

Beowulf - BACKGROUND: Great Tales from the Germanic Heritage:

1. **The Bear's Son:** a folk myth -- a king had four sons. The youngest is considered of no account. He saves and befriends a bear in the woods. The Bear adopts him as his son and gives him his strength. Monsters attack the king's steddung. The older brothers are helpless. The youngest saves them all and inherits the throne. (Beowulf = Bee-wolf, or Bear). (2183-7, p.71)

2. **The Golden Hall,** or the Scyldingasaga: (told in Saxo Grammaticus, Gesta Danorum, and in Icelandic sagas.) History and folktale mix. The Northern Camelot story -- The line of the semi-divine Scyld descends through **Beow** (Bee) to **Healfdene**. H. has a daughter and three sons. The daughter is married to **Onela** the Swede and goes into another set of tales. The 3 sons are named in our tale as:

Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga

Heorogar is killed in battle against the Heathobards, old enemies of the Danes, the Heathobard king Froda, who had himself killed Healfdene years before, is also killed in that battle. **Hrothgar** succeeds to the Danish throne, bypassing Heorogar's son, **Heoroward**, who is too young to win the nobles' election. Heoroward and his uncle Hrothgar are estranged and Heoroward goes into exile with his aunt, among the Swedes. Hrothgar makes of his court an exemplary kingdom, similar to the Round Table of Camelot in later English tales. Hrothgar takes a fancy to his other nephew, **Hroth(w)ulf**, son of Halga. Hrothulf, as the name-rhyme might indicate, may be the illegitimate son of Hrothgar, as for instance Mordred in the Arthurian tales is the king's bastard. He makes him "nephew," a next-in-line position in a Germanic court. But he does not give him the armor of Heorogar -- in our story only very rich armor (2152 -2154, p.70) but in the legend the magical armor of Scyld Scaefing, founder of the line -- and with it, the legitimacy as heir. Our poet says Hrothgar gives that fateful armor to Beowulf, (2153-62, p.70) and with it the recognition Hrothulf desires. A dire insult and miscalculation on Hrothgar's part. Now Hrothgar is highly successful in making his realm rich. He builds the Glory of the Northlands, the great mead hall **Heorot**, the Hall of the Hart, the "Golden Hall" of the sagas. The fame of the building, shining like light on the hilltop with gold and paint, reaches to all the Germanic world. The incident of the grendel (grendele = grinder, monster) recounted here is not a usual part of the Heorot or Scyld story, though it is a motif of the Germanic hero-tale, of the Bear's Son tale in particular. (Our poet seems to have made it up, for his own purposes). The Scylding story known otherwise is this: (2020- 2067, pp. 65 -67) Hrothgar will try to make peace with the old enemies, the Heathobards. He will marry his daughter **Freawaru** to the Heathobard prince, **Ingeld**.

The story of Ingeld was the subject of many medieval poems, now lost to us. It was expressly forbidden reading for clergy in ninth and tenth century England. At the wedding feast, in Heorot, an old Heathobard warrior sees the sword of his dead lord, king Froda, being worn by one of Freawaru's attendant warriors. He goes to Ingeld, the son of the slain dead lord, and incites him to take revenge. The young boy kills the Dane and a fight ensues in which the wedding party has

to fight their way out. The Heathobards attack Heorot; and in the hall itself, Freawaru's father, Hrothgar, and brothers kill her husband, the young Ingeld. Hrothgar is wounded and dies soon after. The allusion in the *Beowulf* holds that the Hall was burned in that fight (83-6, p. 5) The more usual version has it that the hall survives Hrothgar's death to be lost by his sons. That burning is the subject of the Hrothulf portion of the story.

Hrothgar leaves his kingdom to his young sons, **Hrethric** and **Hrothmund**, and places them both, and his widow, the lady **Wealhtheow**, in the care and regency of his beloved nephew Hrothulf. (1176-8, p. 38) But Hrothulf is untrue, resenting his lack of legitimacy and his father's refusal to acknowledge his claim to the throne. (1014 -1017, p. 34) Hrothulf has his young wards murdered, to get the throne for himself.

