

Beowulf and Hiram

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As many of you may know, I have a fondness for old literature, including classic poetry. Of course I cannot read most classic poetry in its original form, since my literacy is limited to English and mathematics. As a result, I am forced to read translations of such great works as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. I even struggle with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which is written in English. OK, it is written in Middle English, which is still truly another animal, despite its similarities to modern English. As a result, I am always on the lookout for outstanding translations of these works. Occasionally, my collection grows when a new translation is recommended, much to the consternation of my wife, who believes that libraries should be in public buildings, not private homes. Of course she is wrong about this, as I am about everything else.

Despite my fondness for all these works, I must admit that one stands high atop my "shelf of admiration". That work is *Beowulf*, a relatively short poem, written in Old English about events in Denmark and Geatland (or southwestern Sweden). The story itself is pretty simple, telling the tale of a young Geat warrior, Beowulf, who seeks fame and fortune by traveling to Denmark with several companions, where he kills a monster, Grendel, which had been terrorizing the Danish King Hrothgar for 12 years. After killing the monster, he is forced to kill yet another monster, identified only as Grendel's mother, who seeks revenge for the death of her son. After collecting a fortune in compensatory gifts, he returns to Geatland, shares the wealth, eventually becomes King, and rules for 50 years. He is then forced to battle a dragon, killing it in its lair, but suffering mortal wounds in the process. Mixed into this violent combination of gore, mayhem, and death are several historical interludes, tying the heroic events of the poem into the context of the late 5th century.

Exciting, huh? Well, if that is all there was, it would be pretty boring. There must be some stronger appeal. After all, this poem has been mandatory reading in many literature classes throughout the years. And I was sufficiently impressed by the poem that I honored my pet Rottweiler with the name Beowulf. But remember, this is a poem, and the power of the story is amplified, perhaps created, by the poetry. While I really wish I

could read Old English, I suspect I never will. However, the first time I was exposed to this poem, I was fortunate to read from a translation by Burton Raffel¹, which I still consider the best of the four or five that I have read. And while Raffel's poetry may not be as good as other translations, his word selection and phrasing evoke power and wonder among the death and destruction and violence, making the story real. Based on his translation, I can truly imagine the power and majesty of the original.

Sometimes the simplest and most trivial coincidence can lead a person into fertile fields of possibility. I had read the poem several times, enjoying it simply as escapism. But one day, while rereading a portion of the story, I was struck by one phrase, in which Hrothgar talks about Beowulf:

And I've heard that when seamen came, 375
Bringing their gifts and presents to the Geats,
They wrestled and ran together, and Higlac's
Young prince showed them a might battle grip,
Hands that moved with thirty men's strength,
And courage to match.

A mighty battle grip! Surely this was just a coincidence, the accidental result of a simple word choice by the translator. It is certainly not identical to a "strong grip" or a "lion's paw". But for some reason, this coincidence stuck in my head. I must note that other translators include the reference to "hands with the strength of 30 men", while say nothing about a mighty grip. I did a bit of on-line research using Old-English dictionaries, and came up with the following, very literal, translation of the phrase:

The Geat fire maker there understood (or had skill in) the virtuous craft of 30 men in his finest handgrip.

I must admit, this translation does not really match up with any image of a violent young warrior. But then, I was looking at the Old English words in a very different light than other translators. I was, most certainly, forcing my own slant onto possible meaning. But, never-the-less, this translation worked, and reinforced my initial "ahah" moment. So now, as I reread the poem, I also viewed it with different eyes, with different perspective, and with different purpose. I was now searching for further coincidences. And I found them! I found so many, in fact, that I can hardly believe I hadn't noticed them before. They were hidden in plain sight, right before my unseeing eyes.

Christianity. This is partially illustrated in the following lines, describing Hrothgar's actions after the death of Grendel.

Thus that guardian of Denmark's treasures 1046
Had repaid a battle fought for his people
By giving noble gifts, had earned praise
For himself from those who try to know truth.

But perhaps the seekers of truth were something else.

The Killing of the Monsters

The monsters in this poem are truly monstrous. They are much more than just enemy fighters. A mighty warrior such as Beowulf would gain little fame or fortune from dispatching such puny, insignificant adversaries. In fact, he performs that very killing in some of the historical tidbits buried in the poem, with little fanfare. Such battles are scarce worth mention. But Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon, are evil creatures. Grendel, and by relational reference his mother, is described as the spawn of Cain:

...that demon, that fiend 101
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not Hell, but earth. He was spawned in that slime,
Conceived by a pair of those monsters born
Of Cain, murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel's death. The Almighty drove
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,
Shut away from men; they split
Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,
A brood forever opposing the Lord's
Will, and again and again defeated.

