifra mearh
 burh-stede bēateð. Bealo-cwealm hafað 2265
 fela feorh-cynna forð onsended.’

(*Beowulf*, 2247–66)

[“Hold you now, earth, now that warriors cannot, the possession of men. Indeed, the good ones got it from you before. Battle-slaughter took them away, terrible deadly affliction, each of the race of my people, of those who gave up this life, they had seen the last of hall-joys. I have no one to bear the sword, or to carry forth the decorated cup, the prized drinking vessel. The old troops have gone elsewhere. The fierce helmet, wound with gold must be deprived of its treasures. The polishers sleep, those who should burnish the

battle-visor; also the war-shirt, which at battle endured over the breaking of shields, the bite of irons, decays alongside the warrior. Nor may the ringed mail coat travel far after the war-chief, beside the warriors. Nor is there joy of the harp, delight of the joy-wood, nor does the good hawk swoop through the hall, nor does the swift steed beat across the courtyards. Dreadful death has sent forth a great many of the kin of the living.”]

At first glance, the Survivor’s careful, almost ceremonial placement of these treasures in a barrow, and his loving itemisation of each valuable objects, seems closer to votive offerings such as Sutton Hoo or Taplow than the Staffordshire Hoard.³² However, on closer inspection, a number of interesting parallels with the Staffordshire Hoard begin to emerge, inviting us to read this well-known passage in a new light. For example, the fact that Survivor hid (*gehȳdde*) his nation’s treasures in a place chosen for its inaccessibility (*nearo-cræftum fæst*), following the crushing defeat of an entire people in battle (*gūð-dēað fornam,/ feorh-bealo frēcne*), are point to the opportunistic concealment of loot. By committing these treasures to the earth, the Survivor may be honouring his unburied fallen comrades with the funeral that they were denied by their enemies. Yet, comparison with the Staffordshire Hoard may hint at another, more pragmatic, dimension to the Last Survivor’s actions: to prevent his peoples’ enemies from returning to the battlefield to claim (or even reclaim) these treasures as trophies. Indeed, this theme of reclaimed treasure is hinted at in the opening of Survivor’s address to the earth, from which, he says, these same treasures were formerly taken (2248b–49a).³³ As we have seen, the Staffordshire Hoard itself may have been hidden by a Mercian survivor of the Battle of the Winwæd in 655 in order to prevent looting by their

³² Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals*, pp. 61–84, argues that this passage describes the funeral of a nation, linking it to the three other funerals in the poem (of Scyld, Hildeburh’s kin and Beowulf).

³³ The same hoard is returned once again to the earth during Beowulf’s funeral (3163–68).

Northumbrian enemies.³⁴ If this was the case, the Lay of the Last Survivor might have spoken eloquently to a contemporary Mercian audience about the shame of defeat and the need to protect national wealth from enemies.

The marriage of Freawaru and Ingeld

Treasures recovered from the battlefield might be prominently worn by the victor to symbolise their victory. However, as *Beowulf* demonstrates, the public display of looted items could also be viewed as an affront, resulting in further bloodshed. On his triumphant return from Denmark, Beowulf informs his lord, King Hygelac, of Hrothgar's plan to bring about a truce between the Scyldings and their neighbours, the Heathobards, by marrying his only daughter, Freawaru, to King Froda's son, Ingeld. But in the hero's estimation, all such attempts at peace-weaving are futile, so strong is the impulse to avenge the death of kinsmen (2029b–31). In order to illustrate his point, Beowulf invites his audience to envisage a scene in which an old Heathobard warrior is offended by the sight of one of Freawaru's attendants, decked out in looted armour:

On him gladiað gomelra lāfe,
 heard ond hring-mæġ Heaða-Beardna gestrēon,
 þenden hīe ðām wāpnum wealdan mōston —
 oð ðæt hīe forlæddan tō ðām lind-plegan
 swāse gesīðas ond hyra sylfra feorh.
 (2036–40)

³⁴ Yorke, 'Historical Background', p. 292.