Back over in Sweden, the exiled Heoroward sees his chance and invades Denmark with a Swedish army. They attack Hrothulf, who with his wicked retainers has taken refuge in the steddung of the Golden Hall; and to dislodge them, the attackers set the building on fire. Hrothulf charges out of the burning hall, to be cut down by Heoroward's men; but Heoroward himself is stabbed in the back by one of Hrothulf's cowardly followers amid the smoke and burning, as Heoroward tries to rescue the treasure of the hall from the flames. The last of the line of the Scyldings perishes along with the doomed hall. "The battle-surge of consuming flame swallows it up." (83 -84, p.5)

3. **The Battle of Ravenswood**, or *The Goetingasaga*: (Saxo Grammaticus) historical legend, (2910 - 2994, pp. 93-95) -- the Geatish king **Hrethel** had three sons, **Herebeald**, **Heathcyn**, and **Hygelac**. Herebeald was killed in a hunting accident by his brother Heathcyn. The father was then honor-bound to slay his son's killer, even tho' that killer be his own son. He could not kill his son, and so died in sorrow and grief, a dishonored man. (2429-2471, pp.78-9)

Heathcyn took the throne and made war on their old enemies the Swedes, on **Ongentheow**, king of the Swedes, and **Onela**, son of Ongentheow and husband of Hrothgar's sister. At the battle of Ravenswood, Ongentheow killed Heathcyn (2472-2487, pp.79-80) and drove the Geats into the wood (2910-2994, pp.93-95) where they waited through the long winter night for death the next morning. Many froze in the night, some the Swedes caught, and burned alive, in front of the eyes of their comrades cowering in the forest, taunting the Geats to come out and warm themselves at the cozy fires. The Swedes try to burn the wood, but it is too cold. Then as the dawn comes, the Geats hear the horns of the reserve force that the very young (12-13 yrs.?) **Hygelac** has brought up for their rescue. In the battle that follows, the old Swedish king Ongentheow is killed, and the Swedes are driven back to their fortress.

The Swedish stockade wall is stormed and taken and the Swedes defeated. Hygelac spares Onela and his men and makes a treaty with the Swedes.

Hygelac then reigns for several years, during which our story takes place, and then, in his early twenties, goes on a viking raid against the Frisians on the Belgian coast, persuaded to attempt a

vengeance for a dishonor done his cousins (the Danes in the fight at Finnsburg?). He comes up against the Franks instead, and before he can leave in his ships, the Frankish prince Theodebert arrives and defeats the Geat vikings. Hygelac is slain (1197 -1214, p. 39); and according to our poet, who adds his fictional character into the historic narrative, Beowulf kills his slayer, the Frisian prince Daeghraf, without a sword by hugging him to death, bear-fashion, breaking through his armor and bone by his 'strength of arms alone (2500-2509, p.80). Beowulf then swims to safety, carrying with him thirty suits of armor, and makes his way back to southern Sweden across land and water, having at one point to swim the straits of Kategat between Denmark and Sweden.(2354-2367, p.76)

4. **The Fight at Finnsburgh**, see the Finnsburg Fragment(only a portion of the poem survives) -- (1063 - 1159, pp. 35 - 37)

the Danes visit the Frisian king **Finn** at his stronghold. **Hnaef** the Danish king has come to visit his sister Hildeburgh, Finn's queen. Because of old feuds, Hnaef insults the Frisians during the feasting. During the night the Frisians slip up on the guests asleep in the hall to kill them. The Danes wake and fight for five days holding the hall against their attackers. The sixth day Hnaef is killed when the Frisians fire the hall and drive the Danes out to fight in the open; the Frisians make peace, recognizing the surviving Danes as great warriors. They give to the new chief of the Danes, **Hengest**, his own hall and equal rights in the Frisian lands. Hengest settles in for the winter. Then in the Spring, one of his men lays in Hengest's lap the sword of their dead lord Hnaef. Hengest must choose between the oath to Finn and the older oath to Hnaef. He chooses the older duty and attacks Finn, killing him and his sons and getting killed himself with all the Danes. Hildeburgh is left to mourn her lord, her sons, her brother, and her cousins.

