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I

The poetry of an aristocratic warrior society

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1

The chronological implications of the bond between kingship in *Beowulf* and kingship in practice

Hwæt, we Gardena in geardagum,
þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon!

['Lo, we have learned of the power of the Spear-Danes, of the kings of the people, in days long ago, how those princes put their fighting spirit into action!', *Beowulf* 1–3].

Our finest long poem in Old English took as its starting-point the mighty kings of a warlike people far in the past. The glory this people had achieved was a matter of knowledge which was shared (or at any rate was alleged to be) by the 'we' of the narrator and those he addressed (or at least some of them).[1] A poem beginning in this way was not going to turn into an exercise in idiosyncratic self-expression. Nor was it going to issue from some unique inspiration. The narrator was speaking for common report. He was assuming the function of giving fresh impetus to existing general knowledge. Unrestrained fantasy would not have served this purpose; nor would mere fact have been enough. His business was to make a portion of tradition come alive to an audience in the present, to stir a contemporary response of a traditional sort.

His entry into tradition was by way of invoking a name, *Gardene*, 'Spear-Danes', and playing on its associations.[2] It was not to the point to place this name in time more specifically than in the long ago; and this tribal name was sufficient in itself to suggest a region. What mattered was to activate straightaway the name's associative potential by placing it in a

[1] Elsewhere in this poem the narrator invariably referred to himself as 'I'.
[2] On the rôle of names as linguistic nuclei for stories in Germanic tradition, see Robinson, 'The Significance of Names', esp. the discussion of 'Hygelac' in *Beowulf* at pp. 53–7.

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narrative setting which was both applicable to the name itself and valid in the present and was also rich in suggestion: to link the Spear-Danes' prosperity with their leaders' martial vigour was to do just that. Through this coupling this people immediately came to exemplify a broad, general, truth, namely that to do well in war is to prosper. They were being introduced as an illustration of a process of (what we would call) cause and effect which operated in an audience's own society as much as it had in theirs. And the Danes' reward could be counted on to rouse any audience's emotions – glory. What marked this distant people off from the present was, of course, that they had been judged already by posterity: their glory possessed the authority of common repute; it had passed the test of time, as contemporary reputation necessarily had not. They provided an exemplary fulfilment of a primary need of a present-day society: these Danish kings had given their people the kind of fighting leadership which Anglo-Saxons wanted their own rulers to exert. What they had done, therefore, the story of their successes and failures, was of compelling interest to an Anglo-Saxon audience, not for escapism but for illumination of current experience. A comparison had been initiated between kingship in poetry and kingship in practice.

Set as it was in a remote past and a far-off place, this poem perforce depended on the general conception of traditional kingship prevailing in the poet's own time. But this in no way put a curb on his ambition. On the contrary it was precisely his strength. A lively sense of that tradition enabled him to mount impressive full-length royal portraits. Firstly, in the person of Hrothgar, presiding over the Danish court when Beowulf freed it from the ravages of the monster, Grendel, he presented a moving study of a king whose early years of glory had turned into later ones of dark despair; and then, in the person of the hero, Beowulf, he furnished an absorbing account of the critical actions of a man who when young was proving himself fit to rule his people, the Geats, and when old was doggedly carrying out this duty in the face of death after ruling them with steady success for fifty years. The confidence of this delineation argues for a close rapport between past and present kingship, and in this chapter I want to examine the nature and implications of this accord.

From an institutional point of view kings in *Beowulf* were regularly rulers of peoples (not countries), as conveyed by the generic compound noun *þeodcyning*, 'ruler of the people' (2a and six (or seven) other places), and less often by *fold-* and *leodcyning*, and as expressed by the simplex

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þeoden, 'leader of a people', nearly forty times. Through other expressions, notably 'son of . . .' epithets, they were repeatedly set in the perspective of their kin; Hrothgar, for instance, was called 'bearn/maga/mago/sunu Healfdenes' (or 'Healfdenes sunu') fifteen times. Other terms, most numerous of all, depicted them in their active personal capacity as leaders of their close followers, their comitatus: for example, *dryhten* (formed in the same way as *þeoden)*, 'leader of a *dryht*, a troop of active soldiers', occurs fifteen times, and its compounds, *frea-*, *freo-*, *gum-*, *mon-*, *sige-* and *winedryhten*, were used twenty times between them.

