

**The Beowulf Manuscript**  
**Dr. Brian McFadden**  
**British Literature I**  
**ENGL 2323**

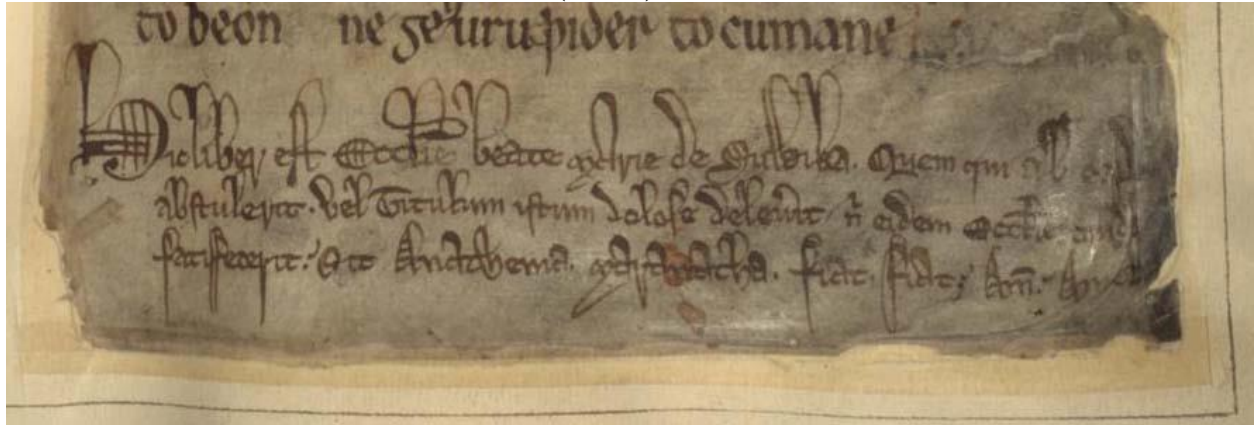
**The Beowulf MS – Two for the name of one**

- London, BL, Cotton Vitellius A.xv
- A composite manuscript - one volume bound in 17c from a tenth- and a twelfth-century manuscript
- Ended up in collection of Robert Bruce Cotton (1571-1631), whose family donated it to the British Museum (BL is now a separate unit)

**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.

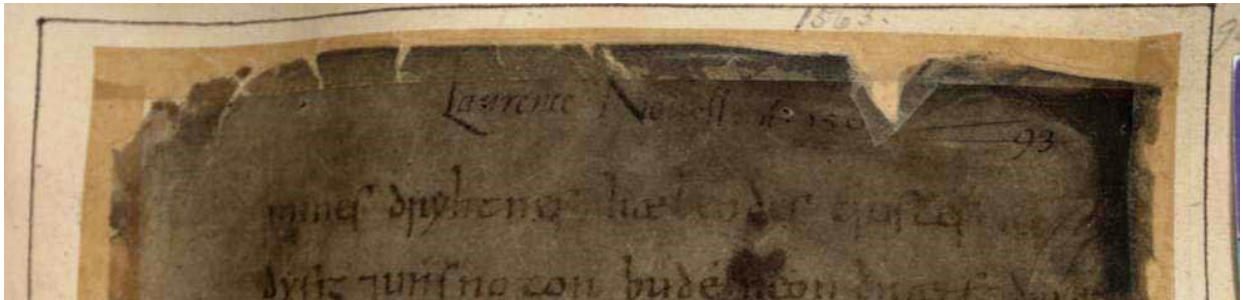
**The Nowell Codex**

- 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
  - MS damaged in fire at Ashburnham House (British Museum library building) October 23, 1731 – singed around the edges, and bits continued to flake off until conserved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

### 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 Old English 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 EMedE law codes (*Archaionomia*)

### How we know about the poem

- George Hickes, 1703-05, wrote an OE 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