5. **The Sigemund and Fitela Lay**, or the Volsunga Saga (874-915, p. 30) The Beowulf poet only refers to one incident of the life of **Sigemund**(Sigmundr), the dragon slaying, a feat accounted to his son Siggurthr(Sinfjoethli/**Fitele**) in continental German sagas, but here given to the father. These allusions, to the father-son heroes and the dragon slaying, are part of a larger tale of daring, magic, and revenge.

The story preserved in the Medieval German Volsunga Saga involves the interaction of the Huns (a Finno-Ugric people) with the East German Goths at the time of the legendary steppe-empire of Hermanreich (Eormanric). **Sigemund** and **Signy** are twin brother and sister, eldest children of the king of the Huns, Volsungr. Signy is betrothed to **Siggeir**, king of Gautland (the Geats of Beowulf), and is taken to Siggeir's fortress for the wedding by her father and 10 brothers. During the feast, Siggeir attacks and kills Volsungr and captures the brothers. He proceeds to kill them one by one over the next days in various gruesome ways, feeding them to a giant she-wolf, who is his werewolf mother. Signy contrives to free her twin, Sigemund, by persuading Siggeir to tie him to a stocks in the forest where the great she-wolf will find him. She smears his face with honey, and the She-wolf licks it before killing him. He bites her tongue and holds on as she pulls back and pulls him free of the stocks. He kills her and flees into the great forest and there becomes, through the help of certain magical dwarfs, the greatest fighter in the world. Years

pass.

Sigemund's fame reaches the ears of Siggeir, who sends his two sons to try out for the troupe of warrior youths Sigemund is training in his martial arts. Sigemund tests them each, and each fails and dies. Signy, seeing opportunity for revenge in this unknown forest champion and wizard, disguises herself as a witch-woman and goes to Sigemund's house in the forest. She recognizes him but he does not recognize her. She visits and sleeps with him three nights, returns home before dawn and takes Siggeir to bed, and then bears a son for Siggeir, without his knowing that the child's real father is her lost brother, Sigemund. When the boy, **Sinfjoethli**, called **Fitela** in our poem, grows up, she sends him to the forest and Sigemund's troupe of warriors. Sigemund tests him and he passes all the tests better than anyone has before.

Sigemund and Sinfjoethli have a series of adventures, of which one is the dragon-slaying here alluded to, (880-888, p.30), but finally they attack Sigemund's enemy Siggeir in his fortress. Siggeir is killed, the fortress burned, and Signy, her revenge complete, turns back into the fire and kills herself, to wipe clean her dishonor for living so long as Siggeir's wife and sharing his bed. The tale continues in some versions in familiar folk-motif: Sigemund and Sinfjoethli, unaware that they are father and son, later kill each other, as Sinfjoethli is duty-bound to avenge his mother's death. Vengeance and duty destroy the Volsung line.

6. The Tale of Heremod, (906-915, p. 30) Contrasted with Sigemund, and repeatedly mentioned as type of the bad king, (1710-21, pp. 55-6) **Heremod** was last of the line of Danish kings before **Scyld Scaefing**. No other mention of him survives besides these in the *Beowulf*. But he has been identified with the tyrant Lotharus, recounted by Saxo Grammaticus. Lotharus/Heremod betrayed his friends, cruelly tortured his enemies, starved his people and engaged them in useless wars for profit with their neighbors, incurring blood-feuds that were to last into the next dynasty, particularly that feud with the Heathobards that finally destroys Hrothgar's line. His own people finally put an end to him and his sons, and his name becomes a cautionary tale forever. **Scyld** arrives out of the sea-mists as a baby in a little boat, wrapped in cloth-of-gold swaddlings. He is taken in by the Danes, raised to manhood, and elected King to replace Lotharus/Heremod. His reign is golden and his line semi-divine, like that of Arthur. He may be, like Arthur, of the half-elven folk.