[On him glistens the treasure of the Heathobards, ancient heirloom, fierce and ring-marked, when they were able to wield weapons — until their own dear comrades led to destruction at that shield-play both them (i.e. the weapons) and their own lives.]³⁵

Beowulf's goes on to predict that the *eald æsc-wiga*, 'old spear-warrior' (2042a), enraged by the sight of this Dane *frætwwum hrēmig*, 'rejoicing in treasures' (2054a), will incite a young Heathobard to strike him down; the youngster will thereby avenge his own father's death and reclaim the looted *mēce*, 'blade', that by rights should belong to him (2041b–69a).³⁶ This poetic passage serves as a useful reminder of the great power that weapons could still wield even after the death of their owners. In this light, the practice of dismantling and burying of weapons attested by the Staffordshire Hoard might be viewed as an attempt not only to dishonour the dead but also to erase them from memory.

The Franks plunder Hygelac's corpse

Setting out in pursuit of plunder and glory in a raid on Frankish territory, King Hygelac meets his untimely end on the shores of Frisia. This event The fall of Hygelac during a raid on Frankish territory is referred to more times than any other event in the poem, save the hero's own impending death.³⁷ This story appears to have been the subject of a popular legend as

³⁵ The meaning of these lines is contested, in particular whether the subject is the weapons themselves or the Heathobards: see K4, pp. 231–32.

³⁶ The audience of this poem, learned in Scandinavian royal legend, would not need reminding that the reawakening of this same feud would result in the burning of Hrothgar's royal hall, an event already alluded to in *Beowulf* (82b–85) and mentioned also in *Widsith* (45–9). Similarly, in the Finnsburg Episode, it is the contemplation of a sword that compels Hengest to act, with devastating consequences (1142–59a).

³⁷ For discussion of this 'leitmotif', see Arthur Brodeur, *The Art of 'Beowulf'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), pp. 78–9. See also Frederick M. Biggs, 'History and Fiction in the Frisian Raid', in Neidorf, ed. (2014), pp. 138–56; and now Edward Currie, 'Hygelac's Raid in Historiography and Poetry: The King's Necklace and *Beowulf* as "Epic"', *Neophilologus* 104 (2020), 391–400.

early as the seventh century, and much preoccupied our poet, who returns to it again and again.³⁸ One reason why the poet was so interested in this theme of Hygelac's death might be that it provided him with an opportunity to meditate on the fate of looted treasure. First, as the Danish queen, Wealhtheow, rewards Beowulf for his victory over Grendel with the gift of *heals-bēaga mǣst*, 'the greatest of neck-rings' (1197b), the narrator compares this great treasure with the legendary *Brōsinga mene*, 'necklace of the Brosings' (1199b), itself stolen from Eormenric, king of the Goths, by Hama.³⁹ Then, we learn that this same ring will one day be looted from Hygelac's corpse by Frankish warriors:⁴⁰

Pone hring hæfde Higelāc Gēata,
 nefa Swertinges nȳhstan sīðe,
 siðþan hē under segne sinc ealgode,
 wæl-rēaf werede; hyne wyrd fornam
 syþðan hē for wlenco wēan āhsode,
 fāhðe tō Frȳsum. Hē þā frætwe wæg,
 eorclan-stānas ofer ȳða ful,
 rīce þēoden; hē under rande gecranc.
 Gehwearf þā in Francna fæþm feorh cyninges,
 brēost-gewædu, ond se bēah somod.
 Wȳrsan wīg-freccan wæl rēafeden
 æfter gūð-sceare; Gēata lēode

³⁸ On the legend of Hygelac, see Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of 'Beowulf'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), pp. 52–53; Margaret E. Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of 'Beowulf'* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 98–99; Michael Lapidge, 'Beowulf, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex', *Studi Medievali*, 3rd series 23 (1982), 151–92 (pp. 176–79); Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, pp. 121–26.

³⁹ Eormenric, king of the Goths, is mentioned in *Deor* (21–7) and *Widsith* (8–9, 18b, 88–92); Hama also appears in *Widsith* (24b–31). For traces of the legend of Hama and Eormenric in other sources, see K4, pp. 193–94.

⁴⁰ We later learn that Beowulf had given this same ring to Hygelac's queen, Hygd, on his return from Denmark, and that she had worn it proudly on her breast (2172–76). Presumably Hygd subsequently gave it to Hygelac. See K4, p. 194.

hrēa-wīc hēoldon.

(1202–14a). (Emphasis added).

