BEOWULF AND CELTIC TRADITION

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The author traces and evaluates the possible influences of Celtic tradition on the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*. He discusses theories of the origins of the poem, draws parallels between elements in *Beowulf* and in Celtic literary tradition, and suggests that the central plot of the poem, the conflict with Grendel and his mother, is "fundamentally indebted to Celtic folktale elements." The study is well documented and rich in references to Celtic literature, legend, and folklore.

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PREFACE

This study of Celtic parallels and analogues to and possible source material of a considerable number of elements in *Beowulf* got its initial impetus many years ago in the course of a scrutiny of a number of puzzles and cruces in the Anglo-Saxon epic, relating mainly to seemingly preternatural elements such as the hero's superhuman, physiologically impossible swimming and diving exploits. Ancient Irish literary tradition appeared to provide striking enough parallels for the matter to demand closer investigation. It was only then that I fully familiarized myself with what may be called the Celtic case for *Beowulf*, a varied train of theorization undeservedly, I now think, paid relatively little attention by the main thrust of *Beowulf* scholarship of recent decades. I believe that it is time to take a long, close look at evidence of Celtic content and influence in the epic, the extent of which may well remain in dispute for some time but about whose presence there can now hardly be any doubt.

Some critics despaired long ago of arriving at a firm solution of the vexed problem of the origin of the story of Grendel and his mother on the basis of internal evidence; there was in the 1930s talk of a moratorium on this question, which seemed to many beyond a positive answer. In the last few decades numerous scholars have, while for the most part accepting the claim of basic Scandinavian origin of the Grendel adventure—a theory not backed by convincing evidence—often endeavoured to explain the manifold puzzles and anomalies in this part of the epic largely on the basis of modern realism. The *Beowulf* poet has been increasingly viewed as a sophisticated "maker" in full command of his material, almost always able to mould it according to a ra-

tionally motivated literary pattern, or even as the inventor of most of it. The hero's motivation in some situations has been subjected to a psychoanalysis that at times almost seems to credit him with actual physical existence. It is doubtless a tribute to the literary power of the poet to make his hero walk right out of the written page into the twentieth-century critic's study, but it appears to me that regardless of the merits or shortcomings of such an approach there are other avenues to pursue in a quest intended to decipher the veiled clues to the origin and genesis of the plot of the Grendel story of the epic. It seems to me that there is no need to despair of explaining some of the hitherto baffling elements or try to account for them with far-fetched speculation if the possibility of the influence of ancient Celtic literary and folklore tradition is left open. It is the intention of this work to show that the mosaic of the poem shows enough marks of Celtic influence not only to render some of the puzzling elements explicable—on the basis of such indebtedness rather than modern rationalization—but also to explain how the essential plot of the major part of the epic, the struggle against Grendel and his mother, could have grown out of Celtic folktale.

In this latter connection I propose to deal with questions revolving around the background of the basic plot of the story. Implicit in this approach is the fact that I have no theory I care to articulate as to the nature of the genesis of the epic in its entirety; my objective is limited. And I have no wish to tackle on a theoretical basis that thorniest of questions referred to above—to what extent was the *Beowulf* poet an independent "maker"? My argument will, however, I hope, make it amply clear that I think he was, at least in the Grendel part of the poem, deeply and widely indebted to material such as folktales and a body of more or less popular tradition, folkloric, historical, and other. I will voice my suggestion as to the likely nature of the genesis of the basic plot of the Grendel conflict largely as a corollary, though a vital one, of the essential objective of this work, which is to trace and attempt to evaluate the possible influences of Celtic tradition on *Beowulf*—parallels, analogues, possible inspirational or source material, elements that may, directly or indirectly, have influenced the creation of the epic.

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I

REVIEW OF THE CASE FOR CELTIC INFLUENCE IN *BEOWULF*

Alleged discoveries of Celtic elements and influences in *Beowulf* constitute largely a phenomenon of this century. When scholars previously pointed out some parallel in Celtic literature or tradition to matter in the Anglo-Saxon epic, they tended to avoid firm conclusions as to any definite connection. Thus, for example, W. P. Ker remarks that the giant-wrought sword in Grendel's underwater dwelling reminds one of "the glaives of light" kept by the "gyre carlines" in West Highland tales,[1] but stops short of suggesting a direct link. Sophus Bugge[2] drew attention to elements in *Beowulf* that struck him as being strongly reminiscent of Celtic literature and tradition. Thus the elegiac strains in the second structural part of the epic remind him of similar notes in Celtic folk-literature of past ages. He also notes the similarity between the descent from Cain of the Grendel brood and the origin of monstrous broods in the Irish *Lebor na hUidre*. Yet Bugge does not press home any claim of Celtic influence on *Beowulf* in these matters; he merely directs a question to "experts in Middle Celtic literature" as to whether the influ-

[1] W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (London and New York, 1897), p. 199.

[2] Sophus Bugge, "Studien über das Beowulfepos," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, XII (1887), 77.

ence of this literature may not be discernible. Ludwig Laistner,[3] Stopford Brooke,[4] and Albert Cook[5] noted the similarity of the Irish and Scottish "Hand and Child" folktale[6] to the framework of the Grendel story in *Beowulf*, Brooke wondering "if the Grendel tale may not be a Celtic story, which in very ancient times became Teutonic," and Cook stating, "It is much to be desired that Celtic scholars shall assist in elucidating the relationship between the two stories."

The first significant suggestion of indebtedness of the Anglo-Saxon epic to Celtic literary and mythic tradition was made by Max Deutschbein,[7] who tried to make a case for some sort of connection between *Beowulf* and *Fled Bricrend*, pointing out a number of parallels. While, as Oscar Olson[8] plausibly argued, these appear to be of too slight and superficial an order to warrant a claim of definite connection, Deutschbein's appreciation of the affinity with Irish literature and tradition of certain elements of the Grendel story and of the cultural ties between Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England in the seventh and eighth centuries is nevertheless a harbinger of similar conclusions reached by subsequent scholars.

C. W. von Sydow considerably furthered the case for deep-rooted Celtic influence in the Grendel story in *Beowulf*.

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[3] Ludwig Laistner, *Das Rätsel der Sphinx. Grundzüge einer Mythengeschichte* (Berlin, 1889), II, 25.

[4] Stopford A. Brooke, *History of Early English Literature* (London, 1892), I, 120.

[5] Albert Cook, "An Irish Parallel to the Beowulf Story," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, CIII (1899), 154-56.

[6] In this tale a long demonic arm reaches in through the chimney or smoke-hole to abduct a prince's newborn children. A hero, generally with some comrades, watches over one such infant and he or a companion tears or hews off the intruding arm, but the other arm normally catches the hero off guard and abducts the child, who is subsequently, together with the previously kidnapped children, recovered from the haunt, mostly in a water setting, of the wounded monster, to which this creature is tracked and where he is slain.

[7] Max Deutschbein, "Die sagenhistorischen und literarischen Grundlagen des Beowulfepos," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, I (1909), 103-19.

[8] Oscar Olson, "Beowulf and the Feast of Bricriu," *Modern Philology*, XI (1914), 407-27.

He attacked Friedrich Panzer's then widely credited thesis of the derivation of this story from the folktale of the Bear's Son[9] and suggested instead central indebtedness to the widespread Celtic folktale of the demonic arm that reaches into a dwelling to seize humans—of which the tale of "The Hand and the Child" is the most common and familiar version.[10] Von Sydow buttresses his theory of the indebtedness of the epic to Celtic popular tradition by pointing to some other elements in *Beowulf* as instances of parallelism: the insolence of Unferð, paralleled by the behaviour towards strangers of Conan Mael in the Finn cycle; the role of multitudes of sea-monsters.[11]

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[9] Friedrich Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagengeschichte*, I: *Beowulf* (München, 1910), pp. 273f. Within the representative and geographically relevant story-pattern of this widespread and varied folktale, the hero, an immensely strong youth, typically if not always of part bear parentage or raised by bears, guards with some companions, sometimes his elder brothers, a dwelling (at times a castle) haunted by a malicious supernatural creature. They take turns watching it, and while his companions come to grief, being severely manhandled by the demon, the hitherto unprized youth, whose turn comes last, overcomes the assailant, who flees wounded to his subterranean domain. The intrepid youngster follows him there, being usually lowered by a rope through a well or some other hole in the earth, and generally slays him, sometimes with a magic sword he finds in the underworld. Often he similarly kills some other supernatural foe or foes there. At times he encounters a demonic female, sometimes represented as the mother of his enemy; in some rare instances she is killed by the hero. He also frees in the underworld some (usually three) captive princesses and has them pulled up to the world above by his companions with the rope by which he descended. Coveting the girls, his treacherous comrades try to prevent his return by cutting the line, but he manages to make his way up and thwart their designs. The hero then punishes the traitors and weds one of the princesses.

While more recent folklorists prefer to call this folktale "The Three Stolen Princesses," classified by Aarne as Type 301, it would seem more appropriate in a consideration involving analogy and parallelism with *Beowulf* to use the name "The Bear's Son," employed by Panzer and other earlier *Beowulf* scholars cited in this work and thus more easily and conveniently applied in this connection.

[10] C. W. von Sydow, "Irisches in Beowulf," *Versammlung deutscher Philologen und Schulmänner* (Marburg, 1913), pp. 177-80.

[11] Von Sydow also points to the repeated usage in *Beowulf* of the numbers fifteen and thirty, highly popular in Irish—as distinct from Germanic—tradition.

Von Sydow argued[12] that Panzer's method of showing parallels to elements of *Beowulf* in geographically widely-scattered variants of the Bear's Son folktale is unreliable, especially since most of the resemblances noted involve motifs common in folklore, likely to be applied here and there on account of some degree of adaptability. He points to a number of basic dissimilarities between the folktale and the epic and concludes that there is no solid reason to assume a direct connection between the Grendel story and the tale: the resemblance is of an incidental nature and has arisen through the fact that basic themes of a degree of similarity have developed in a somewhat parallel fashion. Von Sydow admits that rejection of Panzer's theory eliminates convenient explanations of some problems and puzzles in *Beowulf*, such as those of the very name of the hero, his alleged lack of reputation in youth, and his delay in coming to grips with Grendel—explanations that had helped make Panzer's theory palatable to *Beowulf* scholars. He suggests, however, that explanation on such grounds is far from imperative.[13]

Some of von Sydow's arguments concerning Panzer's thesis are, given the complex nature of the subject, of course open to dispute and the validity of his attempted refutation of it cannot be fully evaluated without an elaborate review of arguments on both sides, for which there is hardly justification here, especially since Panzer's theory no longer looms nearly as significant as it once did; its shortcomings have been widely recognized. I shall, however, return to it in connection with some of its notable aspects.[14] Suffice it here to conclude that von Sydow's arguments pointed to evident cracks in the veneer of Panzer's case and rightly drew attention to another folktale as a possible source of the Grendel

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[12] "Beowulf och Bjarke," *Studier i Nordisk Filologi*, XIV, no. 3 (1923), 23ff.

[13] The name Beowulf, von Sydow suggests, is probably an adaptation of an actual Nordic hero name, names of this type being common in Nordic countries in ancient times; a hero's lack of reputation in youth is a common folklore motif; the account of the slaying of Hondscioh is motivated by the poet's desire to make for visualization of Grendel's grisly atrocities and to heighten, by contrast effect, the glory of Beowulf's feat.

[14] See pp. 87f.

story in *Beowulf*.[15] In short, von Sydow made a vitally significant contribution to the "Celtic case" for the Anglo-Saxon epic.

Heinz Dehmer[16] is the next significant advocate of the indebtedness of *Beowulf* to Celtic folktale tradition. He endeavours to show that, while the motif of the defence of the haunted dwelling is a well-nigh universal one, the nature of the struggle with Grendel marks it as belonging to a distinct "Irish type," whose central characteristic is the struggle with the monstrous arm, as opposed, for example, to the all-round grapple of Grettir with the troll-woman at Sandhaugar and with the revenant Glám. As Dehmer puts it, the kernel motif of the Irish type is "the demonic arm which reaches out to seize humans but is seized by the superior hero and after a struggle torn off or cut off."[17] Dehmer cites[18] more than a dozen instances of the occurrence of this motif in ancient and modern Irish (and related) folktales, mostly manifesting itself in stories of the "Hand and Child" variety,[19] but at times lacking the element of child-theft. In the former instances the monster is for the most part pursued to his dwelling in the sea (on a rock or island) and slain; the abducted children are recovered there. The sex of the demon is sometimes male, at other times unspecified, and in some instances female; in one version[20] the mother of the frustrated and mutilated demon comes to carry off the severed arm as well as the child.[21] In a couple of variants the demon's mother is also killed in the

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[15] A number of variants of this folktale had earlier been noted and summarized by G. L. Kittredge ("Arthur and Gorlagon," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, VIII [1906], 227f.), who remains, however, non-committal as to any connection with the Grendel story in *Beowulf*.

[16] Heinz Dehmer, "Die Grendelkämpfe Beowulfs im Lichte moderner Märchenforschung," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, XVI (1928), 202-18.

[17] Ibid., 207.

[18] Ibid., 208-12.

[19] Dehmer appears to be unacquainted with Kittredge's previously published list, although some of the tales he cites are the same.

[20] William Larminie, *West Irish Folk-Tales* (London, 1893), pp. 21f.

[21] Dehmer considers this as a striking parallel to Grendel's Mother's revenge foray.

insular dwelling; in one of these[22] she, the wife of the wounded demon and mother of six giants who are in turn slain, is described as a fearsome hag; she attacks the heroes and is killed with a magic sword.[23]

Dehmer also points[24] to other traits of resemblance between the Grendel story and elements found in the Celtic tales he cites, some of the most significant being the following (the number indicating in how many of the latter the element in question occurs): the monster is a demon of the sea (7); all previous watching has been futile—in one instance the watchers have been killed (4); the hero does not watch alone but is accompanied by comrades (4); the hero is superior to the demon (12); the castle resounds and terror overcomes its dwellers (2); the demon screams horribly (4); general scrutiny of the severed arm (1); preliminary pursuit (without fighting) of demon (2); revenge by demon's mother (2).

Dehmer also points[25] to similarities between the stories he cites and Beowulf's aquatic foray against Grendel's Mother.[26] These include finding the mutilated monster in his dwelling (4) and the sea turning red from blood (1). Like von Sydow, Dehmer also points to the decapitation of the dead Grendel and the carrying of his head in triumph as a common and characteristic Irish motif.

Undeniably interesting is also Donald A. Mackenzie's suggestion of a few years later that a folktale from the Isle of Skye provides a striking parallel to the Grendel story in *Beowulf*.[27] Mackenzie theorizes that it reflects the original British source of the story of the monster and his mother in the Anglo-Saxon epic. In the tale of *Finlay the Changeling* the hero slays a giant, then his father and mother, all of whom attack him in turn in his dwelling. The struggle with "the

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[22] Adeline Rittershaus, *Die neuisländischen Volksmärchen* (Halle, 1902), p. 180.

[23] Cf. the story of the Tuairisgeal, p. 37.

[24] Dehmer, 213.

[25] Ibid., 216.

[26] The affinity of this foray to Celtic tradition will be dealt with in Chapter VIII.

[27] Donald A. Mackenzie, *Scottish Folk-lore and Folk Life* (London and Glasgow, 1935), pp. 119ff.

fierce grey hag," the female monster with great tusks, is the most physical and perilous, involving fierce grappling—the male giants are quickly despatched by shooting; she is clearly the climactic adversary. The hero also obtains in the cave-dwelling of the giants a golden sword which, in the words of the vanquished hag, "never has failed to overcome man or beast against whom it was drawn."

While this story may well remind one of *Beowulf* with regard to the perilous struggle with Grendel's Mother, the parallelism is on the whole not close. The embodiment of the motif of the female monster more fearsome than the male is, as will be seen in Chapter II, widespread in Celtic tradition, Irish as well as Scottish. The finding of a precious, conquering sword in a giant's cave is, again, a common motif in folktale, Germanic as well as Celtic; and the sword is here not, as in *Beowulf*, used to slay its owner.

The folktale in question exhibits in some ways greater resemblance to *Grettis saga* than to *Beowulf*, not only in that a cave, rather than a submerged "hall," is invaded by the hero—and in the saga there is also a sword on the wall—but also in that there is a fierce struggle between the hero and the powerful ogress coming to his dwelling, who, like the troll-woman at Sandhaugar, drags the hero outside, where, as in the saga, a lengthy combat ensues. While Grettir finally manages to get his hand free to cut off the arm of his adversary, Finlay "was a cunning wrestler, and suddenly made a swift and unexpected move which caused the hag to fall flat, breaking an arm and a rib." This tactic recalls yet more closely that of Grettir in dealing with Glám.

While the parallelism of this story with *Beowulf* thus hardly appears on the whole close or striking and a basic connection hence seems rather unlikely,[28] it may well be

[28] Not to be ignored in this connection is a Welsh folktale recorded by Constance Davies in 1935 ("Beowulf's Fight with Grendel," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 9, 1935, p. 722), though its existence has been noted since the seventeenth century. It tells of a robber, "a gigantic man covered with red hair," who victimizes the inhabitants of Nanhwynan by breaking into their farms to steal cattle, goats, and food. A farmer's wife of bold spirit resolves one winter night to watch for the intruder; at midnight, hearing a loud noise at the kitchen window, she comes upon the thief as he is

taken to indicate and illustrate the apparent, often bewildering affinity between folktale tradition in Iceland and the British Isles—including that of Celtic origin—a phenomenon of supreme interest in dealing with the question of the connection between *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga.*[29]

Dehmer's theory, of greater moment than that of Mackenzie, purporting to show the Grendel fight to be centrally inspired by the Celtic tale of the struggle with the monstrous arm, failed to convince the large majority of *Beowulf* scholars of the presence of significant Celtic influence in the Grendel story. During the following couple of decades little progress was made in investigating the question of indebtedness of this nature, scholars tending to ignore the "unorthodox" theories suggesting it or treating them as mere hypotheses.

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halfway through it and severs his right hand from the arm with a blow of her axe. The hand is "huge and hairy, with long nails as hard and sharp as steel." The next morning people follow the blood-stained tracks to a waterfall in a gorge and, seeing blood in the water of the pool at the foot of the fall, discover a cave behind the cascade. Apparently nobody ventures to explore it, but, since the creature is never seen again, it is concluded that he must have died in this hideout, still pointed out in the Ferch gorge above Hafed y Llan, on the southern slopes of Snowdon, where "the pool under the fall is on a rocky shelf, surrounded by lichen-covered rowan and pine that overhang the water, their roots fast in the crags; and the cave, clearly visible through the pellucid water in summer time, shelves away under the pool, and is so sickeningly deep as to appear utterly black."

The supposed demonic hideout as described here obviously resembles somewhat a combination of the concepts of Grendel's mere and the waterfall-cave in *Grettis saga*. It is not inconceivable that we here meet an instance of the attachment of echoes of external, perhaps literary, tradition to a particular locale suggestive of some of its striking elements, a local legend of some degree of resemblance perhaps serving as a catalyst. And such influence, especially if of ancient date, could serve as an indication of the geographically far-flung impact of orally reported saga tradition in Britain and neighbouring lands and the spell it widely cast on popular imagination in times past. In connection with the theory of the influence of *Beowulf* on *Grettis saga*, it would seem to make the possibility of the breakdown of the epic into elements later incorporated into folktale more plausible.

And yet, what with the strange workings of folk tradition, the possibility of some degree of basic connection between *Beowulf* and the Welsh folktale cannot be totally dismissed.

[29] See pp. 114f.

In the 1950s, Gerard Murphy supported[30] the arguments regarding the fundamental indebtedness of the Grendel story to the Celtic folktale of the intruding monstrous arm. He stresses the weight of von Sydow's arguments about the evidence value of the similarities between the Grendel story and the tale, specifically with reference to a brand of it called the Fionn Helper Tale. Here a strong helper of Finn (Fionn) mac Cumaill cuts off the aggressive arm of the demon, who is then (usually the next day) pursued to his dwelling, sometimes underground but often in a water setting, and slain, as is frequently his mother, a fierce and dangerous hag.

Murphy finds a connection likely; and he sees strong reasons to conclude that the story in *Beowulf* is not primary to the Irish tale, since the Grendel variant of the motif, where the arm does not enter through the chimney or smoke-hole but is torn off in open fight in the hall, bears, he thinks, internal signs of not presenting the motif in its original form:

> Why was the injury to the arm only, and not to some other part of the body? If the arm came down the oldfashioned Irish chimney, however, which was little more than a hole in the roof, it is clear why the injury should have been to the arm alone.[31]

Murphy also discounts the possibility that both stories may have descended by independent channels from a source common to Teutons and Celts, since the motif, while abundant in Celtic folktale, "is found in Teutonic literature only in the *Beowulf* poem and the Grettir episode that is based on it."[32] Thus Murphy agrees with von Sydow and Dehmer that the story of the Grendel fight appears to be basically derived from the Celtic folktale.

James Carney's lengthy chapter "The Irish Elements in *Beowulf*" in his *Studies in Irish Literature and History*[33]

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[30] Gerard Murphy, *Duanaire Finn*, III: *Irish Texts Society* (Dublin, 1953), XLIII, 184ff.

[31] Ibid., 186.

[32] Ibid.

[33] James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin, 1955), pp. 77-128.

represents a significant contribution to the case for Celtic influence in the Anglo-Saxon epic. Carney makes the farthest-ranging claims yet of such indebtedness; he suggests that "the Irish elements cover most of the central incidents of *Beowulf*."[34] According to Carney's thesis, the poem derives its basic structural framework from "a small-scale model,"[35] the Irish heroic tale *Táin Bó Fraích*, while the struggle with Grendel and his mother is, as already suggested by von Sydow, Dehmer, and Murphy, inspired by the folktale.

The weakness of the initial suggestion lies in the fact that, while multiple parallels are indeed apparent between the accounts of the missions of Beowulf and Froech, their arrivals and reception, the subsequent parallels are scattered and by no means close or numerous. R. S. Loomis validly suggests[36] that the striking initial parallelism may be due to somewhat similar patterns of courtly etiquette in Irish and Anglo-Saxon societies reflected in the two works. Then again, perhaps we meet here reflections of related narrative and rhetorical traditions and patterns—an indication of the affinity of *Beowulf* with Irish literary tradition. It is, however, hardly beyond the realm of possibility that the initial part of the Anglo-Saxon epic—and perhaps some subsequent elements—may indeed owe a direct debt to the ancient Irish tale, even if Carney's "small-scale model" theory fails to carry conviction.

In supporting the theory of the influence of the Irish folktale on *Beowulf*, Carney cites and upholds Murphy's central argument cited above, in the process advancing some intriguing points in favour of the indebtedness of *Grettis saga* to the epic.[37]

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[34] Ibid., p. 89.

[35] Ibid., p. 121.

[36] Review of Carney, *Medium Ævum*, XXVI (1957), 197f.

[37] Carney's argument as to why the two unrelated demon fights in *Grettis saga* must be descended from the related ones in *Beowulf*, though interesting, is too elaborate to be summarized here. More striking yet is his suggestion that Glám's curse indicates that Cain—and hence *Beowulf*—figured in the author's source material: "The author is a free agent and there is no reason why he should not borrow an idea and transfer it at his will to another character. Part of the curse of Cain was that he was to be '*vagus et profugus in terra*.' When the monster Glam is dying he curses Grettir and

Carney's argument for the Irish affiliations with *Beowulf* is at its most persuasive in presenting evidence to show that the tradition of the monstrous broods descended from Cain must have reached the Anglo-Saxon poet through the medium of Irish ecclesiastical writings.[38]

Of interest is also Carney's discourse on the cultural, including literary, contacts between the Irish and the northern English around the year 700 A.D., a subject already

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part of his curse is: 'Thou shalt be outlawed and doomed to dwell alone, away from men.' This suggests that Cain figured in the author's source material; when Cain was eliminated the terms under which he was cursed were retained; but he is made, in the person of Glam, to utter the curse of which, in the source material, he was the recipient" (p. 96).

On the other hand, anybody acquainted with the vast loneliness of the Icelandic wasteland—presumably drearier yet for an outlaw in Grettir's day—need not necessarily look for Scriptural, or any kind of literary, inspiration for the phrasing of such a curse.

[38] Acknowledging that Charles Donahue had independently reached the same conclusion ("Grendel and the Clanna Cain," *Journal of Celtic Studies*, I, no. 2 [1950], 167-75), Carney finds the account of Cain's kin in *Beowulf* to be based on Irish ecclesiastical lore, largely as exemplified in a text, *Sex Aetates Mundi*, preserved in manuscripts of the eleventh and succeeding centuries. Varying accounts of the origin of monsters are given in this text. According to one version, the monstrous broods spring from Cain, according to another from Ham (Cham), who, having been cursed by Noah, is referred to as "Cain's heir after the flood." This confusion is significantly reflected in the *Beowulf* manuscript, where *cames* (l. 107) is altered to *caines*, whereas line 1261 features *camp*—referring to Cain the fratricide.

Equally significant is the similarity of the formulaic enumeration of the broods of Cain in *Beowulf* to that in *Sex Aetates Mundi*. Donahue credits the tradition embodied in the epic with coinciding closely with the passage reflecting the Cain tradition in the Irish work, in that the general word for monsters (Irish *torothuir*, O.E. *untȳdras*) is followed by a triadic formula of elaborative enumeration in which the first two items are "perhaps as nearly identical as differences in language and folklore permit," seeing that "*eotena*, like the *fomoraig*, were big monsters. *Ylfe* were smaller beings like the *luchorpain*."

Carney believes the original Irish tradition on this point to have been somewhat different; this he deduces on the basis of the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville, to which he believes the tradition to be strongly indebted. The differences from Donahue's thesis are, however, of little significance in this connection and do not justify entering into Carney's quite elaborate argument. Suffice it to note that both provide striking, essentially coinciding evidence of the indebtedness of *Beowulf* in this matter to Irish ecclesiastical lore.

touched by Deutschbein.[39] Carney believes that "about the year 700 A.D. there must have been many ecclesiastics, and others, who knew both Irish and Anglo-Saxon."[40] Given this degree of bilingualism, there is nothing strange, Carney thinks, in the breaking of the cultural, including literary, barriers between Irish Celt and Anglo-Saxon:

> Just as Latin lives of saints, heavily influenced by material coming from the East, formed part of the total literary experience of the writer of an Irish prose tale, similarly, in the situation that obtained in England about 700 A.D., Irish ecclesiastic thought, Irish vernacular literature, and even Irish folk-tales, could form part of the total experience of an Anglo-Saxon poet.[41]

This suggestion is, I think—and hope to show—borne out by literary evidence in connection with *Beowulf*.[42] While

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[39] See p. 2.

[40] Carney, p. 86.

[41] Ibid., p. 84.

[42] It has been suggested by Deutschbein, Cook, and Carney that the court of King Aldfrið of Northumbria (d. 705) may have been the place of composition of *Beowulf*. The first-mentioned points out (p. 118) that the King, son of an Irish mother, obtained his schooling in Ireland and was himself a man of literary inclination, credited with being the author of some poems in Irish. He suggests that "the court of this Anglo-Saxon-Irish king was exactly the kind of place where the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, which exhibits such a striking blend of Germanic and Celtic elements, could have been composed."

Cook ("The Possible Begetter of the Old English *Beowulf* and *Widsith*," *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences*, XXV [1922], 281f.) concurs with the opinion that Aldfrið seems to have been exactly the kind of patron of literature to create at his court the proper atmosphere for the composition of *Beowulf*, while Carney (p. 86) goes so far as to suggest that the King may himself have been the author; he certainly, Carney avers, "fulfills all the requirements."

R. W. Chambers (*Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem* [3rd ed.; Cambridge, 1959], p. 369; to be referred to as *Introduction*) is impressed with Cook's argument: "In the nature of things, proof is impossible, but no one can read Cook's pamphlet without feeling how very well it all fits in."

Whatever the exact truth of this matter, there exists obviously a solid argument for the composition of the epic in an atmosphere of considerable Celtic cultural influence. As both Cook and Carney point out, Aldfrið was a friend and not improbably student of Adomnán, the learned abbot of Iona;

scholars such as Dehmer, Murphy, and Carney have in dealing with this issue advanced significant theories and striking arguments, a good deal of further comparative study is undoubtedly in order for establishing the nature of the parallelism and analogy.[43]

Cook suggests that Bede's reference to Aldfrið's "living as an exile in the Irish islands, in order to gratify his love for literature," may be interpreted "to cover Iona for at least part of the time, since Bede always considers that island as belonging to Ireland."

[43] Far from proposing to consider here all the suggestions of instances of the influence of Celtic literary and popular tradition in *Beowulf*, I have contented myself with referring to what appear to me the truly significant and cogent ones. While the existing evidence generally points to Irish influence, the possibility that traditions of the Celts of the British Isle, of whichever category—often closely related to those of the Irish—have at times left their mark, is by no means to be excluded. Thus, for example, the earliest manifestation on record of the Celtic "Hand and Child" motif occurs in the ancient Welsh *Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed*, considerably older in origin than the oldest known version of the Irish "Hand and Child" tale, which was composed, Carney thinks (p. 374), probably some time in the period 1250-1500.

II

THE MIGHT OF GRENDEL'S MOTHER

The figure and role of Grendel's Mother in *Beowulf* pose a puzzling paradox. When, on her revenge foray to Heorot, she carries off the retainer Æschere, she fails to stand and fight with the Danes, who had proved such inferior opponents for her son, and flees in all haste back to her mere-retreat. Her evil exploit is thus of a rather dubious nature from the point of view of blood revenge—the actual killer Beowulf and his men get off scot-free. While she might conceivably be thought of as being wary of the now proven might of the Geatish hero, who, though not present, is, she must realize, close by, the author makes it emphatically clear that she is as a fighter vastly inferior to Grendel:

> Wæs se gryre lǣssa
> efne swā micle, swā bið mægþa cræft,
> wīggryre wifes be wǣpnedmen,
> þonne heoru bunden, hamere geþrūen,
> sweord swāte fāh swīn ofer helme
> ecgum dyhtig andweard scireð. (ll. 1282-87)

(The fear was less by just so much as women's strength, a woman's war-terror, is, as compared with that caused by a man, when the ornamented, hammer-forged blade, the blood-stained sword, trusty of edge, cleaves through the boar-image on the helmet of the foe.)[1]

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[1] The Anglo-Saxon text used in this work is from the edition by Friedrich Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (3rd ed.; Boston,

And yet, when Beowulf invades her domain, she faces him fiercely and aggressively and drags him by main force to her "hall." There the hero, who had scorned to use weapons against the statedly mightier Grendel, tries to kill her with his sword, fails to injure her, then attempts to overcome the ogress with his trusty strength, which had overwhelmed Grendel in a onesided struggle; again he fails and is in the process thrown for a fall, is in dire danger of death, and finally triumphs only with God's miraculous help.

Here, then, we are faced with a discrepancy of the first order—in her second appearance Grendel's Mother is represented as far more fearsome and dangerous than in the first. How is one to explain this contradiction?

Klaeber has the following suggestion: "The inserted remark that Grendel's Mother is less dangerous than Grendel in as much as she is a woman . . . is evidently to be explained as an endeavor to discredit the unbiblical notion of a woman's superiority."[2]

The remark in question is, however, clearly borne out by the action described; whereas Grendel had terrorized and slaughtered the assembled Danish champions with impunity and carried off thirty at a time, the ogress contents herself with seizing one and beats a hasty retreat when she is discovered in the course of her sneak attack. Thus the notion of female physical inferiority is here unmistakably woven into the fabric of the poem. There is, of course, nothing surprising about this inferiority, least of all to the modern reader. Furthermore, it is logically consistent with the heroic tenor of *Beowulf*, where the proper female role is to be "peace-weaver" rather than fighter. That Grendel's Mother should be represented as fleeing quickly is also understandable from the artistic point of view; otherwise one would expect an immediate showdown with Beowulf, quartered nearby, and this is, of course, not "in the cards" at this point. In short, there is nothing surprising about her behaviour or the poet's comment on it—he is fond of inserting comparisons and

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1950); the translations are from *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment*, translated by John R. Clark Hall (rev. ed.; London, 1950).

[2] Klaeber, p. 181n.

explanatory reflections. It is, instead, Grendel's Mother's dangerous powers in Beowulf's struggle with her that are surprising to the modern reader, especially so after the earlier episode; they may nevertheless provide the key to an explanation of the puzzle. That there existed an "unbiblical notion" is, I think, correct, but before examining its nature, let us deal with another proposed solution of the problem.

Some critics[3] have suggested that the poet's moral sensibility and "sense of fairness" constitute a significant factor. According to this train of reasoning, while Grendel is a ruthless, unprovoked aggressor, his mother, again, acts in accordance with the standard Germanic code of blood-revenge; furthermore, her own domain is invaded; for these reasons a measure of sympathy on the author's part is due to her and hence Beowulf's revenge of revenge is made out to be a difficult and hazardous undertaking.