7. The Tale of Thryth (1931-1662, p. 63) **Thryth**, or Modthryth, is a character of folk-tale, much like the operatic heroine Turandot, whose beauty was such that she killed men who dared to sully it by looking at her. The story as told here conflates her, in the only obvious mention of any English connexion in *The Beowulf*, with the wife of the English king Offa II of Mercia, Queen Cynethryth, or Quendrida, who is said to be responsible for the murder of St. Ethelbert, as well as many others including her husband Offa. Also similar is the story of Hermathruda in Saxo, who from a violent youth becomes a loving wife to her strong husband once she is forced to fall in love with him.

8. The Ragnarok, the Burning of the Gods, or End of the World (the Elder Edda)

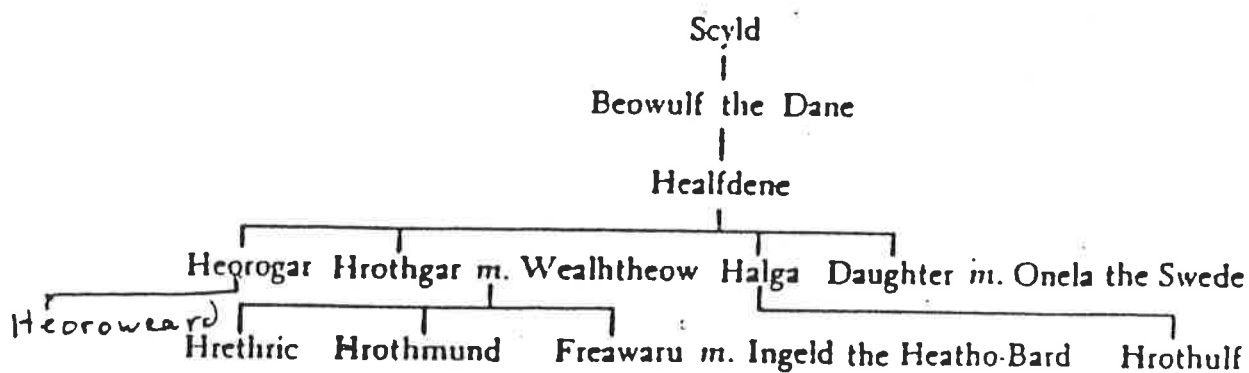
Another story not told in the *Beowulf* but underlying its whole vision of life and purpose. The Germanic world-view survived long into the Christian imagination of the Northern Peoples and colored their Christianity in many ways. The Ragnarok -- The old Northern Gods know they are only for a time immortal. Some day the giants and monsters will pour back over the walls of the earth and overwhelm the gods and men, and leave the earth a burned and chaotic waste. Woden will fall to the fire wolf, Thor will be eaten by the Fenris wolf, and Frey will be crushed by the Midgarth Serpent. The bridge of the rainbow will be broken, the towers of the Valhall, the Northern Olympus, will burn and fall, and nothing will survive. Defeat is the certain end of all. "The winning side is Chaos and Unreason, but the gods, who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation." In their final war, men are the gods' chosen allies, able to share in that "absolute resistance, perfect because without hope."

9. **The Torque of the Brosings** (1189 - 1196) In Norse myth, the three dwarf artisans (the Brisings/ Brosings) responsible for building the gods' mead-hall, Valhal, and the rainbow bridge, Bifrost, conceive a plot to punish Woden for his stinginess in paying them. They make a gold necklace, a torque, so beautiful that to see it is to desire it. Woden's wife Frea falls under its spell. She agrees to sleep with each of them in turn in return for possessing the necklace. When Woden learns of this he is shamed and demands she return it. She refuses, and there begins an estrangement between them that continues through time. Woden makes a fateful thoughtless curse, that whosoever should possess the necklace should never be satisfied, or never be happy, or never be safe in the holding of it, or some such curse. It is to bring about the destruction of whoever holds it, however. Loki steals it from Frea, and is banished from Valhal for that. In revenge he sets loose the Fenris Wolf and starts the events of Ragnarok.