[Hygelac of the Geats possessed that ring, the nephew of Swerting, on his last expedition, when he contested for treasure under the banner, protected the spoils of battle; fate took him away, since he out of daring (*or* arrogance) sought out strife, a feud with the Frisians. He carried that treasure, the ancient stones, over the expanse of the waves, mighty prince; he fell under the shield. The life of the king then fell into the possession of the Franks, the breast-garment, and the ring together. *Inferior battle-warriors plundered the corpse after the battle-shearing; the bodies of the Geatish people covered the place of corpses.*]⁴¹

The importance of royal funerals in *Beowulf* cannot be overstated: the poem begins and ends with the splendid funerals of Scyld and Beowulf, both of whom die in their homeland, honoured with treasures by *swāse gesīðas*, ‘beloved retainers’ (29a), and *heorð-genēatas*, ‘hearth-companions’ (3179).⁴² Conversely, the denial of a proper burial dishonours the dead.⁴³ Brodeur has noted that Beowulf’s love for his uncle is his ‘strongest and most enduring emotion’.⁴⁴ It is all the more poignant, then, that Hygelac should meet his end on a foreign battlefield, surrounded by enemies, stripped of his breast-garment (*brēost-gewādu*)

⁴¹ For alternative readings of lines 1213b–14a, see K4, p. 195.

⁴² See Adrien Bonjour, *The Digressions in ‘Beowulf’*, Medium Ævum Monographs, V (Oxford: Blackwell, 1950, repr. 1965), pp. 1–11; Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals*.

⁴³ See Owen-Crocker, ‘Horror in *Beowulf*’, pp. 82–3. Owen-Crocker notes that burial of the dead was important to the Anglo-Saxons even before the conversion (p. 91), while in the eyes of the church, ‘[t]he worst fate of all is to be denied burial of any kind (p. 92).

⁴⁴ Brodeur, *Art of ‘Beowulf’*, p. 80.

and the peerless ring (*bēah*) given to him by his nephew, his unburied corpse left as food for the beasts of battle on the place of slaughter (*hrēa-wīc*).

Beowulf plunders the Franks

We learn the identity of one of these *wyrsan wīg-freca*n, ‘inferior battle-warriors’ (1212a), when the hero describes how he stopped Dæghrefn, a champion of the Hugas, from presenting Geatish loot to his Frisian lord:

nalles hē ðā frætwe Frēs-cyninge,
brēost-weorðunge bringan mōste
(2502–03).

[Not at all was he able to bring those treasures, breast-adornments, to the Frisian king.]

The ferocious manner in which Beowulf kills Dæghrefn, crushing his *bān-hūs*, ‘bone-house’, in a *hilde-grāp*, ‘battle-grip’ (2505–08a), recalls his earlier struggle with Grendel.⁴⁵ In both contests, Beowulf dishonours the corpse of his adversary by mutilation.

Having avenged his uncle’s death, Beowulf himself now takes on the role of plunderer. Echoing the actions of Grendel in Heorot (120–25), discussed below, the hero swims back home with the armour of thirty slain Franks as loot:

Ponan Bīowulf cōm

⁴⁵ Orchard notes that the hero is here ‘at his most bear-like’ (*Critical Companion*, p. 121).

sylfes cræfte, sund-nytte drēah;
hæfde him on earme ealra þrītīg
hilde-geatwa þā hē tō holme þrong.
 Nealles Hetware hrēmge þorfton
 fēðe-wīges, þē him foran ongēan
 linde bæron; lýt eft becwōm
 fram þām hild-frecan hāmes nīosan.
 (2359b–66). (Emphasis added).

[From there Beowulf escaped, through his own skill, endured a long swim; *he had on his shoulders the battle-gear of all of thirty, when he plunged into the sea.* Not at all did the Hetware have need to rejoice in that foot-battle, when they carried shields against him; few came back to seek out their homes from that war-chief.]

Through these multiple narrations of Hygelac's death, each told from a different perspective, we are given to understand that the act of looting the slain after a battle was not in itself seen as shameful in the eyes of the *Beowulf*-poet, any more than it was by the authors of the Old English biblical poems. Rather, in the heroic society depicted in these poems, looting brings glory to the victors and dishonours the defeated.