First and foremost in this poem a king in his own person was his people's proud leader in war. His authority depended directly on his individual prowess as a soldier. When Hrothgar, then old, honoured Beowulf with the most valuable gifts possible in reward for the young hero's victory over Grendel, they included the saddle which had been the king's own when he had gone into battle himself in his younger days:

> þæt wæs hildesetl heahcyninges,
> ðonne sweorda gelac sunu Healfdenes
> efnan wolde, – næfre on ore læg
> widcuþes wig, ðonne walu feollon

['that was the high king's battle-seat when the son of Healfdene wanted to perform the play of swords – never did the prowess of the widely famed one lie low in the forefront when the slain fell', 1039–42].

It was as brave leader when swords were wielded that Hrothgar had shown his pride in his lineage and earned his widespread renown.

Warfare was incessant. Dangerous neighbours posed an ever-present threat. Swedes and Geats were represented as perpetually feuding; whenever a king of the one people had the upper hand he raided the territory of the other. A ruler invariably took advantage of whatever political opportunities came his way: aid and comfort were given to any disaffected among the opposition; Hrothgar gained a debt of gratitude when he played the peacemaker by paying compensation after a man of another tribe, Beowulf's father, had killed a man of yet another people (457–72). There were always ancient scores to settle: many a time, when the chance came, a king was driven to take revenge; Hrothgar attempted a pact with old enemies by giving his daughter in marriage to the Heathobard prince, Ingeld, son of a king whom the Danes had killed, but this was seen as a vain hope (2020–31). A king's overriding duty was to

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protect his people against its enemies. Beowulf's first claim to have been a beneficial ruler over fifty years was

næs se folccyning,
ymbsittendra ænig ðara,
þe mec guðwinum gretan dorste,
egesan ðeon

['there has not been the king of a people, any ruler of the neighbouring peoples, who has dared to attack me with war-allies, threaten with terror', 2733b–6a].

All the principal rulers in *Beowulf* were celebrated as 'folces' or 'rices hyrde' ('guardian of the people or kingdom'), while Hrothgar and Beowulf (approaching the end of his long reign) were each honoured as *eþelweard*, 'guardian of the native land'.

The seat of a king's power was his hall. As soon as Hrothgar had established his royal authority by success in war,

Him on mod bearn,
þæt healreced hatan wolde
medoærn micel men gewyrcean
þonne yldo bearn æfre gefrunon

['It came to his mind that he would order a hall to be built, a mead-hall greater than the sons of men had ever heard of', 67b–70].

This *folcstede*, 'place of the people' (76a), was to be an intertribal status symbol: it was to outdo other halls as Hrothgar's reign was to outshine all others. He ordered men from many distant tribes to adorn it; he whose word held sway far and wide named it *Heorot*, 'Hart'. 'Sele hlifade / heah ond horngeap' ('The hall towered, high and wide-gabled', 81b–2a), the most famous building under the skies; 'geatolic ond goldfah' ('splendid and decorated with gold', 308a), it had a radiance which shone over many lands. In it Hrothgar was surrounded by wise counsellors and a well-armed and well-disciplined troop of loyal fighting men. There his gold-adorned queen, Wealhtheow, personified the virtues of an ideal consort which gnomic poetry proclaimed for all time:

[sceal] wif geþeon,
leof mid hyre leodum, leohtmod wesan,
rune healdan, rumheort beon
mearum ond maþmum, meodorædenne
for siðmægen symle æghwær

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eodor æþelinga   ærest gegretan,
forman fulle   to frean hond
ricene geræcan,   ond him ræd witan
boldagendum   bæm ætsomne

['a wife shall thrive beloved among her people; she shall be cheerful, keep secrets, be generous with horses and valuables; at mead-dispensing before the company of warriors she shall at all times and places approach the protector of princes first, quickly pass the first cup to her lord's hand, and know the advice to give him as master and mistress of the house both together', *Maxims I* 84b–92].

There, in his hall, Hrothgar kept a nephew in check and his sons in good company. As gnomic poetry, again, put it:

Geongne æþeling sceolan   gode gesiðas
byldan to beaduwe   and to beahgife

['Good companions shall encourage a young prince to battle and to ring-giving', *Maxims II* 14–15].

There his *scop*, 'poet', played the lyre, telling stories, and sometimes the king himself took the lyre. There comradeship was enjoyed, news exchanged, etiquette observed, visitors were welcomed, memories revived and good food and drink served. Beyond its doors hawks were trained, stags and boars hunted and horses raced.