I think this kind of proposition is not on firm ground in the light of mythical realism discernible throughout the epic; it is the kind of theorizing about the author's motives one might justifiably indulge in only if other avenues of explanation—based on possible mythical background material—seem positively closed. While the author does from time to time apply standards consisting of a curious mixture of elements of Christian religio-morality and heathen or semi-Christian sociology, there is little doubt that on the essential elements of the story he is largely faithful to his source material; this no doubt accounts for some of the puzzles and seeming inconsistencies in the poem. Even if, however, the poet may at times strongly assert his independence, this is very unlikely in this instance; it is hard to believe that a measure of what must be rather forced sympathy would lead him or, for that matter, the moulders of the tradition to tarnish the glory of the great Beowulf by representing him as thwarted, in fact overmatched—save for the grace of God—by the monstrous hag, with all the loss in heroic stature this does entail. It is, after all, repeatedly stressed that his is the right cause.

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[3] E.g., Klaeber, p. lii (Introduction), and John Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King," *Medium Ævum*, XXXIV, no. 2 (1965), 90.

It would, I think, be a more plausible suggestion that Beowulf's difficulties in his struggle with Grendel's Mother are due to the writer's desire to create suspense and prevent this encounter from being a mere carbon copy of the struggle with Grendel. Even this kind of theorizing ought, however, to take second place to an investigation of possible mythical background to the puzzle at hand, especially since, as just pointed out, these difficulties introduce a jarring note into the heroic theme of the epic. Could it be that some tradition of supernatural female creatures of superior might has influenced the story of Beowulf's struggle with Grendel's Mother?

Lehmann[4] thinks to discern an echo of ancient Indo-European tradition. He points to the concept of mighty female devils in Persian mythology, who were regarded as the original demons, alluring men to sin and thus turning some of them into devils. He also points to evidence that Persephone was initially regarded as ruler of the Underworld, Hades being a subordinate, corpse-eating demon, who only in Homeric times was by masculine pride elevated to the dignity of lord of the nether kingdom. Lehmann further draws attention to an appellative of Thor—"Slayer of Giantesses"—indicative of the power and dignity that, presumably at an early stage, must have been attributed to females in Scandinavian demonology. A striking example of the gradual lowering of the status of the female in Indo-European mythology is, Lehmann suggests, the masculinization of the originally female demon Groa in Celtic myth.

Lehmann views the roles of Grendel and his Mother as reflecting a transitional stage, embodying the concept of duality, within the process of development in question, a stage marked by lack of uniformity in the relative attribution of powers to demons along lines of sex.

Panzer[5] thinks Grendel's Mother to be derived from the old woman the hero meets in the demon's underground lair in the folktale of the Bear's Son. It seems, however, that any similarities between the two ladies are of a very superficial

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[4] Edv. Lehmann, "Teufels Grossmutter," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, VIII (1905), 411-30.

[5] Panzer, p. 278.

nature. True, both females are met by the hero in the dwelling of the demon he has overcome, and in many instances of the folktale the hag is said to be the demon's mother, but her "personality" seems very different indeed from that of Grendel's Mother. Far from being a fierce, murderous fighter, the old female in the subterranean dwelling never puts up a serious fight; in the few instances where she makes a menacing gesture, she is easily slain. She is far from always killed; more often she is merely threatened or beaten by the hero so as to be made to reveal the whereabouts of the fugitive demon or of the captive princesses; at yet other times she is feignedly or genuinely friendly towards the hero. Nor does she, of course, venture out of her lair on a revenge expedition or any other sort of mission. While she may indeed have some connection with the Devil's Grandmother and thus, if Lehmann is right,[6] the two female figures in question may possess a degree of common ancestry, the theory that the fierce "she-wolf of the water" of *Beowulf* is derived from the rather pathetic hag of the folktale seems far-fetched, indeed implausible.

Lehmann's basic proposition with regard to the origin of Grendel's Mother is far more interesting and plausible. But what particular body of myth and tradition could, one must ask, have directly influenced *Beowulf* in the matter in question?

The demonic hag more dangerous in fight than her similarly evil son or sons, not manifest in Germanic literature and tradition (outside of *Beowulf*),[7] turns up in a considerable

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[6] Lehmann believes the Devil's Grandmother to be a degenerate descendant of the mighty female demons in early Indo-European mythology.

[7] In the Icelandic *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar* the man-eating giant Brusi has for mother "a coal-black she-cat, and as big as the sacred oxen, which are the biggest" (Chapter V). This monster is said to be "even worse to deal with" than Brusi. On entering the cave of the monsters, Orm is set upon by the cat-monster, knocked over and fiercely clawed, and escapes only by vowing to go on pilgrimage to Rome if he prevails over the monster and her son, whereupon her strength immediately dwindles and he slays both her and Brusi (Chapter VIII).

There is a distinct possibility that we glimpse here an echo of the fight with Grendel's Mother or a story of some similarity. The cat-monster's being "even worse to deal with" than her son may well echo the Celtic

number of instances in Celtic lore, a selection of which are to be cited here. Thus a modern Irish folktale, an early version of which was, as Murphy has shown, followed, with some modifications, by a twelfth-century literary tale, *Acallam na Senórach*, tells of Finn mac Cumaill's severe, protracted struggle against a hag and her three sons living "on the eastern side of the world," in defence of a king's castle burned down each night[8] by the youngest son. With the help of his hound Bran, Finn overcomes, successively, the three sons in rugged battles, each more severe than the preceding one; yet the fight with the mother, who comes to heal and restore to life, as well as avenge, her sons, is described as, beyond comparison, the hardest and most perilous:

> Then followed a greater battle than the world had ever known before that night, or ever has seen since. Water sprang out of the gray rocks, cows cast their calves even when they had none, and hard rushes grew soft in the remotest corner of Erin, so desperate was the fighting and so awful, between Finn and the old hag. Finn would have died that night but for Bran.[9]

Not until daybreak does Finn manage to strike off the head of the hag.

While the twelfth-century literary tale introduces the mother of the slain burner[10] in a non-violent role—she merely seeks a healer—Murphy convincingly shows that this repre-

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tradition of the superior fighting powers of the monstrous mother; her feline nature, which lacks tangible parallels in Icelandic saga, adds weight to the likelihood of borrowing—in the absence of a local tradition of the more dangerous female, the fearsome mother may be represented as a monstrous beast in order to lend credibility to her powers.

It may be pointed out in this connection that cat-shaped monsters are featured in Celtic legend—thus Cúchulainn has in *Bricriu's Feast* (Chapter IX) a struggle with a magic cat; this may be a further indication of a connection between the saga in question and Celtic tradition.

[8] In the twelfth-century version Tara is burned down annually, on Samain night.

[9] Jeremiah Curtin, *Myths and Folklore of Ireland* (Dublin, 1890), p. 218.

[10] Here no brothers of the burner turn up after he is slain, as is the case in the modern folktale.

sents a departure from the original motif in the story of "the burning of the court," which motif survives in the modern version.

Some of the same motifs turn up in another Irish folktale, wherein a champion of Alba, Fear Dubh, imprisons the Fenians, including Finn himself, in a magic castle, intent on slaying them. Fialan, son of Finn, comes to the rescue and kills, in successively more severe battles, Fear Dubh with his whole army and his brothers with their hosts, whereupon their mother arrives through the air carrying restorative liquid; she is described as follows:

> She is more violent, more venomous, more to be dreaded, a greater warrior than her sons. The chief weapon she has are the nails on her fingers; each nail is seven perches long, of the hardest steel on earth.[11]

Fialan having fallen into a state of faintness, Diarmaid Ó Duibhne tangles with the hag in a terrific struggle, which he finally manages to win only with the help of Bran and the timely exhortation of a robin.

In a story in *The Book of Leinster* the Fenians invade the subterranean dwelling beneath a spring of Sen-Garman, a hag with the strength of nine men, who has imprisoned Oisín there.[12] After digging their way down to the lair, they slay there the inhabitants, the hag and her son Slechtaire—who is not credited with extraordinary strength—as well as another hag, named Criblach, also with the strength of nine men, and her son Crimthand.[13]

In a Scottish folktale[14] Finn comes to the land of Big Men, a gigantic race, where in defence of the daughter of the king of the land, demanded by a "Big Monster," he fights, in turn, the monster, his father, and the "Big Hag," his mother.

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[11] Curtin, *Myths and Folklore of Ireland*, p. 228.

[12] Murphy, p. lviii. *The Book of Leinster* (*Leabhar Laighneach*) is a voluminous manuscript from about 1150. To be abbreviated as *LL*.

[13] Murphy concludes that Criblach-Crimthand is a doublet of Sen-Garman-Slechtaire, introduced to explain the place-name Airer Criblaige.

[14] J. G. Campbell, *The Fians: Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, Argyllshire Series, no. IV (London, 1891), pp. 175-91.

The combat with the hag is, by far, the most perilous; only when "she had nearly done for Finn" with her "tooth," does Bran slay her, as he had the others, with his venomous "shoe" (claw).[15]

In an Irish folktale Wishing Gold, son of the King of Erin, comes to an island where he slays, in succession, three five-headed giants. Then he sits down and says to himself: "As these three were in one place, their mother must be in it too." And indeed, soon a "dreadful hag" turns up. The battle with her lasts three days and nights:

> Wishing Gold was doing no harm to the old hag, but the old hag was squeezing the heart out of him, until at last he was thinking: "It is here that my death will be."[16]

At this point his mother, who seems to have been a fay or perhaps a magician, turns up and advises him that the hag is invulnerable as long as she "has the long net on her." The hero then cuts off the net, and she loses her strength and is slain.

Here, then, the hag's powers, rather than being conceived of as an inherent quality, are credited to a magic object. This presumably represents a latter-day explanation of the tremendous strength of the hag, the original motif having apparently been lost sight of in the modern folktale.

In modern Celtic folktale it is not always her male offspring that the mighty demonic hag tries to avenge. For a variation we may note an Irish tale[17] which tells of a monstrously ugly hag living with her three daughters in an underwater castle. After killing her similarly foul daughters on an island, the hero fights with her in the castle, is in mortal danger from her seven-inch-long steel nails, and prevails only

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[15] This tale is pointed out by Mackenzie as a parallel to the story of *Finlay the Changeling* (see pp. 6-7). While it is difficult to agree with any suggestion that tales of this type reflect the basic source of the Grendel story, it does seem to be a question of a sharing of the motif of the vengeful she-monster mightier than the male; some such folktale has very probably exerted formative influence in the genesis of the plot of this story in *Beowulf*. Cf. pp. 130f.

[16] Jeremiah Curtin, *Irish Folktales* (Dublin, 1943), pp. 4-5.

[17] Ibid., pp. 35-44.

by transforming himself into a bear and breaking her backbone.[18]

Not always is the demonic hag mighty of strength, common in Celtic tradition, represented as mightier than her offspring; frequently no criteria for comparison are provided or they are inconclusive. Nevertheless, enough instances of this superiority turn up for us to recognize the existence of a well-established motif, very possibly related to the Indo-European tradition discerned by Lehmann (see pp. 17-18 above), which motif, in the absence of such in the larger Germanic tradition, stands out as the likely influence on *Beowulf* or its source material, thus providing twentieth-century readers with a puzzle and paradox.[19]

It hardly seems profitable to try to speculate here why the motif of the superlatively mighty hag turns up only in connection with Grendel's Mother's second appearance on the scene of action and not the first; we know nothing definite about the process of genesis of the poem, even if recent scholarly opinion tends to credit one single poet with composing the epic. Whatever the truth of this matter, there is no denying the occasional presence of apparent inconsistencies and illogicalities within the poem. This phenomenon need, however, not necessarily be due to artistic ineptitude, or even excessive reverence for source material; the author, as a free agent, may at times purposely deviate from the original tradition or motif or even independently create new elements[20]—where it suits his artistic purpose of creating a lengthy poem with an elaborate plot, possibly making use of a great number of isolated stories and traditions. Yet, as already suggested, it is extremely unlikely that the *Beowulf*

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[18] The submarine setting, the terrible nails, and the ferocious strength of the hag may well recall Grendel's Mother in her fight with Beowulf.

[19] It may be noted in this connection that some elements of the second adventure in the epic, the foray against Grendel's Mother, have seemed to a number of scholars to point in the direction of Celtic influence; see Klaeber, Introduction, p. xxi. Subsequently, Carney has drawn attention (pp. 97-99) to the parallelism between Beowulf's underwater monster-fight and such fights in Irish legend.

[20] He may, of course, also choose between divergent existing traditions on one and the same issue.

poet would have independently introduced such a puzzling and, within the context of the story, jarring element as the fearsome, superior might of Grendel's Mother.[21]

[21] The way in which this element may have entered the story will be considered in dealing with the question of the genesis of the Grendel story in the epic (pp. 130f.).

III

THE LIGHT-PHENOMENON IN GRENDEL'S DWELLING

The light, bright as *rodores candel*[1] ("the candle of the sky"), that shines forth at Beowulf's beheading of Grendel's Mother, has by many editors, for example, Sedgefield and Klaeber, been taken as merely another reference to the light burning brightly at Beowulf's involuntary entry into the "hall" of the she-monster.[2] Others have, however, seen a reference to the mighty, giant-wrought sword gleaming in action. Thus, for example, Lesslie Hall translates, "The brand was brilliant, brightly it glimmered," while Chambers opines in the Wyatt-Chambers edition that "since the 'sword of light' is common in story," such an interpretation "seems not unlikely."[3]

The first-mentioned assumption does not, at least from the artistic point of view, seem satisfactory within the context; it would make the vivid simile conveying a picture of intense, dazzling light appear redundant—why this much

[1] L. 1572.

[2] Grettir's kindling a light—presumably from the fire said to be flaming in the cave under the waterfall—in order to examine the interior of the cave after slaying the giant in the Sandhaugar episode of the saga, has been pointed to in support of this interpretation. The parallelism is, however, too slight and general to be indicative of the nature of the light-phenomenon in *Beowulf*.

[3] Ker also refers (*Epic and Romance*, p. 199) to the sword as "the sword of light."

reinforced repetition of the initial statement that the sub-aquatic hall is brightly illumined? That statement is very much in order; since the hearer or reader is bound to picture the depths of the mere as dark or at least dim, it would seem artistically desirable to convey an image of the hall lit brightly enough for the hero to perceive and take dead aim at his adversary. No such need for mention, let alone simile-adorned emphasis, of illumination exists in the latter passage—it is at this point quite obvious that the struggle takes place in full light; indeed the hero's visual observation of the mighty sword on the wall has only just been described, as has the deadly accuracy of his ensuing swordsmanship.[4]

While artistic incongruity does not necessarily disqualify an interpretation, it does add motivation to a search for an alternative—and an alternative has, as indicated above, already been suggested, if only tentatively, without coming to grips with the complexities of the issue.

Disregarding the first-mentioned interpretation, the explanation closest at hand would seem to be that the light flooding the "hostile hall" is somehow precipitated by the use of the sword; indeed this idea may well flash into mind through sheer association; swords in heroic poetry—Germanic, Celtic, and other—are not infrequently poetically described as gleaming, flashing objects (witness, for example, the kennings *beadolēoma* ("battle-light"), for the sword Hrunting in *Beowulf*, l. 1523, and *hildelēoma* ("battle-light"), for the sword of revenge in the Finnsburg episode of the poem, l. 1143). It seems, however, most unlikely that it is here a question of a mere poetic description of a gleaming sword—the simile describing the phenomenon of light seems far too intense to be intended to convey nothing more than a mental picture of the ephemeral glitter of flashing steel. One would sooner, I think, be inclined to conclude that we glimpse here a mythic tradition concerning a fabulous weapon and a light-phenomenon precipitated by its use. Thor's hammer and Jove's thunderbolt—the familiar weapons of gods of lightning—may at once spring into mind

[4] There is no reason whatever to assume that the light previously referred to should suddenly undergo an inexplicable flare-up at this point.

and, if so, we may well be on the right track in the search for a plausible source of influence; since we are, however, dealing with a sword, the parallelism is not very close or striking. A closer parallelism is to be found in the case of the mythic tradition of the luminescent sword, itself, it seems, in origin the weapon of a deity of lightning, and connected with a myth of deicide of widespread ramifications influential in a great range of myth-coloured mediaeval literature, including, it may well be, *Beowulf*. Its manifestations are of vital interest in this connection.

The slaying of gods, even those of prime rank and cardinal importance, is a not uncommon motif in mythology, paradoxical as such death may seem at first thought, what with the connotations of immortality of the very concept of divinity. Familiar instances of mythical deicide that may readily spring to mind are the slayings of Tvastr in Vedic and Baldr in Nordic mythology. The Twilight of the Gods was expected to sweep to their doom all the prime Germanic divinities. In Irish myth gods also fall in battle; thus Nuadu, the chief god of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, and the war-goddess Macha meet their fatal end in the war with the Fomors.

What is of prime interest here is a distinctive pattern for the death of a divinity in Celtic lore; it appears discernible, if more dimly, in Germanic tradition. This motif involves centrally the slaying of a deity with a weapon uniquely suited for this purpose, in the fundamental myth apparently his own.

In Irish myth the weapon fatal to the god is the lightning-weapon, i.e., the thunderbolt conceived as a weapon. It is a (usually fiery) stone, spear, sword, hammer, or club. This object is of Otherworld origin. Thomas O'Rahilly succinctly explains:

> It was forged by the Otherworld God,[5] the divine smith; but in myth we generally find it wielded by a younger and more human-like deity, the Hero, as we may call him. With this weapon the Hero overcomes his enemy the Otherworld

[5] The so-called Otherworld God in the strongly solar-oriented religion of the ancient Irish Celts is, according to O'Rahilly, the god of the sun as well as lightning and lord of the Otherworld.

> God, or, as it might be expressed, he slays the God with the God's own weapon.[6]

O'Rahilly refers here to the basic myth in its purity; it has not been recorded altogether as such but is glimpsed through the more or less transparent disguise of versions where the identity of the Otherworld God is somewhat obscured; at times he is partially humanized.

A number of famous fatal combats in Irish legend reflect this myth; I will content myself here with reference to a few of the most striking and familiar. A notable instance is the slaying of Balar by Lug. The one-eyed[7] Fomor Balar, whose eye emits a death-dealing glance[8] when his eyelid is by attendants raised with a hook, is apparently in origin a solar deity; he is slain by Lug, a god with manifest solar traits and associations.[9] The fatal weapon in this instance is a stone launched

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[6] Thomas F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), p. 60.

[7] When conceived anthropomorphically, the sun-god is often, O'Rahilly shows, pictured as a one-eyed being, the eye apparently signifying the sun regarded as the eye of heaven. The one-eyed *kyklopes* of Greek mythology seemingly reflect this concept. So does probably the one-eyed god Odin in Nordic mythology. In early Irish myth the sun-god is frequently one-eyed.

[8] Balar's lethal glance lies of course behind the proverbial "Balor's eye." In Irish myth lightning is often thought of as a fiery glance from the sun-god's eye; it appears to be conceived as a missile rather than as some kind of death ray (see O'Rahilly, p. 60). The explanation in *The Second Battle of Moytura* that Balar's eye had been permeated with deadly fumes from a magic concoction probably represents a corruption or secondary explanation of the original motif.

[9] Lug is Balar's grandson. Thus his slaying of Balar may be viewed as somewhat of a parallel to—and it very possibly has a distant connection with—the elimination of the sky-god Cronos by his thunder-god son Zeus, who according to Cretan cults is also a sun-god. Similarly, in Vedic myth Indra, the greatest of the gods, lord of the sky, and wielder of the thunderbolt, slays his father Tvastr, who had fashioned this weapon for him. Lug's nature as a sun-god is strikingly illustrated in *Oidheadh Chloinne Tuireann* ("The Death of the Children of Tuireann"), where his approach makes it seem that the sun is rising in the west. Furthermore, Lug was by the ancient Celts honoured with a festival at the time of the summer solstice. His cognomen Lámfada ("Long Arm") apparently refers to his complementary role as god of lightning.

from a slingshot which thrusts Balar's single eye all the way through his head.[10]

Another striking instance is the slaying of Cúroi (Cú Roí) mac Dáire with his own sword by Cúchulainn (Cú Chulainn). The solar nature of the latter has been widely recognized, notably by Rhys, Eleanor Hull, and R. S. Loomis. This is attested by traits like his radiant appearance, fantastic body heat, and strange, fiery contortions somewhat reminiscent of a thunder-cloud.[11] Also, his prime weapon, the Gáe Bulga, is almost certainly a lightning-spear.[12] Loomis persuasively argues[13] that Cúroi betrays manifest traits of a deity of sun and lightning. Hence it appears to be basically a question here of the slaying of one sun-god by another.[14]

The motif of the lightning-weapon fatal to a sun-god obviously underlies Cúchulainn's slaying, in *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, of his most formidable and resilient adversary, Fer Diad, with the Gáe Bulga. There is hardly any doubt that Fer Diad is the mythic double or twin of Cúchulainn. They are foster-brothers; furthermore, "well-matched and alike was their manner of fight and of combat. Under the same instructresses had they done skilful deeds of valour and arms . . . ." Moreover, it is stated, "neither of them overmatched the other, save in the feat of the Gae Bulga, which Cúchulainn possessed."[15]

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[10] *The Second Battle of Moytura*, translated by Whitley Stokes, in *Revue Celtique*, XII (1892), 101. This saga (*Cath Maige Tured*) of the mythological cycle is preserved in a manuscript of the sixteenth century, but the language is early, perhaps ninth or tenth century (see Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* [Chicago, 1948], p. 58. To be referred to as Dillon).

[11] This latter is suggested by Loomis (*Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* [New York, 1927], p. 48).

[12] The name has been interpreted by some as being really *gabul-gáe* "forked spear," an apt description of lightning (see Loomis, p. 48). O'Rahilly (pp. 63f.), again, connects it with Bolg or Bulga, one of the many names of the Celtic sun- and lightning-god.

[13] Pp. 49f.

[14] Loomis suggests (p. 57) indeed a connection between the names and a partial fusion of identity; he holds it not unlikely that "Cuchullin is a diminutive Curoi, the little Curoi, the young sun god, who like Zeus kills the old sun and lightning god and takes over the symbols of his power."

[15] *The Ancient Irish Epic Tale Táin Bó Cúalnge*, translated by Joseph Dunn (London, 1914), p. 218. This translation is based on the manuscript in *LL* but inserts additional elements from other manuscripts of all three

That anybody but his mythic double should be declared the exact equal of the peerless Cúchulainn is well nigh unthinkable; it is obviously a question of one sun-deity slaying his double or twin with the lightning-weapon.[16]

Weapons of this mythic nature are numerous in ancient Celtic legend. At times the motif of deicide is absent—the weapon is not, within the story in question, employed to slay the original owner or his stand-in; obviously the basic motif has been lost sight of or, again, the lightning-weapon may in some instances have been independent of the deicidal tradition in the first place—myth is, after all, often quite independent in its manifestations.

One of the most famous of such weapons in Irish myth is the battle-spear of Lug, which comes alive with roaring fire whenever, in time of war, its head is removed from the sleeping-draught made from poppy leaves wherein it is in time of peace kept immersed to curb its innate fury; it then struggles against the thongs binding it and, when released, tears all by itself like lightning through enemy ranks, killing everybody in its path.[17]

A gigantic spear that is said to "strike fire"—doubtless in origin a lightning-weapon—is wielded by the hero Mac Cécht, himself probably a euhemerization of Diancécht,[18] another deity with manifest solar characteristics, if best known as the god of healing.[19]

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recensions, the antiquity of the material being a prime consideration of the translator. The quotations drawn from this translation are, unless otherwise specified, wholly or essentially from *LL*. Where the essential elements in them also occur in the mangled oldest manuscript—on which the version in *LL* is based—in *Lebor na hUidre* ("the Book of the Dun Cow"), a collection of works from about 1100 (to be abbreviated as *LU*), this will be noted. In the earliest form in which we have it, the epic dates probably from the ninth century, but the story is believed to have been first recorded in writing in the seventh century (see Dillon, p. 3).

[16] Should observation of natural phenomena underlie the myth of the slaying of a sun-god, it is not inconceivable that solar eclipse may be a source of inspiration. A yet more plausible source is seasonal change—the "slaying" of the "old sun" by the "young sun."

[17] See Charles Squire, *Celtic Myth and Legend* (London, 1912), pp. 62-63.

[18] See O'Rahilly, p. 66.

[19] It may be noted in this connection that the trident of Poseidon is by many mythologists believed to have been originally conceived as a lightning

The lightning-weapon conceived as a sword is, of course, of special interest in this connection,[20] as are latter-day echoes of this concept. To this category belongs the most famous brand in Celtic legend, known in Irish myth as Caladbolg and in the Welsh as Caledvwlch; in Arthurian tradition it turns up as Escalibor (Caliburnus, Excalibur), the sword alternately of Arthur and Gawain, if best known as the weapon of the former. In Irish myth Caladbolg,[21] forged in the Otherworld (Fairyland), became the possession of the hero Léte. It passed on to his son Fergus mac Léti and then to the great Fergus mac Roich. It is told that whenever this Fergus desired to strike with the sword, "it became the size of the rainbow in the air."[22] Whether this applies solely to the sweep of the weapon or also to its light-emitting propensity, there is no doubt that Caladbolg is in its mythical origin a lightning-sword, since there is no mistaking the luminescent qualities of its equivalents in Welsh and related Arthurian tradition. Thus in *Dream of Rhonabwy*[23] Arthur's sword, unnamed but doubtless to be identified with Caledvwlch, has two golden serpents engraved on it; when the sword is drawn from the scabbard, tongues of flame seem to issue from the jaws of the serpents.[24]

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weapon. It may also be wondered whether Gungnir, the spear of Odin, which the god at times lends to his favourites and against which all other weapons are useless, may not be in origin a lightning-weapon. The possession of a miraculous spear is, of course, anything but unnatural for a god of battle such as Odin, but as this god exhibits evident solar traits, such as being one-eyed and possessing a wondrous steed, such origin of the spear is not inconceivable.

[20] The primitive sword, essentially a thrusting weapon, was not altogether unlike a spear.

[21] As noted above (footnote 12), Bolg or Bulga is one of the names of the Irish sun- and lightning-god.

[22] *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, p. 356.

[23] *The Mabinogion*, translated by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London, 1949), p. 144. *Dream of Rhonabwy* is preserved in the fourteenth-century *Red Book of Hergest* but is generally believed to reflect Welsh folklore and tradition centuries older.

[24] The giant-wrought sword in *Beowulf* is said to be *wyrmfāh* ("snake-adorned"), l. 1698. We cannot tell for certain what type of serpentine ornamentation this implies; it is, however, not impossible that, as Bugge suggests (p. 77), it is pictured as being like the sword in *Dream of Rhonabwy*.

In the French Vulgate *Merlin* Escalibor is repeatedly described as blazing with light. When Arthur unsheathes it, "it cast as great a light as if two torches had been kindled there."[25] Later it is told that the sword blazes like a torch as Arthur fights Rion with it.[26]

While Caladbolg, though in mythic origin clearly a lightning-sword, is in Irish tradition not manifestly represented as blazing with light, other swords do exhibit this quality. Thus Cúchulainn is said to possess a sword[27] that "shone at night like a candle."[28]

Further, the hero Mac Cécht, already referred to as the possessor of a wondrous lightning-spear, also has a miraculous fiery sword: "Thirty amply-measured feet is his deadly-striking sword from dark point to iron hilt. It shews forth fiery sparks which illumine the Mid-court House from roof to ground."[29]

Unmistakable if rather blurred survivals of the blazing lightning-sword of ancient Celtic myth are manifest in relatively modern folktales[30] from Ireland and Scotland. These are the "swords of light" or "glaives of light," usually in the possession of some giant or supernatural "hag." Their remarkable qualities are, however, almost never specified;[31]

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[25] *Le Roman de Merlin*, edited by H. Oskar Sommer (London, 1894), p. 99.

[26] Ibid., p. 246.

[27] *in Cruaidín Catutchenn*.

[28] *The Irish Ordeals, Cormac's Adventure in the Land of Promise, and the Decision as to Cormac's Sword*, edited by Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch, in *Irische Texte*, 3rd Series, Vol. I (Leipzig, 1880), p. 218. The earliest two manuscripts of this tale, derived from the same source, on which this edition and translation are based, are from the late fourteenth century.

[29] *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, translated by Whitley Stokes, in *Epic and Saga*, The Harvard Classics (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1910), p. 236. *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* is preserved in *LU* and the late-fourteenth-century *Yellow Book of Lecan*; it is thought to belong to the ninth century (see Dillon, p. 25).

[30] In collections such as those of Jeremiah Curtin, William Larminie, and J. F. Campbell.

[31] On occasion the sword is referred to as "the white glaive of light." The epithet "white" may well conjure up a vision of intense, dazzling light. In one tale the sword screams when the hero seizes it from the wall. This may represent a corollary of the light-phenomenon or a translation of it into sound.

presumably these are (or once were) familiar enough. Frequently this weapon is the object of a quest by a hero who on getting it through some ruse in his hand slays the owner with it—apparently an echo, on the folktale level, of the old mythic motif of the slaying of the Otherworld God with his own weapon. The implication is, of course, that this is the only weapon with which its owner can be despatched; at times this is explicitly stated. Thus in a Scottish tale it is told as follows about the owner and his brother: "The death of the two is in the sword, but there is no other sword that will touch them but it."[32]

This motif also turns up in the ancient Welsh tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, where Cei goes to the dwelling of the giant Wrnach, whence no man has returned alive, by a ruse—he claims to be a skillful burnisher of swords—gets hold of the giant's weapon, and beheads the owner with a lightning stroke.[33]

An apparent echo of the motif in question also turns up in the Huth *Merlin* and, as a result, in Malory.[34] The treacherous Morgan le Fay plots the killing of Arthur with his own sword Excalibur, which she hands to her lover Accolon, who unwittingly fights the King with it; the latter is saved from being slain with his own weapon only through the timely intervention of his protectress, the Lady of the Lake Nimue.

Celtic tradition exhibits, then, a large family of luminescent swords deriving their remarkable qualities from the myth of the deicidal lightning-weapon, swords producing light-phenomena which by parallelism lend credence to an interpretation crediting the giant-wrought sword in Grendel's Mother's abode with the light-phenomenon so vividly described. Further parallelism is provided by the clear implica-

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[32] J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (London, 1890), I, 5.

[33] *The Mabinogion*, pp. 121f. *Culhwch and Olwen* is preserved in the *Red Book of Hergest*; this story of folktale nature is generally believed to reflect a great deal of very early Welsh—one may venture to say British—myth and folklore.

[34] Book IV, Chapters 8-12. In the English Alliterative *Morte Arthure* Guinevere (Waynor) gives Arthur's sword Clarent to Modred, who slays the King with this weapon.

tion that only with this weapon—apparently an heirloom of the Grendel clan—can the ogress be slain. Though manifestations of the motif of the uniquely lethal weapon appear also in tradition other than Celtic, its association with the motif of the luminescent sword is noteworthy in this connection, as there thus appears to exist twofold parallelism between *Beowulf* and Celtic tradition. While it would hence be tempting to make a definite connection with this tradition here,[35] one should nevertheless note that Germanic literature, some of it of quite early date, exhibits instances of some degree of parallelism worth considering in this connection.

Thus in the Old Icelandic *Þrymskviða* in the *Elder Edda* the god Thor's lightning-hammer Mjǫllnir is stolen by the giant Þrymr, who will return it only on condition that he receive the goddess Freya in marriage. The gods hit upon a ruse; Thor is dressed to impersonate Freya the "bride" and travels to the giant's dwelling. When at the beginning of the wedding ceremony the hammer is returned and placed in Thor's lap, the vengeful god lays low the assembled giants with it.

This appears, at first glance, a rather farcical story of the outwitting of a deceitful giant by the gods—a theme not uncommon in Nordic mythology. Yet already Jacob Grimm suggested[36] that it is here a question of corrupt tradition—that Þrymr in fact represents a deity of lightning earlier than Thor. He thinks the name Þrymr to be connected with the Old Norse word *Þruma* "thunder." Þrymr's hiding the stolen Mjǫllnir eight leagues underground represents to Grimm a parallel to the descent underground (seven or nine leagues) of the wedge-shaped lightning-bolt of early German myth.

If Grimm is correct, we obviously glimpse behind the lay an underlying motif of the slaying of a divinity of lightning with his own weapon—by a younger lightning-god—a striking parallel to the Celtic tradition. This parallelism lends, one must conclude, weight to Grimm's theory, as it hints at the

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[35] Multiple close parallels to elements in Celtic tradition have been alleged for this section of *Beowulf*. See Klaeber's edition (1950), pp. xx-xxi; also Carney, pp. 97f.

[36] Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie* (Göttingen, 1844), I, 165.

existence of a common Indo-European background motif;[37] the early date of the *Elder Edda* makes it unlikely that Celtic influence, common in later Icelandic tradition, is at work here.