Wulf and Eofor plunder King Ongentheow's corpse

The leitmotif of Hygelac's death, with its attendant themes of the plundering and dishonouring of the dead, is counterbalanced by the Geatish Messenger's account of the slaying of the feared Swedish ruler, Ongentheow, by two of Hygelac's own warriors, Eofor

and Wulf, and their subsequent looting of his corpse.⁴⁶ In return for this courageous deed, Eofor is lavishly rewarded by his king with the gift of a prestigious marriage:⁴⁷

Lēt se hearda Higelāces þegn
brādne mēce, þā his brōðor læg,
eald-sweord eotonisc entiscne helm
breca ofer bord-weal; ðā gebēah cyning,
folces hyrde, wæs in feorh dropen.
Ðā wron monige þe his mæg wriðon,
ricone ārærdon, ðā him gerȳmed wearð,
þæt hīe wæl-stōwe wealdan mōston.
Penden rēafode rinc oðerne,
nam on Ongendō īren-byrnan,
heard swyrd hilted, ond his helm somod,
hāres hyrste Higelāce bær.
Hē ðām fræt wum fēng ond him fægre gehēt
lēana mid lēodum, ond gelæste swā;
geald þone gūð-ræs Gēata dryhten,
Hrēðles eafora, þā hē tō hām becōm,
Iofore ond Wulfe mid ofer-māðmum,

⁴⁶ Ongentheow had himself threatened to dishonour the slain Geats at Ravenswood by hanging their bodies as sport for birds (2939–41).

⁴⁷ Alaric Hall argues that Hygelac's reward to Eofor is excessive, jeopardising the future of the Hrethlings ('Hygelac's only daughter: a present, a potentate and a peaceweaver in *Beowulf*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 78 [2006], 81–7). For a more positive interpretation of Hygelac's actions, see Leonard Neidorf, 'Hygelac and His Daughter: Rereading *Beowulf* Lines 2985–2998', forthcoming in *Medium Ævum*, 83 (2020). King Onela rewards Weohstan for slaying Eanmund, allowing him to keep the latter's looted helmet, mail coat and sword (2611–19). Highlighting the poet's interest in systems of non-monetary exchange, Naismith observes that *Beowulf* 'paints a picture of young warriors aspiring to win land through the favour of lords', comparable to that presented by Anglo-Saxon charters ('Economy', p. 379).

sealde hiora gehwæðrum hund þūsenda
 landes ond locenra bēaga — ne ðorfte him ðā lēan oðwītan
 mon on middan-gearde, syððan hīe ðā mārða geslōgon —
 ond ðā Iofore forgeaf āngan dohtor,
 hām-weorðunge, hyldo tō wedde.
 (2977–98). (Emphasis added).

[The fierce thane of Hygelac (i.e. Eofor) then let the broad blade, the gigantic ancient sword, break the giant's helmet over the shield-wall, when his brother (i.e. Wulf) lay dead. Then the king (i.e. Ongentheow) bent down, shepherd of the people, he was struck to his life. Then there were many who bandaged his kin, quickly raised him up, when room was made for them, so that they were allowed to hold sway over the slaughter-place. *Then one warrior plundered another, he took from Ongentheow the mail coat, fierce hilted sword, and his helmet all together, bore the ornaments of the grey-haired one to Hygelac.* He received those treasures and fairly promised him reward among the peoples,, and he fulfilled that; the lord of the Geats, Hrethel's son, repaid Eofor and Wulf for that war-rush, when he had returned home, with a surfeit of treasures, gave to each of them a hundred thousand *sceattas*' worth of land and locked rings — men on middle-earth had no need to reproach him for that payment, since they struck for glory — and he gave to Eofor his only daughter, as a home-honouring, to wed with honour.]

As Owen-Crocker notes, the personal names *Eofor*, ‘boar’, and *Wulf*, ‘wolf’, themselves recall animals associated with battle and carrion respectively.⁴⁸ The hint of bestiality suggested by these names is brought to the fore in the concluding lines of the Messenger’s Speech, which provide a startling variation on the popular ‘Beasts of Battle’ motif:⁴⁹

Forðon sceall gār wesan
 monig morgen-ceald mundum bewunden,
 hæfen on handa, nalles hearpan swēg
 wīgend weccan, ac se wonna hrefn
 fūs ofer fægum fela reordian,
 earne secgan hū him æt æte spēow,
 þenden hē wið wulf wæl rēafode.
 (3021b–27)

[Therefore the spear must be grasped in the grip on many a cold morning, held in the hands, the sound of the harp will not awaken warriors, but the dark raven often calls out eagerly over the doomed, telling the eagle how he got on at the feast, when he plundered the slain together with the wolf.]