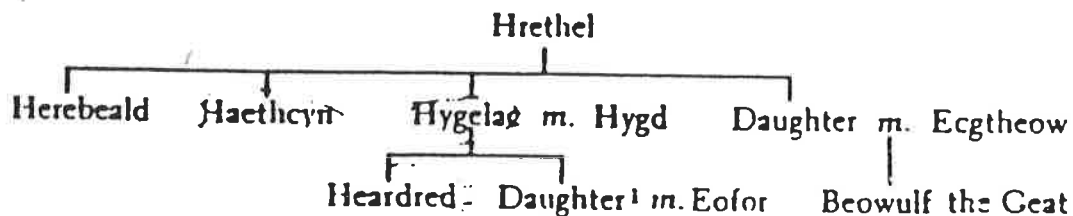
The *Beowulf* poet compares the torque that the Danish queen Wealhtheow gives to Beowulf to the torque **Hama** stole from the hoard of **Eormenric** (Hermanreich/ Ermanaric) at the end of the empire of the Eastern Goths, either conflating that jewel to the mythical torque of the Brisings (*Brisingamen*) or making an implied comparison. Like the mythical necklace, the necklace of Ermanaric also brought death to its possessors, and by implication, this jewel also will do the same. Beowulf will give it to Hygd, his young queen, (2121 - 2127) and she will give it her husband, the young King Hygelac, and he in turn will wear it and die on the last great viking raid against the Frisians (1197 - 1210). Like the *Brisingamen* of Norse myth, this necklace, for all its beauty, will be a curse for its wearer.

Appendix: Tribes and Genealogies

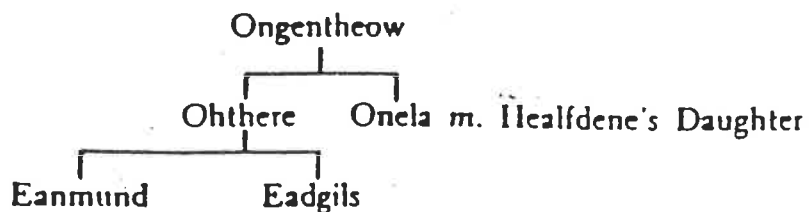
I. The Danes (Bright-, Half-, Ring-, Spear-, North-, East-, South-, West-Danes; Scyldings, Honor-, Victor-, War-Scyldings; Ing's friends).