Giants, of course, were the traditional enemies of Odin and the other Norse Gods. Here the poet casts them in terms more familiar to the Christian listener. But dragons, on the other hand, are ancient creatures of fable and imagination, too terrible even to be compared to any offspring of man. What could be more appropriate for Beowulf's final challenge than battle-royal with a beast evoking the fires of hell. The poet's Christian listeners would contemplate a battle between the brave, virtuous

(but pagan) hero and a demon-like creature, spawned in Hell, belching fire and brimstone. Dragons are creatures of our imagination. They need little description; and that is all we get from the poet.

... And a stalker 2270
In the night, a flaming dragon, found
The treasure unguarded; he whom men fear
Came flying through the darkness, wrapped in fire,
Seeking caves and stone-split ruins,
But finding gold. Then it stayed, buried
Itself with heathen silver and jewels
It could neither use nor ever abandon.
So mankind's enemy, the mighty beast,
Slept in those stone walls for hundreds
Of years;

These were the monsters that Beowulf faced, faced with courage and determination, and finally destroyed. But how did they die? They died horrible deaths, as perhaps the poet and listener would presume they deserved. There is no sympathy in this poem for the monsters, just as there was no mercy for three other impious, murderous wretches.

Beowulf lay in wait for Grendel in the halls of Herot, awake while his men slept, anticipating the arrival of the monster. He faced Grendel with no armor or weapon save his own great strength. When Grendel came, killing one of Beowulf's men, Beowulf grasped him with his bare hands, with that "strong grip", and ripped the monster's arm from his body.

... Then he stepped to another 745
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper
--And was instantly seized himself, claws
Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
Knew at once that nowhere on earth
Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing
Could take his talons and himself away from that tight
Hard grip.

... Suddenly 781
The sounds changed, the Danes started
In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible

Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang
In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's
Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms
Of him who of all the men on earth
Was the strongest.

... Grendel 811
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at
His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,
But his power had gone. He twisted in pain.
And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder
Snapped, muscle and bone split
And broke. The battle was over.

... No Dane doubted 832
The victory, for the proof, hanging high
From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the
monster's
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

Grendel was killed, his arm plucked off, a gaping hole left in his chest.
His heart was not torn out, but his life's blood most certainly was.

Grendel's mother sought vengeance. She came to the hall the following
night, while the warriors were sleeping off the effects of the great
celebration ensuing from Grendel's death. She attacked, seized one of
Hrothgar's favorite retainers, and carried him off to be devoured in her
cave. Beowulf followed, tracked her to her lair, and closed in battle. She
fought valiantly and fiercely. His sword could not hurt her. Her strength
was perhaps his equal. Only his armor saved him from being stabbed to
death. But then he saw his chance.

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy 1556
Sword, hammered by giants, strong
And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons
But so massive that no ordinary man could lift
Its carved and decorated length. He drew it
From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,
And then, savage now, angry
And desperate, lifted it high over his head
And struck her with all the strength he had left,

Caught her in the neck and cut it through,
Broke bones and all. Her body fell
To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.

So now, another monster is dead, her head smote off, a rather severe
form of having one's throat cut from ear to ear. But yet another monster
awaits. It waits for more than fifty years, while Beowulf assumes the
Geatish throne, and rules well. But yet he comes. The dragon, too,
seeks vengeance, but not for the death of Grendel, or even his mother.
The dragon seeks vengeance for the theft of a cup, a simple jeweled cup.
Perhaps one could claim some relationship with another cup of legend,
but I will leave that possibility for others to explore. During the fifty year
wait, Beowulf fights other battles, battles of note in a historical epic, but
not in this poem. Here they are merely a postscript. The monsters are
where the significance lies.

So Edgetho's son survived, no matter 2396
What dangers he met, what battles he fought,
Brave and forever triumphant, till the day
Fate sent him to the dragon and sent him death.

Oh yes, Beowulf kills the dragon, but he dies in the process, just like
another hero who met three ruffians. Beowulf does not meet the dragon
alone. He is helped by a young and faithful retainer, Wiglaf. Beowulf
strikes the dragon, draws blood, but his sword breaks. The dragon
approaches, spewing burning flames while Beowulf and Wiglaf take
shelter behind an iron shield, made especially for this fight. Beowulf knew
he would die, knew that was his fate, his doom, his wyrd, but he faced the
dragon with determination.

... His weapon 2583
Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
Most, that excellent sword. Edgetho's
Famous son stared at death,
Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
Into darkness that all men must make, as death
Ends their few hours on earth.

... Then the famous old hero remembering 2676
Days of glory, lifted what was left
Of Nagling, his ancient sword, and swung it

With all his strength, smashed the gray
Blade into the beast's head. But then Nagling
Broke to pieces, as iron always
Had in Beowulf's hands.