The slaying of the famous and beloved god Baldr may well involve overtones of the myth in question. According to the account in both the Elder and Younger *Eddas* and elsewhere, this god of light[38] is slain with an arrow fashioned from the mistletoe plant with which the malicious god Loki induces Baldr's blind brother[39] to shoot him. According to the greatly euhemerized account of Saxo,[40] again, Baldr, who, though said to be the son of Odin, seems very much an earthly prince, is slain by Hotherus, his rival for the love of Nanna (in the *Eddas* the goddess-wife of Baldr) with a sword he obtains from the dwarf Miming—he has learned that only with this weapon can Baldr be despatched.

In Saxo's account it is, then, a question of a sword of supernatural (Otherworld) origin uniquely suited to slay a deity—a parallel to the Celtic myth central to this discussion, even if nothing is told about the nature of the sword. Whether—with respect to the lethal weapon—Saxo's version represents a corruption of the original motif is a difficult question that cannot be settled here—or probably conclusively anywhere. The role of the mistletoe may, however, conceivably have something to do with its mythic connotations—being a parasite on the oak, the tree traditionally sacred to the god of thunder in Germanic mythology; thus the mistletoe may be to a degree identified with the lightning-weapon. Original or corrupt as a motif, it does obviously represent a weapon uniquely suited for the slaying of a deity. Should it be original, the substitution for it of the sword may be no more than a rationalization,[41] or it may be

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[37] Cf. footnote 9.

[38] Baldr, dwelling in his palace Breiðablik ("Broad-Gleam") high up in the sky, may well have been a deity associated with the sun.

[39] This blindness may have some connection with the traditional one-eyedness of a solar divinity. Thus the myth of the slaying of one sun-god by another may well lie at the root of this story.

[40] Book III.

[41] To anybody familiar with the mistletoe it can hardly seem conceivable that this plant could be shaped into a lethal arrow.

due to familiarity with the Celtic tradition of the deicidal weapon.[42]

A luminescent sword reminiscent of those in Celtic legend is met in the Icelandic *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*. The light phenomenon is one of the many wondrous qualities of the sword Tyrfing: "Every time it was drawn a light shone from it like a ray of the sun."[43]

Such luminescence obviously resembles that of swords like the previously cited Escalibor.[44] Again, an echo of the Celtic tradition may be present here, lending to this paragon of magic swords one of its many marvellous qualities. On the other hand, this may be an instance of a distantly-related Germanic parallel to the Celtic motif.

Let us also carefully note that the sword Tyrfing, obtained from dwarfs, i.e., of Otherworld origin, seems capable of slaying Odin, who in at least some of his qualities appears to be a solar deity; when King Heiðrek on recognizing the disguised Odin strikes at him with the sword, the god finds it necessary to escape in the shape of a hawk, which yet has its tail shorn off by the weapon. Thus a degree of further parallelism with the deicidal lightning-weapon of Celtic myth is glimpsed here; again it seems impossible to determine the exact nature of the connection.

The Icelandic *Friþðióf's saga* features a conquering sword that exhibits a unique phenomenon of light. This is the hero's family heirloom Angurvadel; the name is said to mean "Brother of Lightning." Made by dwarfs in the distant east, it bears on its blade mysterious runic characters unknown in Norway. In time of peace these are so pale that they can hardly be seen, but when battle is impending they gleam "like a flash of lightning."[45]

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[42] The sword-name Mistelteinn has, however, been recorded elsewhere in Icelandic literature. J. A. MacCulloch suggests (*Eddic Mythology: The Mythology of All Races* [Boston, 1930], II, 136) that since *-teinn* in compound words means "sword," "the sword-name might easily be taken for that of the plant, which would then be supposed to be the instrument of Baldr's death."

[43] *The Saga of King Heidrik the Wise*, translated by Christopher Tolkien (London, 1960), p. 2.

[44] P. 31.

[45] Chapter IV.

The ascription of preternatural luminescence to a sword by itself hardly proves it to be in mythic origin a lightning-weapon; the introduction of such a trait can probably be inspired in poetic-mythic fantasy by the observation of a flashing, gleaming blade.[46] While in this particular instance the verbal association of the sword-name with lightning may be significant, it may equally well only be a question of a fanciful epithet. Furthermore, the luminescence is here very possibly conceived as nothing more than a marvellous quality of magic runes. A connection of some sort with the tradition of the deicidal weapon of Otherworld origin is more readily indicated by the presence of a combination of luminescence (or other association with lightning) and the motif of deicide or an echo of it—as appears to be the case in *Beowulf*.

Thus both mythic and artistic considerations strongly suggest that the light flooding the "hostile hall" at Beowulf's decapitation of the hag is precipitated by the giant-wrought sword. What can hardly be conclusively decided, however, is whether the light-phenomenon is thought to occur when the sword, with deadly effect, strikes Grendel's Mother or prior to this, i.e., when drawn, as is statedly the case in some of the parallels cited. One should note that while *gebrægd* in this episode is by some translators rendered as "swung,"[47]

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[46] It should be noted that the motif of the slaying of a giant or other kind of ogre with his own sword occurs in a number of Icelandic sagas (e.g., *Ambáles saga*, Ch. 23; *Egils saga ok Ásmundar*, Ch. 16; *Bragða-Ölvis saga*, Ch. 2). Usually the hero finds the sword on the wall or ceiling of the dwelling of the hostile creature—thus a situation not unlike that in *Beowulf*—and proceeds to kill the owner, at times rather unheroically in his sleep. The sword in question never exhibits, however, any qualities reminiscent of the sword of light; thus the parallelism consists solely in the presence of the motif of the weapon used to slay its owner. That this represents an echo on the folktale level of the myth of the deicidal lightning-weapon is possible but far from certain, since such a motif may well be of independent origin; it may simply be an echo or offshoot of the folklore tradition of intimate objects magically employed to work the owner's harm, even destruction. This elemental motif, probably part and parcel of the myth of the deicidal weapon, may assert itself independently here, rather than as an echo of this myth. It may also be useful to recall here that it also manifests itself in the tale of the Bear's Son, where the hero despatches the ogre in the subterranean dwelling with the latter's own sword.

[47] E.g., in Clark Hall's translation.

elsewhere in the epic the verb is unmistakably employed to refer to the drawing of the weapon from the scabbard;[48] since there is no reason to assume that the mighty sword hung unsheathed—this would in heroic concept have been unbefitting its dignity, aside from being harmful—the verb not improbably has this meaning here. The fact that the light-phenomenon is described only after the account of the decapitation is hardly significant, as the description of the violent act is brief and breathless—to interrupt it with a simile of some length would be very awkward. Yet the question of its exact nature is of no great moment when it comes to establishing the connection of the "ancient, giant-wrought" sword[49] with the larger tradition of the luminescent sword, which tradition is itself, as we have seen, far from uniform.

A multitude of factors point towards Celtic tradition as the immediate source of the sword of light in *Beowulf*. The Celtic motif is deep-rooted, widely prevalent, and influential in literature of various genres; it also exhibits close, double-edged parallelism to *Beowulf*. The Germanic parallels, on the other hand—none of them recorded in the British Isles—are, with the exception of the one in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, rather vague, distant, or hypothetical; and the saga must itself be open to suspicion of Celtic influence. Of cardinal interest is also the featuring of the motif of the sword of light with which its owner is beheaded in the Scottish folktale *An Tuairisgeal Mór*,[50] of which several versions are extant. This is a tale of the Hand-and-Child category, featuring a monstrous claw-like hand that descends through the opening in the roof and carries off the newborn children of a king. The hand is severed by the guarding werewolf (a prince transformed by magic) and the wounded ogre is pursued to his

[48] E.g., ll. 2562 and 2703.

[49] The sword is said to be *eotonisc* (l. 1558) and *enta ærgeweorc* (l. 1679) or *gīganta geweorc* (l. 1562). While the giant craftsmen in question appear to be thought of by the poet as the giants of *Genesis* overwhelmed by the Deluge, this supernatural origin is not a little reminiscent of the origin of the lightning weapon forged in the Celtic Otherworld.

[50] *Am Prìomh Sgeul* ("The Chief Story"): "How the Great Tuairisgeal was Put to Death," in J. F. Campbell, *More West Highland Tales*, translated by John G. McKay (Edinburgh and London, 1940), I, 3f.

dwelling on an island, where he is decapitated with his own "sword of light." The likely connection between *Beowulf* and the Hand-and-Child story to be demonstrated in Chapter X lends further significance to this parallelism.[51]

In addition, the melting of the sword in question (see Chapter IV), very likely indebted, as will be shown, to Celtic tradition, and other Celtic affinities in this section of *Beowulf*,[52] such as the very concept of the subaquatic adventure (see Chapter VIII) and the nature of Grendel's Mother (see Chapter II), add to the likelihood of the presence here of an echo of the Celtic tradition of the luminescent sword.

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[51] This tale exhibits further similarity to *Beowulf* in that the hero takes with him as trophies from the giant's dwelling the latter's "sword of light" as well as his head. Furthermore, the giant's son, dead from being for a long time bound to one particular spot by the *geasa* of the hero, is beheaded by the latter with this very sword when he starts to come back to life upon the hero's returning and telling the story of the death of the parent monster—the stipulation of the initial *geasa* invoked by the offspring. Does this parallelism with the post-mortem decapitation of Grendel with the luminescent sword that had wrought his parent's death represent some sort of connection with the epic?

[52] Carney, it may be noted, points out somewhat of an Irish parallel to the account of the history of the sword on its hilt in *Beowulf*: "That a sword should have the name of its first owner in runic letters may well correspond with primitive Germanic reality. But the idea that the narrative of events before the Flood was preserved written on a sword is somewhat strange. A medieval Irish poem *Iarfaigid lib cóecait cest*, 'The Poem of Fifty Questions,' shows that some thought was given in Irish ecclesiastical circles as to the manner in which the history of Cain's descendants survived. One of the fifty problems is: 'The two fair columns that perverse races made, let the knowledgeable ones of the melodious world say which of them survived the Flood.' In the answer we are told that the descendants of Cain made two columns of lime and one of stone, so that accounts of their doings would survive the Flood" (pp. 113-14).

IV

THE MELTING OF THE GIANT-WROUGHT SWORD

Þā þæt sweord ongan
æfter heaþoswāte hildegicelum,
wīgbil wanian; þæt wæs wundra sum,
þæt hit eal gemealt īse gelīcost,
ðonne forstes bend Fæder onlæteð,
onwindeð wælrāpas, sē gewēald hafað
sæla ond mæla; þæt is sōð Metod.
Ne nōm hē in þæm wīcum, Weder-Gēata lēod,
māðmæhta mā, þēh hē þær monige geseah,
būton þone hafelan ond þā hilt somod
since fāge; sweord ær gemealt,
forbærn brōdenmæl; wæs þæt blōd tō þæs hāt,
ættren ellorgæst, sē þær inne swealt. (ll. 1605-17)

(Then the sword, the war-blade, began to waste away in gory fragments like icicles, by reason of the foeman's blood. It was a great marvel that it all melted, very like to ice, when the Father—he who has mastery of times and seasons—loosens the bond of frost, unwinds the flood-ropes. He is the true Lord. He, prince of the Geats, did not take more of precious objects in the caves—though he saw many there—than the head, and the hilt besides, adorned with treasure. The sword was already melted, the damasked blade burnt up—so hot had been the blood, the fiend so poisonous, who had died in that place.)

The melting, through the hot, poisonous blood of Grendel's Mother (or, conceivably, Grendel[1]) of the mighty giant-made sword which Beowulf finds in the subaquatic "hall" and with which he slays the ogress and decapitates her dead son, is an element to which no clear-cut parallel is found in recorded Germanic tradition. The only instance of some degree of resemblance is met in a nineteenth-century Icelandic folktale,[2] which tells of a farm-labourer's obtaining a fairy scythe which operates by itself, even with several blades attached. The man is told by the fairy donor never to hold it over fire (while whetting it). One day his wife lends it to a neighbour, in whose keeping it will, however, not mow. Ignoring the warning of the wife, the borrower tries to whet it over fire; as soon as the blade is touched by the flame, it melts like wax and only a lump of metal remains.

The resemblance of this element to the melting of the sword in *Beowulf* is, clearly, of a superficial nature. The kernel of the story is the mutability under certain conditions, often at the breaking of a taboo, of fairy-endowed objects; hyper-destructive blood or extremes of heat and venom play no role here.

Significant parallels are, on the other hand, found in Irish tradition. Thus in a modern Irish folktale Finn mac Cumaill places the head of the slain Curucha na Gras on top of a holly bush; "the minute he put it there the head burnt the bush to the earth, and the earth to the clay."[3]

More striking as a parallel to the melting of the sword in *Beowulf* is the capacity of blood to melt stone in the story of Conall Cernach's slaying of Mesgegra, King of Leinster. The vanquished Mesgegra, knowing the fate in store for him, tells Conall as follows: "Put thou my head on top of thy head and add my glory to thy glory." Conall proceeds, however, in a more prudent fashion:

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[1] The sword is obviously exposed to the blood of both monsters; the author is, however, probably thinking of Grendel's Mother rather than Grendel—this is, after all, an episode dealing centrally with the ogress and her fearsome qualities. Moreover, the blood of the male monster ought to be thought of as being cold by this time.

[2] Konrad Maurer, *Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart* (Leipzig, 1960), pp. 8-9.

[3] Curtin, *Myths and Folklore of Ireland*, p. 279.

> Then Conall severed his head from him in the Path of Clane, and Conall took the head and put it in the flagstone on the ford's brink. A drop fell from the back of the head and went through the stone into the ground. Then he put Mesgegra's head on the stone and it moved from the top of the stone to the ground, and moved on before him to the river.[4]

The same motif turns up in the account of Conall's killing of Lugaid.[5] The latter also asks that his head be placed on that of his conqueror. Conall places it on a stone and leaves it there. On returning he finds that the head has sunk through the stone.

Even more relevant for comparison with *Beowulf*—in that weapons are involved—is an episode in *The Battle of Magh Leana* in which spears are said to be scathed by hot blood:

> And their spears were scathed in each other's bodies by the boiling heat of the blood burning them: and what was not wasted of them was broken, so that the spears were in visible, various, minute, tree-cut, flesh-besmeared, clear-broken pieces in the men.[6]

In none of these Irish stories is the potent blood said to be of a poisonous nature. In only the last story is it explicitly

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[4] *The Siege of Howth* from *The Book of Leinster*, in Eleanor Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 92. This story, *Cath Étair*, dates probably from the eleventh century but contains elements considerably older (see Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die Irische Helden und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* [Halle, 1921], p. 506; to be referred to as Thurneysen).

[5] *Brislech mór Maige Muirtheimne*; see Thurneysen, pp. 555-56. This tale is found in a fragmentary manuscript in *LL*. Its age is hard to determine but Thurneysen shows evidence that part of it existed in the ninth century and that some language forms point to the eighth (p. 548). He also thinks the element in question to be the likely source of the similar one in *Cath Étair* just referred to.

[6] *Cath Mhuighe Léana, or the Battle of Magh Leana*, edited and translated by Eugene Curry (Dublin, 1855), p. 133. The three manuscripts used by Curry are from the eighteenth century; the earliest is from the sixteenth. Kenneth Jackson concludes that "the tale as we have it is probably to be dated on the linguistic evidence 14th or late 13th century." It seems to be "a late compilation made up largely out of earlier material" (*Cath Maighe Léna*, edited by Kenneth Jackson, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series, Vol. IX [Dublin, 1938], xxxiv).

stated to be hot, while its inflammatory propensity in the first instance at least hints at the same quality; in the others no clue is given as to its destructive property. Nevertheless, one and the same central motif is shared by all—the miraculously destructive, consuming nature of the blood in question.

Fantastic heat of body (blood) is also manifest in an episode of *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel.* Mac Cécht, severely wounded in battle, goes forth to find water; he carries along Conaire's son, Lé fri flaith, under his armpit: "Then Lé fri flaith, son of Conaire, died under Mac Cécht's armpit, for the warrior's heat and sweat had dissolved him."[7]

We should in this connection not forget two further apparent parallels—the "melting" of the "hot" dragon in the Sigemund digression in *Beowulf* and the body heat of Cúchulainn in his battle rage. The applicability of the former is dubious; the *wyrm hāt* "hot dragon," which, after being slain, *gemealt* "melted," may conceivably be thought of as a fire-breathing dragon—like the one which kills Beowulf;[8] thus he may be imagined to be consumed by his own "fire mechanism" damaged and out of control, rather than by the heat of his blood. The body-heat of Cúchulainn, on the other hand, represents a clear-cut instance of the tradition of fantastic temperature of body (blood). In one story Cúchulainn slays in his battle rage thirty-three enemies, at which point his companions attempt to check his fury:

> Then Labraid entreated Cuchulain to stay his hand from the slaying; "and I fear now," said Laeg, "that the man will turn his wrath upon us; for he hath not found a war to suffice him. Go now," said Laeg, "and let there be brought three vats of cold water to cool his heat. The first vat into which he goeth shall boil over; after he hath gone into the second vat, none

[7] *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, p. 263.

[8] Nowhere but in *Beowulf* is Sigemund credited with killing a dragon. Such a feat is, on the other hand, widely ascribed to his son, named in Old Norse legend Sigurðr, in Middle High German Sigfrit. Scholarly opinion is divided between tracing the dragon fights of both heroes to one and the same tradition and, on the other hand, crediting Sigemund's feat with independent origin: it shows both parallels to and dissimilarities from accounts of the other. Let us specifically note that nowhere is the dragon slain by Sigurðr or Sigfrit said to dissolve.

> shall be able to bear the heat of it; after he hath gone into the third vat, its water shall have but a moderate heat."[9]

It hardly requires a physicist to appreciate the temperature Cúchulainn's body is here imagined to have developed. In an episode of *Táin Bó Cúalnge* we are told about rather similar effects of this same hero's heat when his heroic rage comes upon him:

> And the snow melted for thirty feet around him, because of the intensity of the warrior's heat and the warmth of Cuchulain's body. And the gilla remained a good distance from him, for he could not endure to remain near him because of the might of his rage and the warrior's fury and the heat of his body.[10]

As the figure of Cúchulainn seems to have evolved, as previously noted,[11] from that of a solar deity, this origin is likely at the root of his spells of fantastic body heat.[12] And, far-famed as the Cúchulainn legend undoubtedly was, the Irish tradition of the consuming blood may have evolved from it, or the legend may at least have exerted formative influence. This we have no way of determining here and this question is in any case rather irrelevant in this connection.[13] What mat-

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[9] *The Sick-bed of Cuchulain*, in A. H. Leahy, *Heroic Romances of Ireland* (London, 1914), I, 76. *Serglige Con Culainn* is preserved in *LU*; this manuscript represents a combination of two versions, apparently derived from a common source, one probably from the tenth, the other from the eleventh century (see Dillon, p. 118).

[10] *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, p. 109.

[11] P. 28.

[12] Be it noted, as a parallel, that in the Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen* Cei also possesses great heat of body: "When the rain was heaviest, a hand-breadth before his hand and another behind his hand what would be in his hand would be dry, by reason of the greatness of his heat; and when the cold was hardest on his comrades, that would be to them kindling to light a fire" (*The Mabinogion*, p. 107).

[13] Such a motif of fantastic body heat is not uncharacteristic of the general fondness in Celtic tradition for exaggeration and hyperbole. One may note a manifestation of it in a legend concerning the last illness of Sir Robert Grierson, the Laird of Lag, a notorious gentleman suspected of sinister dealings with the occult who died in 1733; sorely tormented with gout, "he had relays of servants posted so as to hand up from one to another

ters is that we do have evidence of an Irish tradition of fantastically hot or otherwise destructive blood, whether it sets a bush aflame, makes water boil or snow melt, consumes solid rock, scathes warriors' spears, or dissolves a human being. As the motif of hyper-destructive blood is, aside from *Beowulf*, not recorded in Germanic areas, there exists a very considerable likelihood that the element of the melting of the giant-wrought sword in *Beowulf* is indebted to Irish tradition.

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a succession of buckets of cold water from the Nith, that he might cool his burning limbs—but the moment his feet were inserted into the water it began to fizz and boil" (J. Maxwell Wood, *Witchcraft and Superstitious Record in the South-Western District of Scotland* [Dumfries, 1911], pp. 231-31).

V

BEOWULF AND IRISH BATTLE RAGE

It is repeatedly stated in *Beowulf* that the Geatish hero is during battle "angry," "furious," "enraged." Thus when he engages Grendel at close quarters, *yrre wæron bēgen / rēþe renweardas*[1] ("both the raging guardians of the house were furious"), and in the account of the struggle with Grendel's Mother Beowulf is described as *yrre ōretta* ("angry warrior") and shortly thereafter we are told that *brægd þā beadwe heard, þā hē gebolgen wæs, / feorhgenīðlan, þæt hēo on flet gebēah*[2] ("the brave in combat, bursting as he was with rage, so flung the deadly foe that she fell upon the ground").

While, strictly psychologically considered, fury in a man so cool and collected as Beowulf appears to be may seem startling at first glance, such an element in accounts of heated battle should, on mature consideration, hardly be surprising; this is almost universally part and parcel of poetic description of fierce combat, common in Western heroic literature ever since Homer.

Far more puzzling is the anger which is described as overtaking Beowulf well in advance of battle, as is the case before the struggle with Grendel:

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[1] Ll. 769-70.

[2] Ll. 1539-40.

Scēotend swæfon,
þā þæt hornreced healdan scoldon,
ealle būton ānum. Þæt wæs yldum cūþ,
þæt hīe ne mōste, þā Mētod nolde,
se scynscaþa under sceadu bregdan;—
ac hē wæccende wrāþum on andan,
bād bolgenmōd beadwa geþinges. (ll. 703-709)

(The liegemen who had to guard that gabled hall slept—all except one. It was well known to men that the demon foe could not drag them to the shades below when the Creator did not will it. But he, fiercely watching for the foe, awaited in swelling rage the ordeal of battle.)

And yet, when the monster mutilates and devours Beowulf's handpicked retainer before his very eyes, the "enraged" hero watches with apparent calm *hū se mānscaða under fægripum gefaran wolde*[3] ("how the murderous foe would set to work with his sudden attacks"). It has been suggested that this extremely strange passivity may be due to the influence of some underlying tradition poorly integrated within the framework of the poem.[4] Likewise, the very strongly-worded statement about the hitherto phlegmatic-seeming hero's pre-battle fury may well provoke the suspicion of the influence of some essentially extraneous tradition.

Such a suspicion is strengthened on noting the occurrence of similar elements later in the poem. Thus Beowulf is said to be furious when he sets out to encounter the dragon: *Gewāt þā twelfa sum torne gebolgen / dryhten Gēata dracan scēawian*[5] ("Then the lord of the Geats went, with twelve others, bursting with rage, to look upon the dragon"). Thereafter, however, the hero indulges in a lengthy, calm discourse of reminiscence, whereupon he advances and, "enraged," shouts a furious challenge to his adversary:

Lēt ðā of brēostum, ðā hē gebolgen wæs,
Weder-Gēata lēod word ūt faran,
stearcheort styrmde. (ll. 2550-53)

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[3] Ll. 737-38.

[4] See *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, p. 155n.; also this work, pp. 98f.

[5] Ll. 2401-402.

(Then did the chieftain of the Geats, in his rage, let a cry burst forth from his breast; stoutheartedly he stormed.)

In one instance Beowulf's anger seemingly does not leave him when the fight is over. This is when, after killing Grendel's Mother, he decapitates her dead son in the sub-aquatic hall:

> Hē æfter recede wlāt;
> hwearf þā be wealle, wǣpen hafenade
> heard be hiltum Higelāces ðegn
> yrre ond anræd,— næs sēo ecg fracod
> hilderince, ac hē hraþe wolde
> Grendle forgyldan gūðræsa fela
> þāra þe hē geworhte tō West-Denum . . .
> . . . Hē him þæs lēan forgeald,
> rēþe cempa, tō ðæs þe hē on ræste geseah
> gūðwērigne Grendel licgan,
> aldorlēasne, swā him ær gescōd
> hild æt Heorote. Hrā wide sprong
> syþðan hē æfter dēaðe drepe þrōwade,
> heorosweng heardne, ond hine þā hēafde be-
> cearf. (ll. 1572-90)

(He gazed about the chamber and then turned along the wall; Hygelac's thane, incensed and resolute, raised the weapon firmly by the hilt. The blade was not useless to the hero: for he wished at once to pay back Grendel for the many raids which he had made upon the West-Danes. . . . He, wrathful warrior, had given him his reward for that, so that he now saw Grendel lying in his resting-place, worn out with fighting, destitute of life, as he had been maimed erewhile in fight at Heorot. The body gaped wide when it met the blow, the lusty sword-stroke after death, and Beowulf cut off his head.)

Here again, despite the claim of anger, Beowulf seems to be acting in a deliberate, calculating manner.

It appears, then, that Beowulf's battle fury is—or was at some stage of the genesis of the poem or parts of it—thought of as a mental state of some duration rather than merely the ferocity engendered by the heat of combat. Nowhere else in Anglo-Saxon literature do we meet this kind of battle rage. It evokes, however, the thought of parallels in two bodies of literature that have influenced the Anglo-Saxon, viz., the Scandinavian and the Irish.

The Scandinavian tradition in question is, of course, that associated with the *berserkr* rage, a state thought of as a possession of maniacal nature, in the course of which warriors were believed to imagine themselves transformed into fierce beasts of prey and often to act accordingly, for example, howling like wolves, biting their shields, and so on. The fit of rage was also thought to lend supernatural strength to the *berserkr*. In Beowulf's battle-fury there is no trace of resemblance to this type of possession and its symptoms. Admittedly, a distant echo need not necessarily bear a close resemblance to the original, but the possibility of such a source of influence is exceedingly remote, since the date of composition of *Beowulf* almost certainly antedates any Scandinavian influence fostered by viking raids and the subsequent settlement of Norsemen in England. Furthermore, nowhere in Anglo-Saxon literature does the *berserkr*-motif turn up in any recognizable form and no traces of it are found in continental Germanic tradition which might at an early date have reached Anglo-Saxon England. Clearly the possibility of its connection with *Beowulf* is a very remote one.

In Old and Middle Irish legend and myth the tradition of the enraged warrior is, on the other hand, widely established. As intimated above, fury in battle as a prime quality of the outstanding warrior is frequently stressed in Irish heroic literature. Thus, to give a typical example, in *The Banquet of Dun na n-Gedh* Conan Rod, having wreaked slaughter on his father's retainers, is described as follows:

> He came again, and sat at the same poet's shoulder, and the king and the queen were seized with awe of him, when they had seen his warlike feats, and his heroic rage and champion fury roused. But he told them that they had no cause to fear him unless the household should again return into the house.[6]

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[6] *The Banquet of Dun na n-Gedh and The Battle of Magh Rath*, translated by John O'Donovan (Dublin, 1842), p. 71. *Fled Dúin na nGéd* and *Cath Muighe Ráth*, of which the former is in subject matter prefatory to the latter, though evidently of different authorship, are translated (except for one missing page supplied from another manuscript) from a fifteenth-century

In *The Battle of Magh Rath* anger is prominently featured in the listing of heroic qualities by Conall mac Baedain:

> The battalion of Conall is resolute to maintain the field of battle; the first thing that rouses the heroes is their own anger, their manliness, their choler, their energy, their valour, and their firmness, their nobleness, their robustness, their regal ordinance of great valour setting them on against their enemies.[7]

Later in the tale the battle-ready divisions are described as follows: "At length the mighty men were ready for the heavy contest, when the warriors were armed, arrayed, excited; when their heroes[8] were furious, angry, valiant, ready to meet every challenge."[9]

While the second citation may appear as little but a rhetorical enumeration of heroic qualities, the last one clearly describes the warriors, or heroes, as being in a state of anger before the start of battle. For detailed and dramatic illustration of the Irish heroic tradition of the pre-battle rage of the individual hero, let us turn to the legend of Cúchulainn. A characteristic instance of his fury is described as follows:

> Cuchulain saw far away in the distance the fiery glitter of the bright-golden arms over the heads of four of the five grand provinces of Erin, in the setting of the sun in the clouds of evening. Great anger and rage possessed him at their sight, because of the multitude of his foes, because of the number of his enemies, and because of the few that were to avenge his sores and his wounds upon them.
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> Then Cuchulain arose and he grasped his two spears and his shield and his sword. He shook his shield and brandished his spears and wielded his sword and sent out the

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manuscript. While the famous battle of Magh Rath was fought in 637 and the tales, as evidenced by language forms, are drawn from ancient authorities, they were probably composed in the twelfth century (see O'Donovan's Preface, pp. viif., and *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, edited by Ruth Lehmann, Medieval and Modern Irish Series, Vol. XXI [Dublin, 1964], p. iv).

[7] Ibid., p. 155.

[8] From the apparent distinction between "warriors" and "heroes" it might seem that battle-rage is here thought of as a quality peculiar to the great and famous among the fighters.

[9] P. 225.

> hero's shout from his throat, so that the fiends and goblins and sprites of the glens and demons of the air gave answer for the fearfulness of the shout that he lifted on high.[10]

It might be suggested that this "hero's shout" may remind us somewhat of Beowulf's angry battle-cry as he prepares to face the dragon.[11]

In one instance the anger seems to overtake Cúchulainn already during the night before the battle:

> Cuchulain arose early and came to his place of meeting and his wrath bided with him on that day. And after his night's vigil, with an angry cast he threw his cloak around him, so that it passed over the pillar-stone near by, the size of himself, and snapped the pillar-stone off from the ground between himself and his cloak. And he was aware of nought because of the measure of anger that had come on and raged in him.[12]

Pre-battle fury is depicted with great vividness in Fergus mac Roich's description in *Táin Bó Cúalnge* of the muster of the Ulster host:

> This was the constant sparkling of shining stars on a bright, clear night that he saw there and the sparks of red-flaming fire, even the bloodthirsty, terrible eyes of the champions and battle-warriors from under beautiful, well-shaped, finely-adorned battle-helmets; eyes full of the fury and rage they brought with them, against the which neither before nor since has equal combat nor overwhelming force of battle prevailed.[13]

When thoroughly wrought up with battle rage, Cúchulainn has at times great difficulty "unwinding."[14] Thus once, after the hero has slain thirty-four foes, his charioteer Laeg becomes apprehensive of his fury: "and I fear now," said Laeg, "that the man will turn his wrath upon us; for he hath not found a war to suffice him."[15]

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[10] *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, pp. 180f. Also found (essentially) in *LU*.

[11] See p. 46.

[12] *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, p. 129.

[13] Ibid., p. 312.

[14] This element may recall Beowulf's (continuing) anger after the slaying of Grendel's Mother.

[15] *The Sick-bed of Cuchulain*, p. 76.

The battle rage of Fergus mac Roich can be equally intense and potentially destructive. To sate it he on one occasion, on Conall Cernach's advice, takes his sword Caladbolg and hews off the tops of the three hills in Mide.[16]

At times the heroic rage in Irish tradition is referred to as a fit or paroxysm. Thus Cúchulainn's protracted states of fury are at times described in terms of fits with preternatural manifestations possibly connected with his alleged traits of a solar hero, as in an instance touched on already in the preceding chapter:

> Heavy snow fell that night, so that all the five provinces of Erin were a white plain with the snow. And Cuchulain doffed the seven-score waxed, board-like tunics which were used to be held under cords and strings next his skin, in order that his sense might not be deranged when the fit of fury came on him. And the snow melted for thirty feet all around him, because of the intensity of the warrior's heat and the warmth of Cuchulain's body. And the gilla remained a good distance from him for he could not endure to remain near him because of the might of his rage and the warrior's fury and the heat of his body.[17]

This is not the place to enter upon a consideration of the strange contortions and other weird physical phenomena which at times come upon Cúchulainn in connection with his paroxysms of rage, or their possible significance. Since these paroxysms are, as we shall soon see, also said to overtake other heroes, it is far from certain that Cúchulainn's fury is to be considered to be the result of his contortions and other obviously mythical "antics"; it may be the other way around, or these latter may be corollaries. There exists, of course, also the possibility that Cúchulainn's rage, with all its preternatural connotations, is at the bottom of, or has strongly influenced, the Irish stories of fit-like battle fury.

The account of Congal Claen's battle-plan in *The Battle of Magh Rath* contains the following statement:

> Congal scanned the great host from its centre to its borders, selecting the leaders from among heroes, and marking the

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[16] *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, p. 356. Also in *LU*.

[17] Ibid., pp. 108f.

> arch-chieftains among soldiers, picking the free-born nobility from among the hosts, so that it might be on the chieftains of the army that he would expend the first paroxysm of his rage and valour in revenging his wounds on them all.[18]

In the same tale the King of Erin answers the above-quoted[19] speech of Conall mac Baedain as follows: "This paroxysm is of the hereditary fury and of the northern madness, o Conall, o warrior!"[20] Here, then, extreme battle fury is claimed to be a hereditary trait of the Ulster warriors; it is at times said to be a prime warlike asset of theirs. Thus Fergus mac Roich assures Medb, Queen of Connaught, of the following:

> Thou shalt find no host in all Erin, nor in Alba, nor in the western part of the world from Greece and Scythia westwards to the Orkney Islands, the Pillars of Hercules, Bregon's Tower and the islands of Cadiz to cope with the men of Ulster when once their anger comes on them.[21]

In the case of Cúchulainn rage also at times invests the hero with exceptional warlike powers. Thus, for example, in *Fled Bricrend* he is being worsted in battle by the Amazons of the Glen. Laeg, his charioteer, taunts him with his plight, with the result that "Cuchulain was enraged. He turned back upon the horrors and cut and gashed them till the glen was filled with blood."[22]

Nevertheless, "paroxysms" of battle rage are not solely confined to Ultonians; other Irishmen are at times also subject to these. Thus in *The Battle of Magh Leana* the kings of Erin give vent to a wild fit of rage, in the course of which they mutilate a felled enemy:

> It was then that a truly awful, boiling rage, and a dark-rushing paroxysm of fury seized upon the kings of Erin,

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[18] P. 249.

