Beowulf and the Finnesburh Fragment

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Pæt pe garde

na ingeap dagum. peod cyninga
hym germon hida æfelingsa eal
fre medon. ofte sceald scealf sceapen
treatum monegæ maegum meodo sceal
of teah æpsode eopul sydan æpset peap
pea sceapen funden heæf frøppa seba
peax under pollcnum peopl myndum þah
óð him æshylyc þana ymb sitten dra
ofe þepn. pæde hyran scole somban
sydan tipes god cyning. ðæm eapena peāç
after cennded seong ingeapldum þone god.
fende folce toppræ fyrne dæpppe on
geat þone ægodægon aldor leafe. længe
hpie him þæs lifraga puldeor pealdæn
popold æpe forgeap. beopulp þæs breme
blæd pide sprang scyldef eapena seode
landum in. Søpæal seong suma göde
zæ þrycean þromum peoh þif tum onfæde
Riverside College Classics

BEOWULF
AND THE FINNESBURH FRAGMENT

TRANSLATED FROM THE OLD ENGLISH,
WITH AN INTRODUCTORY SKETCH AND NOTES

BY

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INTRODUCTORY SKETCH

When Henry VIII, at Cromwell's suggestion, suppressed in 1536 the smaller monasteries, and in 1539 and 1540, those which were larger and richer, the king and his unscrupulous vicar-general no doubt profited greatly, but literature suffered an irreparable loss. The rich stores of these treasure-houses of ancient learning were in great part scattered and lost, and there were few to heed or care. As at thought of the lost plays of Shakespeare, regret is awakened, the greater because unavailing, when such testimony is considered as that of Bishop John Bale in his preface to Leland's "New Year's Gift to Henry VIII," in 1549. Though an ardent reformer and approving the suppression of the monasteries, Bishop Bale cannot repress his sorrow and indignation. He writes as follows:—

Never had we been offended for the loss of our libraries, being so many in number and in so desolate places for the more part, if the chief monuments and most notable works of our excellent writers had been reserved. If there had been in every shire of England but one solemn library to the preservation of those noble works and preferment of good learnings in our posterity, it had been yet somewhat. But, to destroy all without consideration, a great number of them which purchased those superstitious mansions reserved of those library books... some to secur their candlesticks, and some to rub their boots. Some they sold to the grocers and soap-sellers, and some over sea to the bookbinders, not in small number, but at times whole ships full, to the wondering of the foreign nations. Yea, the universities of this realm are not all clear in this detestable fact. But cursed is... [he] which seeketh to be fed with such ungodly
gains and so deeply shameth his natural country. I know a merchant man, which shall at this time be nameless, that bought the contents of two noble libraries for forty shillings' price, a shame it is to be spoken. This stuff hath he occupied in the stead of gray paper by the space of more than these ten years, and yet he hath store enough for as many years to come. I judge this to be true, and utter it with heaviness, that neither the Britains under the Romans and Saxons, nor yet the English people under the Danes and Normans, had ever such damage of their learned monuments as we have seen in our time.

Not all, fortunately, were lost. John Leland, the King's Antiquary, saved as many manuscripts as his opportunities and means permitted, and Dr. Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, and, later, Sir Robert Cotton, were zealous collectors. But Bale's account finds illustration in the fact that two Old English epics, the "Fight at Finnesburh" and the "Waldere," are known to us only through fragments, accidentally preserved upon parts of bindings or covers of other works.

The manuscript of "Beowulf," one of those collected by Sir Robert Cotton, is now enshrined in the British Museum under the caption "Ms. Cott. Vitellius A. 15." The Cotton manuscripts were catalogued under the names of the Roman emperors whose busts stood over the cases which held them, the "Beowulf" being one of those beneath the bust of Vitellius. This casual association of names surely affords one of those nice antitheses of perfect poise,

Chance in his curious rhetoric employs,

suggesting, as it does, a contrast between the great-souled hero and wise king of the Geats and the maudlin emperor, sunk in self-indulgence, whose throne was established by murder, even though Tacitus could say
of his earlier record that "in his provincial administration he displayed the virtues of a former age."

Great indeed would have been our loss, if the most precious monument of Teutonic antiquity, the only remaining folk-epic of the Germanic peoples, had perished in doing menial service to grocer or soap-seller, or been cut to strips by the book-binder. It was to run a further risk. More than a hundred of the Cotton manuscripts were destroyed or lost, and ninety-eight, among them the "Beowulf," injured, by the fire in 1731 in Little Dean's Yard, Westminster, where they were housed. The edges of the "Beowulf" were charred, but, fortunately, parchment resists flame to a remarkable degree, as appeared also recently in the deplorable disaster to the library at Turin. The charred edges, however, crumbled easily, and many words and letters have disappeared between 1786, when Thorckelin used the manuscript, and the present time. The manuscript was not carefully bound and safeguarded formerly, as it is now.

