

Beowulf and the *Beowulf* MS informal

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ENGL 3335

Difficulties with *Beowulf* - what we don't know

- Date - 8th to 11th centuries have been proposed
 - Michael Lapidge, “The Archetype of *Beowulf*” in *ASE* 29
 - Richard North, *The Origins of Beowulf* (Oxford UP, 2007)
- Language - West Saxon, Mercian, Northumbrian, Anglian forms, both early and late - date and place obscured
- Provenance - a variety of owners - if we don't know who had it or where it was, how do we know anything about the author, the audience, etc?
- Author - Lay? clerical? one? two? oral traditional? composite poem?
 - Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*
- Audience - lay? clerical? literate? oral?

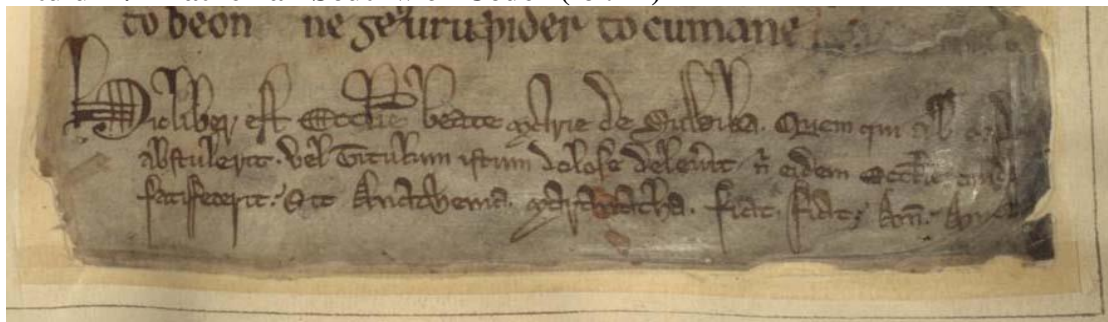
London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv formal

- Part of library of Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1631)
 - Largest personal library of medieval manuscripts in England - seized by British government in 1630 and returned to his heirs after his death
 - donated to the British Museum by the Cotton family in 1700
- 17th century binder had bound two medieval manuscripts together into one book

The Southwick Codex

- Twelfth-century MS from a monastery at Southwick
- Philosophical and religious texts
 - *Soliloquies of St. Augustine* - an internal dialogue on the nature of the soul
 - fragmentary *Gospel of Nicodemus* - apocryphal gospel most famous for the tradition of the Harrowing of Hell
 - *Debate of Solomon and Saturn* - a dialogue between two figures representing Christianity and paganism in the form of a riddle game
 - fragmentary *Life of St. Quintin* - Roman martyr tortured and killed for preaching in Gaul

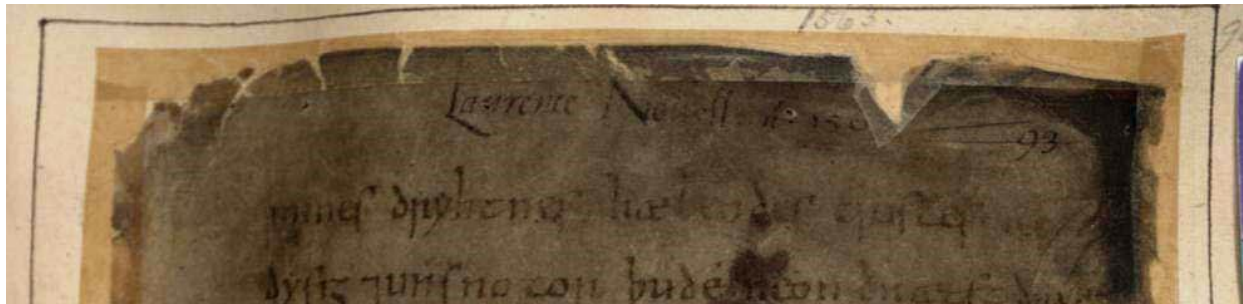
Titulum / Anathema - Southwick Codex (fol. 2r)



Hic liber est Ecclesie beate Marie de Suwika. Quem qui ab eadem abstulerit. Vel Titulum istum dolose deleuerit nisi eidem Ecclesie condigne satisfecerit. Sit Anathema. Maranatha. Fiat. Fiat. Amen. Amen.