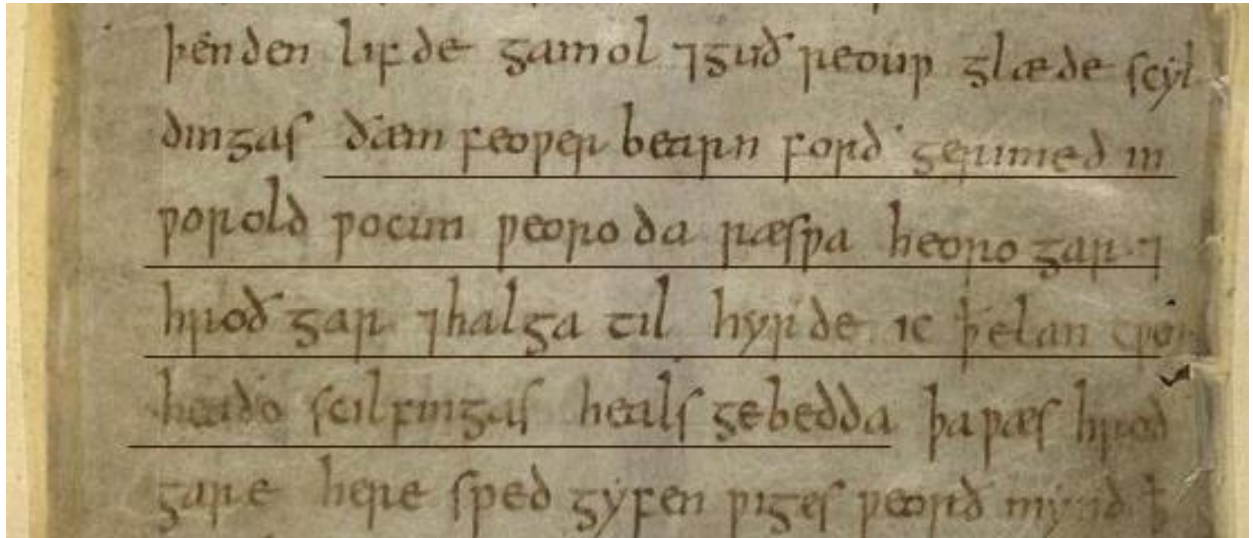
### **Difficulties with Beowulf - what we don't know**

- Date - 8th to 11th centuries have been proposed
  - Michael Lapidge, “The Archetype of Beowulf” in *ASE* 29
  - Sam Newton, *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia*
  - 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?

### **The Problem with Editions and Translations**

- Medieval scribes made mistakes and intentional changes
  - What's on the page may not be author's intent - print bias
  - O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song* - key text in this regard
- Editors make changes too - big debates on when to emend the text and when to go with the MS
  - all reasons for emendation have underlying assumptions that may or may not be true
- Translators rarely work from the MS - depend on editions
  - Editors' work dictates what the translator does
  - 200 years of scholarship on the poem affects translators
- Is there really such a thing as “the” text of *Beowulf*?
- Are we really reading a medieval text or are we reading a modern text that reflects centuries of change?

## The Children of Healfdene



- f. 130r -ðæm feower bearn forð gerimed in worold wocun weoroda ræswa heoro gar 7 hroð gar 7 halga til hyrde ic þæt elan cwen heaðo scilfingas heals gebedda ... to whom four children [came] forth in order, woke in the world, leader of the host, Heorogar and Hrothgar and the good Halga; I have heard that [?was ?to ?On] elan queen of the Battle-Scylfings, a dear bed companion.

## The Children of Healfdene - Thorpe

MS: ðæm feower bearn forð gerimed in worold wocun weoroda ræswa heoro gar 7 hroð gar 7 halga til hyrde ic þæt elan cwen heaðo scilfingas heals gebedda

1) ðæm feower bearn  
forð-gerimed  
in world woc<sup>on</sup>,  
weoroda ræs<sup>w</sup>an,  
Heorogar ond Hro<sup>þ</sup>gar  
ond Halga til  
\*\*\*

hyrde ic þæt Elan cwen  
Heaðo-Scylfing<sup>e</sup>s healsgeb<sup>e</sup>dda.  
\*\*\*

To him [Healfdene] four children  
brought forth in order  
awoke in the world,  
leaders to the people,  
Heorogar ond Hrothgar  
and Halga the good  
\*\*\*

I heard that Elan the queen [was]  
the dear bed-companion of the Battle-Swede.  
\*\*\*