[19] See p. 49.

[20] P. 159.

[21] *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, pp. 312f. Also found (essentially) in *LU*.

[22] *Fled Bricrend: The Feast of Bricriu*, Irish Texts Society, Vol. II (Dublin, 1899), p. 87. This story of the Ulster Cycle is preserved in *LU* and probably dates from the eighth century (see Dillon, p. 18).

> when they saw Conn in his fainting fit; and they all thrust their spears into Eoghan, as many as could get round him; and they raised him high upon their spears, and made him victim of spears and lances; and then they raised a shout of exultation aloud.[23]

It is obvious, then, that a widespread tradition of battle-rage, overtaking heroes not only during but also well before battle and at times lingering on after it,[24] is prevalent in ancient Irish heroic literature. Since it turns up in works with deep roots in a very early period, such as *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, it is most likely to have been prevalent in the climate of tradition to which *Beowulf* was in the course of its genesis exposed. Germanic—most importantly Anglo-Saxon—literary tradition exhibiting, apart from the Nordic *berserkr* rage already discussed, no parallels at least to the pre-battle rage—in this connection the significant variety—exhibited in *Beowulf*, one may well suspect the presence in the Anglo-Saxon epic of a somewhat superficially superimposed influence of the Celtic motif in question,[25] the result of a literary convention strong enough to manifest itself repeatedly even in connection with a hero who otherwise appears the very

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[23] *Cath Mhuighe Léana*, pp. 142f.

[24] It may be noted, for comparison, that in the Irish *Gillie of the Ferule* (*Giolla on Fhiugha: Adventures of the Lad of the Ferule*, edited and translated by Douglas Hyde, Irish Texts Society [London, 1899], p. 45) the slaying of a conquered giant is described in terms reminiscent of those reporting the beheading of the dead Grendel: "Thereupon he raised with a fury not feeble the venomous weapon, and smote him at the joining of the head and neck, so that he swept the five heads off at once." Cf. the description in *Beowulf* (see p. 47).

[25] While one can only speculate about the origin of this motif, it seems not illogical to suggest that rather than having mythic or other preternatural connotations, like the *berserkr* rage, it may well have arisen through overblown, perhaps rhetorical description of the "keyed-up" state of warriors before battle. The outward demeanour of a warrior at such a time, like that of a boxer before a contest—whether one of grim concentration or nervous volatility—can easily be construed as a manifestation of rising anger and with poetic fantasy and exaggeration be described in terms of various states of fury, especially so perhaps among the supposedly "high-strung" Celts with their tendency toward literary hyperbole. Also, the tradition of pre-battle anger may reflect a practice of trying to intimidate the enemy through a show of fury, a tactic not uncommon among rather primitive warriors.

epitome of stoical calm and cool restraint. Beowulf is no volatile Achilles buffeted by fits of fierce emotion, prominently wrath—his pre-battle fury seems altogether anomalous.

VI

THE SWIMMING PROWESS OF BEOWULF

The fantastic swimming prowess of Beowulf may well stand out as one of the most amazing abilities of a hero endowed with seemingly superhuman powers. On his youthful swim adventure with Breca Beowulf braves for six or seven days[1] rough, wintry waves of the open sea. In the course of refuting Unferð's claim that he had been bested in swimming by Breca, the Geatish hero asserts that he possessed *merestrengo māran* ("more strength in swimming") than anybody else; still he refers but briefly to the hardships caused by *wado weallende* ("the tossing seas"), *wedera cealdost* ("coldest weather"), *nīpende niht* ("darkening night"), *norþanwind heaðogrim* ("fierce north wind"), and *hrēo ȳþa* ("rough waves"), and devotes most of his account to the perilous, victorious fights with water-monsters. This emphasis is understandable; as in his initial address to Hrōðgār, in which he refers to his slaying *on ȳðum niceras nihtes* ("by night sea-monsters in the waves"), the accent is here on the hero's credentials as a monster-killer. Yet this thematic emphasis should in no way cloud the magnitude of Beowulf's swimming feat and deter the modern critic from wondering

[1] The exact duration of the swim is not altogether clear, but it appears likely, from the statement of Unferð (l. 517), that it is seven days, Beowulf being in his version of the story not altogether explicit with time-reference after mentioning that Breca and he swam together for five days.

whether he here views an isolated flight of exaggerating fantasy on the part of the poet or an element indebted to contemporary tradition. Equally stupendous is the hero's swim home from Frisia after the disastrous ending of Hygelāc's expedition; indeed it is more amazing yet if Beowulf, as appears likely, carried with him the *þrītig hildegeatwa* ("thirty pieces of war-equipment," ll. 2361-62).[2] Where, if anywhere, in possibly related tradition do we find parallels to such feats of swimming?

Feats in a sport as elemental and as cherished by athletes and heroes as swimming have naturally been celebrated in legend and tradition in many places across the world, especially among sea-girt or lake-rich nations and tribes, at times doubtless with exaggeration of the magnitude of the exploit in question. In this connection we need, of course, concern ourselves primarily, or exclusively, with traditions of Germanic and Celtic nations.

Water feats and competitions are featured in a considerable number of Icelandic sagas. *Kormáks saga*[3] features a swimming race over a short distance; trials such as these were, it seems, common during breaks in the proceedings of the All-Thing. *Laxdœla saga*[4] and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*[5] feature a contest between the Icelander Kjartan and King Óláf Tryggvason consisting in attempts by each to keep the other under water (to test whose breath fails first); they part

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[2] Kemp Malone (*English Studies*, XV [1933], 151) doubts that Beowulf swam home with this equipment; he believes *(st)āg* (the first two letters represent Kemble's generally-accepted conjecture, being illegible in the manuscript) is less plausible than *(bē)ag* "turned, fled" in *þā hē tō holme —ag* ("when he to the sea —*ag*"). Malone thinks that the thirty sets of armour, presumably stripped from as many enemies, are introduced "to bring out Beowulf's prowess in battle, not in swimming." This conjecture seems preferable only if one refuses to believe that the poet was capable of introducing a motif of such fantastic carrying power in swimming. There is hardly valid reason for such refusal in the case of a hero whose apparently superhuman qualities on land and in water are repeatedly illustrated and who carries the strength of thirty men in his handgrip. Furthermore, the parallels in Irish tradition to be cited in this chapter render it all the more likely that Beowulf did not abandon his spoils of war but heroically carried them home.

[3] Chapter 12.

[4] Chapter 40.

[5] Chapter 160.

with honours about even. In *Ásmundar saga kappabana*[6] the hero dives to the sea-bottom to recover a sword, in order to gain favour with a princess; he succeeds in the third dive. In *Hrólfs saga Kraka*[7] King Agnar of Northumbria recovers, also in the third attempt, from the seafloor a ring that had belonged to his father Hróar.

None of these exploits represents a feat of distance swimming; they are in this connection of less interest than the aquatic heroics of Grettir, who is obviously as superlative a swimmer as he is a fighter and strongman. Like Beowulf and Breca, he braves wintry waters; yet the distance he swims in crossing a channel to fetch fire is, of course, very short in comparison. With his friend Bjǫrn he also swims in one course the entire length of the river Hítará from the lake at its head down to the sea (a distance of approximately twenty-five miles)—a splendid feat but not unmatched by marathon swimmers of our day and age. And since, moreover, even today hardy northerners are not always averse to a dip in icy waters, there is hardly any need to assume that the swimming prowess of the mighty Grettir must be indebted to some larger tradition of fantastic endurance in water.

In *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*[8] Egil engages, together with a number of other youths, in a swimming contest in a lake; they are to swim out to an island. Egil is the fastest, but all get lost in a dense fog and Egil swims around for two days before, utterly exhausted, he reaches land.

Thus, while in Icelandic sagas we find accounts of sterling efforts and great endurance in water on the part of hardy northerners, we find nothing to present striking parallels to the swims of Beowulf, clearly covering hundreds of miles of open sea—manifestly superhuman feats.[9] Furthermore, if on Beowulf's swim with Breca the Geatish hero is—or could be if he wanted to—supreme, Breca is obviously a not unworthy

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[6] Chapter 5.

[7] Chapter 9.

[8] Chapter 9.

[9] It is, no doubt, to a great extent this superhuman aura that in the nineteenth century led to a rash of attempted mythologization (by Müllenhoff and others), now generally discounted, of the Breca adventure.

companion; thus the incomparable Beowulf is not the sole super-swimmer in the Anglo-Saxon epic.

Nor are parallels found elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon or other Germanic literary tradition. In ancient Irish literature we find, on the other hand, in the old epic tale *The Battle of Magh Rath*, a feat reminiscent of Beowulf's swimming heroics: near the end of the poem we are told that none of the "foreigners" escaped but Dubhdiadh the Druid, who "swam across to Scotland without ship or barque, with a dead hero tied to his leg."[10] This could be regarded as a striking parallel to Beowulf's swimming back to Geatland after the Hygelāc disaster. Admittedly, the distance of the Druid's swim is considerably shorter, but the very concept of sea-crossing does involve a goodly amount of parallelism. The carrying of *þrītig hildegeatwa* while swimming would, of course, be a far greater encumbrance than a corpse shackled to the leg. Yet the number thirty need not necessarily have to be taken at face value, as in mythic tradition a definite number is at times rather freely used to denote a multitude or a great amount or to lend emphasis to the magnitude of a feat; it may be noted in this connection that the number thirty is popular in *Beowulf*, as it is in ancient Irish tradition.[11] Nevertheless the statement about this load of equipment[12]—if indeed Beowulf enters the water with it—does, of course, manifestly demonstrate his immense carrying power in swimming. Such power is attributed to Cúchulainn in *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, in an episode where the marvellous ocean-swimming prowess of the hero Fainnle mac Nechtain is also stressed. Cúchulainn's comrade Ibar addresses the hero of Ulster:

> Fandall son of Necht is the man whom thou seest. For this he bears the name Fandall ("the Swallow"): like a swallow or

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[10] *The Banquet of Dun na n-Gedh and The Battle of Magh Rath*, p. 321.

[11] Note also that Beowulf is said to pack the strength of thirty men in his hand-grip (ll. 379-81).

[12] F. C. Robinson plausibly points out ("Beowulf's Retreat from Frisia: Some Textual Problems in ll. 2361-2362," *Studies in Philology*, LXII [1965], 1f.) that *hildegeatwe* may refer to any kind of war-equipment, not necessarily, as has been generally assumed, suits of armour.

> weasel he courseth the sea; the swimmers of the world cannot reach him.[13]

Cúchulainn retorts:

> Thou shouldst not speak thus before me, O Ibar. I swear, never again will he ply that feat on the men of Ulster. Thou knowest the river that is in our land, in Emain, the Callann. When the boys frequent it with their games of sport and when the water is not beneath them, if the surface is not reached by them all, I do carry a boy over it on either of my palms and a boy on either of my shoulders, and I myself do not even wet my ankles under the weight of them.[14]

Far more fantastic yet, and combined with marvellous ocean-swimming ability, is Cúchulainn's carrying power in water in *Siaburcharpat Con-Culainn.* Here the hero's ghost tells about his troublesome return from a plundering expedition to the land of Scath ("Shadow"):

> After we had come upon the ocean,
> Which was vast by the north,
> My curach's crew were drowned[15]
> By the hard storm.
> After that I floated them,
> Though it was a great danger:—
> Nine men upon each of my two hands,
> Thirty on my head.
> Eight upon my two thighs—
> They clung to my body:
> Thus I swam the ocean
> Until I was in the harbour.[16]

It is obvious, then, that while palpable parallels to the swimming feats of Beowulf are lacking in Scandinavian (and

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[13] This statement about Fandall's prowess as a swimmer may, even if no feats of his are specified, remind one of Beowulf's "gliding" across the sea.

[14] *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, pp. 72-73.

[15] Obviously, "plunged into the sea."

[16] *Siaburcharpat Con-Culainn: The Spectral Chariot of Cuchulinn*, translated by J. O'Beirne Crowe, *Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland Journal*, 4th Series, I (1871), 371f. The earliest manuscript of this tale is preserved in *LU*. Thurneysen concludes (p. 567) from the literary devices employed that its composition can hardly have taken place beyond the tenth century.

other Germanic) tradition, some striking instances turn up in the Irish, pointing to a considerable likelihood of the influence of the latter on the Anglo-Saxon epic. One cannot, of course, totally discount the possibility of independent flights of exaggerating fantasy on the part of the poet, but where parallels indicate the existence of a wider tradition, the probability of a connection is great; and it is all the greater where it is a question of double parallelism, as appears to be the case in this instance, what with the twin motifs of fantastic endurance and carrying power in swimming.[17]

Irish tradition in general is, it may be noted, rich in hyperbole and vast exaggeration of the kind illustrated by the motifs considered here. Transplanted into the less fantastic world of myth-coloured Anglo-Saxon literature, such elements may understandably appear somewhat startling or discordant in their context.[18]

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[17] Be it noted in this connection that it has been suggested by Carney (pp. 97f.) that Beowulf's dive into Grendel's mere is indebted to Irish tradition. Cf. Chapter VIII.

[18] Karl P. Wentersdorf ("Beowulf's Withdrawal from Frisia: A Reconsideration," *Studies in Philology*, LXVIII [1971], 395ff.) suggests that the description of Beowulf's return is couched in terms (*sundnytte drēah*, l. 2360, and *oferswam ðā sioleða bigong*, l. 2367) that could be intended to mean that the hero instead of swimming travelled by boat or dugout; Velent, he points out, attempts in *Þiðreks saga* a journey along the North Sea coast in a hollowed-out tree; perhaps the poet has that adventure in mind. It would, however, seem, in the light of Beowulf's marvellous prowess in water elsewhere in the epic—and not least in view of the Irish parallels cited above—that such radical search for realism is hardly necessary in this instance.

The same conclusion would seem to largely apply to a more recent article by Wentersdorf ("Beowulf's Adventure with Breca," *Studies in Philology*, LXXII [1975], 140ff.), wherein he suggests that Beowulf and Breca engaged in a rowing- rather than swimming-adventure. He thinks that the term *sund* (in *sundnytte*) has in this episode the exceptional meaning "trip in a boat, a voyage" rather than the standard one of "swimming"; the etymological argument to show that this is possible is, however, quite speculative. Moreover, the author admits that he favours this interpretation because the meaning "swimming" seems to him "unlikely because of the length of time Beowulf and Breca are at sea" (p. 159), in other words, because the meaning under the standard interpretation appears to him too fantastic and unrealistic—and also because he finds, as he shows at some length, no tangible parallels in Germanic or classical tradition.

VII

BEOWULF'S FIGHTS WITH WATER-MONSTERS

Beowulf's encounters with hostile bestial creatures of the water in the course of his aquatic adventures—slaying in his youth "*niceras* at night in the waves" (ll. 421-22), facing the aroused and dangerous creatures referred to as *merefixas* ("sea-fishes," l. 549) and *niceras* (l. 575) on the swim with Breca, and braving the *wundra fela* ("many strange creatures," l. 1509), also referred to as *sǣdēor* ("sea-beasts") and *āglǣcan* ("monsters"), that harass him in Grendel's mere—these exploits have by some scholars been thought to reflect influence of Celtic tradition.[1] As, however, no clear-cut evidence has been produced—the matter has indeed been treated quite casually and superficially—there is reason to consider here the question of such indebtedness and its ramifications and implications in this connection, all the more so since, as suggested in the preceding chapter, the swimming prowess of Beowulf—an element closely connected with his monster fights—appears indebted to Celtic tradition. Further motivation is offered by the fact that while the hostile water-creatures dangerous to man, whatever name is applied to them, seem almost omnipresent in the waters braved by heroes in *Beowulf*, only extremely vague

[1] E.g., Deutschbein (see Ch. I, n. 7), von Sydow (see Ch. I, n. 10), Dehmer, *Primitives Erzählungsgut in den Islendinga-sögur* (Leipzig, 1927), pp. 64-65.

and feeble traces of them appear elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon literary records; Irish and related Celtic lore, on the other hand, exhibits a prolific tradition of water-monsters, in many ways, as will be seen, paralleling that reflected in *Beowulf*, a tradition that flourished in the period of the epic and has survived to the modern era.

The overall picture of the hostile water-creatures of *Beowulf* is a rather complex, to some extent blurred, one. The angry *merefixas* could reflect the internationally widespread tradition of the hostile, malicious whale or reports of sharks, or yet other, more or less apocryphal, stories of killer fish. The *mihtig meredēor* ("mighty sea-beast," l. 558) slain by Beowulf in a fierce struggle in the course of the Breca adventure may be thought of as such a creature, whether or not it is to be identified as one of the *niceras*, of which, as the hero states somewhat later in the same account, he slew nine.[2] The statement that the *mānfordǣdlan* ("evil-doers," l. 563) did not get a chance to devour the champion, "sitting around their feast on the sea-bottom," conjures, however, up an image of creatures rather different from any kind of fish or even the whale, the fish-shaped mammal; hence it is not unlikely that the poet—rather than using the term *niceras* freely to refer to any kind of hostile water-creature—is here thinking in terms of the same type of beasts as are featured in the account of the second expedition to Grendel's mere, viz., the amphibious *niceras* of that episode; these creatures are said to be lying on the slopes of headlands, their land-based lairs, *nicorhūs* (l. 1411), being passed by the troop along the way.[3] They retreat, *bitere and gebolgne* ("bitter and enraged," l. 1431), into the water, whereupon one, *wundorlīc wǣgbora* ("wondrous wave-traverser"), is shot and extracted to be examined; yet there is no hint as to its appearance—it is merely described as *gryrelīc gist* ("terrible

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[2] It should be noted that Beowulf states that at the outset of the swim with Breca the heroes braced themselves for attacks by *hronfixas* ("whales").

[3] Max Rieger ("Zum Beowulf," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, III [1871], 388) suggests that the *niceras* here represent a fantasy-coloured picture of walruses.

stranger").[4] Their hostile, malicious nature is further underscored by the statement of the danger they pose to seafarers—*on undernmæl oft bewitigað sorhfulne sīð on seglrāde* ("at morning time they often take their disaster-bringing course over the sail-road," ll. 1428-29). Similarly, in his initial address to Hrōðgār Beowulf, describing his slaying of *niceras* in the waves, emphasizes their evil nature: *wræc Wedera nīð—wēan āhsodon—, forgrand gramum* ("I avenged the attacks upon the storm-loving Geats—they courted trouble—I ground down the fierce foes," ll. 423-24). One has here the impression of almost demonic creatures, revelling in malice and hostility to man.

On the whole, the poet's picture of the hostile water-creatures is vague and blurred—to us anyway; it may have been clearer to those versed in the animal lore of the day, but even this is doubtful, what with reference to beings never even seen in pictures. They are strange, hostile, fearsome, dangerous—these are the unifying qualities of these creatures, whatever term is applied to them. Also, they turn up in large numbers, seeming, as already mentioned, well nigh omnipresent in water.

While the word *nicor* is not found anywhere in Anglo-Saxon verse aside from *Beowulf*, it does appear in a *Blickling Homily*, based on a *Visio Pauli*; there it seems to refer to some type of water-monster or to serve as a general term for such creatures:

> Sanctus Paulus wæs geseonde on norðanweardne þisne middangeard, þær ealle wætero niðer gewitað, one he þær geseah ofer ðæm wætere sumne hārne stān; ond wæron norð of ðæm stāne awexene swiðe hrimige bearwas, ond ðær wæron þystro-genipo, ond under þæm stāne wæs niccra eardung ond wearga. Ond he geseah... manige swearte saula... ond þa fynd þara on nicra onlicnesse heora

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[4] As Beowulf is being dragged by Grendel's Mother to her "hall," he is said to be attacked by *sǣdēor* ("sea-beasts"), who batter him *hildetūxum* ("with warlike tusks," ll. 1510-11); Rieger sees a reference here to the tusks of the walrus; yet it is not clear that these creatures are to be identified with the *niceras* described earlier in the same episode of the epic.

> gripende wæron . . . gewitan þa saula niðer . . . ond him onfengon ða nicras.[5]

(St. Paul was looking towards the north of this world, where all waters pass downward, and he saw there above the water a grey stone; and to the north of the stone there had grown groves very much covered with hoar-frost, and there were dark mists, and under that stone was the dwelling of *nicras* and evil creatures. And he saw . . . many black souls . . . and the fiends in the shape of *nicras* were grasping at them . . . the souls went down . . . and the *nicras* seized them.)

That there exists a manifest similarity indicating some kind of connection between this passage and *Beowulf* (ll. 1357-64 and 1414-17) has long been recognized.[6]

In the Anglo-Saxon translation of *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem*,[7] again, the word *nicor* is used for the hippopotamus; *niecres brēostum* corresponds to the Latin *hypopotami pectore*. In Middle English usage, on the other hand, the term refers to mermaids and watersprites.

The paucity of occurrence and variation in usage of the term in question may well be indicative of an application lacking firm roots in ancient England, thus possibly hinting at the influence of some external tradition of creatures never clearly conceived or firmly established in English folklore. Certainly, whatever the etymology and usage of the word *nicor*[8] in Anglo-Saxon, only in *Beowulf* is a creature so named represented as playing the role of a water-monster

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[5] *The Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century*, edited by R. Morris (London, 1880), pp. 209-11.

[6] The exact nature of the connection is not clear. Wrenn, admitting that it is "quite possible—though our records do not show it—that both the *Beowulf* poet and the Blickling Homilist were drawing independently from a common source among material now lost concerning Hell," believes that the homilist "knew *Beowulf* well, and thought this passage an apt illustration and source for descriptive material suggested to him by the *Visio Pauli*" (*Beowulf*, edited by C. L. Wrenn [London, 1953], p. 210).

[7] *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem: Narratiunculae Anglice conscriptae*, edited by T. O. Cockayne (London, 1861), pp. 11, 20.

[8] E. Classen suggests (*Modern Language Review*, X [1915], 85f.) that the word *nicor* may be derived from the Latin *unicornuus*. If true, this derivation would speak against the origin of the tradition of this creature in popular lore.

hostile and dangerous to men. There is of course no doubt that a very great deal of literature from the *Beowulf* era has failed to survive the ravages of time; one could nevertheless expect the tradition of water-monsters, widely reflected in the epic, and especially of heroic fights with them, to survive with some vitality in Anglo-Saxon literature aside from *Beowulf* if it reflected a wider tradition native to the founders of England or one conceived and prevalent in that country. That is, however, not the case. Abundant, indeed almost omnipresent as the hostile creatures are in the waters of the epic, they are conspicuous by their absence (if one excludes the vague glimpses of them—very possibly indebted to *Beowulf*—in the *Blickling Homily* referred to above) elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon literature.

All this may well foster the suspicion that the water-monsters of *Beowulf* may owe their literary existence to some alien tradition that, while not inconceivably undergoing some degree of local adaptation and modification, never became widespread or deep-rooted in England.[9] What, then, about the logical candidates for sources of such influence? Continental Germanic lore of old is devoid of water-creatures in any significant way resembling those of *Beowulf*. The monster lore of Scandinavia is also a very unlikely candidate, already on account of the early date of the epic, antedating Scandinavian settlement and the consequent popular influence of Nordic folklore in England. Moreover, evidence of ancient Nordic water-monster tradition, as reflected, of

[9] A few English geographical names seem to reflect some form of the old word *nicor*. Thus there is a Nikerpole in Wiltshire, a Nikeresaker in Cambridgeshire, and Nickurlands in Essex (see Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* [Oxford, 1951], p. 74). All that these names indicate, however, is a degree of survival of the word in question—there is no indication to what kind of creature they refer; one may note the modern surname Nickerson, not attached, one hopes, to sons of water-monsters. And if these geographical names indeed involve reference to the kind of monsters featured in *Beowulf*, it is not impossible that this survival is due to *Beowulf* and its early popularity. Traditional English folklore features creatures like Jenny Greenteeth and Peg Powler—relatives of the Swedish *näck* and German *Nix* in that they are of largely human shape and dangerous to swimmers; the hostile water-monster of animal nature is, however, extremely rare in and not typical of English tradition.

course, largely in Icelandic literature, is of a very slight order and little reminiscent of the monster lore exhibited in *Beowulf*.[10] Irish and related Celtic lore, on the other hand, exhibits a prolific, widespread tradition of water-monsters, in many ways paralleling that embodied in the Anglo-Saxon epic, a tradition that flourished in the era of the composition of this poem and has survived to recent times. Lakes, rivers, and estuaries were, it was thought, apt to be inhabited by uncanny, hostile monsters, who in early times seem to have been widely considered *droidheacht*, i.e., druidical.[11] It was the mission of heroes to rescue the inhabitants of the land from these miscreants and many superlative feats of slaying water-monsters are in Irish tradition attributed to individual heroes, some ancient, some relatively recent. Hardly surprisingly, no one is more celebrated for such feats than Finn mac Cumaill; as stated in one of many poems and stories dealing with such exploits of his, "What fell of monsters by Fionn, till doom may not be reckoned; what he achieved of battle and exploits, all men cannot number."[12] Then follows a lengthy list of monsters slain by Finn; most of these are creatures of lakes and rivers.

As already mentioned, the tradition of water-monsters extends far back into the Old Irish period. Thus Fergus mac Léti, the owner of the marvellous sword Caladbolg, engages, in a story believed to go back to the seventh or eighth century, under the waters of Loch Rudraige a *muirdris*, a fearsome monster which keeps alternately inflating and contracting itself like a smith's bellows:

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[10] Of course, already the myth of the Miðgarðsormr ("World-serpent") encompassing all land indicates that the concept of monstrous creatures of the sea was not alien to the early Northmen. In Saxo (Bk. 1) Hadding encounters and kills in a stream "a beast of unknown kind" and monstrous sea-serpents are met and slain in two late mediaeval Icelandic sagas (see Inger M. Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, in *Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana*, Vol. XXVII [Copenhagen, 1966], p. 42). Multiple strange sea-creatures are of course described by the Swedish Bishop Olaus Magnus in the sixteenth century.

[11] See *Lay of the Chace of Sliabh Truinn*, edited by Nicholas O'Kearney, in *Transactions of the Ossianic Society* (London, 1854), II, 51.

[12] *Duanaire Finn, I. Irish Texts Society*, Vol. XLV (London, 1908), p. 192.

> For a whole day and night the loch seethed from [the contest between] him and the *muirdris*, and the surge of its waves kept coming on to the land. Eventually he emerged on the surface of the loch, holding the head of the monster, so that the Ulaid saw him, and he said to them: "I am the survivor." Thereupon he sank down dead, and for a whole month the loch remained red from [the battle between] them.[13]

In *Fled Bricrend* Cúchulainn, watching the castle of Cúroi mac Dáire, "heard the rising of the loch on high, as it were the booming of a very heavy sea." The hero goes to investigate and encounters a huge monster:

> He then perceived the upheaving monster, and it seemed to him to be thirty cubits in curvature above the loch. It raised itself high into the air, sprang towards the fort, opened its mouth so that one of the palaces could go into its gullet.
>
> Then he called to mind his swooping feat, sprang on high, and was as swift as a winnowing riddle right around the monster. He entwined his two arms about its neck, tore out the monster's heart, and cast it from him on the ground. Then the beast fell from the air till it rested on the earth, having sustained a blow on the shoulder.[14]

This account of the towering, upheaving monster may well represent a fantasy-coloured description of a whale.[15]

Táin Bó Fraích,[16] a tale which Carney thinks to have contributed materially to the genesis of *Beowulf*, features a water-monster that attacks Froech as the hero is swimming across a river and is slain and beheaded by him with a sword brought to him in his dire straits by his sweetheart Findabair.[17]

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[13] *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti*, in *Ériu*, XVI (1952), 43-44.

[14] *Fled Bricrend*, edited with a translation by George Henderson, *Irish Texts Society*, Vol. II (Dublin, 1899), pp. 108-109.

[15] Cf. the description of a menacing whale in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* (*The Life of Saint Columba*, by Saint Adomnán, translated by Wentworth Huyshe [London, 1906], p. 170) by one Brother Berach: "And behold! a whale of wondrous and immense size, lifting itself up like a mountain, floating on the surface, opened wide its mouth all bristling with teeth." This work was written about 680 A.D.

[16] See p. 10.

[17] Note also Pilib's struggle with a "fierce, venomous monster" at "the bottom of a deep stream" cited on p. 75, and Murough's slaying a monstrous serpent at the bottom of a lake (see p. 77).

The monsters featured in the stories referred to so far are those of inland bodies of water. The nature of the habitat of their counterparts in *Beowulf* is not altogether clear, except for those met on the Breca adventure—where it is the ocean. Monsters of the open sea[18] are also not infrequently encountered in Irish legend.[19] Thus, in *Life of Brendan of Clonfort*[20] St. Brendan encounters in the course of his voyage a huge, hostile "fish," also referred to as a monster; here we may glimpse a fantasy picture of a whale. The saint and his companions one day "saw a huge and terrible fish coming towards them, throwing up the waves on either side of him in his hurry to get to the boat and swallow them up." When "the monster came in front of the boat, and reared itself on high above their heads," the saint invokes the help of God, with the result that "another like monster" appears and kills the attacker.

At times the sea-monsters appear in multitudes reminiscent of *Beowulf*; witness an episode in the very same story of St. Brendan:

> Another day when Brendan was celebrating the feast of Peter in his boat, they saw all the sea around them so pellucid, bright and clear, that they saw all the fish and monsters of the ocean like so many herds of cattle on wide level plains, forming as it were walls round about the boat. And when the brethren perceived them, they prayed Brendan to say Mass in a low voice, that the monsters might not hear the sound which he made.... And when the monsters heard the voice of the holy man, they fled away from the boat, so that not a trace of them was seen henceforth.[21]

Herds of terrifying, if small, monsters of the ocean are described in the account of the journey of Cormac the Cleric

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[18] If more traditions of inland water-monsters survive, this may well be due to the fact that these are more likely to be connected in popular consciousness and memory with definite localities than are sea-roaming monsters; this facilitates the survival of traditions.

[19] Huge man-eating serpent-monsters of the sea are encountered in some modern Irish folktales, e.g., Larminie, pp. 151f., and Curtin, *Myths and Folklore of Ireland*, pp. 159f.

[20] Charles Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn: Lives of Irish Saints* (Oxford, 1922), II, 71.

[21] Ibid., 74.

in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*. The Cleric is driven far to the north by a southerly wind:

> Whence it happened that after the tenth hour of the same fourteenth day certain awful terrors, almost too great to be borne, arose on every side; for certain loathsome and very dangerous creatures, which, up to that time, indeed, had never been seen, came into sight, covering the sea; and with a terrible rush they smote the keel and sides, the stern and prow, so heavily that it seemed as though in the end they would break through the leather sheathing of the boat. And, as those who were there afterwards related, they were about the size of frogs, with very terrible stings, and more like swimming than flying creatures, and they also swarmed over the blades of the oars. And seeing these, among other monsters, of which there is no time to tell, Cormac and the companions of his voyage are greatly troubled and terrified, and pray with tears to God, who is a kind and timely helper of those in trouble.[22]

St. Columba, in his monastery, becomes aware of their distress and effects by prayer a change of wind, which enables Cormac and his companions to escape from the zone of danger.[23]

In the same work St. Columba uses his power of word in exorcising an aquatic monster in the river Ness, flowing between Loch Ness and the Moray Firth. On hearing that the monster has killed a swimmer, the saint orders one of his companions to swim out and bring him from across the river a coble beached on the opposite bank. The monster emerges and "with a great roar rushes on him with open mouth" but is thwarted by St. Columba:

> The blessed man seeing it, after making the Salutary Sign of the Cross in the empty air with his holy hand upraised, and invoking the name of God, commanded the ferocious monster, saying: "Go thou no further, nor touch the man; go back at once." Then, on hearing this word of the saint, the mon-

[22] *The Life of Saint Columba* (see n. 15), p. 170.

[23] Carney suggests (p. 87) that "Beowulf's account of his early adventures with sea-monsters may represent a transference to a heroic milieu of the adventure of Cormac the cleric in Northern seas."