Above all, the hall was where a king was in union with his close followers, both the *duguð*, the experienced among them, and the *geogoð*, the young. His primary obligation was ceremonially to bestow gifts on his assembled warriors – 'Cyning sceal on healle / beagas dælan' ('A king shall distribute rings in hall', *Maxims II* 28b–9a) – and theirs was to pledge, in the hearing of all, that they would resolutely use in his defence the wargear he gave them. The king on his ceremonial *gifstol*, 'gift-seat', was the dominant image of this vital bond between leader and follower. For the king himself the seat symbolized his very rule: when Heardred, ruler of the Geats, was killed, the narrator could economically express Beowulf's succession by simply stating that the victor 'let ðone bregostol Biowulf healdan / Geatum wealdan' ('let Beowulf hold the princely seat, rule the Geats', 2389–90a). For the follower it represented his membership of a social group which provided for his essential needs. The king's comitatus shared his hearth and his table; they served him as his *þegnas* in various capacities (such as *heal-* or *sele-* and *ombihtþegn*) and the wise among them, the *witan*, those

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with knowledge born of much experience, were his advisors; they were his dear companions in the field, his *eaxlgesteallan*, his 'shoulder-to-shoulder comrades-in-arms'. Emotional ties of kinship and thegnship were strong. When Hrothgar lost his *aldorþegn*, 'head thegn', his *þegnsorg*, 'sorrow for a thegn', knew no bounds. If a thegn lost his friendly patron he became the sort of exile whose troubled sleep is depicted so movingly in *The Wanderer*:

þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten
clyppe ond cysse, ond on cneo lecge
honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær
in geardagum giefstolas breac

['It seems in his mind that he is embracing and kissing his liege lord, and laying hands and head on his knee, as when from time to time in days of old be used to receive gifts from the throne', 41–4].

Material possessions expressed the corporate identity of the group. The adornments of the conquered became the ornaments of the conquerors, emblems of their superiority. The king was both keeper and distributor of his warriors' treasure ('hordweard hæleþa' and 'sinces' or 'beaga brytta'). Wealth gained, guarded and given by the king was the index of his people's well-being. It was integral to their social life:

Gold geriseþ on guman sweorde,
sellic sigesceorp, sinc on cwene

['Gold is fitting on a man's sword, choice ornament of victory, treasure on a woman', *Maxims I* 125–6]

was the conventional wisdom, and Beowulf's victory over Grendel called for 'win of wunderfatum' ('wine from wonderful vessels') in Heorot (*Beowulf* 1162a). The war-equipment conferred and accepted in hall-ceremonial was the touchstone of good discipline. When, the night after Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, the Danes lay down to sleep in Heorot, their care in first disposing their weapons round them, although they believed that their hall was safe again, drew an expression of general approval from the narrator:

Wæs þeaw hyra,
þæt hie oft wæron an wig gearwe,
ge æt ham ge on herge, ge gehwæþer þara
efna swylce mæla, swylce hira mandryhtne
þearf gesealde; wæs seo þeod tilu

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['Their custom was that they were often ready in war, both at home and on campaign, in either case on such occasions as need befell their liege lord; that people was good', 1246b–50].

Failure to live up to the obligation which the arms brought was a betrayal leading inevitably to irreparable disgrace, as, after Beowulf's death, his young kinsman, Wiglaf, scornfully made plain to the picked men who had accompanied their king to the dragon's mound only to desert him in his hour of need.[3]

Both strength of mind and strength of body were essential to the good king in the *Beowulf* poet's view. This was the combination which marked out the young Beowulf as an ideal future ruler in Hrothgar's eyes: 'þu eart mægenes strang, ond on mode frod, / wis wordcwida!' ('You are strong as regards might and experienced in mind, wise as regards words!', 1844–5a), he declared admiringly and went on,

Wen ic talige,
. . .
þæt þe Sæ-Geatas selran næbben
to geceosenne cyning ænigne,
hordweard hæleþa, gyf þu healdan wylt
maga rice

['I consider it likely . . . that the Sea-Geats will have no better king to choose, guardian of the treasure of warriors, if you are willing to rule the kingdom of your relatives', 1845b and 1850–3a].

The bad king squandered his abilities by becoming a violent, treacherous, mean tyrant, such as the Danish king Heremod. By contrast Beowulf, fifty years a king, could look back over his long reign with a clear conscience when near to death (2732b–43a): he had given his people security; he had not put them at risk; he had been a good steward; he had not been violent; he had been a just man of his word; he had been loyal to his kin. 'þæt wæs god cyning!'

Insecurity, however, was endemic in *Beowulf*ian kingship, strong though it might be: any ruler was vulnerable to forces he could not control. Mighty agents from outside society, such as Grendel or the dragon, could destroy his kingdom. Pride could corrupt him within; his abilities, his sway and all that he had came from God, a mightier ruler than he

[3] See below, pp. 415–16.

