

Sisam, Kenneth, The Structure of Beowulf (Oxford at the Clarendon Press) 1965

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p. 3 At one time leading critics like Mullenhoff explained the form and length of the poem by postulating a number of interpolators who worked over a more shapely, compact, and consistent synthesis of short lays. Recently ~~Haecker~~ ^{Hensler} 2 has given his authority to the view that Beowulf is the work of an ecclesiastic who emulated the epic breadth of Vergil. I prefer to think, with Chadwick, 3 that long secular poems were a native development, to be expected when story-telling was the principal entertainment in the northern winter, and when professional minstrels (scopas) had the training necessary to compose or ~~recite~~ ^{recite} an heroic poem that could entertain an audience for hours, even for days. There would be times when a continuous, slow-moving story would please better than the less restful succession of short pieces; and the length of Beowulf was well within the capacity of memory accustomed to work without books. 4

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1. Beowulf, Berlin, 1899
 2. Die altgermanische Dichtung, 2nd edn., Potsdam, 1943, p. 192
 3. The Heroic Age, pp. 73 ff.

4. For the great lengths that may be attained without writing, see C. M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry, 1952, pp. 351 ff. Composition without writing is not necessarily the same as improvisation. Improvisation of a comparatively short eulogy of Beowulf is implied in lines 871-4, though there was some time in which to prepare it. But an unlettered poet could work in another way. He could prepare parts of a longer poem on solitary walks or resting in the dark, memorize them, and later link them together. The first recitations would serve as rehearsals, enabling him to make improvements. It is hard to believe that poems like the Iliad and Odyssey were, in the main, versified by a poet as he recited them. Beowulf, with more lapses and more use of devices that help an improviser, has many of the marks of premeditated art.

p. 4 At the rate of delivery which the dignified style suggests, its 3,182 lines might occupy four hours without pause, so that there would be ~~many~~ ^{many} occasions when it could not be recited complete at one session. If, as I suppose, Beowulf had a life outside of books - if it was sometimes recited from memory - it could be adapted to a shorter time by reducing speeches or omitting episodes and digressions. The extant form suggests a serial in three instalments. 2