> ster was terrified, and fled again more quickly than if he had been dragged off by ropes, though it had approached Lugne as he swam so closely that between man and monster there was no more than the length of one punt pole.[24]

St. Mochua of Balla saves a swimmer from even direr straits. The man is, like Jonah, swallowed in one morsel while swimming in a lake,[25] then "the Cleric waxed wroth with the monster, so it threw up the warrior every whit whole in the presence of the hosts, and never did hurt to anyone afterwards."[26]

The saints thus accomplish with the power of their word or prayer what heroes do in more strenuous, hazardous, and lethal fashion. There is little doubt that it is here a question of Christian exorcism of creatures of evil taking the place of heroic conquest of the miscreants featured in earlier tradition. The monster-fights of *Beowulf* parallel, of course, the heroic monster-fights of early Irish legend. In tenor with the heroic tone and mood of the epic, Beowulf prides himself on undergoing dire peril and suffering distress while fighting the monstrous creatures of the water, at times, like many Irish heroes, in the defence of his people or allies; thus he avenges the "attacks upon the storm-loving Geats" (l. 423) and even despatches one of the *niceras* retreating into Grendel's mere.

In comparing the monster-fights of *Beowulf* with those of Irish or related Celtic lore, one can hardly help but find an impressive array of parallels; indeed all the component motifs of Beowulf's encounters with savage, bestial beings of the water are found in Celtic tradition: a variety of aquatic creatures hostile to man[27]—at times myriads of these—

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[24] *The Life of Saint Columba* (see n. 15), pp. 136f.

[25] Lough Ree on the River Shannon. It may be noted, if largely as a curiosity, that multiple sightings of a "monstrous" water-beast on this lake were alleged in the 1960s (see Peter Costello, *In Search of Lake Monsters* [New York, 1974], pp. 136f.). Numerous such sightings on Irish lakes have been claimed in this century, not to mention previous ones.

[26] *Life of Mochua of Balla: Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, in *Anecdota Oxoniensia*, Medieval and Modern Series, Vol. I, Pt. 5 (Oxford, 1882), p. 284.

[27] A story recorded in the nineteenth century in the Orkneys (Walter T. Dennison, "The Lady of Loch Maree," in *The Orcadian Sketch-Book* [London, 1880], pp. 71f.) tells of a suitor who causes the death of his

viewed largely in the light of monsters, infesting various bodies of water; violent encounters with these creatures on the surface or underneath it, at times on the very bottom; heroes of fantastic swimming power coursing the ocean. All these motifs may well have been employed by the *Beowulf* poet to supply him with thematically useful raw material for depicting the hero of the epic as the supreme monster-fighter in the waves, to provide him with the credentials, on his arrival at the Danish court, required to rebut Unferð and allay any general scepticism, thus helping to set the stage for the struggle with the water-based ogre Grendel and, yet more directly and pointedly, the water-adventure in Grendel's mere,[28] where, consistently, the hero's talents of survival in the face of attacks by water-monsters still shine. Moreover, the fights with the seemingly semi-demonic creatures of the water provide indeed striking parallels to the conflict with Grendel. They are, like the ogre, enemies of man, angry and malicious; in one instance (ll. 562-64) the miscreants are vividly described as coveting the "joy" of the same kind of man-devouring "feast" Grendel so much relishes. Beowulf's encounters with them seem to thematically frame the central struggle of the hero with the hideous descendants of Cain, eliciting an artistically coherent picture of his confrontation with the powers of darkness and evil.

It may be of interest to note here that Beowulf's role as a great monster-fighter in the water parallels that of Finn mac Cumaill; this is of particular interest since these heroes share

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favoured rival and then stabs to death his intended; to escape retribution he jumps into the loch and is never seen again. The people believe that "the evil-hearted one was transformed into a water-monster which still haunts Loch Maree, and as such works evil by raising sudden storms that cause boats to sink, and by seizing late-farers and drowning them in the darkness." This concept of the malicious, destructive water-monster exhibits close kinship with that of the creatures in *Beowulf* that *on undernmæl oft bewitigað sorhfulne sīð on seglrāde* (see p. 63) and the ones the hero slays *þat syðþan nā ymb brontne ford brimlīðende lāde ne letton* ("so that henceforth they could not hinder sea-farers in their passage over the deep water-way," ll. 567-69). It appears to reflect the widespread Celtic idea of the malicious "druidical" beasts—evil humans transformed into such creatures.

[28] The dive into the mere appears, as will be shown in the following chapter, to be very probably indebted to Celtic tradition.

yet other roles. Thus, like Beowulf, Finn is famed, as noted in Chapter II, as the adversary of a female monster of tremendous strength and ferocity. Perhaps yet more striking, he is the most popular hero of the "Hand and Child" tales, providing, as will be shown in Chapter X, significant parallels to Beowulf's struggle with Grendel. It must of course be recognized that the far-famed Finn legend has attracted to itself a vast collection of the more popular Irish story motifs and that hence such parallelism hardly proves a direct connection between the legends of Finn and Beowulf; nevertheless, it may be seen as buttressing the case for the Celtic affinities of Beowulf's encounters with water-monsters.[29] The hero's aquatic feats may indeed seem to parallel and combine two traits of the most celebrated Irish heroes—Finn's redoubtable powers as a fighter and slayer of fearsome water-creatures and Cúchulainn's awesome swimming ability. All in all, it seems not unlikely that the water-monster element in *Beowulf* owes a considerable debt to the fertile imagination of the insular Celts and their prolific, time-honoured tradition of malicious monsters infesting various bodies of water.

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[29] It may in this connection be worth noting that the only "live" water-monster traditions in Britain are from basically Celtic areas. The best known of these is, of course, that of the Loch Ness monster, not inconceivably a "descendant" of the creature exorcised by St. Columba. Another lake in Inverness-shire, Loch Oich, is, however, also credited with harbouring a strange beast allegedly sighted by many people (see Alasdair A. MacGregor, *The Peat-Fire Flame* [Edinburgh and London, 1937], p. 82) in this century, as are Loch Morar (see Elizabeth M. Campbell, *The Search for Morag* [London, 1972]) and yet other lakes. Huge sea-serpents are also, as late as the latter part of the nineteenth century, claimed to have been observed along the Scottish coast and islands (see MacGregor, p. 85). Not to be forgotten among the water-monsters of Scottish folklore are the generally nefarious, often homicidal *each-uisge*, or water-horse, dwelling in lochs, and its counterpart in rivers and streams, the kelpie—familiar to readers of William Collins' famous ode on Highland superstitions. These amphibious creatures were as late as at the turn of the century popularly believed to inhabit many a body of water in the Highlands and the Islands.

VIII

BEOWULF AND IRISH UNDERWATER ADVENTURE

Of the many miraculous elements in *Beowulf*, hardly any seems as startling as Beowulf's lengthy submersion in the mere of Grendel and his mother. The dive to the bottom of the mere, lasting, it appears, a considerable length of time,[1]

[1] Beowulf's adventure seems to last from fairly early in the morning till late afternoon; it is told that the Danes leave the mere after *nōn dæges* (l. 1600)—3:00 P.M. As to the actual duration of the hero's descent, it is stated *þā wæs hwīl dæges / ǣr hē þone grundwong ongytan mehte* (ll. 1495-96) "then it was *hwīl dæges* before he could see the bottom." *hwīl dæges* is for the most part taken to mean "a large part of the day"; it can also mean "the space of a day," a meaning favoured by earlier editors and translators, but this seems unlikely since there is no indication that the warriors spend a night at the mere. S. O. Andrew suggests (*Postscript on Beowulf* [Cambridge, 1948], pp. 98f.) that *hwīl dæges* means "time of day(light)." This suggestion, Andrew indicates, stems largely from his disbelief in any concept of Beowulf's preternatural powers of underwater survival; in the light of the Celtic parallels to be presented in this chapter, such scepticism would seem unnecessary. So far editors and translators have failed to support the suggestion, yet F. C. Robinson ("Elements of the Marvellous in the Characterization of Beowulf," *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, edited by R. B. Burlin and E. B. Irving [Toronto, 1974], pp. 121f.) buttresses Andrew's argument with a few verbal parallels from Anglo-Saxon poetry which make the interpretation semantically feasible, though by no means imperative or even preferable. Should it, however, be correct, this would not seem to greatly alter the significance of the time-reference for the

seems fantastic enough for one to feel impelled to look for the influence of some body of myth where the barrier between the worlds above and under water tends to weaken or vanish. Such a quest is rendered all the more logical by a comparison with the corresponding element in *Grettis saga*, the hero's descent into the cave behind the waterfall—a feat at least in theory not impossible[2] for a bold and powerful swimmer.[3] The folktale of the Bear's Son also fails to provide meaningful parallelism to Beowulf's aquatic feat. Here the hero only exceptionally descends through water—that of a well;[4] he is then supported by a rope, and almost invariably an explanation is given—water parts around him forming an air pocket, or a magic sponge soaks it up, or he travels down through it in a chest. In one variant listed by Panzer—from India— the hero does descend into the sea, but apparently to no great depth and here he is also attached to a line.

The only literary tradition which exhibits significant parallels, in some instances analogues, to Beowulf's submersion is the Celtic. James Carney cites[5] as parallels references in two poems edited by him to ancient Irish heroes' underwater adventures. One such reference is found in a praise poem addressed to Fearghal O'Reilly; the poet, praising O'Reilly in allegorical terms, says:

> When the descendant of Cathal (= Fearghal O'Reilly) was voyaging in the ocean he came to an Otherworld palace (*síothbhrugh*); the man of Cuan Clochair (= Fearghal) recognized his ancestral treasures in a giant's cave. Ó Duibhne (= Diarmaid Ó Duibhne), as a stout champion, went under the wave until he got the rings; (likewise) this

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purposes of this discussion: it would indicate that during Beowulf's descent morning passes into day—the temporal clause beginning with *ǣr* "before" seems to clearly indicate a considerable lapse of time. It would hardly be used in conveying the idea of a brief plunge.

[2] The volume of the waterfall is of course the decisive factor.

[3] As for the suggestion of W. W. Lawrence that it is a question of a confused echo of the Nordic tradition of the waterfall habitation of trolls, see p. 105.

[4] Normally he descends supported by a rope into the monster's subterranean lair.

[5] Carney, p. 97.

> bright blossom of Galway (= Fearghal) leapt under the lake at his opponent.[6]

In a praise poem to Pilib, son of Aodh Conallach O'Reilly, written shortly before 1596, the poet, also praising his subject in allegorical terms, says:

> Though the heir of our Aodh (= Pilib) found hardship in the danger of the well-known struggle with it, he took a fierce venomous monster from the vegetation at the bottom of a deep stream. His spirits rise on seeing the monster inhabitant of the cold stream; its dwelling and treasures (literally "the place of its goblets") are now in this stout hand, a monster caught by a hand that is stronger.[7]

Carney comments as follows: "It is apparent that in Irish material when one wishes to gain access to the underwater home of a monster, one simply dives in and somehow—it is never quite explained—one moves freely in the world beneath the water."[8]

Carney suggests that this Irish motif manifests itself in *Beowulf*. While he is, I think, altogether right, the matter seems to demand some further attention, both for further illustrating and elucidating the Irish tradition of underwater survival and for shedding light on the nature of its parallelism with *Beowulf*.[9]

It appears not unlikely that the Irish tradition of such survival is ultimately traceable to the mythical concept of the otherworld under the waves, which seems to have its origin in the idea—not inconceivably related to the Atlantis myth—of a wondrous country under the sea, an enchanted land sunk in remote times and still held under spell; it is often called *Tír fó Thuinn* "the Land under the Wave." This concept is strikingly glimpsed in *The Voyage of Mael Dúin*, where, after leaving the "crystal sea," the voyagers see "beneath the clear water a beautiful country, with many mansions surrounded by

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[6] *Poems on the O'Reillys*, edited by James Carney (Dublin, 1950), pp. 220f.

[7] Ibid., p. 188.

[8] Carney, p. 98.

[9] It may be noted that I had arrived at the theory of Irish influence on *Beowulf* in this matter before learning of Carney's suggestion.

groves and woods."[10] In the original tradition this land was out of bounds to mortals, but it became subsequently accessible to some heroes through, it seems, the influence of the concept of the fairyland beyond the sea, becoming thus at times confused with it or, one may say, virtually the underwater fairyland, as plausibly concluded by A. C. L. Brown:

> The Land beyond the wave, where the fairy folk are represented as dwelling, was no doubt confused with the Land beneath the Waves, just as Zimmer has shown that the Fairies of the *síd* and the Fairies of the Land beyond the Waves are never kept separate.... That the Celtic Other World was early confused with the Land beneath the Waves is clear from the tale of Loegaire mac Crimthann in the Book of Leinster.[11]

The story[12] mentioned by Brown tells how Loegaire goes to the aid of Fiachna, a fairy ruler. He and his fifty men dive into a loch and find underneath it a wondrous land (*síd*, i.e., fairy domain), where they defeat Fiachna's enemies, rescue his abducted wife, and then enjoy the love of Fiachna's daughter and fifty other women for a year; they subsequently, after a farewell visit home, return to the ageless delights of the fairy realm.

Another legend notably featuring the concept of the subaquatic otherworld is that of *Gillie of the Ferule*.[13] This story tells of Murough, son of the King of Erin, encountering a mysterious stranger who presents the prince with two hounds and a hunting horn, thereupon disappearing "like the

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[10] *Old Celtic Romances*, translated by W. P. Joyce (London, 1894), p. 147. A mangled manuscript of this tale is found in *LU*, a complete one in the fourteenth-century *Yellow Book of Lecan*.

[11] A. C. L. Brown, "Iwain," *Harvard University Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, VIII (1900), 41.

[12] Standish H. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (London, 1892), II, 290-91. This tale is from the *Book of Lismore*.

[13] *Giolla on Fhiugha*. This folktale-type story is translated from a nineteenth-century manuscript. The date of its origin is unknown but, as Hyde, the translator (see Ch. V, n. 24) notes (p. x), "so far back as eight hundred years ago, Murough, son of Brian Boru, was credited with adventures in the fairy world." He suspects (p. x) that the story "had been told for ages before it was written down, and that, in fact, it may never have been committed to paper until perhaps a century or two ago."

water of a winter fog or the whiff of a March wind." The next day Murough goes hunting with the strange hounds and at the end of the hunt, needing help to carry all the quarry home, he is accosted by a man in a long cloak and black shirt who asks to be taken into his service. Murough agrees to hire him as his gillie and to grant him in wages and stipend whatsoever he shall ask at the end of the year. The year past, the gillie asks for a ferule to fit his stick. The only suitable one turns out to be at the bottom of a lake. The hero dives there, encountering and slaying a monstrous serpent[14] and obtaining the ferule as well as a magic cauldron. The gillie claims in addition the cauldron as a stipend and disappears under the water. The hero resolves to recover it; he dives into the middle of the lake "so that he was travelling in it for three nights and three days,[15] until he was swallowed up at last to the country-under-wave." There he learns that the king of the land has been robbed of most of his possessions and the people have been victimized by a five-headed giant and his foul hag mother; the giant is to come that very evening to carry off the king's daughter. Murough slays the giant in a furious battle; then, going to the court of the King-under-Wave, he finds his Gillie of the Ferule sitting as King on a golden throne. After spending what seems to be a week or two in continual feasting, the hero returns to Ireland; he has been away for more than a year.

In *The Wooing of Emer* Cúchulainn tells his charioteer a story featuring the motif of underwater adventure in question:

> There was a famous king here in Erin, Ruad, son of Rigdond, of Munster. He had an appointment of meeting with foreigners. He went to the meeting with the foreigners round the south of Alba with three ships. Thirty were in each ship. The fleet was arrested from below in the midst of the sea. Throwing jewels and precious things into the sea did not get them

[14] It may be noted that the serpent's blood on the surface leads the watchers at the lake to conclude that Murough is dead—the same pessimistic conclusion as is drawn in *Beowulf* after the hero's fight with Grendel's Mother.

[15] This length of time recalls the *hwīl dæges* it takes Beowulf to reach the bottom of Grendel's mere.

> off. Lots were cast among them for who should go into the sea and find out what it was that held them fast. The lot fell upon the king himself. Then the king Ruad, son of Rigdond, leapt into the sea. The sea at once closed over him. He lighted upon a large plain on which nine beautiful women met him. They confessed to him that it had been they that had arrested the ships, in order that he should come to them. And they gave him nine vessels of gold to sleep with them for nine nights, one night with each of them. . . . Then he joined his men, and they went on with their voyage.[16]

In Celtic tradition the subaquatic otherworld is not always reached through the sea, or even a lake. In the story of *In Gilla Decair* it is reached by descent down a well. There is no doubt that the same general concept applies here; the size and nature of the body of water has no absolute significance in Celtic lore—as the otherworld can flourish behind the ocean, so can it behind smaller bodies of water (for example, a stream, as in Marie de France's *Graelent* and, though in somewhat obscured form, in Chrétien's *Lancelot*); the same formula obviously holds true for the subaquatic otherworld. In *In Gilla Decair*[17] Diarmaid Ó Duibhne, searching with Finn and his comrades for fifteen abducted Fenians, dives down a well (fountain), after vaulting a precipitous cliff with the help of the magic staves he had received from Manannán, and comes to "a wide open country, beautiful and flowery," which, he learns, is *Tír fó Thuinn*.

In all these Irish tales the hero's visit underwave is apparently precipitated or inspired by the inhabitants of the otherworld.[18] No hint of such instrumentality is found in *The*

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[16] *The Wooing of Emer*, translated by Kuno Meyer, in *The Archaeological Review*, I (March, 1888), 155. A fragmentary version of *Tochmarc Émire* is preserved in *LU*; there is a complete manuscript from about 1300. Meyer's translation is based on both. Fragments of a tenth-century recension containing Old Irish strata, on which the *LU* version is based, indicate considerable antiquity (see Eleanor Knott and Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Literature* [New York, 1966], p. 127).

[17] *Silva Gadelica*, II, 292f. This tale is translated from an eighteenth-century manuscript. Its antiquity, like that of so many another romance of folktale nature, is uncertain.

[18] This is less obvious in *In Gilla Decair*; nevertheless here the chain of events is started by the appearance of one of the Tuatha Dé Danann in magic disguise. Moreover, Diarmaid's success in reaching the well is made possi-

Death of the Children of Tuireann, in an episode of which Brian, one of the three sons of Tuireann, ventures under the sea in order to obtain a cooking spit, part of the fine placed on him and his brothers for the slaying of Cian, the father of Lug:

> Then Brian put on his water-dress, with his helmet of transparent crystal on his head, and, telling his brothers to await his return, he leaped over the side of the ship, and sank at once out of sight. He walked about for a fortnight down in the green salt sea, seeking for the Island of Fincara; and at last he found it.[19]

Similarly, in the accounts cited by Carney[20] there is no hint of any concept of supernatural aid in the hero's survival underwater in the course of the subaquatic monster fights in question. It seems not unlikely that, like the story of Brian's adventure, they reflect a dilution of the motif of the underwater otherworld in the course of which the motif of survival underwave is extended so as no longer to embody the fairyland concept as accounting for this survival[21]—the hero simply survives in water. In the story cited above it is nevertheless stated that Brian put on his "water-dress" and had his "helmet of transparent crystal" on his head;[22] it is not clear exactly what the nature of this diving equipment is thought to be—whether, for example, it is supposed to possess magical qualities; in any case, however, it obviously represents an attempt to introduce a faint glimmer of realism into the preternaturalism of the tradition of underwater adventure.[23]

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ble by the magic staves of Manannán, one of the most celebrated of the Tuatha Dé Danann.

[19] Joyce, *Old Celtic Romances*, pp. 87f. The earliest manuscripts of *Oidheadh Chloinne Tuireann* are from the eighteenth century, but the story was certainly in existence in the sixteenth century and its main elements are evidenced in some form or other between the eleventh and late fourteenth centuries (see Knott and Murphy, *Early Irish Literature*, p. 109).

[20] See pp. 74-75.

[21] It is interesting to note that in the story of *Gillie of the Ferule* the two concepts seem to co-exist. Initially the hero slays the serpent and obtains the cauldron on the bottom of the lake; later he makes his way to the subaquatic fairyland under the lake.

[22] In *Gillie of the Ferule* Murough is also said to wear a helmet of glass on his subaquatic expedition.

[23] In this connection we may note the miraculous quality of Cei, in the Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen* (see Ch. IV, n. 6), p. 107: his breath lasts "nine

The dilution or eclipse of the fairyland concept accounting for subaquatic survival may have been, at least partially, a result of the encroachment of Christianity on belief in the fairy realm. This latter phenomenon must not be overstressed; belief in fairies has in Ireland exhibited remarkable staying power through the centuries, even if largely on the level of popular superstition, and (non-allegorical) fairy romance survived as a literary form throughout the Middle Ages. Yet the advent and consolidation of Christianity did of course deal severe blows to the genuine, firmly-rooted belief in the physical existence of elfland, an influence that manifested itself in literature. While in some instances Christian influence in connection with the tradition in question may have been solely negative, in others it clearly furnished new explanations of underwater survival. Witness the story of *The Psalter of the Pig*, in which subaquatic existence is expressly credited to the help of God:

> The Cleric permitted the big man to take his son with him to bury him. He consented. "Why not come with me, o Caenchomrac, to see the monastery?" They went together under the lake into the monastery. Caenchomrac remained in it from one canonical hour till the corresponding one the next day performing canonical service and mass. He wondered at the palace and its delightfulness. "It is so easy for God," said the Cleric, "to cause us to dwell under water as in other places."[24]

Here we perceive what appears to be a Christianization of the Irish tradition of underwater habitation. Similarly in *Death of Eochaid*[25] Liban, daughter of Eochaid, is "pro-

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nights and nine days" under water. Whether this is conceived as an exceptional quality inherent in the man or as being due to external magic is not clear; a connection with the Irish motif of underwater survival is, however, a manifest possibility.

[24] *The Psalter of the Pig*, translated by Tom Peete Cross, *Modern Philology*, XVIII (1921), 451. The translation is from the oldest manuscript, in the fifteenth-century *Book of Fermoy*. Essentially the same story is told in *Disappearance of Caenchomrac*, from the *Book of Lismore*, *Silva Gadelica*, II, 94f.

[25] *Silva Gadelica*, II, 267f. From *LU*.

tected by God from the water" and survives in a chamber under the lake after the overflowing of Lough Neagh.

It should be noted that in these latter two stories we find the concept of a presumably watertight underwater dwelling, a concept also found in *Beowulf*; thus the Anglo-Saxon epic exhibits yet another motif inherent in the Irish tradition of subaquatic existence—the submerged dwelling.

It is conceivable that the idea of divine aid in underwater survival, embodied in the two stories cited above, may have been in the mind of the Christian *Beowulf* poet when he describes Beowulf's foray against Grendel's Mother, or that it may have been involved in some of the material he used; this would parallel God's aid to the hero at the crucial moment of the fight with the ogress. Be that as it may—and evidence is of course totally lacking—it appears not unlikely that the miraculous descent under water of the mighty Geat, which lacks credible parallels in Germanic tradition, is connected with the Celtic motif of the ability of mortals to penetrate and survive under water traced and considered in this chapter.

IX

BEOWULF'S SLAYING OF DÆGHREFN

Beowulf's modus operandi in slaying the Frankish champion Dæghrefn, on Hygelāc's ill-fated expedition to the area of the lower Rhine, is as startlingly unconventional—as a mode of combat in Germanic heroic literature—as is the Geatish hero's procedure in dealing with Grendel. In neither instance is a weapon of war used; while the arm of the monster is torn off at the shoulder, the Frankish warrior's chest is shattered in the deadly grip of Beowulf:

> nalles hē ðā frætwe Frēscyninge,
> brēostweorðunge bringan mōste,
> ac in campe gecrong cumbles hyrde,
> æþeling on elne; ne wæs ecg bona,
> ac him hildegrāp heortan wylmas,
> bānhūs gebræc. (ll. 2503-508)

(He could not bring the adornments, the breast-decoration, to the Frisian king; but he, the standard-bearer, sank in battle, a noble in prowess. Nor was the sword his slayer, but my unfriendly grasp crushed his body, the surgings of his heart.)

Germanic heroic literature fails to yield palpable parallels to this mode of combat. Thus in *Grettis saga*—of special interest here because of its established connection with *Beowulf*—the immensely strong Icelander never slays an adversary through the use of sheer strength. His physical

might does indeed stand him in good stead in his fight with the troll-woman at Sandhaugar and in his struggles with two powerful revenants and a bear, but he kills or mortally wounds these and other foes with weapons. The pattern tends to be the same everywhere in ancient Germanic literary tradition, from Icelandic saga to epics like *Nibelungenlied* and *Gudrun*—the sword, dagger, spear, or battle-axe is the decisive instrument of slaughter in combat.[1] Granted that we do not possess, aside from a few fragments like *The Fight at Finnsburg* and *Hildebrandslied*, records of Germanic battle poetry roughly contemporaneous with *Beowulf*, nevertheless the absence of this element in later Germanic heroic literature leaves one free to look for the possible influence of the literary tradition that appears, as has been suggested and will be further shown in the following chapter, to be responsible for Beowulf's violent, deadly grapple with Grendel, viz., the Irish.

Violent mangling modes of combat with strictly physical means are indeed found in Irish heroic literature. Thus a striking parallel to Beowulf's slaying of Dæghrefn is met in *The Battle of Magh Rath*:

> Howbeit, when Cellach observed that Conan was dim-sighted and blind, he did nothing but close upon him and press him by the mighty force of his arms and body, so that the warrior Conan fell down a mangled corpse, and as he lay, a conquered champion, he was mutilated and beheaded by Cellach.[2]

From the brief allusion to the slaying of Dæghrefn in *Beowulf*, we can only speculate about the Geatish hero's reasons for closing with his adversary in deadly physical combat—if the *Beowulf* poet at all had a source for this

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[1] In Icelandic sagas cruder weapons, like clubs or sticks of wood, are occasionally used, but not in what might be considered heroic combat; they are employed as a last resort when regular weapons are not available or in dealing with berserks, considered as human vermin against whom the use of any weapon or trick is justified. And the berserks themselves, despite their frenzied pre-battle antics, relied essentially on weapons of war in mortal combat.

[2] *The Banquet of Dun na n-Gedh and The Battle of Magh Rath*, p. 271.

element that made these clear. There is no reason to suggest that, like the monster Grendel, Dæghrefn—a human being—may have been through enchantment invulnerable to steel; yet he may perhaps have been the possessor of marvellous, impenetrable armour. Or perhaps he, like Conan, was already physically disabled, incapable of wielding weapons, and Beowulf, like Cellach, scorned to employ these against him; this would parallel the hero's refusal to use arms against Grendel, incapable through his nature of responding in kind. Then, again, perhaps Beowulf considered Dæghrefn so inferior a warrior—inferior to him—as to be unworthy of the dignity of being slain with his weapon; this would not be inconsistent with the superb arrogance Beowulf exhibits elsewhere in the poem. Should this be the case, Cúchulainn's encounter with Láirine mac Nóis in *Táin Bó Cúalnge* would provide an especially striking parallel. The hero of Ulster does not slay this adversary or even wound him with a weapon, but does with his physical violence in a grisly fashion reduce him to a sorely maimed invalid, the injuries leading to a lingering death:

> Cuchulain went to meet him at the ford and he deemed it unbecoming to bring along arms or to ply weapons upon him, so Cuchulain came to the encounter unarmed except for the weapons that he wrested from his opponent. And when Larine reached the ford, Cuchulain saw him and made a rush at him. Cuchulain knocked all of Larine's weapons out of his hand as one might knock toys out of the hand of an infant. Cuchulain ground and bruised him between his arms, he lashed him and clasped him, he squeezed him and shook him, so that he spilled all the dirt out of him, so that the ford was defiled with his dung and the air was fouled with his dust and an unclean, filthy wrack of cloud arose in the four airts wherein he was. Then from the middle of the ford Cuchulain hurled Larine far from him across through the camp till he fell into Lugaid's two hands at the door of the tent of his brother.[3]

On another occasion Cúchulainn wrestles with his foe and in his battle rage crushes or tears him to pieces.

[3] *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, p. 159. Also found (essentially) in *LU*.

Cúchulainn and Mann mac Muirsce grapple in combat; Mann thrice throws Cúchulainn, whereupon the latter's charioteer Laeg incites the hero:

> "Were it the champion's portion thou wast contending for in Emain, thou wouldst be all powerful over the yound bloods in Emain!" At these words the hero's wrath and warrior's rage returned to Cuchulain, so that he overcame Mann at the pillar-stone and he fell to pieces and morsels.[4]

The Irish heroes' modi operandi in these instances obviously clearly resemble Beowulf's method of dealing with Dæghrefn. An echo of this Irish battle motif hence looms as a definite possibility.[5] It is, of course, not altogether impossible that the *Beowulf* poet independently conceived this element as yet another demonstration of the hero's immense physical strength, perhaps to serve as a parallel and complement to the lethal maiming of Grendel; nor is it inconceivable that this type of mayhem may have been not entirely foreign to very early Germanic heroic literature, even apart from *Beowulf*, of which not much survives. Yet the parallelism to the Irish instances cited is striking and there exists a manifest possibility that, whether or not the passage is original with the poet, we here glimpse an echo of the Irish heroic tradition of lethal combat with strictly physical means.[6]

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[4] Ibid., pp. 211f. From the fourteenth-century *Yellow Book of Lecan*.

[5] It should be kept in mind that, as far as we know, both Beowulf and Dæghrefn are non-historical personages, of whom—or whose type of combat—there is no mention in the chronicle accounts of the Hygelāc (Chlochilaicus) expedition.

[6] The familiar suggestion that the slaying of Dæghrefn reflects the ursine qualities of the Bear's Son carries little weight since, strong as he may be said to be, the Bear's Son does not deal with his foe in any similar fashion.

X

THE QUESTION OF THE ORIGIN OF THE GRENDEL STORY

The multiple Celtic parallels to a wide range of elements in *Beowulf* considered in the preceding chapters indicate, it would seem, an affinity with Celtic literary and popular tradition that lends further credibility to the theory of the indebtedness of the Grendel story to the Irish-Scottish folktale of the monstrous predatory arm and the struggle with it. It is valid to suggest that indications of Celtic influence in various elements of *Beowulf* reciprocally reinforce each other, since much of the resistance to acceptance of the "Celtic case" for the Anglo-Saxon epic has hinged on a reluctance to place credit in theories purporting to demonstrate non-Germanic influence in a poem written in a Germanic country, set in Germanic lands, permeated with elements of Germanic (more or less legendary) history, and finding affinities in saga elements in Iceland, a predominantly Germanic country (even if this island did in the Middle Ages have very close cultural and other ties with some of the Celtic parts of the British Isles). Once, however, this "credibility barrier" has been breached—as should now be the situation—the merits of the case can be weighed in a more objective fashion.

It would at this point seem profitable to scrutinize the central question of the basic source of the conflict with Grendel and his mother in the light of this added credibility and

with reference to the parallels and affinities considered in the previous chapters. In this connection the most important objections to the theory—to be articulated—of the influence of Celtic folktale, as well as the arguments in favour of basic Scandinavian influence, must, of course, also come in for scrutiny.

The claims in favour of central indebtedness to the folktale of the Bear's Son, though weakened already by von Sydow's objections[1] and subsequently undermined by arguments relating to parallels in both Celtic folktales and Icelandic sagas, nonetheless deserve some consideration; this can be provided by means of a method of comparison, an approach that may prove conducive to illumination of some vital issues.

The parallels to *Beowulf* exhibited in the tale of the Bear's Son (to be henceforth referred to as BS) are on the whole far less striking than those inherent in the Celtic tale, generally called, since Kittredge, "The Hand and the Child" (to be referred to as HC). Thus in the latter the hero generally goes, as in the epic, to the dwelling he defends on a well-defined mission, and this dwelling is as a rule that of a king or prince. In BS, on the other hand, the hero and his companions come under unsolicited and unexpected attack, usually in an uninhabited building—generally a house in the woods—they light upon and take shelter in. As in *Beowulf*, in HC the hero normally awaits the visitant with a number of companions; in BS, again, the adventurers for the most part take turns guarding the house. In the former two the encounter occurs at night, in BS mostly by day.

In HC, as in the epic, the monster is an inveterate abductor of people from the very dwelling the hero and his companions guard; the kidnap motif in BS, on the other hand, features princesses abducted from some different place—thus the abduction is there not directly connected with the story of the defence of a dwelling.

In both folktales the wounded demon is, as in *Beowulf*, as a rule tracked by his trail of blood, a natural motif under the circumstances, one that by itself hardly bespeaks a connec-

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[1] See pp. 3f.

tion between the stories. The haunt of the demon to which he is pursued is in BS almost invariably underground, as it at times is in HC; yet in the latter tale it is more often, as in *Beowulf,* in a water setting, mostly on an island or rock in the sea;[2] once it is a cave beside a marshy lake.[3]

A striking parallel to the Anglo-Saxon epic is the occurrence in an Irish Fionn Helper Tale[4] of a bag carried by the intruding demon. Here the Fian are unwittingly enticed one by one into it by the son of the ogress whose arm the hero's helper hews off; the latter jumps in intentionally. This bag recalls, of course, Grendel's *glōf* ("glove"), the "game bag" made of the skins of dragons in which, according to Beowulf's account to Hygelāc,[5] the monster apparently was wont to carry off his victims.

