

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

p. 53 What then of Wiglaf, Beowulf's successor? He is given some credentials.

. . . So there may have been a Scandinavian hero named Wiglaf, though he is unknown to Scandinavian tradition.

On the other hand, everything Wiglaf does in Beowulf is fictitious.

p. 54 Outside Beowulf evidence for the very early history of the Geats is scarce.

p. 58 After all, Beowulf is a tale of marvels set in the Heroic Age - poetic fiction, not history. In the last part the outcrop of history, or legend based on history, is obtrusively large; but it need not be extended by interpretation.

The Transmission of Beowulf

p. 70 In its manuscript transmission Beowulf is not likely to have been exempt from such variations. To say that 'no other poet in Anglo-Saxon England composed poetry comparable with Beowulf'² is to assert what cannot be ^{p.71} known. But if it were true, there is no evidence that the Anglo-Saxons recognized it in a way that would secure special respect for the text: for example, by choosing the poem for recital on official occasions, as the Athenians chose the Iliad and the Odyssey. Whether in an oral or a written transmission, changes are to be expected which methodical textual criticisms cannot detect, because its resources are so slight in this case.

With so many uncertainties, a textual critic has no simple prescription for improving the text. Complete scepticism is a barren doctrine. Undisciplined guessing cannot be justified, though conjectures that are not in themselves acceptable may be valuable in exposing a difficulty or opening the way to a solution.