The Messenger’s Speech highlights both the bestial and courtly dimensions of the accepted social practice of plundering the slain: on the one hand, the mercenaries *Eofor* and *Wulf* engage in an animalistic desecration of *Ongentheow*’s corpse;⁵⁰ on the other, by presenting

⁴⁸ Gale Owen-Crocker, ‘Beast Men: *Wulf* and *Eofor* and the mythic significance of names in *Beowulf*’, in *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. by Stephen Gloosecki (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 257–80.

⁴⁹ The seminal study is Francis P. Magoun Jr., ‘The Theme of the Beasts of Battle in Anglo-Saxon Poetry’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 56 (1955), 81–90.

⁵⁰ Cf. *The Wanderer*, lines 80–84.

Hygelac with the symbols of Ongentheow's royal power, helmet and sword, Eofor demonstrates his loyalty to his own king and proclaims a significant Geatish victory over the Swedes, for which he is suitably rewarded. However, while these and other scenes in the poem certainly hint at a less glorious side to plunder, it is in the hero's encounters with monsters that the theme of dishonouring—and looting—the dead comes to the fore.⁵¹

Beowulf plunders the hoard of the Grendelkin

The hero's three combats with the monsters provide the poet with an opportunity to dramatize the realities of contemporary warfare and plunder, such as are hinted at by the Staffordshire Hoard. Most strikingly, the three decapitation-scenes—of Æschere, Grendel's mother and Grendel—all involve an element of public display intended to dishonour the victim.⁵² Helen Appleton and Thijs Porck have both recently shown how the practice of displaying heads on spikes reflects an Anglo-Saxon practice of demarcating boundaries as well as the ritual humiliation of the defeated.⁵³ Having wreaked havoc inside Heorot, Grendel returns to his watery abode with the bodies of *þrītig þegna [...] hūðe hrēmig*, 'thirty thanes [...] rejoicing in booty' (123a–24a). Similarly, Grendel's mother quickly seizes Hrothgar's most cherished warrior, Æschere, before returning to the fens (1294–95). Within their water-

⁵¹ The passage is in fact structured around the theme of plunder: in the central section, the Messenger envisages the Geats themselves will be *golde berēafod*, 'stripped/plundered of gold' (3018b), after news of Beowulf's death reaches their enemies. Another example of arguably inglorious plundering is the sombre return journey made by *Scēotend Scyldinga*, 'the bowmen of the Scyldings' (1154a), bearing the grimly-won treasures from Finn following their disastrous expedition to the hall of the Frisian king (1154–59a).

⁵² For the possibility that Beowulf had to decapitate Grendel to prevent his corpse reanimating, see Owen-Crocker, 'Horror in *Beowulf*', pp. 92–3.

⁵³ Helen Appleton, 'The Role of Æschere's Head', *Review of English Studies*, 68 (2017), 428–47; and Thijs Porck, 'Marking Boundaries in *Beowulf*: Æschere's Head, Grendel's Arm and the Dragon's Corpse', *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik*, 77 (2017), 521–40. Bede, for example, describes how Penda had Oswald's head, hands and arms cut off and displayed on poles after the Battle of Maserfield in 642 (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, III.12). See also Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr, 'Grendel's Arm and the Law', in *Studies in English Language and Literature: 'Doubt wisely': Papers in Honour of E. G. Stanley*, ed. by M. J. Toswell and Elizabeth M. Tyler (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 121–32; and John Edward Damon, 'Descecto Capite Perfido: Bodily Fragmentation and Reciprocal Violence in Anglo-Saxon England', *Exemplaria*, 13 (2001), 399–432.

hall is a pile of treasures (1557a), presumably looted from the corpses of those whom they have previously slain and devoured.⁵⁴

Conversely, in defeating the monsters, the hero loots their respective halls and mutilates their bodies: after the first fight, Grendel's arm and shoulder are displayed as a wonder in Heorot (833b–36); then, on Beowulf's return from the mere, the hero has four men carry Grendel's head to Hrothgar (1634b–39);⁵⁵ before finally, the dragon's corpse is similarly dishonoured, unceremoniously shoved over the sea-cliff while its hoard is plundered (2743b–46, 2773–82, 3129b–33).