The central, most significant parallels between the epic and the Celtic tale lie in the nature of the physical conflict between Beowulf and Grendel. While in the epic the hero clamps an iron hold on the monster's arm grasping at him, in the tale the demonic arm reaching in through the chimney or smoke-hole is similarly seized by the protagonist and there ensues a struggle which, as in the poem, ends in the severing of the aggressive limb, or, again, the arm (or hand) is cut off with a stroke of the hero's weapon. No such mutilation occurs, as a rule, in BS,[6] where the ways of coping with the attacker, who is only rarely of great stature—often he is a dwarf—range from imprisoning him by his beard in a cleft log to shooting or a general beating.

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[2] While in the HC tales the demonic dwelling is never subaquatic, it may be noted that this is sometimes the case in the Irish folktale of the mighty hag treated in Chapter II, which, as will be suggested later in this chapter, has been influential in the genesis of *Beowulf.* In one instance she dwells in a submerged castle (see p. 21) and in another in an underground chamber beneath a spring—a location that may seem to represent a combination of the motifs of underground and underwater settings, perhaps, in degenerate form, the idea of a subaquatic "hall," such as that of Grendel's Mother.

[3] Rittershaus, p. 179.

[4] See Murphy, p. 180.

[5] Ll. 2085-91.

[6] In a few variants (see Panzer, p. 274) the arm is severed (by cutting or shooting). Geographically relevant are the French-Flemish tale of Jean l'Ourson, coloured by "literary touches" (Chambers, *Introduction,* p. 379) and an Icelandic tale, possibly influenced on this point by HC or *Grettis saga.*

A connection with the highly distinctive struggle against the hideous arm in HC would explain the Geatish hero's otherwise mystifying mode of dealing with his monstrous enemy in their combat. Even taking the statement about Grendel's immunity to weapons at face value,[7] one can hardly help wondering why Beowulf grips the monster's arm instead of using more directly lethal tactics, such as going for the throat—which in a fight in the open spaces of Heorot would seem to be a far more natural modus operandi;[8] surely the strength that sustains a grip of such fantastic power can hardly be thought of as ineffective against parts more vital and vulnerable than an arm.[9]

The parallelism between the combat in *Beowulf* and that in HC is rendered even more striking by the fact that while the severing of the arm in the epic seems to take place largely through the frantic efforts of the monster,[10] the same appears

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[7] One must in this connection recall Beowulf's boast—seemingly contradicting the statement about Grendel's immunity—that he could full well kill the monster with a weapon (l. 680)—but refrains from doing so for reasons of pride.

[8] It may be suggested that Grendel's large stature renders a more ordinary kind of combat impossible. Yet there is no indication that the poet applies this type of logic to Beowulf's combats; thus in the struggle with Grendel's Mother—like her son of superhuman stature—the hero has obviously no difficulty in reaching her head with a sword stroke or throwing her with a shoulder-grip. And while Grendel's large stature is, rather casually, mentioned, so is Beowulf's. The monster's carrying off thirty men at a time or stuffing his booty in a *glōf* must, again, not be taken too realistically as indication of size; it is probably a question of hyperbolic exaggeration common in stories of ogres.

[9] The slaying of the monster is, after all, Beowulf's avowed aim; after the struggle he expresses regret that he could not *hine . . . on wælbedde wrīþan* ("pin him . . . down to his death-bed," ll. 963-64).

[10] This degree of passivity on the part of the hero clearly emerges from the account of the combat. The monster is *ūtweard* ("moving out," l. 761) but his *fingra gewealdes* ("control of his fingers") is *on grames grāpum* ("in the enemy's grip," ll. 764-65) and Beowulf clings to his foe—*hēold hine fæste* ("held him firmly," l. 788)—as the latter desperately struggles to free himself and escape—following him wherever he goes. He relentlessly refuses to let go—*nolde eorla hlēo ænige þinga / þone cwealmcuman cwicne forlætan* ("The protector of nobles would not by any means let the murderous visitor escape alive," ll. 791-92)—holds on for dear life until the arm is torn off at the shoulder. The emphasis is clearly throughout on Beowulf's

to hold true in many [11] of the folktales where gripping rather than cutting is featured (which primitive tactic probably represents the elementary form); indeed in some variants this is made explicitly clear.[12] The semi-passive nature of the hero's modus operandi is more understandable by far in the folktale—where his primary objective is the defensive one of preventing the arm from seizing the infant—than in the epic, where the avowed purpose of super-hero Beowulf is to kill the intruder—and clutching the arm of such a tough and fearsome monster, no matter how powerfully, hardly impresses one as deadly tactics. An echo of the tale in the poem may thus well seem further indicated.[13]

"hanging tight"; nowhere is there any intimation of an effort of wrenching or tearing on the hero's part—he simply *hine . . . hæfde be honda* ("had him by the hand," l. 814). Beowulf's grip on Grendel's hand is so hard that the monster's fingers crack; one has the impression of a viselike grip, an operation perhaps comparable to that of the leg-trap, which severely hurts its quarry, causing pain and terror that at times impel the caught animal to tear or gnaw off its caught limb in order to escape.

[11] As would be expected, the folktale varies considerably on this matter; often it is a question of a veritable tug-of-war.

[12] Thus in an Irish tale (Patrick Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts* [London, 1860], pp. 229f.) "a violent effort was made by the powerful witch sprawling on the roof to draw it away, but in vain. Another and another, and down it came across the body of Cluas Guillin." In another (Jeremiah Curtin, *Hero-Tales of Ireland* [Boston, 1894], pp. 445-46) the immobile inertia of the gripper called Lazy Back is yet more pointed. When the ogress "felt her hand caught, she struggled greatly; but Lazy Back kept the hold that he had, and nothing could stir him. At last the arm left the shoulder of the hag."

[13] Assuming an echo of the folktale in the epic, it is not difficult to see why in the latter the monster is found dead in his dwelling rather than still alive as in the tale; Grendel has to die from his wound for the train of blood-revenge to be set in motion. The author makes a great deal of this issue with sociological overtones, one that may, however, as I shall suggest (p. 132), well be accounted for by the influence of the Celtic folktale of the hag intent on avenging her offspring considered in Chapter II. Moreover, Beowulf positively declares on the morning after the fight that his enemy is dead and a discovery to the contrary would impair the hero's credibility and dim his glory. His assumption may indeed seem puzzling in terms of logic—why need so tough a monster of necessity die from the loss of an arm? Yet the conclusion is dramatically appropriate; if there was any doubt about this issue, how could everybody now breathe easily and celebrate—as Beowulf had pledged the previous night they would be able to—and how

Moreover, why is Grendel all but utterly helpless against Beowulf's attack? Surely he has another arm of gigantic strength with which to retaliate, yet he seems for all practical purposes one-armed.[14] One may note that in the closest literary parallels from Germanic territory—the fights of Grettir with the troll-woman at Sandhaugar and the revenant Glám—the hero struggles with his attackers in an all-round grapple, attacking the body with basic wrestling tactics, even if the severing of the troll-wife's arm that ends the encounter very likely does reflect a connection with *Beowulf*.

To pursue the question of the puzzling nature of Beowulf's encounter with Grendel to its bare bones on a basis of logic, which, though not infallible in matters such as this, can yield significant clues and put things in a revealing perspective, one may further ask why the hero, as superior to Gren-

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could the hero be praised and rewarded for his success? Such significant plot elements may well have motivated the introduction of a minor note of unrealism.

[14] Much is made of Grendel's apparently one-armed tactics. He grasps at Beowulf *mid handa* ("with his hand," l. 746), before the hero clamps his determined hold on the aggressive limb. In Beowulf's account to Hygelāc, again, the monster is said to grasp at him *gearofolm* ("with ready hand" or, perhaps, "outstretched hand," l. 2085) to stuff him in his dread *glōf*; one has here the impression of a rather nonchalant, if greedy, grasp for supposedly helpless prey, recalling the *modus operandi* of the long-armed monster of HC.

Calvin Brown ("Beowulf's Arm Lock," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, LV [1940], 621f.) and Donald K. Fry ("Beowulf's Hammerlock," *Modern Philology*, LXVII [1969], 364f.) speculate about Beowulf's employment of canny wrestling tactics. The former sees the hero turning his back to the monster after seizing his arm and then wrenching off the limb held beneath his own shoulder, while bearing down on the elbow. Fry, again, thinks that the hero, after seizing Grendel's arm, quickly moves behind him, in the process twisting the arm behind the monster's back; then during the entire struggle which ends in the severing of the arm, he remains in this rather safe position, following Grendel wherever the latter goes.

Such speculation is of course intended to fill the void left in the poem—at least in the view of those who demand a precise, rational explanation of all elements, a contemporary trend—by the apparent vagueness of the account of Beowulf's modus operandi, a vagueness that is more understandable if the struggle is seen as an echo of that with the monstrous arm in the Celtic tale.

del as he has proved to be, does not after the severing of the arm quickly pursue the severely-crippled monster instead of merely "rejoicing in his work"?[15] Why does he not, for example, quickly move to seize the other arm—if arm-gripping is his favourite combat technique—or otherwise clutch him as he tries to escape, and keep on mangling him? His failure to follow up his advantage is, on the other hand, more understandable if viewed in the light of the situation in HC, where the hero could hardly be thought able immediately to catch up with his adversary since the latter is outside the building and thus, if intent on flight, able to get a headstart and vanish into the darkness.

Beowulf's procedure and its background are perhaps further clarified and placed into their logical perspective by stark contrast with his modus operandi in the struggle with Grendel's Mother. Far from forswearing the use of weapons against the supposedly weaker female monster, he borrows a trusty sword with the express purpose of attacking this very creature therewith; when his onslaught fails, he takes recourse to basic wrestling tactics, throwing her to the ground; there is no question here of repeating his already proven successful tactic employed against Grendel. Why? The answer may well lie in the distinctive derivation of the fight with Grendel—and Grendel only—from the struggle with the demonic arm in HC—a close and rigidly-applied echo. Following this pattern, the hero is to engage in combat with the arm—and the arm alone—and the demon, no matter how severely wounded, is allowed to vanish into the night. As already indicated, Beowulf's strength as represented here resembles that of "Gripper" or "Firmholder" of some of the variants of HC; this character, derived from the folktale of "The Skilful Companions," excels in his one particular talent; he need, one may assume, not be particularly proficient in all-around combat or swift pursuit.

Origin in or at least the vital influence of the Celtic folktale could thus be seen as accounting for Beowulf's

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[15] L. 827. He does, after all, voice his regret at the monster's physical escape.

strange mode of combat,[16] the monster's helplessness in the face of it, and the resulting loss of arm—all this since in that tale is the arm alone exposed. This very point is developed with striking logic by Murphy, who, as previously mentioned,[17] sees the origin of the motif in question in the nature of "the oldfashioned Irish chimney, which was little more than a hole in the roof."

The consideration of the nature of the Grendel struggle would seem to provide a logically formidable core for a theory of the indebtedness of the Grendel story in *Beowulf* to the Irish folktale. If other parallels were lacking, it would be easier—though still difficult—to see chance and coincidence at work; this is, however, by no means the case, as a substantial framework of parallelism between the epic and Celtic tradition surrounds, as already seen and to be further shown, this central motif.

Yet an assumption of such a basic connection does not totally eliminate BS as a possible source of influence on the epic, as the Celtic folktale need not necessarily represent the sole source of the entire Grendel story in *Beowulf*; thus, notably, the setting of Grendel's Mother's abode and the very struggle with her are only partially paralleled by some of the variants of the tale. Before facing this particular question and the "waterfall argument" inevitably connected therewith, a consideration of some of the parallels between the folktale and the epic that have—largely as a result of Panzer's study—impressed many scholars, would seem to be in order. Thus it is stated at the very end of the Grendel part of the poem that the hero was in his youth considered slothful and unpromising, an allegation that contrasts sharply with his claims of youthful exploits and his being greatly cherished by his grandfather King Hrēþel. This element has been widely regarded as indebted to the lack of regard for the Bear's Son on the part of his elder brothers or other companions.

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[16] The possession of the strength of thirty men in his handgrip, attributed to him by Hrōðgār, adds to the impression of legendary kinship with the "Gripper" figure of the folktale.

[17] P. 9.

The motif of the underrated youth who ultimately proves his worth is, however, as pointed out by von Sydow,[18] extremely common and widespread in the realm of folktale and may easily have been incorporated into *Beowulf* as a "floating motif" rather than surviving as a relic of BS. Nevertheless, since the story in the epic and the tale exhibit a degree of surface parallelism, such influence is not altogether out of the question; general resemblance often serves as a catalyst in the transfer of individual motifs.

The perplexing sleep of the fourteen hand-picked retainers of Beowulf during the Geats' wait for the murderous visitation has long been recognized as one of the prime psychological puzzles of the poem. With all due allowance for travel fatigue and the effects of the beverage served in Hrōðgār's hall, it is not easy to account for such sang-froid, fatalism, or simply apathetic lethargy on the part of every single member of Beowulf's elite band of Geatish warriors. It is not difficult to conceive a suspicion that some element from a source or earlier version of the story may be manifesting itself here. Klaeber has this comment:

> How is it possible for the Geats to fall asleep in this situation? Obviously their failing enhances the achievement of Beowulf. Or does this feature reflect ancient tales in which preliminary unsuccessful attempts to cope with the intruder are incident to the defenders' failure to keep awake.[19]

Klaeber refers for possible solution of the puzzle to a few variants of BS listed by Panzer. In these, where the visitation takes place at night, the hero's companions have succumbed to sleep during their respective vigils or do so in his presence; the hero manages to stay awake through more or less drastic means, such as pacing to and fro, kindling a light and smoking, rubbing pepper into his eyes, or placing a thorn or the point of a weapon under his chin. It should be noted, however, that none of these variants is from the British Isles or any area close to Britain; the nearest is from central Europe. As Chambers very logically suggests,[20] the evidence value of

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[18] See Ch. I, footnote 13.

[19] P. 154.

[20] *Introduction*, p. 369.

the parallels between *Beowulf* and BS hinges greatly on the geographical proximity of the relevant variants of the tale to the area where the epic was composed. Already on this premise—and further in view of the paucity of such variants—BS stands out as a less likely source of the puzzling sleep in *Beowulf* than does HC, many of whose variants feature a sleep, at times statedly magically induced, that overtakes the hero's companions at the vigil, sometimes even the hero himself, prior to the climactic struggle with the dread visitant. In a Scottish tale Feunn Mac Cüail (Finn mac Cumaill) and his companions are exposed to soporific music:

> Then came the sweetest music that was ever heard.... Feunn Mac Cüail's men fell asleep. Feunn himself was like to fall with sleepiness, and did not know what to do. At last he put the poker in the fire and made it pretty hot, and held it to his chin, so that when he would bend his head it would touch the poker; and this kept him awake.[21]

In another Scottish tale[22] Finn and his company are similarly overtaken by sleepiness induced by music, but "The one who never slept"—one of the "Skilful Companions"—manages to keep everybody awake. This music is undoubtedly thought of as a magic charm, as is made pointedly clear in an Irish tale,[23] where the sleep that overcomes Finn (here his companions stay awake) is statedly "druidic," i.e., magic. In a variant of the Celtic saga recorded in Iceland,[24] again, all watchers but "Watchwell" succumb to a sleep said to be magically induced. In yet another Scottish tale, where Finn tells his men, said to be tired and sleepy, to take their rest while he watches, the drastic means he has to employ to stay awake similarly indicate indebtedness to the motif of magic sleep: "... he had a bar of iron in the fire, and as often as his eyes would begin to

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[21] Donald MacInnes, *Folk and Hero Tales: Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, Argyllshire Series (1889, etc.), no. 2, p. 63.

[22] J. G. Campbell, *The Fians*: ibid., p. 205.

[23] Kennedy, p. 227.

[24] Rittershaus, p. 179.

close with sleep, he would thrust the bar through the bone of his palm, and that was keeping him awake."[25]

It is clear, then, that succumbing to magic sleep or resisting it plays an important role in numerous HC tales, very likely reflecting a basic motif accounting for the mystifying drowsiness of men in such perilous circumstances, even if in many variants of the folktale the reasons for the puzzling sleep are—as in Beowulf—not made clear.

Thus, while there is of course no positive proof of the indebtedness of the epic to HC in this matter—the possibility of independent origin or the presence in both works of a widespread "floating" motif cannot be totally discounted and, as noted above, the element of drowsiness at watching also turns up in BS—the parallelism between the epic and the Celtic folktale widespread in Ireland and the Gaelic area of Britain nevertheless represents yet another intriguing link in the chain of resemblance between the Grendel fight of *Beowulf* and the story of the struggle with the demonic arm in HC. An echo of HC may well lie behind the perplexing sleep of Beowulf's retainers. It may be a question of a defective relic or the poet may have consciously, if unrealistically, suppressed an element of pagan magic—the idea of the victimization of Christian heroes through such magic may have been less than appealing to the Christian poet.

It is not inconceivable that the state of anger Beowulf is said to be in during his vigil—while, as suggested in Chapter V, it may be borrowed from literary convention—represents a modified echo of the drastic means the hero of HC sometimes, as seen above, has to employ to stay awake, the drastically "keyed-up" mental state replacing physical pain as the antidote against sleep.

Perhaps even more baffling than the sleep of Beowulf's retainers is the hero's failure to go to the rescue of his comrade Hondscīoh when the latter is being dismembered by Grendel before his very eyes; the "enraged" hero watches with apparent detachment *hū se mānscaða under fǣrgripum gefaran wolde* ("how the murderous foe would set to work

[25] James MacDougall, *Folk and Hero Tales: Waifs and Strays* . . . (see footnote 21), no. 3, p. 5.

with his sudden attacks''). How is one to account for such callousness on the part of the great Geat?

The simplest explanation to grasp at would be that the hero indeed, as the wording may seem to suggest, is intent on observing the monster and his tactics so as to be able to devise the proper strategy for dealing with him; after all, a good military commander must at times be ready to sacrifice some of his men on account of this type of consideration. Yet such motivation would be jarringly out of tune with the heroic spirit of the epic and its hero, most of all with the superb confidence with which Beowulf prepares to face Grendel, and it would vastly reduce his moral stature as well, as he would be sacrificing a retainer to his pride; obviously unaware of Grendel's magic invulnerability to metal, he claims he could full well kill him with a weapon but scorns to do so. Moreover, Grendel's fighting methods can at this point hardly be a mystery; the Danes ought to be in a position—on the basis of their twelve years' experience—to brief Beowulf as to the monster's tactics. In fine, it is difficult to accept the proposition of some scholars that the poet has specifically introduced this element as an integral part of the hero's modus operandi in facing his foe. At the most, such reasoning on the part of the poet may represent a feeble attempt at rationalization of a discordant element with deeper underlying motivation.

As previously mentioned,[26] von Sydow suggests that the poet is here intent on providing dramatic visualization of Grendel's atrocities, an almost cinematic close-up illustrating the monster's cannibalistic practices, in the process heightening the admiration for Beowulf's demonstration of his superiority by contrast effect—what with the helplessness in Grendel's clutches of the retainer later identified as Hondscioh.

It seems, however, rather implausible that the poet should find it appropriate to inject such visualization at this point, as he could easily have provided it in connection with Grendel's previous attacks on the hapless Danes of Heorot, with never a need to introduce such a psychologically jarring

[26] See Ch. I, footnote 13.

note tarnishing the figure of a hero described by his mourning retainers as *lēodum līðost* ("kindest to his people"). The contrast effect is of course present, but it is difficult to conceive of it as the motivation—at least the basic and principal one—behind such a disturbing element; Beowulf's might stands out, after all, as awesome already on the background of the futile, indeed pathetic resistance offered by the Danes, who were devoured in droves on the spot or carried off to slaughter in large numbers.

It seems more likely that it is a question here of a relic, a within-the-context incongruous survival of source material, than of an original note injected by the poet. Chambers suggests that an echo of BS is at work here:

> The turn of the hero comes last, after all his companions have been put to shame. But Beowulf, who is represented as having specially voyaged to Heorot in order to purge it, cannot leave the defence of the hall for the first night to one of his comrades. Hence the discomfiture of the comrade and the single-handed success of the hero have to be represented as simultaneous. The result is incongruous; Beowulf has to look on while his comrade is killed.[27]

This suggestion compels more intellectual admiration than acceptance. If the poet is on this point so rigidly tied to the story in BS, why is only one comrade victimized, rather than at least two, as is the case in the folktale? Moreover, in BS the previous watchers are only manhandled, never killed, let alone devoured, as in *Beowulf*—quite a difference in "discomfiture"! Yet, if merit is seen in Chambers' suggestion, HC could also qualify as a possible source of inspiration, since in it previous watchers have also come to grief—and it possesses other traits and elements to recommend it. While in dealing with this puzzle any theory has to be to some extent speculative, it would not seem unprofitable to suggest that Beowulf's perplexing passivity during the murder of his retainer may have some connection with—perhaps its very

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[27] Chambers, *Introduction*, p. 64. Klaeber briefly opines (note, p. 155) that "presumably this is a feature of the original story retained by the poet, though he had added the incident of a previous attack on one of the comrades."

root in—the incapacitation of the hero through sleep or heavy stupor in HC; as previously noted, here this character sometimes succumbs to slumber or has great difficulty warding it off.[28] The presence of a relic of such faintness could account for his not going to the rescue of his comrade. Moreover, in the Celtic folktale the hero's victory over the monstrous arm is very often rather pyrrhic, since within the most typical story pattern the infant is carried off by the other arm. It is conceivable that this loss combined with the notion of the hero's temporary incapacitation is responsible for the casualty marring Beowulf's triumph over Grendel. A super-hero like Beowulf cannot of course be permitted any kind of physical lapse—he must not sleep or doze when pledged to keeping *eotenweard* ("watch for monsters")—and so he is incongruously represented as alertly awake throughout the gruesome murder. Peripheral motivation, such as the desire to dramatize Grendel's ferocity and enhance Beowulf's stature by contrast effect—and perhaps even the desire to depict the hero as the instant avenger—may perhaps have contributed to the genesis of this bizarre element.

The departure of the Danes from Grendel's mere at *nōn dæges* ("the ninth hour of the day," i.e., 3:00 P.M.), an unspecified length of time after they notice blood on water, has been suggested (by Panzer, Chambers, and others) as an echo of the treacherous abandonment (by cutting the rope to the underworld) of the Bear's Son by his comrades. On close analysis the two actions seem, however, altogether dissimilar; there is not the slightest hint of betrayal in *Beowulf*, as the departure is fully explainable in simple psychological terms. Even though *monige* ("many") of the Danes are said to attach a grimly pessimistic significance to the sight of blood on water, all of them apparently remain till *nōn dæges*, when they finally depart. And why not? Beowulf has, after all, been gone for a very long time in fearsome underwater surroundings unfamiliar to men; under such circumstances pessimism has a way of creeping even into the most friendly hearts. The

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[28] Thus in an Irish tale already referred to (Kennedy, p. 229) Fion struggles vainly against druidic sleep: "Three times he made mighty efforts to keep awake, and thrice he was overcome by powerful weariness."

continued, lonely vigil of the Geats, again, introduces a finely poignant note into the poem, somewhat akin in spirit to Wīglāf's death watch over Beowulf; hoping against sober judgment, they stare intently at the water that has swallowed their beloved lord. The retainers, *mōdes sēoce* ("sick at heart") are also pessimistic—and surely the poet could not have dreamed of identifying them in any way with the traitors of BS. The dramatic suspense finally happily over, their being the first to welcome their prince in his hour of triumph and being the ones to carry the grisly trophy, Grendel's head, to Heorot, is in harmony with the poet's endeavour throughout the Grendel story to keep the Geats occupying centre stage and to dramatize their valour and steadfastness; this is, after all, as Beowulf had initially forcefully requested, to be the mission of the Geats and nobody else from beginning to end, the Danes being largely spectators on the sidelines.

Thus it would appear that artistic (including psychological) considerations alone fully explain the grim conclusion and subsequent departure of the Danes from the cliff at the mere and that there is hence no good reason to discern a puzzle here and explain it as an echo of the treachery of the faithless companions of the Bear's Son.

In *Grettis saga*, again, the departure of the priest Stein from his post at the gorge of the stream into which Grettir has dived is, as he himself admits, a breach of faith, but it is clearly due to fear and panic, as is his conclusion that Grettir is dead; that the priest, faced with the dread nearness of a creature who may—even if the evidence is not conclusive—have just killed the incomparable Grettir, should run away in fright with the only professed excuse that justifies such flight is not the least surprising in psychological terms. In addition to being thus realistic, this element is in harmony with the theme of Grettir's almost invariable loneliness and inability to rely on anybody but himself—a poignant one throughout the saga.

It is, however, not unlikely that a connection exists between *Beowulf* and the saga in the matter of the blood on water and the conclusion drawn therefrom, since it is part of a pattern of striking resemblance between parallel episodes of the two works. Yet there is clearly no need to discern in these

episodes the presence of a common echo of the faithless companions of BS, least of all since the central motif of the blood on water is non-existent in the folktale.

The suggestion, initially advanced by Panzer, that the very name Beowulf reflects the hero's origin in the folktale also deserves some attention. "Bee-wolf" (i.e., "enemy of bees," "hive-ravager") has been taken—and quite plausibly so—as a term or nickname for "bear."[29] Yet, granting the plausibility of this etymology, it does not by any means necessarily indicate indebtedness to BS. It need be no more than a question, as von Sydow suggests,[30] of a Germanic warrior name in the Heroic Age, where names of fierce beasts of the forest were commonly used as proper names—witness, for example, Eofor and Wulf in *Beowulf*—as they still are in Scandinavia. Such a name would, of course, be appropriate for a man of fantastic physical strength such as the hero of the Anglo-Saxon epic. Beowulf's physical crushing of the champion Dæghrefn on Hygelāc's Frisian expedition has been suggested as an indication of his ursine propensities and hence of a connection with Bear's Son, but this proposition is not sustained by solid evidence; the hero of the folktale does not indulge in this type of fighting, nor does Beowulf at his other, more celebrated encounters. Such primitive combat tactics are, on the other hand, employed in Irish heroic tradition, even by the great Cúchulainn.[31] In the final analysis, however, the name of the Geatish champion of the epic is not improbably modelled on that of the hero (Bǫðvar) Bjarki ("Little Bear") of Nordic heroic legend.[32]

All in all, it is apparent that the Grendel story in *Beowulf*, far from being derived from BS, exhibits far less parallelism with this folktale than with HC. A number of similarities undeniably exist, especially if all the widely-scattered variants gathered by Panzer are taken into account, but, aside from the general surface parallelism, they tend to be of marginal or questionable significance. This tendency and the

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[29] This was initially suggested by Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, pp. 342, 639.

[30] See Ch. I, footnote 13.

[31] See pp. 84f.

[32] See pp. 126f.

manifest basic differences clearly suggest that any relationship between BS and *Beowulf* must be a distant one; most likely it is no more than a question of parallel development of the basic, widespread motif of the defence of a dwelling visited by a hostile supernatural creature. Such parallel development almost inevitably involves some degree of coincidental similarity, the occasional sharing of "floating" folktale motifs, and, possibly, borrowing of some elements one from the other.

One may now weigh the more weighty objections advanced against the theory of HC serving as the skeletal source of the Grendel story in *Beowulf*. In connection with the central role of Grendel, the marked difference in the nature of the victims in the two stories may give the critic analyzing the parallels pause, as it did Chambers, who voiced this objection: "Surely there is a fundamental difference between the story of a monster who, like Grendel, destroys those who remain overnight in the haunted dwelling, and the story of the furtive arm which steals away one child after another, till the hero comes and restores the children to the parents."[33]

This type of reasoning is, however, hardly convincing as an objection; it represents a rigid, theoretical approach that fails to do justice to the possible flexibility of approach to the subject of the poet or storyteller—or a succession of these—who may be fully capable of moulding or modifying plot elements to suit the purpose at hand. James Carney's argumentation in dealing with this question seems altogether logical in its defence of the free agency of the author:

> "The Hand and Child" is deliberate (and for a medieval audience very entertaining) farce. A farcical situation would be completely out of place in *Beowulf*, because the author has conceived his story on a heroic level. Finn can be depicted as a baby-sitter who failed to adequately guard his charge, but not so Beowulf.
>
> But on the heroic level it is possible to adapt certain features of the farcical treatment. The Irish monster steals children but Grendel steals and devours thanes. Grendel's

[33] Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 478-79.

> action is simply that of the child-stealing monster raised to the level consistent with the author's view of the dignity of his theme.[34]

It might be added that the thanes indeed seem like helpless babes in the clutches of the monster and that this very helplessness heightens the fearsomeness of Grendel and as a consequence the stature of Beowulf—considerations that may well have influenced the author in the moulding of the story elements. It should in addition be noted that, while HC does seem to represent the most popular Celtic treatment of the motif of the monstrous hostile hand, in some of the stories the gigantic arm, whether or not entering through the chimney or smoke-hole, reaches aggressively for heroes.[35] This type of tale may conceivably have served as a catalyst in the adaptation of the HC story to suit the plot of the epic; or, again, it may indeed have been the prototype.

It should hardly be a matter of surprise that an Anglo-Saxon poet or storyteller not conditioned to the Celtic hand-down-the-chimney motif should, while retaining the struggle with the arm and its upshot, have omitted the rather grotesque chimney motif. Grendel, a descendant of the human Cain, is, after all (whatever else some of the progeny of the first fratricide may, according to *Beowulf* and Irish ecclesiastical lore, have been like), described as being of human shape, hence hardly to be imagined as being equipped with an arm of sufficient length to enter through the hearth-opening of the "high hall." Furthermore, Beowulf's feat stands of course out as greater and more heroic in view of his facing

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[34] Carney, p. 101.

[35] Thus in *Fled Bricrend* (p. 108) a huge giant coming from the sea at night stretches out his arm to seize, on successive nights, the watching heroes Loegaire, Conall, and Cúchulainn. The first two fit, "like a year old," into his grasp and are severely manhandled, while Cúchulainn confounds the assailant with his "salmon leap." In another Irish tale (Käte Müller-Lisowski, *Irische Volksmärchen* [Jena, 1923], p. 61) a vengeful ogress, whose man-eating sons Lorcán, Fionn's companion, has slain, attempts to seize the hero through the hearth-opening but has her arm hewn off by him. In yet another Irish tale (Müller-Lisowski, p. 69) a hideous claw enters "through devilish might and magic power" and seizes the whole company before the hero Seachrán tackles it, though in this instance he does not sever it.

and besting the gigantic demon in all his mighty stature and fearsome strength.

The question of the origin of the struggle with Grendel's Mother is a complex one, largely because of the alleged Icelandic parallels to the subaquatic encounter with her, which have led the main thrust of *Beowulf* scholarship to lean towards the conclusion that we here face offshoots of a basic Nordic folktale. Before facing this vexed issue it may be useful to call to mind the fact that the role of Grendel's Mother fits neatly into the Celtic story pattern of a powerful monstrous hag coming to avenge her son or sons slain by a hero, a pattern treated in Chapter II. Moreover, a female monster, usually the mother of the slain monster, frequently turns up in the HC tales. She is normally, together with her son, slain in the demonic hideout. At times she is the initial aggressor.

It is clear, then, that the hand-down-the-chimney motif and the motif of a monstrous hag and her offspring as foes for the hero occur independently in Irish folktale—and sometimes combined; this latter development parallels the story in *Beowulf* and may serve as a vital clue in explaining its genesis.

What might, then, be the background to Beowulf's underwater adventure—his intrepid plunge in full armour[36] into the eerie mere with turbid water, where, after his lengthy and perilous descent to the bottom, he is attacked by the hideous merewife, dragged to her subaquatic dwelling and almost slain before finally with God's guidance and aid overcoming the monster and returning in triumph? Does HC or other Celtic folktale matter lie behind this final round of the sanguinary conflict or are we to discern here through Icelandic parallels indebtedness to Nordic folktale tradition?

The motif of heroes venturing deep under water for long periods of time on various kinds of missions is widespread and well-established in Irish saga tradition, much of it ancient and time-honoured. A hero simply dives into a lake, river, or sea, and somehow carries out his subaquatic mission without

[36] This resembles Brian's strange dive in *The Death of the Children of Tuireann* (see p. 79).

any apparent problems as to respiration. This tradition, considered in Chapter VIII, is on occasion applied in connection with underwater monster fights. Of prime interest is also the motif of the apparently water-tight subaquatic dwelling, at times belonging to a supernatural hag.[37] As previously noted, the hideous creature is in HC frequently pursued to his dwelling in a water setting. All in all, Celtic tradition yields sufficient parallelism to the nature of Beowulf's underwater foray to render a direct connection not improbable.

What, then, about the alleged parallels to Beowulf's water adventure in *Grettis saga* and *Samsonar saga*, elements that have been seen as evidence of the indebtedness of the epic in this matter to Scandinavian tradition? It may in this connection be best to deal first with the so-called waterfall argument. According to the theory central to it the setting of Grendel's Mother's dwelling reflects the concept of troll-infested caves behind waterfalls in the sagas. The main clue to this connection is supposed to be implicit in Hrōðgār's description of the haunt of the monsters:

> Hīe dȳgel lond
> warigeað wulfhleoþu, windige næssas,
> frēcne fengelād, ðær fyrgenstrēam
> under næssa genipu niþer gewīteð,
> flōd under foldan. (ll. 1357-61)

(They dwell in a land unknown, wolf-haunted slopes, windswept headlands, perilous marsh-paths, where the mountain stream goes down under the mists of the cliffs—a flood under the earth.)