The full story is not yet told of the haps and chances that might have cost us our knowledge of the poem, our enjoyment of the inspiriting story it tells, the picture it gives us of the life of our remote ancestors. It might have been lost to us at the very beginning for the following reason. The manuscript is of the tenth century, but the original poems from which the poem was made were much earlier. Our Teutonic forefathers who invaded England in the fifth century had a literature, but it was not written down; it was handed down by memory from one person to another. When in time these Teutonic invaders became Christian, they learned to know written literature, but, naturally, those who could write composed religious works; for
example, the poems on Bible stories long attributed to Cædmon, and those on sacred legends by the first great English poet whose name we know and whose works we possess, Cynewulf. The greater part of Old English poetry is religious, but in time men were found to put in writing poems not religious, such as the “Widsith” and “Deor,” which seem earlier than the coming to England. And some monk, perhaps several working one after another, thought it worth while to make a single complete poem from certain popular lays about the hero Beowulf, and to commit it to writing. But if no one had thought to do this, we should never have heard of Beowulf at all.

To understand how the original poems arose from which the “Beowulf” was composed as we know it, we must go back to the earlier, unwritten literature. The Teutons were fond of poetry, as Tacitus tells us. They made songs celebrating noteworthy events, and these were remembered and repeated for a longer or shorter time. If the poem was about a truly great hero or happening, and was worth perpetuating, it was handed down from one person to another, becoming a permanent part of the tribal or national or racial lit-

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1 The reader may be referred for extended study of Beowulf to the editions by Heyne-Socin, Wyatt, and Holder; to Ten Prink’s English Literature, Stopford Brooke’s Early English Literature, Arnold’s Notes on Beowulf, Morley’s English Writers (an encyclopædic work to be used with caution), Kögel’s Geschichte der deutschen Literatur, Earle’s Deeds of Beowulf, Clark Hall’s Beowulf, and above all, for stimulating study, to Ker’s Epic and Romance. Many statements and views in one or another of these works represent individual opinion or are now set aside, but all are helpful. Among translations, the reader may examine those of Morris and Wyatt, Earle, Garnett, Clark Hall, John Lesslie Hall, and Tinker; also Tinker’s monograph on the translation of Beowulf.
erature. It is especially important to note that poems preserved by this process of tradition would not remain unchanged. Successive poets bettered them, either as regards poetic form or by improving the detail of the story to render it more striking or interesting. While the art of poetry seems to have been very generally cultivated, there were, moreover, professional poets (called in Old English scop or gleoman), who either went from place to place or had positions at the courts of chieftains or kings, and whose living and well-being depended on their poetic gift. They would inevitably bend their efforts to bettering the songs they sang. Moreover, as these songs formed the record of the ancestry of kings and peoples, and of the deeds they had performed in the past,—served as history, in brief,—there was a natural tendency to enlarge and magnify the deeds and events commemorated. As these receded into the past, a hero soon came to be pictured as greater and stronger, his deeds as more wonderful, a battle or war as fiercer or longer, than they had actually been. Supernatural attributes, even, might be added to a hero. Stories of different heroes might after a time be run together, or even stories of a hero and of a god, as seems to have been the case with Beowulf. Thus, as will be seen, these early poems were based upon historic fact, the historic element, however, being usually overlaid or entirely obscured by poetic or mythical additions.

It is possible to discover a basis of historic fact in our Old English epic. Beowulf is held to have been a real person. While not known himself in history, he

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1 It is a striking fact that two of the oldest poems in English, the Widsith (parts of which are the oldest English poetry extant) and Deor, have to do with these two classes of poets.
is represented as a retainer and kinsman of Hygelac, king of the Geats, who was killed during a foray into Frisian territory in a battle against a combined army of Frisians, Hungs, and Franks. Hygelac is an historic character. Under the latinized name Chociilaicus or Chocilagus, he appears, and his foray is described, in the "Historia Francorum" of Gregory of Tours and in the "Gesta Regum Francorum." Further, in a manuscript of Phædrus at Wolfenbüttel of the tenth century, it is recorded that the bones of a King Hunglacus, a Geat, had been discovered on an island in the mouth of the Rhine, and that they were then being exhibited to people "coming from a distance" to view them because of their huge size. Hygelac being thus proved historic, it is held, on the authority of the references in the poem (see ll. 1202 ff., 2354 ff., 2501 ff., and 2914 ff.), that Beowulf also was historic, took part in the foray, and may, after Hygelac's defeat, have actually escaped, as the poem relates, through his skill in swimming. He may also have become king and ruled wisely and well. Because of his bravery and prowess and his qualities of mind and heart, he was celebrated in song, and the epic lays about him were handed down through successive generations with the usual enhancement of the hero's traits and deeds characteristic of the process of tradition.

The historical element counts, however, for very little in the poem. Another element is of chief importance, the legendary or mythical. Myths, as we have seen, frequently formed a feature of Teutonic epic, and in the case of Beowulf it is supposed that stories concerning a god, Beowa, and his exploits in slaying certain monsters, were confused and blended