Then the monster charged again, vomiting 2687
Fire, wild with pain, rushed out
Fierce and dreadful, its fear forgotten.
Watching for its chance, it drove its tusks
Into Beowulf's neck; he staggered, the blood
Came flooding forth, fell like rain.
And then when Beowulf needed him most
Wiglaf showed his courage, his strength
And skill, and the boldness he was born with. Ignoring
The dragon's head, he helped his lord
By striking lower down. The sword
Sank in; his hand was burned, but the shining
Blade had done its work, the dragon's
Belching flames began to flicker
And die away. And Beowulf drew
His battle-sharp dagger; the bloodstained old king
Still knew what he was doing. Quickly he cut
The beast in half. It fell apart.

So finally, the third monster is dead, its body severed in twain, and Beowulf is dying. A dead hero. And the three monsters he faced, also dead, one with its chest ripped open, one with its throat (and head) cut off, and the third severed in twain, the just deserts for doers of evil.

The Growth of Beowulf

When we first meet Beowulf, he is a young, brash warrior, hoping to expand upon a growing fame. He does not fear death. He is confident, self-assured, full of passion. In fact, the young warrior, were it not for his demonstrated ability, would be viewed a braggart. He heard tales of the terror Grendel was wreaking on Hrothgar and Herot. He gathered a group of men, fifteen warriors in all, and sailed for the land of the Danes. Upon landing on those foreign shores, a watchman demanded a password. The Geats had it not, but Beowulf explained their mission, their goal, the purpose of their voyage from East to West. The watchman listens, allows them to pass, and guides them to Herot.

I believe your words, I trust in 290

Your friendship. Go forward ...
... on into Denmark. I'll guide you
Myself

Beowulf demonstrates his youthful brashness when explaining his mission to Hrothgar.

... The days 408
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's
Name has echoed in our land: sailors
Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes
Great King. They have seen my strength for themselves,
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove
Five great giants into chains, chased
All of that race from the earth. I swam
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters
Out of the ocean, and killing them one
By one; death was my errand and the fate
They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called
Together, and I've come.

Beowulf proved his valor. He killed the evil Grendel. But when Grendel's mother came, wreaking vengeance for her loss, Beowulf persisted. He was still confident, but now he showed a grim determination to finish the job. He now recognized that actions have consequences. He knew that failure was a very real possibility. But still, he persevered.

... Beowulf spoke 1383
"Let your sorrow end! It is better for us all
To avenge our friends, not mourn them forever.
Each of us will come to the end of his life
On earth; he who can earn it should fight
For the glory of his name; fame after death
Is the noblest of goals."

... Remember 1474
Hrothgar, Oh knowing king, now

Of course in Masonry, we frequent refer to a Word, whether it be one that is lost or a substitute. We are taught that the Word is an allegory, with divine implications. But could it be that it is an allegory to Fate or Destiny. And if so, what destiny was lost? What destiny was substituted. Could the lost wyrd have been the original destiny of the operative Mason to learn and teach the science, math, and geometry, used in the building of great cathedrals? Of course, this field of study was lost to the natural philosophers or scientists of the enlightenment. Could the substitute wyrd be the speculative Mason's destiny to build temples in the hearts of men, the adoption of true philosophy, the transition from operative to speculative Masonry? Your guess is as good as mine.

Historical Context⁴

The original poem *Beowulf* exists in a single manuscript, written somewhere between the 8th and early 11th centuries. The first known owner is the 16th century scholar, Lawrence Nowell. It was damaged by fire in 1731, and has since crumbled extensively. Significant effort has been made to recover illegible sections. However, it is unclear if this was the original, as some critics claim, or whether it was actually the transcription of a poem written much earlier. Some critics believe the themes and story are much older, formed through oral traditions and passed down to later ages by scops (Old English poets).

For the purpose of speculation, let us assume that it was available, in some form, in the early 10th century, around the time of King Athelstan, who ruled from 924 to 939 A.D. We have in our possession another document, the Regius (or Halliwell) Manuscript, written about 1390, which describes some interesting activities happening during Athelstan's reign.

In time of good King Athelstane's day;
He made then both hall and even bower,
And high temples of great honour,
To disport him in both day and night,
And to worship his God with all his might.
This good lord loved this craft full well,
And purposed to strengthen it every del, (part)
For divers faults that in the craft he found;
He sent about into the land
After all the masons of the craft,
To come to him full even straghfte, (straight)

For to amend these defaults all
By good counsel, if it might fall.
An assembly then he could let make
Of divers lords in their state,
Dukes, earls, and barons also,
Knights, squires and many mo, (more)
And the great burgesses of that city,
They were there all in their degree;
There were there each one algate, (always)
To ordain for these masons' estate,
There they sought by their wit,
How they might govern it;
Fifteen articles they there sought,
And fifteen points there they wrought,

Legend, or history if you prefer, documents this as the first official sanction of the Mason's right to congregate and to govern their own affairs.