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(1724b–61a). An inevitability in events had to be faced too – *wyrd*, which no man, only God, could control (477b–9 and 1056–7a). For King Beowulf on the dragon's mound *wyrd* meant his death (2419b–24). Spells could intervene unpredictably: the treasure in the dragon's mound paid for by King Beowulf's life was subject to one which God alone could vary (3069–75). Death was a journey for the spirit (2819b–20) which King Beowulf, for his part, did not relish (2419b–24). What survived was reputation. King Beowulf on the point of dying gave instructions for the building of a memorial mound in a prominent position on the sea coast to give his posthumous fame a local habitation and a name (2802–8).

The kingship in Anglo-Saxon practice itself was certainly of the same general character as that depicted in *Beowulf* in being fundamentally a personal leadership based on pedigree and exercised over a territorial people. This personal element would have gone right back to the farming communities newly settled in the river valleys of England in the fifth and sixth centuries: these freshly formed groups would have faced problems of security, trade and internal order in unfamiliar surroundings and to tackle them would naturally have turned for leadership to those capable of giving it. Those strongest in mind and body would have been at a premium then just as they were in the poetry; and, given the normal expectation of 'like father like son', it would not have been long before an aristocracy was reestablished in these settlement, and immediately post-settlement, conditions. The significance of poetry's patronymics would have been experienced with pristine force. New dynasties were being born out of the shake-up of tribal groupings caused by migration. The most common designation for an emergent ruler, *cyning*, related him to his kin. Royal status was being rebuilt on its general foundations. The close identity of leader and dynasty had begun again in circumstances which made it particularly vital. And so too had the root connection between personal authority and territory which was expressed in the poetic epithet *eþelweard*, 'guardian of the native land'. For the early Anglo-Saxon settlers nothing could have captured the essence of their experience of personal leadership more completely than the poetic term *þeodcyning* (7× in *Beowulf*[4]) signifying a man of a certain stock ruling over the people holding a certain territory. Nor did corporate self-awareness cease to be focused on the person of the king, as communities, at first local, became regional, and

[4] 8× if the usual amendment is made at 3086a.

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then, by about the second half of the ninth century, partly under ecclesiastical influence and partly under threat from Danish invaders, operated countrywide. Anglo-Saxon society never lost a prevailing sense that its well-being depended directly on the deeds of the king.[5]

It was inherent in Anglo-Saxon practice too that the battlefield and the court were the vital twin settings for the operation of personal rule. King Alfred's reign in the late ninth century illustrates both these working conditions very clearly. There could be no more striking proof of a people's total reliance on their king's performance against their enemies in battle than Alfred's stubborn, stage-by-stage, ultimately successful, fight for survival against the Danes. And Bishop Asser's Latin *Life* of this king vividly reveals how much the business of Alfred's kingdom centred on his person at his peripatetic court.[6] He was involved in an endless round of 'gently instructing, cajoling, urging, commanding' and, when required, 'sharply chastising .. his bishops and ealdormen and nobles, and his thegns most dear to him, and reeves as well' (91); the king himself, Asser reports, sat at judicial hearings for the benefit of high and low and looked into many judgements passed in his absence, taking them up with those responsible where required, 'either in person or through one of his other trusted men' (106); he reorganized the attendance of his thegns at court by arranging them in three groups, each serving there for a month at a time in rotation; he welcomed visitors (as Hrothgar did Beowulf) 'of all races, showing immense and incomparable kindness and generosity to all men, as well as to the investigation of things unknown' (76), and receiving information, messages and gifts from places as distant as Jerusalem (91).

Planned payment for services rendered was a mainstay of Alfred's court, with the dues to his fighting men, as in tradition, having priority. He paid out the first sixth of his revenues every year to them 'and likewise to his noble thegns who lived at the royal court in turns, serving him in various capacities' (100). To his craftsmen, 'who were skilled in every earthly craft' (101), he paid out no less than another sixth. Like Hrothgar when building Heorot, he 'assembled and commissioned [them] in almost countless quantity from many races' (*ibid.*). He was a great builder, ordering new

[5] For a very helpful general account of the formation of Anglo-Saxon kingship, see Loyn, *The Governance of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 3–29.

[6] For an excellent translation of and commentary on Asser's *Life*, see *Alfred the Great*, trans. Keynes and Lapidge. The bracketed numbers below refer to the sections of this translation.

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