This book is of the Church of St. Mary in Southwick. Whoever removes it from there or fraudulently erases this legal notice, unless he suitably does penance / makes satisfaction to the church, let him be anathema from the Lord. Let it be so, let it be so. Amen, amen.

The Nowell Codex



- “Laurence Nowell, 1563” - date of ownership on 93v?
- Dates: 1515-1571
- Secretary to Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Secretary of State to Queen Elizabeth I, MP for Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire, and Lord High Treasurer
 - First cousin was also named “Lawrence” - dean of Lichfield
- Author of *Vocabularium Saxonicum*, the first A-S dictionary
- Cartographer - pocket map of England, survey of Irish east coast
 - Started an atlas of England, but never completed it
- Friend of William Lambarde, first editor of A-S law codes (*Archaionomia*)

The Nowell Codex

- Probably first decade of eleventh century (David Dumville), though possibly as late as 1016 or so (Kevin Kiernan)
- Two scribes - handwriting changes at l. 1939, f. 172v
- Five texts that deal with monsters or humans acting monstrously
 - Fragmentary *passio* of St. Christopher - the torture and death scene, not his acts
 - *Wonders of the East* - marvels supposedly found in India - illustrated
 - two gatherings had been transposed in binding and not fixed until 19th century
 - *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* - purports to be a letter that Alexander the Great sent home describing his battles with monsters and the marvels he sees in India
 - *Beowulf* - one leaf had fallen out in copying and wasn't properly placed until 19th century
 - fragmentary *Judith* - deuterocanonical text about a Jewish woman who helps her town of Bethulia withstand the Assyrians by tricking and beheading Holofernes
- *Judith* in same writing as second scribe of *Beowulf*, added later

The Cottonian Fire

- BL had stored the Cottonian collection in Ashburnham House
- 10/23/1731 - the building caught fire
- many manuscripts were saved, but a number were destroyed, some damaged

- *Beowulf* MS singed around the edges; began a process of decay and loss of letters
- beginning in 1845, conservators pasted the MS into a paper frame to prevent further loss
 - hid many letters around the edges
 - sacrificed original binding and threads to do so

How we know about the poem

- George Hickes, 1703-05, wrote an Old English grammar and dictionary; consulted the MS
- Humphrey Wanley catalogued the BL texts and described contents of poem in 1705; he noted *Beowulf* as poem about a Dane, not a Geat
- 1787 - Grimur Thorkelin, a Danish scholar, saw Wanley's description and, being interested in Danish history, had a scribe copy it (A); later came over to England and transcribed the poem himself (B)
 - Many of the lost letters from the edges we know only from the transcripts
 - One leaf fell out and was misplaced - causes some confusion in numbering
- Thorkelin published the first edition of *Beowulf* in 1815

Historical Context of the MS

- Ker: "s. x/xi", which often is interpreted to mean the year 1000 +/- 25 years
- Dumville - first decade of 11th century
- Kiernan - up to about 1016 or so

The Benedictine Reform

- Attempt to get ownership/governance of monasteries out of the hands of local landowners and to replace secular canons with Benedictine monks
- Started on the continent, esp. at Cluny and Fleury, early in the tenth century - Bishops Æthelwold, Oswald, and Dunstan trained overseas and brought reforms to England
- Started with replacement of canons at the Old Minster in Winchester in 964 and continued through the reign of King Edgar (959-75)

Christianity in Beowulf

- Danes who fall back into Germanic pagan worship on Grendel's assault
- Beowulf's trust in God to save him during his battles
- The sword hilt that prompts Hrothgar's "sermon" - origin of feud between God and the giants
- Frequent gnomic passages praising God's rule of the world
 - Issues important in the Benedictine Reform - royal support for the reformers, and reassertion of civil/ecclesiastical hierarchy in the face of the potential loss of the English throne

The Vikings

- Edgar had been able to maintain an uneasy peace with the Vikings in the Danelaw