As initially suggested by W. W. Lawrence,[38] *fyrgenstrēam* ("mountain stream") would seem to indicate the presence of a waterfall by which the stream empties into the mere. Beowulf, Lawrence thinks, dives into the mere, as Grettir into the river, and, like the Icelander, comes to a cave behind the falling water. The account is vague and confused since the waterfall concept, explicit in the saga, is obscured

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[37] See footnote 2 above.

[38] W. W. Lawrence, "The Haunted Mere in Beowulf," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, XXVII (1912), 208f.; also *Beowulf and Epic Tradition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1928), p. 184.

here, because the poet in non-mountainous England does not fully understand or visualize the nature of the cascade featured in a Scandinavian tale which, Lawrence thinks, must have served as the original source of the corresponding elements in the saga and the epic.

Chambers, who supports this theory,[39] points to *Samsonar saga* as supplying a further parallel, yet another offshoot of the hypothetical original tale. Samson is seized by a troll-wife living in a cave behind the mill foss as he stands on the bank and is dragged beneath the surface, where he manages to stab the creature to death with his knife. He then enters the cave—her dwelling—behind the cascade and exits through a door at the other end.

The evidence for the waterfall concept in *Beowulf* supposedly inherent in the passage cited above appears, however, on close consideration altogether unconvincing. In the first place the application of the meaning "mountain stream" to *fyrgenstrēam* is highly questionable since that word serves in Anglo-Saxon literature on occasion as an epithet or kenning for "ocean." Already Gregor Sarrazin pointed this out[40] and Kemp Malone suggests that the term is to be taken metaphorically, in the sense of "stream that is a mountain (of immensity)"; it "is properly applied to the ocean, which the ancients took for a stream of gigantic size, encircling the land surface of the globe, the *middangeard*."[41] Malone believes that in the epic *fyrgenstrēam* refers to "the great stream of Ocean (i.e., the sea pure and simple), which by subterranean channels penetrates to the mere and so to the cave (l. 2128) where lurk Grendel and his dam, and where Beowulf is destined to fight for his life."[42] He buttresses his case with a close consideration of the numerous terms in the epic for bodies of water and the compounds formed from them to show that semantic and stylistic evidence favours the in-

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[39] Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 461f.

[40] Gregor Sarrazin, "Neue Beowulf-Studien VII. *Fyrgenstrēam*," *Englische Studien*, XLII (1910), 5.

[41] Kemp Malone, "Grendel and his Abode," *Studia Philologica et Litteraria in Honorem L. Spitzer* (Bern, 1958), p. 298.

[42] Kemp Malone, Review of Chambers' *Introduction*, in *English Studies*, XIV (1932), 192.

terpretation that the haunted mere, far from being an inland pool, is part of the sea,[43] a discussion too long and elaborate to be summarized here and doubtless not unfamiliar to scholars.[44]

Impressive as Malone's argument is, a consideration of the alternative—that the standard meaning of *fyrgenstrēam*, i.e., "mountain stream," is applied here—and its implications is nevertheless not out of place. Given this interpretation, it is, however, by no means clear that it is a question of a reference to a waterfall; indeed this represents but contextual speculation inspired by the analogous episode in *Grettis saga*. There is, after all, no definite indication that the disputed term refers to the outlet of the stream—which may simply be seen as running along the *frēcne fengelād* ("perilous marsh-path"). Its passing *under foldan* ("under the earth") may indicate that it flows through a gorge or runs for some distance, like Yeats's stream at Thoor Ballylee, actually underground, rather than that the author should have the cascading water of a waterfall in mind. Such water, indeed, hardly appears visually to pass underground if the stream empties into a body of water—it appears almost statically affixed to the whirlpool; and it would be a rather bold assumption that a poet from the northern part of England must have been altogether unfamiliar with the nature of a waterfall.[45] Moreover, Hrōðgār's description of the countryside need involve nothing more than an attempt to conjure up a vivid picture of terrain rough and fearsome—fen and mountain, traditional haunts of demons.[46] Lawrence's argument

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[43] Thus, notably, he points out that the poet five times calls Grendel's mere *flōd* (ll. 1361, 1366, 1422, 1497, 1516) and that in the other ten occurrences of *flōd* in the poem the word means "large body of water, sea" (note 41, pp. 301-302).

[44] W. S. Mackie ("The Demons' Home in *Beowulf*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, XXXVII [1938], 455-61) also discounts the waterfall theory; he views the waterfall idea as "an interpolation from *Grettis saga*." He sees *fyrgenstrēam*, however, as a reference to stream or mere, with no implication of an underground passage to the sea.

[45] Waterfalls of fairly substantial volume are in fact not uncommon in counties such as Northumberland and Derbyshire.

[46] It may be well to recall that, as indicated on p. 63, this description is closely paralleled by that of the boundary of hell in a *Blickling Homily*. A

that the featuring of both fen and mountain would be unrealistic and that it hence cannot be a question of a mountain stream is hardly on solid ground; fen landscape is sometimes found on high ground and not infrequently below and beside mountains and hills. Furthermore, following his line of argument, how would one account for a waterfall in the fens?

The passing of the stream underground may, aside from a possible realistic touch, be intended to heighten the atmosphere of mist-shrouded darkness and fearful mystery, possibly even with overtones of the concept of a classical river of hell; Grendel is, after all, repeatedly described as a hellish demon and the infernal atmosphere surrounding his mere hardly requires comment. The passage in question may to some extent recall the description of the wild, forbidding landscape with rushing mountain streams traversed by Sir Gawain on the morning of his climactic trial in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, another poem from the northern part of England.

The word *fīrgenstrēam* returns to haunt the critic in Beowulf's report of his adventures to King Hygelāc—if one does not fully embrace Malone's interpretation, under which the meaning is of course crystal-clear. The hero states that Grendel's Mother carried the body of the slain Æschere *fēondes fæðmum under fīrgenstrēam* ("in her fiendish grasp under the mountain stream").[47] If the key word were to be taken to mean "waterfall," a parallel to the haunt of the trolls in *Grettis saga* could well seem indicated; this is, of course, Lawrence's suggestion. Yet such an interpretation cannot be substantiated and will within the total picture seem most unlikely. *under fīrgenstrēam* may simply represent a description of the location of the mere at the foot of the mountain stream; thus it need be no more than a circumlocution,

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description of the landscape of hell somewhat reminiscent of the *Beowulf* passage is, as pointed out by L. Whitbread ("Grendel's Abode: An Illustrative Note," *English Studies*, XXII [1940], 64f.), found in an Irish account: "Woe unto him unto whom that land shall be a lasting inheritance, even for ever and ever. For this is the nature of it: Mountains, caverns, and thorny brakes, plains, bare and parched, with stagnant haunted lochs. The soil is rough and sandy, very rugged, icebound...."

[47] L. 2128.

perhaps alliteration-inspired, for the mere. The idea of a cascade or rapids where the stream may be imagined to flow into the mere may at first glance seem indicated, as the ensuing reference to *holma geþring* ("swirl of waters")[48]—a simple poetic formula for water as it may be—could be taken to indicate watery turbulence, especially since earlier in the poem the water of the mere is said to be *gedrēfed* ("turbid").[49] It emerges, however, on closer consideration of the text that the tumult of the waters is thought of as a fearsome preternatural quality of the haunted mere—like the *fȳr on flōde* ("fire on the flood")[50] referred to by Hrōðgār in his description of its uncanny properties; it is namely stated that *lagu drūsade* ("the water grew calm")[51] when Beowulf returns to his comrades, the *yðgebland* ("surging waves") being then *gefǣlsod* ("cleansed").[52] Clearly, then, the poet thinks of the turbulence as a preternatural phenomenon. The plunge into turbid rather than placid water heightens, of course, the heroic aura of Beowulf's undertaking; such an intent on glorification may motivate the element in question. We may, in addition, glimpse here the poetic device of nature mirroring the mood of man. While the minds of the heroes are troubled and "seething with sorrow," the water is turbid and forbidding; when they blithely rejoice in their triumph, water, too, grows calm and placid.[53] Anyhow, there is no reason to perceive here the idea of a waterfall,[54] let alone one with a

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[48] L. 2132.

[49] L. 1417.

[50] L. 1366.

[51] L. 1630.

[52] L. 1620.

[53] As for Hrōðgār's statement, *þonon yðgeblond up āstīgeð...* ("Thence rises up the surging water," l. 1373), it appears to be, as Malone suggests (see footnote 42), a question of the workings of a windstorm, rather than, as Chambers proposes, the spray of a waterfall; the phenomenon is said to occur when *wind styreð lāð gewidru* ("the wind stirs up baleful storms").

[54] Lawrence thinks the term *næssa genipu* (l. 1360) to mean "the mists of the cliffs"—a reference to the spray rising from the waterfall. On the other hand, *genip* can also mean "darkness" and could thus refer to the descent underground of the mountain-stream, to the subterranean channels suggested by Malone, or simply the dimness along the rock-bound, tree-overhung, mist-shrouded banks of the mere.

cave, the dwelling of monsters—paralleling the situation in *Grettis saga*—behind it. Indeed the terms *grundhyrde* ("guardian of the deep")[55] and *grundwyrgen* ("accursed monster of the deep")[56]—referring to Grendel's Mother—which carry the implication that the dwelling to which Beowulf is dragged is situated at the bottom of the mere, contradict this notion. So does the statement of the length of time—*hwīl dæges*[57]—it takes the hero to descend till he perceives the bottom—unrealistic exaggeration characteristic of Celtic hyperbole as it may be; the emphasis of great depth reinforces the notion that the dwelling of the monsters is conceived as being on the bottom of the body of water. It is, moreover, stated that the mortally wounded Grendel *meregrund gefēoll* ("fell to the bottom of the mere").[58] And conjecture of a vague, muddled echo of the waterfall concept inherent in Icelandic saga—of which, Chambers thinks, *disjecta membra* are glimpsed[59]—and hence of a hypothetical Scandinavian folktale does not stand up very well if a body of direct, clear parallels points in a different direction, as is the case in this instance, what with the multiple Celtic parallels featuring unimpeded underwater passage, fights with monstrous creatures there, and watertight subaquatic dwellings somehow entered and left without impediment;[60] these point

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[55] L. 2136.

[56] L. 1518.

[57] L. 1495. See the comment on the question of the duration of Beowulf's underwater foray indicated by this time reference, Ch. VIII, footnote 1.

[58] L. 2100.

[59] Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 464f.

[60] The demonic dwelling under the mere is described very much in terms conventionally denoting a palace. This is, as aptly pointed out by L. Whitbread ("Beowulf and Archaeology," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, LXVIII [1967], 28f.), indicated by terms such as *sele* (in compounds, ll. 1513, 1545, 2139, and especially *hrōfsele* "roofed hall" in l. 1515), *reced* (l. 1572), and *hūs* (l. 1666). "It has a floor (*flet* 1540), a wall (*weall* 1573, *wāg* 1662) on which a sword hangs just as the tapestries in Heorot hang *æfter wāgum*, 995, and possibly a fire burning (1516-17)."

A description of such nature hardly suggests the idea of a natural waterfall cave, or indeed any sort of cave; and it seems unlikely that the Anglo-Saxon poet would have embellished the account of the dwelling of the monsters with such trappings of gentility unless influenced by some

to a far more plausible area of inspiration or direct source. It is worth noting that the reliance of Lawrence and Chambers on the "waterfall argument" rests heavily, as Chambers himself stresses,[61] on the claim that it provides a rational explanation of what would otherwise appear "sheer unreason." Such explanation seems, in the light of the Celtic parallels presented in Chapter VIII, no longer called for; unreason it may be, but such is the stuff mythic tradition and its echoes are often made of.

Nor is it inconceivable that the Icelandic tradition of waterfall-trolls owes its genesis to the Celtic concept of underwater monsters and (physiologically) unreasonable fights with them, which puzzled the Icelandic storytellers—just as this "unreason" puzzled Lawrence and Chambers—and induced them to rationalize the struggle with the fearsome creatures as having taken place in the natural caves behind the Icelandic waterfalls.[62] What particularly speaks in favour of such influence is the fact that there is very little evidence of the tradition of waterfall trolls in Scandinavia; only two instances of its occurrence have, to my knowledge, been recorded in Norway,[63] none in Sweden. The Scandinavian trolls are, as a rule, dwellers in mountains and hills. Hence there is a strong possibility that the isolated Norwegian instances are indebted to Icelandic influence, if indeed they are not, as Malone thinks may be the case,[64] indebted to *Beowulf*.

There is, as indicated above, another alleged parallel relevant to the argument for Scandinavian influence worth consideration in connection with a subaquatic struggle with a monster in *Beowulf*, viz., the fight with the troll-wife in

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underlying motif. A reflection of the concept of the subaquatic Celtic *síothbhrugh* "otherworld palace" seems hence not implausible.

[61] Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 464f.

[62] It is conceivable that the influence of *Beowulf* on *Grettis saga* may be responsible for sparking this Icelandic concept, also applied to uncanny creatures other than trolls, as in *Gull-þóris saga* and the tale of *Gullbrá og Skeggi* (see pp. 122f.).

[63] See Knut Liestöl, "Beowulf and Epic Tradition," *American-Scandinavian Review*, XVIII (1930), 372.

[64] Malone (see footnote 42), p. 192.

Samsonar saga. In this story a troll-born charmer haunts the woods attempting to cast through music erotic spells on women. His troll mother dwells in a cave behind the mill foss; she attacks the hero and is slain by him in an underwater struggle.

The waterfall argument having already been dealt with, the main point of interest here is the hero's encounter with the ogress, who attacks him as he is conversing with the Miller, the father of Kvintalin, the musical charmer:

> And whilst they were speaking, Samson stood on the brink of the foss. And they pledged hands; and at that moment, before Samson was aware, both his feet were seized and he was thrown into the foss. There was come a troll-woman, and he had no power against her, but when he grappled with her they struggled, and came down to the bottom, and he saw that she was trying to drag him to the bottom. He managed to draw the knife which Valintina, the king's daughter, had given him, and plunged it into the troll-woman's breast, and slit her belly so that the entrails fell out, and the river was like blood to look upon.[65]

This encounter undeniably resembles somewhat that of Beowulf with Grendel's Mother. A striking difference lies, however, in the fact that in the epic the struggle really starts only when the antagonists reach the subaquatic "hall" free of water—and here there is no such "hall." The motif of a fight with an ogress who has a "difficult" son in a body of water is by itself hardly distinctive enough to establish a connection. The blood on water leading to the conclusion that the hero is dead does represent a parallel to the epic, yet the parallelism is closer with *Grettis saga* in that in both the monster is stabbed in the belly—rather than, as in *Beowulf*, decapitated—and thus disembowelled. This element, together with the Icelandic motif of the waterfall cave, make a connection between the sagas seem not unlikely. Yet if, despite the superficial nature of the parallelism, some kind of connection between saga and epic should exist, why may not the former be indebted to the latter? Then again, it may be a question of

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[65] *Samsonar saga fagra*; extract in Chambers, *Introduction*, p. 502; trans. p. 456. Also, with some difference in wording, in edition by John Wilson (Copenhagen, 1953), p. 15.

parallel influence by folktale tradition of the British Isles. It may be useful to note an Icelandic parallel in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*;[66] here the hero has a violent encounter in the sea with a (male) troll called Faxi, who in a hard grapple gets the upper hand and drags his foe to the bottom, where Þorstein is in danger of having his windpipe bitten in two. In this plight he sighs for the help of his friend the dwarf Sindri, who miraculously appears and pulls Faxi off Þorstein so that the situation is reversed, the hero getting on top of the prostrate troll; he then stabs him with the dirk handed him by Sindri and tears out his bowels, thus killing him. The blood and entrails on the surface precipitate the familiar pessimistic conclusion among the hero's friends before he emerges, weary and bedraggled.

The rescue of Þorstein is reminiscent of the supernatural aid Beowulf receives in his dire straits, to some extent also of Froech's receiving in his moment of need a sword from his beloved Findabair in *Táin Bó Fraích*[67] and of Samson's slaying the troll-wife with a knife previously presented to him by the Irish princess Valintina (whom Kvintalin tries to entrap). It appears that we are here faced with a motif that manifests itself in the British Isles as well as Iceland. The question of possible connections poses an enigmatic problem; yet Þorstein's struggle with Faxi contains the interesting element of the mortally-wounded troll speaking at some length under water, reminiscing about his past prowess and blaming Þorstein's supernatural help for his defeat. Chester Gould suggests[68] that this unrealistic element may hint at origin in some story where the encounter took place in some subaquatic "hostile hall"; he has *Beowulf* specifically in mind.

Gould's suggestion is a logical one. The influence of some specific work such as *Beowulf* is within the bounds of possibility; it seems equally likely, however, unless this is a case of independent unrealism on the part of the author, that it is here a question of the general diluted influence of the

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[66] *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar: Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* (Copenhagen, 1829), II, 451f.

[67] See Carney, p. 8.

[68] Chester N. Gould, "The Source of an Interpolation in the *Hjálmtérs saga ok Ölvis*," *Modern Philology*, VII (1909), 214.

Celtic motif of the submerged dwelling which appears to manifest itself in *Beowulf*,[69] or, again, that the Celtic blurring of boundaries between the worlds above and under water is dimly reflected here.

In all, it appears that the evidence value of *Samsonar saga* on the question of the origin of the fight with Grendel's Mother is negligible; the saga may well—if the parallelism is not coincidental—be indebted to the epic or other manifestations of the motif embodied in it.

What appears, then, to be the import of the celebrated resemblance—apart from the waterfall question already considered—between *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga*? Let us first deal with the Sandhaugar adventure in the saga, the more complex of the two relevant episodes in that it features, like the epic, two successive encounters with monsters, one in the haunted dwelling, the other in the demonic hideout. As in the epic, the hero of the saga guards a building against an expected inveterate abductor, whose identity is, however, contrary to the case in *Beowulf*, not known. The troll-woman enters and, like the intruder in the poem, assails the hero, who "sprang up against her," whereupon they fall to fierce grappling:

> She was the stronger, but he gave back with craft, and all that was before them was broken, yea, the crosspanelling withal of the chamber. She dragged him out through the door, and so into the outer doorway, and then he betook himself to struggling hard against her. She was fain to drag him from the house, but might not until they had broken away all the fittings of the outer door, and borne them out on their shoulders: then she laboured away with him down towards the river, and right down to the deep gulfs.
>
> By then was Guest exceeding weary, yet must he either gather his might together, or be cast by her into the gulf. All night did they contend in such wise; never, he deemed, had he fought with such a horror for her strength's sake; she held him to her so hard that he might turn his arms to no account save to keep fast hold on the middle of the witch.

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[69] It is interesting to note that Þorstein leaves the troll-wife's cave through a door at the far end; thus the idea of a "hall" rather than a natural cave may be vaguely reflected here.

> But now when they came on to the gulf of the river, he gives the hag a swing round, and therewith got his right hand free, and swiftly seized the short-sword that he was girt withal, and smote the troll therewith on the shoulder, and struck off her arm; and therewithal was he free, but she fell into the gulf and was carried down the force.[70]

Some of the details of this struggle are obviously closely reminiscent of Beowulf's encounter with Grendel, while others bear a similarity, if less direct, to the fight with Grendel's Mother. As in the epic, the hall of battle is badly damaged, especially so the doorway. The intruder here also tries hard to get out, but for altogether different reasons; far from trying, like Grendel, to escape, she is on the offensive and has the upper hand in the struggle, which is an all-round grapple, not, as in *Beowulf*, essentially a fight against an arm; in this respect, as with regard to the dire peril from which the hero with difficulty escapes, the combat is more reminiscent of that with Grendel's Mother. Significantly the intruder loses, as in the epic, an arm, though, as in many variants of HC, it is cut rather than torn off, and vanishes into the gorge, presumably, like Grendel, to die, for nothing is seen or heard of her again.

The question of the parallelism with *Beowulf* of Grettir's foray into the cave behind the waterfall is, of course, closely connected with the "waterfall argument" already considered. On the basis of this consideration the similarities in setting between the two expeditions are obviously not close or striking. There are, however, other elements that can be, and have been, construed as parallels. Thus there is a large fire burning in the giant's cave, as there is a light gleaming brightly in Grendel's Mother's "hall." This is hardly a striking parallel; lights illuminating dark or dim places need not necessarily have any connection. Similarly, Grettir's kindling a light to examine the interior of the cave is too realistic a move to be of necessity connected with the apparently supernatural light that floods Grendel's Mother's "hall" after her decapitation. Yet, such double-edged parallelism with respect to illumination is striking and conducive to divin-

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[70] *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, translated by Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris (London, 1900), pp. 194-95.

ing a connection. The sword on the wall the giant reaches for or the *heptisax* he fights with prior to that move need hardly by themselves be connected with the mighty giant-wrought sword Beowulf finds and with which he beheads the ogress, since swords found in giants' dwellings represent a highly common motif in saga and folktale; they nevertheless add to the general, cumulative parallelism. The gory evidence of the fight carried downstream and the pessimistic conclusion drawn therefrom by the priest inevitably recall similar elements in *Beowulf*, though the slitting open of the giant's belly parallels rather the troll-slayings in *Samsonar saga* and *Þorsteins saga* than the beheading of Grendel's Mother.

All in all, the multiple parallels between the Grendel story of *Beowulf* and the Sandhaugar episode in *Grettis saga* weave a chain of parallelism persuasive of some kind of connection—something no reputable critic has so far seen fit to deny. As for the nature of the connection, there prevails, however, a sharp division of scholarly opinion. One school of thought believes it to be due to common background in a hypothetical Scandinavian folktale influencing both the Icelandic saga and the Anglo-Saxon epic, while the other ascribes it to the direct influence of *Beowulf* on *Grettis saga*. The most celebrated bone of contention within the scope of this argument is the generally-accepted connection between the words *hæftmēce* ("hilted sword," *Beowulf*, l. 1457) and *heptisax* ("hafted short-sword") in the Sandhaugar episode of the saga, exhibiting, it has been long recognized, a close semantic resemblance; neither word is, it is to be noted, recorded anywhere else in their respective literatures—hence it seems altogether unlikely that they would turn up by coincidence in obviously related stories. The term *heptisax*, applied to the weapon with which the giant in the cave strikes at Grettir, is described in some detail—as a weapon "with a wooden handle with which one could either stab or cut"—whereas the term *hæftmēce* merely serves as a seemingly casual reference to the sword Hrunting lent to Beowulf by Unferð and briefly and futilely wielded by the hero against Grendel's Mother.

Opinions as to the meaning of this apparent connection have been sharply divided, coinciding mostly with the re-

spective theories about the relationship of the works in question. Some[71] argue that indebtedness of *Grettis saga* to *Beowulf* is indicated; according to this view the term *heptisax*, applied to a weapon of little consequence in the story, could hardly have independently survived in oral tradition for six or seven centuries—as it must have done if it independently reached both works. It must, consequently, be derived from a crystallized, literary work, presumably *Beowulf*.

This undeniably weighty argument is countered by Chambers[72] with the suggestion that a sword with an elaborate, celebrated hilt probably played a major role in the basic Scandinavian folktale, as it does in *Beowulf*; hence the term applied to it looms so large as to survive steadfastly throughout oral tradition. He points to the sword-names Gullinhjalti ("Goldenhilt") in *Hrólfs saga Kraka* and Hornhjalti ("Hornhilt") in *Gull-þóris saga* for evidence of attention paid to sword-hilts in Icelandic sagas exhibiting some elements of parallelism to *Grettis saga*. The attention paid the presumably celebrated sword of the basic story accounts, Chambers suggests, for the remarkable longevity of the denomination of the weapon, reaching the saga independently of the Anglo-Saxon epic.

This argument is, however, lamed by the weakness inherent in its failure to explain why the glory of a marvellous, celebrated sword would in both the epic and the saga—not just one—have become so greatly eclipsed and its role so radically altered that it becomes in the former the weapon of a person of questionable character and stature—Unferð—and proves utterly useless in Beowulf's hour of trial, and in the latter a brand briefly and futilely wielded by an evil giant. In the first instance nothing is mentioned about its hilt—only the blade is described; in the second the hilt is of nothing more precious than wood and is ignominiously slashed asunder.

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[71] Prominently, von Sydow, "Beowulf och Bjarke," 28-29; R. C. Boer, Review of Chambers' *Introduction*, in *English Studies*, V (1923), 108-109; Dehmer, *Primitives Erzählungsgut in den Izlendingasögur* (Leipzig, 1927), pp. 57f.

[72] Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 473f.

The parallelism, alleged by Chambers,[73] between the runes on the hilt of the giant-wrought sword in *Beowulf* and Grettir's runestaff, again, is a rather cursory one—commemorative runes are common in Germanic tradition; moreover, the element of the runestaff, generally believed to be a late interpolation, may, should a connection nevertheless exist, be inspired by the runic inscription on the sword-hilt in the epic.

It would appear, then, that Chambers' argument is unconvincing and does little to undermine the solid ground of the suggestion that the *hæftmēce-heptisax* parallelism speaks in favour of indebtedness of the saga to the epic, even if, like most conclusions based on theoretical premises concerning the workings of oral tradition during the long centuries of the dark ages, the evidence hardly carries ultimate conviction; we cannot be sure that we fully understand these workings—as the frequent radical disagreements between the most highly-qualified authorities abundantly testify.

The theory of the indebtedness of the term *heptisax* to *hæftmēce* is, as Dehmer already noted, backed by the casual brevity of the reference to this weapon in *Beowulf* as opposed to the definition of it in the saga. The term *hæftmēce* looks very much like a simple alliterative compound, alliterating with Hrunting. There is little need to look for an honourable ancestry for this term—it is hardly distinctive, every normal sword being endowed with a hilt; one may note, for comparison, the (clearly alliterative) reference in *Beowulf* (l. 2986) to the weapon of the slain Ongenðēow—*heard swyrd hilted* ("hard hilted sword"). The saga writer sees fit, however, to describe the blade with respect to its function; this may well imply that he reads some special significance into this term and, in the interest of realism, attempts to identify it with a type of weapon known in Iceland. After all, if *heptisax* were a term familiar to his fellow-Icelanders, why bother to define it? An echo of *hæftmēce* thus seems not improbable on this account also. In addition, the fact that both swords prove useless to their wielders—their use of them is brief and abor-

[73] Ibid.

tive and they then reach for a weapon on the wall—serves as a further parallel between these weapons of peripheral import.

The story of Grettir's encounter with the revenant Glám exhibits far less meaningful parallelism to *Beowulf* than does the Sandhaugar episode.[74] Like the latter, it features the basic pattern of a furious struggle in a haunted house against a powerful and malignant intruder, a fight that wreaks havoc with the interior of the building. Like the troll-woman in the other episode, Glám is superior in strength to Grettir and drags the hero out of the house; the latter subsequently employs a wrestling trick and beheads the revenant. This latter element is reminiscent of Beowulf's decapitation of Grendel's Mother and her dead son; the parallelism is, however, not remarkable—cutting off an enemy's head is in epic and saga a not uncommon way of dealing with him, and in the saga this action is specifically motivated by the desire to "lay" the revenant for good, a common Icelandic folklore motif. Grettir's fateful faintness from the gaze of Glám's baleful eyes may recall Beowulf's startling weakness in his grapple with Grendel's Mother, as a result of which the latter sits on top of the prostrate Geat, as Grettir sprawls on the fallen Glám. Is this coincidence or an instance of a confused, muddled connection?[75]

Aside from the question of *hæftmēce-heptisax*, the most prominent element in the saga which points towards derivation from the epic is the severing of the troll-woman's arm, a rather unlikely target for a knife wielded by a hand tortuously freed in a tight grapple; stabbing would seem a far more natural move in such a situation. It is not illogical to suspect here the presence of an echo of the severing of Grendel's arm in *Beowulf*. The replacement of the somewhat grotesque tearing-off of the arm with cutting would seem a natural modification within the context; for all his mighty strength

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[74] Some critics have suggested that it is based on the Sandhaugar episode, but there is no firm evidence for this.

[75] In this connection it may be well to recall (see Ch. I, footnote 38) that Carney suggests that the terms in which Glám curses Grettir are due to Cain's figuring in the author's source material, i.e., matter derived from *Beowulf*.

Grettir is not a Beowulf with the might of thirty men in his handgrip; he is indeed manifestly weaker than the attacker. It may be noted as a parallel that in many of the HC tales cutting replaces the more primitive, and probably original, tearing.

That the element of the giant-wrought sword should be missing in *Grettis saga*—if indebted to *Beowulf*—is altogether understandable, already in the light of the reversal of plot elements; Grettir has already passed through his hour of trial and distress at the hands of the troll-wife and is now allowed to overcome the male ogre without serious difficulty, as Beowulf overcame Grendel. Furthermore, the mysterious origin of the sword, based, it appears, on sophisticated Celtic lore, its miraculous characteristics, attributable, it seems likely, to the same origin, and not least Beowulf's rather vaguely conceived escape with God's help—these are all elements that could easily have got lost in an adaptation of the plot by a popular storyteller.

The basic difference in nature and location between the dwellings of the monsters in the two works can be easily accounted for by the Icelandic unfamiliarity with the Celtic underwater tradition reflected in *Beowulf*. This element may, as has been previously suggested, have been rationalized into the waterfall cave concept; or, if the tradition of trolls dwelling in waterfall caves was already current in Iceland, it could have been conveniently remoulded to coincide with it.

It is altogether conceivable that some of the differences between epic and saga are due to a local tradition of a troll-fight at Sandhaugar influencing the saga. Its existence is indicated by the author's report of a popular version of the end of the giantess: "... the men of Bard-dale say that day dawned on her, while they wrestled, and that she burst, when he cut the arm from her; and that there she stands yet on the cliff, a rock in the likeness of a woman."[76] Here we obviously glimpse a reflection of the popular Icelandic story-motif of a troll's petrification by the rays of the rising sun. It probably explains the claim that the adversaries struggled all night, an unrealistic exaggeration alien to the tenor of the saga but understandable as a relic of an earlier tradition in which

[76] *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, p. 196.

sunrise plays a crucial role. It seems to suggest the superimposition of an external story on a local tradition of some resemblance involving a celebrated figure.

What with this folk-tradition lurking in the background and being possibly of some influence, it is not inconceivable that the reversal in the saga of the role of the male monster of the epic is indebted to it, though other or further motivation cannot, as indicated above, be discounted. The total disappearance of the giantess from the story, as opposed to the finding of Grendel's corpse in his mother's "hall" may owe a similar debt, although in this instance, too, other motivation is conceivable: the monster's death in *Beowulf* from the "mere" loss of an arm[77] may have been puzzling to the saga-writer—after all, in Icelandic sagas heroes often bear and survive such injuries with great aplomb; hence in the saga it is possible to conceive of the troll-wife's death as drowning or being crushed against rocks in her fall.[78]

A degree of parallelism to *Beowulf* in *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar* is worthy of notice at this point. As noted in Chapter II,[79] this saga features successive fights between the hero and a coal-black, cat-shaped she-monster and between the hero and her son, the giant Brusi, in the cave of these creatures. Orm manages to slay both, finding himself, however, in dire straits in his grapple with the female monster; after he vows to God and St. Peter to go to Rome (on pilgrimage), her power miraculously wanes and he breaks her back, thus killing her.

The parallelism to the story in *Beowulf* is obviously not close; the only striking parallel elements are the superior fighting powers of the female monster and the miraculous divine aid received by the hero in dealing with this foe. The

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[77] See footnote 13.

[78] Striking and intriguing are some of the points made by Malone, who thinks it altogether likely that the Icelanders got the Grendel story, directly or indirectly, from England; they involve notably somewhat of a reversal of the celebrated "waterfall argument": "... the grey rock or sea cliff of *Beowulf* and the homily, standing between marsh and *mere*, in the saga becomes a cliff over which the river flows to make a waterfall, and the mere itself is reduced to a whirlpool below the falls" (p. 307; see footnote 41).

[79] See footnote 6.

former motif is, as shown in Chapter II, common in Celtic folktale; the latter probably represents a Christianization of the aid the hero in such tales often receives in his hour of need. Thus direct Celtic influence in both these matters is altogether possible, yet since the *Þáttr* seems, as Boer has shown,[80] to be considerably indebted to *Grettis saga*, at times to the point of paraphrasing, the hero's difficulties in dealing with the female—as in the other saga the initial enemy—may be traceable to that story.