(*The Anglo-Saxon Poems Beowulf, The Scop or Gleeman's Song, and The Fight at Finnesburg*, ed. Benjamin Thorpe, 1875)

## The Children of Healfdene - Dobbie

MS: ðæm feower bearn forð gerimed in worold wocun weoroda ræswa heoro gar 7 hroð gar 7 halga til hyrde ic þæt elan cwen heaðo scilfingas heals gebedda

ðæm feower bearn      forð gerimed  
worold wocun,      weoroda ræs<sup>w</sup>an,  
Heorogar ond Hroðgar      ond Halga til;  
hyrde ic þæt \*\*\*      <sup>was Onelan</sup> cwen,  
Heaðoscilfingas      healsgeb<sup>e</sup>dda.

To him four children brought forth in order in  
woke in the world, leaders to the people,  
Heorogar and Hrothgar and Halga the good;  
I have heard that \*\*\* was queen to Onela,  
the dear bed-companion of the Battle-Swede.

(*Beowulf and Judith*, ed. E.V.K. Dobbie, ASPR 4, 1953)

### The Children of Healfdene - Klaeber

MS: ðæm feower bearn forð gerimed in worold wocun weoroda ræswa heoro gar 7 hroð gar 7 halga til hyrde ic þæt elan cwen heaðo scilfingas heals gebedda

Ðæm feower bearn	forð gerimed	To him four children brought forth in order
in worold wocun,	weoroda ræswa[n],	awoke in the world, leaders of the people,
Heorogar ond Hroðgar	ond Halga til,	Heorogar and Hrothgar and Halga the good;
hyrde ic þæt [.....	wæs On]elan cwen,	I heard that ___ was the queen of Onela,
Heaðo-Scilfingas	healsgebodda.	the dear bed-companion of the Battle-Swede.

(*Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Fr. Klaeber, 1950)

### The Children of Healfdene - Sedgefield

MS: ðæm feower bearn forð gerimed in worold wocun weoroda ræswa heoro gar 7 hroð gar 7 halga til hyrde ic þæt elan cwen heaðo scilfingas heals gebedda

Ðæm feower bearn	forð gerimed	To him, <b>the leader to the people</b> , four children
in worold wocun,	weoroda ræswa,	brought forth in order woke in the world,
Heorogar ond Hroðgar	ond Halga til;	Heorogar and Hrothgar and Halga the good;
hyrde ic þæt ( <b>Sigeneow</b>	<b>wæs Sæwe</b> )lan cwen,	I have heard that Signy was the queen of Sævila,
Heaðo-Scilfingas	healsgebodda.	the dear bed-companion of the Battle- Swede.

(*Beowulf*, ed. W.J. Sedgefield, 1913)

Source: *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* - Haldan (Beowulf's Healfdene) has a daughter named Signy who was married to Sævil - noted by Friedrich Kluge and followed by Sedgefield

### The Children of Healfdene - Magoun

MS: ðæm feower bearn forð gerimed in worold wocun weoroda ræswa heoro gar 7 hroð gar 7 halga til hyrde ic þæt elan cwen heaðo scilfingas heals gebedda

Ðæm feower bearn	forþ-gerimed	To him four children brought forth in order in
worold wocon:	weoroda ræswan,	were born in the world: leaders of the people,
Heoru-gar ond Hroþ-gar	and Halga til;	Heorugar and Hrothgar and Halga the good;
hierde ic þæt [Yrse wæs An]	elan cwen,	I heard that Yrse was the queen of Anela,
Heaðu-Scielfingas	heals-gebodda.	the dear bed-companion of the Battle-Swede.

(*Beowulf and Judith*, ed. F.P. Magoun, rev. Jess Bessinger, 1966)

Source: Ursa / Yrse / Ursula is the mother of Hrolf (Beowulf's Hrothulf) in *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*.

### Summary - History, MS, and Text

- Whenever *Beowulf* was written - 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th century - it was copied into this MS in the early eleventh

- Why would people commit time, effort, resources to copy these poems in this MS at this time?
- These texts all deal with the Other (monsters, invaders), which reflects the anxiety that the English felt over foreign-inspired reforms, foreign invaders, and succession issues
- As members of a print culture, we have certain expectations of texts; in medieval studies, we have to be aware of a work's context in its manuscript