Save for Grendel's mother's use of a *seax*, 'knife, single-edged short-sword' (1545b), in self-defence, the monsters do not themselves use weapons. Nevertheless, Beowulf brings a part of a looted weapon as a trophy from the Grendelkin's hall. While grappling with Grendel's mother, Beowulf narrowly avoids defeat after the blade given to him by Unferth breaks. Just in the nick of time, the hero spies an *eald-sword eotenisc*, 'ancient sword of the race of giants' (1558a), which only a man of his enormous strength could brandish. Once Beowulf has used this weapon to decapitate both Grendel and his mother, the blade magically melts away leaving only the hilt. The hero takes this mysterious trophy, together with Grendel's severed head, and presents them to his lord, Hrothgar:

þā þæt sweord ongan

æfter heaþo-swāte hilde-gicelum,

wīg-bil wanian; þæt wæs wundra sum

þæt hit eal gemealt īse gelīcost,

⁵⁴ Following most editors, I take *on searwum* (1557a) to mean 'among the treasures'; for alternative translations, see K4, pp. 208–09.

⁵⁵ Eofor and Wulf similarly loot King Ongentheow's helmet and present it to Hygelac; see above. On the presentation of Grendel's body as a suit of armour, see Megan Cavell, 'Constructing the Monstrous Body in *Beowulf*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 43 (2014), 155–81. On the hero's gift of Grendel's body parts, in lieu of armour, to Hrothgar, see Baker, *Honour*, pp. 40–41.

ðonne forstes bend fæder onlæteð,
 onwindeð wæl-rāpas, sē geweald hafað
 sæla ond mæla; þæt is sōð metod.
 Ne nōm hē in þæm wīcum, Weder-Gēata lēod,
 māð-mæhta mā, þēh hē þær monige geseah,
būton þone hafelan ond þā hilt somod
since fāge; sweord ær gemealt,
 forbarn brōden-mæl; wæs þæt blōd tō þæs hāt,
 ættren ellor-gæst sē þær inne swealt.
 (1605b–17). (Emphasis added).

[Then that sword, the war-blade, began to dissolve after the battle-sweat into war-icicles; that was a certain wonder that it all melted, most like ice, when the Father unleashes the bonds of frost, unwinds the water fetters, He who has power over time and seasons; that is a True God. The Prince of the Weder-Geats did not seize any more treasures in those strongholds, although he could see many there, *except the head and the hilt together, bloodstained treasure*; the sword had melted before, the decorated blade completely burnt up; that blood was too hot, the deadly alien spirit who had perished inside there.]

It is unclear whether Beowulf's decision to only take the head and hilt was motivated by a sense of restraint or the practicalities of his upward swim through the mere—or both. But in his subsequent retelling of his underwater exploits to Hrothgar, the hero emphasises that the his plundering of the Grendelkin's hall, as much as the vengeance that motivated it, was entirely justifiable and appropriate:

Ic þæt hilt þanan

fēondum ætferede, fyren-dāda wræc,

dēað-cwealm Denigea, *swā hit gedēfe wæs.*

(1668b–70). (Emphasis added).

[I carried that hilt away from the enemies, avenged the terrible deeds, the murderous slaughter of the Danes, *as was fitting.*]

As we have seen in the account of Eofor's presentation of Ongentheow's ornaments to Hygelac, a warrior was expected to offer the spoils of battle to his lord as a demonstration of loyalty. Beowulf duly presents the looted sword-hilt to Hrothgar, signalling the defeat of this branch of the race of giants and the hero's loyalty to his Danish lord:

Ðā wæs gylden hilt gamelum rince,

hārum hild-fruman on hand gyfen,

enta ær-geweorc; hit on æht gehwearf

æfter dēofla hryre Denigea frean,

wundor-smiþa geweorc;

(1677–81a)

[Then that golden hilt, ancient treasure, was given to the hands of the ancient warrior, old war-chief, the ancient work of giants; it fell into the possession of the lord of the Danes after the fall of devils, the work of wonder-smiths.]