Succession and Reaction

- 975 - Edgar dies suddenly
 - Succession disputed between his sons Edward and Æthelred - divides bishops
 - Edward becomes king, but is murdered in 978 - Æthelred's mother Æthelthryth may have been involved in the plot
 - Æthelred becomes king in 978
- Legal challenges and some violence against reformed monasteries
 - *Liber Eliensis* - history of Ely - several lawsuits claiming that Edgar and Æthelwold had violated landowners' hereditary rights
 - Ælfhere of Mercia - actually burns down three monasteries - opposes reforms until his death in 983

Fratricide

- Cain and Abel references - Grendel's lineage
- Deaths or fights within families - Hrothgar's heirs, Hrethel's sons, Onela's nephews, Beowulf's potential "sin" at the end
 - Death of Edward "the Martyr," brother of Æthelred

Æthelred Unræd

- Coinciding with or because of the succession instability, Viking raiding picks up in the latter part of the 10th century - new arrivals from Scandinavia

- Æthelred has some early successes, but can't hold the Vikings back - raiding and tribute-taking increases
- Æthelred orders St. Brice's Day massacre in 1002 - kills traders and merchants and some Danish hostages, including Gunnhild, King Swein's sister
- Raiding picks up very heavily after this atrocity, which leads to a loss of confidence in Æthelred
 - Unræd = "ill-advised," not "Unready"

Æthelred, Swein, and Cnut

- 1013 - Æthelred defeated and driven into exile in Normandy
 - Swein Forkbeard is declared Danish king, but dies shortly after
 - His son Cnut (Knute, Canute) succeeds but is driven out in 1014
- 1014 - Æthelred returns; fights against Cnut's renewed invasion for two more years, but dies in April 1016
 - His son Edmund by his first wife succeeds, is able to fight Cnut to a standstill
 - Cnut and Edmund divide England; whoever dies first cedes his land to the other
 - Edmund dies seven months later; Cnut becomes king of England

The Other in *Beowulf*

- Grendel - lineage from Cain
- Grendel's mother - takes on role of avenger; inversion of the hall
- Mistrust between Danes and Geats, especially in the Unferth episode
 - Early medieval English and Vikings had a common cultural background, and some Danes had lived in the island for years; understandably similar, yet threatening
 - Fear of the Danes manifests itself as fear of the monstrous

Æthelred, Emma, and Cnut

- Æthelred had married Emma of Normandy, who had 2 sons by him - made a pre-nup that only "a child of her body" would succeed to the throne
 - was technically broken when Æthelred died and Edmund Ironside became king, but her son Edward (the Confessor) eventually succeeds in 1042
- With Edmund's death and crowning of Cnut, Emma marries Cnut - same pre-nup
 - they have Hardacnut in 1018
 - When Cnut dies in 1035, Harold, his son by his first wife, becomes king; dies 1040
 - Hardacnut succeeds, but dies in 1042; Edward succeeds, and a descendant of Alfred is back on the throne

Lineage in *Beowulf*

- Realizing that there is a question about who Healfdene's daughter marries, lineage is the whole issue for the first 85 lines of the poem - Scyld becoming a strong king and establishing a strong line
- Wealhtheow concerned for succession of Hrethric and Hrothmund, her sons by Hrothgar, and her nephew Hrothulf
- The story of Beowulf's succession to the Geatish throne
- Beowulf dies childless - must name Wiglaf to succeed
 - Whether consciously chosen or not, the poem reflects the anxieties that succession

posed in England

End of a line

- Lay of the Last Survivor - sung over the treasure of a lost nation buried in the cave
- The failure of Beowulf's men to aid him
- Beowulf's lack of children - he and Wiglaf are the last of the Wægmundings
 - The end of Alfred's descendants on the throne of England; fear of a Viking king and foreign conquest

Beowulf and Boethius

- *Wyrð* - 'fate', but more like 'the course of events'
 - *weorðan, wearð, wurdon, worden* - to be, become, happen
 - Is fate fully fixed, or does it depend on what one does?
- *Fæge* - doomed, fated; 'fey' in Tolkien