II. The Geats (Sea-, War-, Weather-Geats)

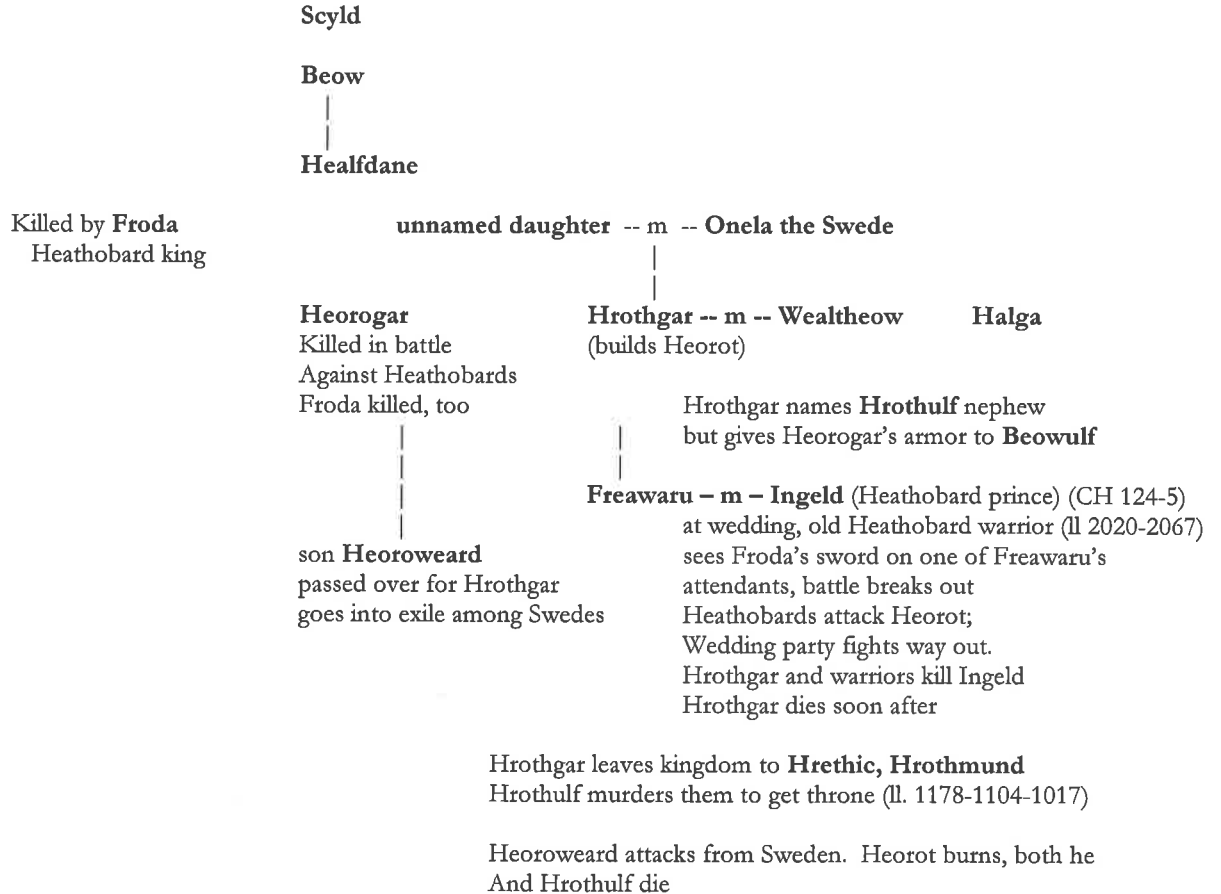


III. The Swedes.



The Scyldings

Heremod—last Danish king before Scyld. Betrayed friends, tortured enemies, starved people, started blood-feuds that last into next generations, esp one that led to the Heathobard feud.



C-H: Crossley-Holland trans. Page numbers

The Geats

Hrethel



Herebald

Heathcyn

Hygelac

Killed in hunting
accident by Heathcyn.
Hrethel can't kill him, so
dies in grief, dishonor
(ll. 2144 ff)

Heathcyn
Takes throne,
battles Swedes—
Ongentheow & son Onela
Onela is son of Hrothgar's sister
(Or Hrothgar's father??)

Battle of Ravenswood:

Ongentheow kills Heathcyn, Geats
Driven into forest. Swedes try to burn
forest, but too frozen, wet. Some Geats freeze to death.
Swedes burn alive ones they catch,
taunt others to come out and warm themselves.
Hygelac, in teens, comes to rescue
Ongentheow killed.

Hygelac
makes treaty w/ Swedes
(our poem takes place during this time)
raids Frisians (Belgian coast)
meets Franks and their king
Theodebert; Hygelac slain.
Beowulf slays killer, hugs him to death
Swims to safety w/ 30 suits of armor

Danes: Fight at Finnsburg

Danes visit Finn, a Frisian (C-H p. 100)

Hnaef, their king, comes to visit Hildeburh, Finn's queen
Hnaef insults Frisians
Frisians at night sneak up on Danes: Danes fight, hold hall for 5 days
Frisians fire the hall; drive out Danes, kill many
Frisians make peace, give Hengest (Dane) his own hall, salute his bravery

Later: Danish thane comes, puts sword in Hengest's lap
H must choose between oath to Frisians and oath to old, dead lord
Hengest fights the Frisians. Both H and Finn die.
Hildeburh left to mourn husband, brothers, cousins

Sigemund

Dragon-slayer
m Siggeir, kills bros in law in
cruel ways

Heremod (C-H p. 110)

last Danish king before Scyld
Scefing
betrayed friends, starved
People, started blood
feuds that last, esp with
Heathobards

Thryth (C-H p. 122)

so beautiful that she killed men
who dared look at her, in poem,
conflated with Offa II's wife,
Cynethyth, who murdered
Offa II and St. Ethelbert