Scholars have demonstrated how the runic inscription on the patterned hilt (*wreopen-hilt*, 1698a) imaginatively links the hero's victory over the Grendelkin with 'the great feud' between God and the giants described in Genesis 6.⁵⁶ Again, comparison with the Staffordshire Hoard opens up interesting new ways of thinking about this passage. As noted above, all of the various hilts and pommels found in the hoard were prised from their handles and blades, either with a view to being melted down and reused or to symbolically dismember and dishonour their former owners. Just as the Lay of the Last Survivor may present a stylised account of the pragmatic concealment of loot after a defeat, so too Beowulf's presentation of the mysterious giant's sword-hilt as a trophy to Hrothgar appears to transform the contemporary practice of plundering the slain into an event of mythical significance and wonder. In both cases, our understanding of these poetic passages is considerably enriched by the archaeological evidence of the Staffordshire Hoard.⁵⁷

Conclusion

In the conclusion to her 1992 essay, Roberta Frank observes that *Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo are destined to remain inseparable until a 'more likely prospect' turns up.⁵⁸ This article has suggested that the Staffordshire Hoard presents, if anything, a better match for the poem than the East Anglian ship burial, though again a direct link cannot be proved. It goes without saying that *Beowulf* describes a distant, imaginary and highly idealised world.⁵⁹ Yet, in

⁵⁶ See, for example, Marijane Osborn, 'The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 973–81, repr. in *'Beowulf': Basic Readings*, Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England 1, ed. by Peter Baker (New York: Garland, 1995), pp. 111–25; Daniel Anlezark, *Water and Fire: The Myth of the Flood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: MUP, 2006), pp. 293–97, 304–11.

⁵⁷ Cf. the gleaming sword hilt of the dragon-slayer *Wulf*, 'Wolf', in *Solomon and Saturn II*, lines 214–15: *Git his sweord scined swiðe gescened, / and ofer ða byrgenna blicað ða hieltas*, 'Yet his sword shines, highly polished, and the hilts gleam over the graves.' For links with the giant's sword in *Beowulf*, see Daniel Anlezark, 'Poisoned Places and Avernian Tradition in Old English Poetry', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 36 (2007), 103–26.

⁵⁸ Frank, 'Odd Couple', p. 331.

⁵⁹ Cf. Naismith, 'Economy', p. 391: '*Beowulf* helped build and reinforce its audience's conception of their own position by illustrating how their ancestors had supposedly led a magnified form of the same lifestyle.'

composing his work, the poet was doubtless informed by certain aspects of his own material culture and the conduct of warriors, kings and queens whom he had encountered, as well as the heroes of old. As Barbara Raw comments in her 1992 discussion of royal symbols in *Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo:

although a poet might well include descriptions of objects which were not of his own period in his main narrative, he is less likely to invent when making casual passing references. The implications of what he says, therefore, the assumptions lurking between the lines, are probably an accurate reflection of the society in which he lived.⁶⁰

Reading *Beowulf* in the light of the Staffordshire Hoard helps to bring into focus some of what we might consider the less ‘heroic’ customs that pertained in the poet’s own day: casual references to the looting and mutilation of corpses; the deliberate exposure of unburied bodies on the battlefield as carrion; the opportunistic concealment of treasure in the earth in the aftermath of a defeat in order to prevent further pillaging; the provocative display of looted items as trophies; and the presentation of the spoils of victory to a lord in the hope of social advancement.⁶¹

This article has also argued that literature can prove a useful tool in giving meaning to archaeological evidence. We will never know if the individual who buried the Staffordshire Hoard was a victor *hūðe hrēmig*, ‘rejoicing in booty’, anticipating a splendid reward from his lord, or if, like the Last Survivor,

⁶⁰ Raw, ‘Royal Power’, p. 174.

⁶¹ Baker notes that the lack of narratorial comment on the practice of looting indicates that the poet viewed this as an unremarkable fact of the heroic life (*Honour*, p. 42).

unblīðe hwearf,
 dæges ond nihtes, oð ðæt dēaðes wylm
 hrān æt heortan.
 (2667b–79a)

[he wandered unhappily, day and night, until death's surging touched his
 heart.]

Yet, by reading the Staffordshire Hoard in the light of *Beowulf* and other Old English poems, we can at least begin to imagine how these ornate treasures, once so highly prized, became *gold on grēote*, 'gold in the earth' (*Beowulf* 3167a).⁶²

⁶² I would like to thank the organisers of the 2020 ASNAC Colloquium, Brittany Hanlon and Patrick McAlary, for inviting me to speak on *Beowulf* and for organising such an excellent conference. Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the Oxford Medieval Britain and Ireland seminar and the Oxford Old English Work-in-Progress group, and I am grateful to contributors at these events for sharing their insights. I also thank Daniel Anlezark, Amy Faulkner, Emma Irwin and the anonymous reader for *Quaestio Insularis* for their helpful comments.