Two further Icelandic stories are sometimes pointed to as exhibiting episodes of some degree of resemblance to Beowulf's encounter with Grendel's Mother, viz., the tale of *Gullbrá og Skeggi* and *Gull-þõris saga*. In the former[81] the pagan witch Gullbrá, wishing to escape from the sight of the sun, as well as the sound of church bells, withdraws, while yet alive, with her gold chest into a cave behind a waterfall. She subsequently starts, much as Glám in *Grettis saga*, haunting the neighbourhood, killing cattle and shepherds. The farmer Skeggi, himself a heathen and wizard, covets the treasure and descends into the gorge by the foss. He manages, after a violent struggle not described in any detail, to possess himself of some of the treasure and return with it, even though his two companions abandon, like the priest in *Grettis saga*, in fright the rope they are to guard. In a subsequent encounter—it is not clear exactly where but presumably in the same location—Skeggi obtains the rest of the treasure but takes to his bed and dies shortly thereafter. He tells that in this second struggle, more severe than the first, he miraculously escaped narrow straits after vowing to build a church: "a great light then shone into her eyes, and before he knew anything she was turned into stone down there in the ravine." In *Gull-þóris saga*,[82] again, the hero and some companions lower themselves by rope into a chasm and invade a cave behind a foss; as in the story of Gullbrá there is

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[80] R. C. Boer, *Die altenglische Heldendichtung*, I: *Beowulf* (Halle, 1912), pp. 177f.

[81] *Gullbrá og Skeggi: Islenzkar þjóðsǫgur og Æfintýri*, edited by Jón Árnason (Leipzig, 1862), I, 148-50.

[82] *Þorskfirðinga saga*, or *Gull-þóris saga: Islendinga sǫgur* (Reykjavik, 1897), XVII, 10-13.

no question of diving or swimming paralleling Grettir's waterfall feat or Beowulf's subaquatic adventure. When a wind blows out the light they are carrying, Þórir calls for the supernatural help of Agnar—the ghostly grave-dweller who had directed him to the treasure—and a great ray of light comes from the entrance to the cave, illumines it for the adventurers and puts to sleep the dragons guarding their gold there. They then stab the dragons with swords found in the cave, but the dragons fly away, killing one of the rope-watchers on the promontory outside and incapacitating the other with their poison. The heroes remain in the cave till the third day and then haul themselves up to the cliff with much treasure, including a sword called Hornhjalti, which had belonged to the depositor of the treasure, the viking Val, who, like his sons, had in dragon shape been guarding the treasure.

The parallelism of these stories with *Beowulf* is, on the whole, but scanty and superficial. It appears to be basically a question of the common Icelandic story motif of the adventurous search for buried treasure which leads to conflict with its uncanny guardians, as in the case of Grettir's encounter with Karr the Old in the latter's gravemound; and it may be noted for a parallel that Þórir first tried to plunder the grave of Agnar. In the two tales in question the motif of waterfall caves as the hideouts of the fearsome creatures is obviously echoed, perhaps independently but not inconceivably as a result of the common influence of *Grettis saga*—the presence of the climbing rope in both stories may hint at such a connection. A link with this saga seems particularly plausible in the case of the Gullbrá story, which exhibits the further parallel of the panic-stricken rope-watcher as well as that of the marauding heathen revenant. Furthermore, the petrification of the witch recalls the Bárðardalr tradition of the similar fate of the troll-woman exposed to the rays of the rising sun during her grapple with Grettir; it may be a question of a Christianized echo of this saga, if it is not an independent manifestation of the popular Icelandic motif of the petrification of uncanny creatures, basically probably trolls and elves. This very motif in corrupt form—a ray of light of indeterminate nature merely incapacitating the fearsome creatures and otherwise aiding and abetting the heroes in

their predicament—probably accounts for the supernatural help received by Þórir and his companions; it appears to be a question of fusion with the motif of supernatural help in distress noted as widespread in both Icelandic and Celtic folktale tradition—and turning, of course, up in *Beowulf*. The finding of swords in dwellings of preternatural creatures, again, represents, as previously noted, too common a "floating" folktale motif to possess significant evidence value as to any specific connection. In fine, there is no plausible indication of any fundamental relationship between *Beowulf* and the two Icelandic tales.

Chambers cannot see his way clear to accepting the idea that elements of a work with such courtly tenor as *Beowulf* could have been adopted on the level of the rustic setting in *Grettis saga*.[83] It should be recognized, however, that the *Beowulf* episodes in question may have reached the Icelandic saga man in already considerably-popularized form. They may have been remembered only roughly by listeners at recitations and spread by word of mouth, being thus only gradually stripped of their courtly gloss, poetic form and sophistication, before being passed on in another language, with the further alienation from the original this process is likely to entail. And it seems hardly incongruous that, being once current in a land where no king, palace, or even town exists, retold plot elements should attach themselves to storied individuals living in this rustic environment. In any case, such a theoretical premise arrived at in the twentieth century concerning the spread of orally-transmitted folktale tradition in the dark ages—a process as yet far from completely understood—fails to carry conviction; it seems more advisable to rely on concrete clues inherent in the works compared in trying to evaluate the evidence of the connection. And such evidence strongly favours the theory of the indebtedness of *Grettis saga* to *Beowulf*.[84]

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[83] Introduction, p. 470.

[84] The theory of a Nordic tale as the source of the Grendel story suffers not least from the weakness that it fails to explain why the struggle with the enemy's arm plays—among all the Germanic tales—a central role in *Beowulf* alone—and in none of the alleged analogues. While the arm is very

On balance, the Celtic folktale of "The Hand and the Child," or a tale very closely related to it, appears to be the most plausible candidate for the role of skeletal source of—or chief inspiration for—the struggle against Grendel and his mother. The basic, central parallelism is striking and it is buttressed by the fact that practically all the component parts of the plot of the essential story of this struggle not manifest in the folktale are, as we have seen, discernible and for the most part common in Celtic lore—prominent among such parallels is the tale of the mighty, vengeful hag, which seems to have influenced the story of Grendel's Mother. Moreover, an examination of many of the puzzles, problems, and anomalies in the epic in the light of Celtic parallels yields a basis for a good deal of plausible explanation or, again, interesting speculation.

The fact that the setting of the *Beowulf* epic involves only Nordic lands is almost invariably advanced as an objection whenever the suggestion of non-Germanic influence is raised. That this is a factor not to be ignored is obvious, but it should not be allowed to carry excessive weight. It is, after all, not a case of a national epic with a patriotic theme; it is a question of a poem with a plot of folktale origin loosely placed in a historical setting that, at least in the Grendel part, is, aside from a few digressions, of no great distinctiveness or import; it would make little difference to the story if Hrōðgār and Beowulf were not, respectively, a Dane and a Geat. An elaborate epic poem relating events of surpassing strangeness requires nevertheless for an appearance of verisimilitude and heroic stature in a heroic age a worthy

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much the focus of attention in the epic—what with the grapple with it, the viewing and carrying-off of it—the arm of an enemy plays no significant role in the Icelandic tales in question, aside from the briefly-reported severing of the troll-woman's limb in *Grettis saga*, which, as already suggested, may well be a distant echo of the tearing-off of Grendel's arm, and, perhaps, Glám's seizing Grettir's blanket, which leads to a robust (two-handed) tug-of-war between the adversaries; here we may glimpse a faint echo of Beowulf's tenacious grip—what with Grettir clinging with similar tenacity to the blanket until it is ripped apart and an all-round grapple ensues. If, then, a hostile arm is of little moment in the Icelandic stories, why would it in the course of an adoption of a Germanic story by the Anglo-Saxons have acquired such a central and crucial role?

geographic-historical setting, of necessity at some distance in time and space, since a familiar setting could destroy the illusion of truthfulness. Hence it could hardly be placed in the England of the poet's time or the relatively brief and recent past of the Anglo-Saxon settlers there; it would at once be protested that no hero by the name of Beowulf or a figure like him had been active there and thus the epic illusion would be shattered. The ancestral continental home of the settlers would also be too familiar. A Celtic environment would not only seem rather too alien and mystery-shrouded to the audience at large but would hardly be altogether palatable to the erstwhile (and at times continuing) foes of the Celts. Denmark and Geatland would, on the other hand, be sufficiently distant and yet withal Germanic lands with which the Anglo-Saxons, some of them of Jutish descent, could culturally and emotionally identify, and they would also possess a sufficiently heroic aura to provide an altogether worthy geographic-historical setting for the epic. It should be recognized that for such reasons and others the plots of innumerable folktales have been attached to widely-scattered localities.[85]

Theoretically suitable for the Grendel story in *Beowulf* as the setting thus appears, it seems not unlikely that it, as well as the identity of the hero, and, as a corollary, the various digressions dealing with Scandinavian history or legend, have in fact been inspired by the legend of Bǫðvar Bjarki, the pre-eminent champion of Hrólf Kraki, the celebrated Danish king glimpsed in *Beowulf* (in his younger days) as the prince Hrōþulf, the nephew of Hrōðgār. The story of Bǫðvar is told in *Hrólfs saga Kraka*, as well as briefly in Saxo, and also in the *Bjarkarímur*. The elaborate version in the saga tells of the hero's coming to Hrólf's court at Leire, where, in defence of a cowardly youth, Hǫtt, taunted and physically ill-treated by the retainers, he kills one of these. The King condones his act and accepts the hero into his retinue. As Christmas approaches, Bǫðvar is told by Hǫtt that each year on Yule Eve a winged beast, whom he also describes as "the greatest troll," is wont to rampage about

[85] Thus, for example, the HC folktale is attached to the courts of many various kings.

the countryside killing cattle. No weapon can wound it and "the champions of the king, those who are the greatest, come not back."[86] On the fatal evening the King orders all his men to stay out of harm's way, but Bǫðvar secretly ventures out and stabs the creature to the heart with his sword. Thereupon he makes a hero out of his cowardly protegé Hǫtt, whom he has forced to accompany him, by making him drink the blood of the slain creature; this renders him strong and fearless. In an elaborate charade arranged by Bǫðvar, Hǫtt then beheads the already-dead foe and gets credit for destroying it.

In Saxo's version[87] of the story the adversary is simply an enormous bear. This version, a couple of centuries older, very likely reflects the original nature of the hostile creature; apart from being older and being from Denmark, the land of Leire, and less artful—the encounter is related in one sentence—it is paralleled by the account in the Icelandic *Bjarkarímur*,[88] roughly contemporaneous with the saga; here Bjarki slays a wolf and Hjalti (Hǫtt) a bear.

The Hǫtt episode of the Bjarki story, in its three variants, obviously bears only a slender and superficial resemblance to Beowulf's Grendel adventure and none to the fight with Grendel's Mother. The ravaging of the countryside by the winged creature in the *Hrólfssaga* has been suggested as a parallel to the dragon story in *Beowulf*; yet since this element appears to be a late embellishment of the Bjarki story,[89] any such connection seems out of the question—and

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[86] *Hrólfs saga Kraka og Bjarkarímur*, edited by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1904), Ch. 23, p. 68.

[87] Saxo, Bk. 2.

[88] *Hrólfs saga Kraka og Bjarkarímur*, p. 136f.

[89] Axel Olrik (*Denmarks Heltedigtning* [Copenhagen, 1903], I, 135f.) concludes that the development of the original bear into the winged monster of the saga is in accordance with the usual heightening, in later Icelandic, of the earlier stories of struggles with natural beasts. He further plausibly concludes that the drinking of the blood of the slain creature indicates that it cannot in the original tradition have been a question of troll-blood—blood was in Nordic tradition drunk to acquire desirable qualities, certainly not those of trolls. Von Sydow suggests ("Beowulf och Bjarke," 11) that both the attribution of wings to the supposed monster and the claim that it was "the greatest of trolls" merely represent the fantasies of the terror-stricken Hǫtt. Whatever the exact truth of this matter, it seems fairly safe to conclude that the original story featured a cattle-marauding bear.

there is no closer resemblance to recommend it in the first place.

What is, on the other hand, significant is the setting of the Bjarki adventure—the Danish royal seat at Leire, almost certainly identical with the site of Heorot, the court of Hrōðgār in the Anglo-Saxon epic. Even more significant is the likely connection in name and national origin of the two heroes. The most plausible and widely-accepted etymology of the name Beowulf—"Bee-wolf," i.e., "enemy of bees," "hive-plunderer"—closely parallels the name Bjarki—"Little Bear." Bjarki's father's name in the saga, it may be noted, is Bjǫrn ("Bear") and his mother's Bera ("She-bear"); his father is transformed by magic into bear-shape and Bǫðvar fights, it appears, in this shape in Hrólf's final battle.[90]

The question whether or not the apparent parallelism between the saga and the epic as regards the setting and the names of the heroes reflects a direct connection has been the subject of much debate, far too elaborate and complex to enter into here. Aside from this basic parallelism, the most significant indication of a connection lies in the fact that both heroes come to the Danish court from Gautland[91] and in that, just as Beowulf helps Ēadgils gain the Swedish throne from Onela, Bǫðvar plays, according to the *Bjarkarímur* and *Skáldskaparmál*, the same role in the Aðils-Áli contention.[92]

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[90] Olrik forcefully argues (pp. 215f.) that Bǫðvar acquired his ursine affiliations—and hence his cognomen—among the Scandinavian settlers in northern England, through contact with the tradition of the bear ancestry of Siward, Earl of Northumberland. This would explain why, for obvious reasons, the bear-slaying is omitted in the *Hrólfssaga*.

It is logical to conclude that Bǫðvar would in early tradition hardly have been represented as a bear-slayer had he then been credited with ursine affiliations; if he then at all bore the cognomen Bjarki, it must have been based on the criterion of strength only. This would seem to preclude Beowulf's owing any bear traits (such as allegedly manifested in the slaying of Dæghrefn) to the early Bjarki legend.

[91] Bǫðvar is, according to the saga, a prince of Uppdalir in the north of Norway, but he comes to Leire from Gautland, where his brother Þórir is king.

[92] This parallelism was noted early this century by critics such as Chadwick and Chambers.

In fine, it is not difficult to conceive the impression that some sort of connection[93] between the two works is indicated.[94] Given this assumption, it appears, by the laws of logic as well as chance, likely that the historical setting and geographical framework of the Grendel story in the epic and the name of the hero are indebted to the Bǫðvar saga rather than vice versa.[95] Far earlier as the composition of the epic is, it is difficult to conceive of the Anglo-Saxon work as inspiring the Nordic setting and the identity of the Nordic hero in three separate, considerably differing Nordic variants of the Bǫðvar saga, especially so that of Saxo, composed in the very land of Leire. None of this is, of course, entirely beyond the bounds of possibility, especially since the early history of the Bǫðvar legend is shrouded in the mists of the dark ages, but indebtedness of the epic to the story of King Hrólf's champion as to the geographic-historical setting of the Grendel

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[93] A number of scholars, among them Panzer (pp. 372-73) and Chambers (*Introduction*, pp. 56-57), suggest a connection between the sword Gullinhjalti, with which in the *Hrólfssaga* Hǫtt decapitates the slain monster, and the giant-wrought sword with the *gylden hilt* (l. 1677) in *Beowulf*, with which the hero beheads the already-dead Grendel (and, prior to that, the monster's mother). Yet the parallelism is not particularly striking and may well be coincidental; that the hilt of a wondrous, ancient sword should be golden is hardly remarkable (elsewhere in the epic, ll. 1900-901 and 2190-94, reference is also made to gold-adorned swords), and there is no evidence that *gylden hilt* should, as has been suggested, be read as one word and seen as the name of the sword; it is indeed hard to see how the poet could lay claim to such a piece of God-like knowledge concerning the ageless, mysterious heirloom of the monstrous outcasts.

[94] This is the opinion of scholars such as H. Munro Chadwick (*Cambridge History of English Literature* [London, 1907], I, 29-30); Panzer (pp. 372-73); von Sydow, "Beowulf och Bjarke," 8ff.; Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 54f.; Malone, *Literary History of Hamlet* (Heidelberg, 1923), pp. 90f. Prominent among those seeing no connection is Olrik (pp. 135-36); the same conclusion is drawn by Oscar Olson (*The Relation of the Hrólfssaga Kraka and the Bjarkarímur to Beowulf: Publications of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study*, III, no. 1 [1916], 7ff.). Larry D. Benson agrees with this conclusion ("The Originality of Beowulf," *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*, edited by Morton W. Bloomfield [Cambridge, 1970], pp. 15ff.).

[95] That the Boðvar story is indebted to *Beowulf* has been suggested by Bugge (pp. 55-57); Bernhard ten Brink (*Beowulf Untersuchungen* [Strassburg, 1888], pp. 185f.); Lawrence (see footnote 38, second entry), p. 78.

adventure and the identity of the hero seems to loom as the most plausible conclusion. Yet the whole question of the connection of *Beowulf* with the Bǫðvar legend is of little consequence for the prime object of this investigation and hence does not deserve thorough scrutiny here. The possible inspiration of certain elements of the poem by a Nordic tale or story cycle no more contradicts or negates the likelihood of the indebtedness of the Grendel story, as regards the central plot elements, to the Celtic material considered than the latter precludes the former. The rich mosaic of the poem betrays a multitude of varied influences; as eloquently stated by Lawrence, "like the glittering hoards over which dragons watched, it displays treasures wrought by many hands, and ancient heirlooms, fashioned by men of old in lands far beyond the sea."[96]

While the basic, central ingredients of the plot of the story of the fight with Grendel and his mother can thus, it would seem, be identified, the exact process by which they combined to crystallize—perhaps coagulate would be a more appropriate term—into the framework of this part of the epic is far from clear and in the absence of anything like demonstrable direct sources inevitably to some extent food for conjecture. It seems, however, improbable that the basic source is constituted by an early version of the Bjarki saga, which, by attracting to itself elements of the Celtic folktale, would have thus been transformed almost beyond recognition; it is unlikely that the plot of the saga episode could have been almost totally submerged by such intrusion. It seems far more plausible that some version of the HC folktale or a tale closely related to it provided the initial, skeletal source of the fight with Grendel. In the process of adaptation and transformation into a work of epic grandeur it may then have acquired some of the accoutrements—specifically the heroic setting and the identity of the hero—of an episode of some resemblance in an early version of the Bjarki legend; dressed in such trappings, it would then understandably attract as digressions elements such as the Finnsburg episode and the allusions to the fate of Heremōd. Whatever the exact truth of

[96] Lawrence (see footnote 38, first entry), p. 245.

this matter, the story seems, as already suggested, to have amalgamated at some stage of the process of its genesis with elements of the Celtic folktale of the demonic hag who comes to avenge her offspring. Aside from indications of such a fusion provided by the basic parallelism in *Beowulf* of the monstrous merewife trying to avenge her son and by the inconsistency of the treatment of the powers of Grendel's Mother discussed in Chapter II, such a combination could also seem indicated by the duplication in the epic of the trip to the haunted mere.

There is, as many critics have noted, a marked difference between the descriptions of the tract traversed by the warriors on the two expeditions; on the return from the first they race the country roads *cystum cūðe* ("known for their excellence")[97] whereas on the second they tortuously advance through a wild, forbidding landscape.[98] While the device of nature mirroring the mood of man seems, as previously suggested,[99] not alien to the epic, it is doubtful that it would by itself have motivated such a jarring contrast.[100] The tracking of the wounded Grendel may seem a natural enough, if indeed rather audacious undertaking on the part of the Danes—a "wounded tiger" can be very dangerous—yet no conclusive evidence as to the monster's fate is uncovered; he has obviously managed to reach his hideout, a fact that, however, in no way shakes the general jubilant conviction that he is dead. And the trackers, instead of returning to court to report their findings, fade out of the story with the

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[97] L. 867.

[98] Malone ("Coming Back from the Mere," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, LXIX [1954], 1292f.) suggests that there is a conscious artistic intent to juxtapose the festive disposition of the Danes returning from the first expedition to the sober mood of the Geats walking back from the mere with Grendel's head.

[99] See p. 109. For what seems an example of a creature of nature mirroring the mood of man, see my article, "The Blithe-hearted Morning Raven in *Beowulf*," *English Language Notes*, X (1973), 243ff.

[100] Kenneth Sisam (*The Structure of Beowulf* [Oxford, 1965]) opines that "the possibility that the expedition is a later addition cannot be excluded" (p. 30); he suggests, however, that "if interpolation is excluded, it must be allowed that the poet used to the limits an artist's privilege of varying or selecting material in order to express a mood" (p. 32).

Sigemund and Heremōd digressions.[101] In short, the excursion seems anti-climactic and its nature and atmosphere hardly logically warranted within the context of the poem as we possess it.[102] The digressions seem by themselves hardly likely to have been the *raison d'être* of the journey; they could easily have been introduced in some other context. The quest is, on the other hand, more easily explainable as a by-product of a fusion of the plots of the two Celtic folktales, specifically as a relic of the pursuit and consequent slaying of the ogre in HC (or a related tale)[103]—valid reason for triumphant, exuberant rejoicing—an element that had to be truncated and curtailed when the story of the vengeful hag entered the picture; the showdown under the mere now has to wait until the hideous merewife has claimed her victim and been in consequence sought out by the hero in her watery domain.[104] Grendel having been "declared dead" by Beowulf, the underwater expedition of the hero,[105] not im-

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[101] The poet may, of course, intend such a report to be inferred from the context. Yet this omission adds to the general impression of "maladjustment" of the episode in question within the framework of the poem.

[102] It would also appear that the mere is in the account of the initial quest seen as being farther from Heorot than in that of the second—after all, the telling, indeed to some extent improvisation, of a wealth of stories must have taken a good deal of time, whereas according to Hrōðgār it is not *feor heonan mīlgemearces* (ll. 1361-62); it is, of course, possible to imagine the warriors going out of their way in search of roads suitable for horse-racing, yet such delay in returning to court would seem rather puzzling.

[103] D. A. H. Evans ("Lake of Monsters in *Beowulf*," *Studia Neophilologica*, XL [1968], 148f.) sees "good grounds for believing that in the tale which underlies the first adventure in *Beowulf* the fight under water followed immediately the fight in the hall." He thinks that "our author has somewhat confused his story by now embracing a different version in which a second monster seeks vengeance for the first." Thus, aside from my suggesting the influence of a specific, different tale, Evans' suggestion essentially parallels mine.

[104] An intrusion of the story of the vengeful hag may conceivably have been to some extent inspired by the fact that the aggressor in HC tales is not infrequently female; and in a few of these tales the demonic mother of the intruder attempts revenge, but it is of course doubtful that this represents an original note—it may instead be a question of the influence of the story of the vengeful hag on the HC tales.

[105] The Celtic motif of underwater adventure and monster-fight appears to have somehow entered the story, perhaps employed to add heroic

probably inspired by the pursuit in the basic tale, could under the circumstances be justified only by an atrocity on the part of Grendel's Mother: to seek out and slay a female creature, even an ogress, who has suffered a grievous personal loss, in her home without such provocation would clearly have violated the ideas of justice reflected in the poem. The hag generally comes, as does Grendel's Mother, to the place where her offspring has been fatally vanquished to exact revenge, and she is slain in a perilous struggle there, one that has understandably been postponed in the epic since a showdown in the demonic dwelling is, as suggested above, apparently dictated by the plot of the basic folktale. Hence the hag is conveniently, if inconsistently in the light of later events, represented as relatively feeble and timorous—as compared with Grendel; instead of making a stand and being as a result slain, she quickly returns to her mere, to which she is naturally pursued and where she is logically the target of bloody revenge once Æschere's severed head is found on the cliff by the water.

In the light of this theory of the genesis of the basic Grendel story the carrying-off of the arm of the monster by his mother and his posthumous decapitation by Beowulf may also seem more easily explainable. It has been noted earlier[106] that in a HC tale the mother of the mutilated demon carries off the arm as well as the child—a parallel, it may be suggested, to Grendel's Mother's procedure with Hrōðgār's favourite Æschere and her son's severed arm. It is, however, not inconceivable that the carrying-off of the limb may have some connection with the magic healing powers attributed to the monstrous hag in some of the tales of this type of creature and her offspring considered in Chapter II.[107] While the hag's desire to recover the hideous trophy triumphantly displayed by the Geats and Danes can, of course, be seen as sufficient motivation for her initiative, her hope to heal her son by magically restoring the limb may, though lost to the *Beowulf* poet—to whom Grendel is irrevocably dead—have some-

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lustre and imaginative grandeur to Beowulf's feat, in the process paralleling the hero's other seemingly superhuman aquatic heroics.

[106] See p. 5.

[107] See pp. 19-20.

where along the line played a role in motivating this element in the story of the epic.

The post-mortem decapitation of the dead Grendel need not seem to be motivated by anything more than a desire to acquire a grisly trophy even more impressive and conclusive of victory than the severed arm;[108] behind this element may, however, lurk the original slaying of the wounded long-armed demon in his dwelling in the HC tales.[109] In any case, the reason for the decapitation given in the poem—the desire to repay Grendel for his evil deeds—does not seem very convincing or likely to represent the original note; this type of hollow, supererogatory revenge hardly seems worthy of a hero of Beowulf's stature, who, indeed, had previously seemed altogether satisfied with the revenge already exacted.

While the role of Grendel seems to be derived, in essence, from that of the abducting monster of the HC tale, a native tradition of a water-ogre appears likely to have contributed the monster's name and possibly some of his traits, such as his homicidal propensity and the cannibalism connected therewith. The name Grendel (or some slight modification of it) occurs namely in a number of place names in England,[110] the earliest record being from 708 A.D.—thus it

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[108] Von Sydow ("Irisches im Beowulf," 178) sees here a reflection of the head-hunter practices of the ancient Irish. An interesting parallel to the carrying-off of the head of Grendel is, as previously noted (see p. 37), found in the HC type of tale *An Tuairisgeal Mór*, where the decapitating "sword of light" is also retained as a trophy.

[109] As previously suggested (see footnote 13), the influence of the tale of the mighty hag intent on blood revenge could explain why the male monster in the epic is found dead rather than wounded.

[110] Grindeles pyt (Worcestershire, 708 A.D.); Grendeles pyt (Devonshire, 739); Grendeles mere (Wiltshire, 931); Grindles bec (Worcestershire, 932); Grendeles sylle (Surrey, 957); Grendels mere (Staffordshire, 958); Grendeles gate (Middlesex, 972). (See von Sydow, "Grendel i anglosaxiska ortnamn," *Namn och Bygd*, II [1914], 160f.)

According to a charter of Æðelstān's which records in 931 A.D. *Grendles mere* in Wiltshire, there is not far from it a place called *Bēowan hamm*—"the dwelling of Bēowa." This could be, and has been, taken (Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 42f., and Lawrence, *Beowulf and Epic Tradition*, p. 146) as a possible reflection of a native tradition involving a conflict between one Bēowa, conceivably identical with Bēow (or Beo), the equiva-

is most unlikely that it could be indebted to *Beowulf*; also, most of the records are from West Saxon areas, hence less likely to be influenced by a poem from the Anglian north. As the name is almost invariably attached to bodies of water, it would seem to reflect a popular tradition of an Anglo-Saxon water-ogre called Grendel—whose identity has, it appears likely, somewhere in the process of genesis of the epic been fused with that of the long-armed monster of the HC tale.

There exists no direct evidence as to the concept of the nature of this Grendel in folk tradition—all we have is the name, clearly Germanic whatever the exact etymology[111]—but there is little reason to think that he was not thought of, like the Grendel of the epic, as an evil and homicidal ogre; it may be noted that malicious, man-killing human-shaped creatures of rivers, such as Jenny Greenteeth, Peg Powler, and Peg o'Nell, have also been current in more recent English folk tradition, even if they are more closely akin to water-creatures like the German *Nix* and its Scandinavian equivalents in that they imperil swimmers and bathers rather than venturing forth to attack human dwellings. Such may also have been the modus operandi of the popular Grendel, his role having been in the epic altered through indebtedness to the story of the demonic palace-visitant of HC and perhaps

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lent in Anglo-Saxon genealogies of Bēowulf I (the Dane) in the epic, and Grendel. This role of Beo(w)(a) may, then, have inspired that of Beowulf the Geat, name and all. This hypothesis is, however, on rather shaky ground. The name-identification is open to question; it may be a case of coincidental similarity. Then again, perhaps we meet here a confused echo of the epic—confused not only in that the name of the hero has been abbreviated so as to coincide with that of Beo(w) but also in that his dwelling, rather than that of his host Hrōðgār, is placed in the neighbourhood of his adversary. Yet, who really knows? Perhaps we do have here a reflection of a native tradition that accounts for the name of the hero of our epic and provided the seed or some degree of inspiration for the story of his conflict with a water-ogre called Grendel. We may recall in this connection the Welsh folktale (see Ch. I, footnote 28) where a fearsome visitant dwelling in a gorge is mutilated, and presumably slain, by a deliverer not come from afar but a sojourner of the victimized nearby farmstead.

[111] Lawrence suggests (p. 163) that the name Grendel, most commonly suggested to be derived from *grindan* ("grind")—thus reflecting his role as "grinder"—or *grund* ("bottom")—reflecting his habitation at the bottom of the mere—may be a generic term for a water-monster.

also as a result of the kinship with Cain attributed to him. According to *Beowulf*, Grendel is, like his ancestor, the first murderer,[112] doomed to roam the wilderness; thus it would not be unnatural for him to undertake depredations on land. He is also, however, forced to inhabit *wæteregesan, cealde strēamas* ("the dread waters, cold streams").[113] The background of the concept of this type of habitation is not made clear in the poem, but it may well have had its root in an attempt to explain how the evil descendants of Cain survived the Deluge—by becoming water-dwellers or amphibious creatures. Such a concept would indeed seem to exhibit a striking affinity to the Celtic one of transformation of evil creatures into monsters, and there is, moreover, evidence that the problem of the survival of Cain's heirs was not overlooked among the Irish—it seems on the contrary to have been the subject of dispute,[114] one in fact reflected in the *Beowulf* manuscript. Irish monster lore of "druidical" metamorphosis[115] may well have supplied an answer that is mirrored in the epic and this may have paved the way for the

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[112] Grendel also exhibits, one may note by way of parallelism, traits similar to those of his ancestor, such as homicidal inclination and deadly envy of those favoured by God.

[113] Ll. 1260-61.

[114] Some of the manuscripts of the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi* substitute Ham for Cain as the ancestor of monsters, on the premise, it would seem, that the descendants of Cain were destroyed by the Flood; one text states explicitly that the monsters (*torathair*) "are not of the race of Cain as the Irish relate, for nothing remained of his seed after the Flood, for the reason of the Flood was to drown the posterity of Cain" (see Carney, p. 104). As previously mentioned (Ch. I, footnote 39), this Irish confusion seems to be reflected in the *Beowulf* manuscript.

S. J. Crawford ("Grendel's Descent from Cain," *Modern Language Review*, XXIII [1928], 207f.) thinks that mediaeval theologians discerned Scriptural authority for "the continuous survival of Cain's descendants, overwhelmed by the Flood, as sea-monsters," as indicated in a verse in the *Book of Job*: "Ecce gigantas gemunt sub aquis, et qui habitant cum eis" (*Job* XXVI, 5). One may note, as somewhat of a parallel, the widespread north-European legend of the survival of Pharaoh's army overwhelmed by the Red Sea through transformation into seals. (See my article, "The Seal in the Folklore of Northern Europe," *Folklore*, LXXIV [1963], 327ff.)

[115] See p. 66.

identification of the Anglo-Saxon water-ogre Grendel as a descendant of Cain.

The apparent fusion of the identities of the long-armed monster of HC and the Anglo-Saxon water-ogre within the figure of Grendel of the epic was, it would seem logical to suggest, probably greatly inspired or at least facilitated by the fact that, like Grendel, the monster of HC dwells for the most part in a water setting, usually the sea. That the ogre of the epic dwells deep under water may, aside from the possible general influence on the poet of the Celtic tradition of underwater habitation or some specific story featuring it, have been suggested by the occasional underground habitation of the monster of the HC tale; thus the idea of water setting common in it may have acquired a subaquatic dimension of depth—in this form more easily fusing with the tradition of the water-based Anglo-Saxon ogre—and influencing the story of Beowulf's underwater adventure in the epic.[116]

All this, anyhow, is what may have happened; logically considered, it seems altogether plausible. Yet, aside from the speculative nature of a good deal of the argument, we cannot be absolutely certain that even the earliest surviving geographical record (from 708 A.D.) involving the word Grendel actually precedes some stage of the epic where the name is already featured and may thus conceivably have influenced popular tradition; this seems, however, as indicated above, rather unlikely. And here I am content to let the matter, which is somewhat peripheral to the main thesis of this work, rest.

It should, at the conclusion of this discussion of the thorny problem of the origin of the Grendel story, be admitted that the possibility of some form of basic influence by Scandinavian folktale, so much theorized about, cannot be totally dismissed, even if there seems, to me, no need for any such assumption—the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle seem to fall reasonably well into place without it. Yet it is not inconceivable that, as so many a scholar thinks, some extinct Scandinavian tale may lurk in the background. It may have fused in England with somewhat similar Celtic folktale elements

[116] Cf. footnote 2 above.

and possibly elements of Anglo-Saxon folklore, such as those considered above, to provide the basic plot of the Grendel story; and, just conceivably, this story may then, to the further bedevilment of the *Beowulf* student, have travelled to Iceland to fuse there with an offshoot of its partial ancestor from Scandinavia, thus rearing its bewildering head in *Grettis saga*. All this complication seems to me altogether unlikely—yet, who truly knows? Strange things happened during the long centuries of oral transmission of mediaeval folktale and the vanity of dogmatizing in this still rather nebulous matter should be all too evident.

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