It is known that Athelstan, and his grandfather, Alfred the Great, had contact with what I will call Viking bands. They fought; they intermarried, and, without doubt, traded traditions. Certain of the pagans were converted to Christianity, not always willingly. Certainly, the oral traditions of these Viking warriors would have entered into the lore of the English. And it is not unbelievable that these early Masons could have adopted aspects of this tale, and made them their own.

Of course, we do not know where or how the single extant manuscript of *Beowulf* was written or preserved. But it was first identified in the late 17th century. Masonic scholars also claim that the third degree, as we know it, did not exist when the First Grand Lodge was formed in 1717. But within 30 years, it was strongly present. Could it be that the early modern Masonic authors, working in the early 18th century, took a piece of ancient Masonic lore, expanded upon in a newly rediscovered document, and recast it as our third degree, substituting King Solomon's Temple for an ancient Danish mead-hall, thereby making it more familiar and meaningful to men of that day.

Of course, the manuscript was nearly destroyed by fire in 1731. The conspiracy theorists would instantly claim this was an attempt by those same authors to eliminate all trace of the True Source of the Hiram Legend.

But perhaps we have it backwards. Perhaps the Hiram Legend, as we know it, already existed in some form during the time of Athelstan. And perhaps the poem *Beowulf* was nothing more than an allegorical retelling of the story, the first (and previously unidentified) expose of Freemasonry.

In his article, "*Beowulf*, The Monsters and the Critics"⁵, J.R.R. Tolkien takes to task the critics who dismissed the poem as lacking in historical context, filled with unnecessary monsters. He argued against the critics who said the poem put the important historical references on the edge and the useless monsters in the center. He claimed that the monsters were critical, were, in fact, central to the entire poem, that they were the foil against which Beowulf proved himself and became a man, and that the growth of Beowulf was the entire point of the poem. I likewise contend that the ruffians in the third degree hold a similar place of significance. What they purposed, that they performed. And against their purpose, Hiram, though losing his life, overcame their evil purpose.

Vidar and Fenrir

Other Norse stories seem to have relevance to our Masonic traditions. We are told that the candidate wears a single shoe because of an ancient Israelitish custom, described in the book of Ruth. This explanation has always left me unsatisfied. I think a more appropriate parallel can be found in the story of Ragnarok, the final battle between the Norse Gods and all the forces of evil. For years, Odin had been having his ravens bring scrap leather to Vidar, his son. The following tale is told in *The Children of Odin*⁶:

Odin, speaking to Vidar, told him,

“And I shall tell why my ravens fly to thee, carrying in their beaks scraps of leather. It is that thou mayst make for thyself a sandal; with that sandal on thou mayest put thy foot on the lower jaw of a mighty wolf and rend him. All the shoemakers of the earth throw on the ground scraps of the leather they use so that thou mayst be able to make the sandal for thy wolf-rending foot.”

Later, during the final battle between the Gods and the forces of evil, the following was related.

By Fenrir the Wolf, Odin was slain. But the younger Gods were now advancing to the battle; and Vidar, the

Silent God, came face to face with Fenrir. He laid his foot on the Wolf's lower jaw, that foot that had on the sandal made of all the scraps of leather that shoemakers had laid by for him, and with his hands he seized the upper jaw and tore his gullet. Thus died Fenrir, the fiercest of all the enemies of the Gods.

Somehow, the use of a single sandal to ensure that Good would triumph over evil in the last days, seems much more relevant than the explanation we are given. Odin had sacrificed an eye for wisdom. But due to his sacrifice, he saw much. Again from *The Children of Odin*:

But he saw, too, why the sorrow and troubles had to fall, and he saw how they might be borne so that Gods and Men, by being noble in the days of sorrow and trouble, would leave in the world a force that one day, a day that was far off indeed, would destroy the evil that brought terror and sorrow and despair into the world.

If ever more Masonic sentiments were uttered, I know not where it could have been.

The Final Dirge

When I started this paper, my good friend and Brother, John Klaus, cautioned me with the following Latin words, “Si post hoc ergo propter hoc.” (If after this, therefore because of this.) This was good advice. We should never read too much into our own speculations, because coincidence does not causality make. But sometimes, imagination supersedes reality, wishes really do come true, and what could be, is. With that in mind, let us close with one final scene from the great unknown poet. And as you hear it, remember in your mind's eye the concluding moments of the Third Degree.

In this scene, Beowulf was dead, slain by the fire-spewing dragon. Nothing remained but for his retainers to honor his life, honor his death, and build a monument to commemorate his accomplishments.

.... The bearers brought 3140
Their beloved lord, their glorious king,
And weeping laid him high on the wood.
Then the warriors began to kindle that greatest
Of funeral fires; smoke rose

