

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

p. 49 5. No such aptness can be claimed for the so-called 'Thryth' episode.

. . . almost anything could / <sup>p.50</sup> be dragged in on the ground of more or less likeness or unlikeness. The old suggestion that this passage points to contact with the court of the Mercian Offa (d. 796) is attractive because it ends with the names of three members of the Mercian royal house. But perhaps it is a sufficient explanation that the poet aimed at entertainment. If the extraneous stories he wanted to use fitted neatly into the narrative, so much the better; if not, they were still good entertainment. 'Beowulf's Return' would be thinner and more monotonous without the two episodes. As a whole, the 'Return' appears to be an extension of the two older stories of Grendel and Grendel's Mother made by the poet who gave Beowulf substantially the form in which it has survived.

Fiction and History

p. 51 The borderland between fiction and history in Beowulf is a curious field for speculation. . . . For most people without written records the past closes up behind their grandfathers' time. . . .

This borderland is the more baffling because the distinction between fact ~~and~~ fiction is seldom clear, and because the poet has the art of giving verisimilitude <sup>p.52</sup> to his stories. That the Danes, Geats, Swedes, and Frisians were contemporary peoples of the west Baltic and the North Sea is historically certain. Hygelac's disastrous raid (c.525) on the country about the mouth of the Rhine is recorded by a serious historian, Gregory of Tours, within living memory of the event. There is a sufficient probability that Hrothgar and Hrothulf were kings of the <sup>Danes</sup> ~~Danes~~, and that Ohthere, Onela, and Eadgils were Swedish kings. But the poem itself is the only evidence that there was a Geatish hero called Beowulf (who is not mentioned in Widsith or Scandinavian tradition), that he became king, that he was a contemporary of Hygelac and Hrothgar. His actions in the main plot are fiction, and nothing that is told of him is very probably fact.<sup>1</sup>

The fiction touches the historical background seldom and vaguely.

<sup>1</sup> That he avenged Hygelac by killing Daeghrefn (250lf.) is the one precisely described act that might be historical. But some power of invention should be allowed to a poet. . . .