



# MAN, METAL AND METAPHOR:

## Metal in Early Medieval Warrior Culture and in *Beowulf*

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### *Prologue*

In the Iron-Age culture of 500 AD, man made the metals. And metals also made the man. The importance of metallurgy to the early medieval Germanic culture of Northwestern Europe is captured in the old English poem *Beowulf* about a warrior culture in which the very fabric of society is woven in mail. Some sort of metal object is described on every page of the poem as characters are identified by their “gold adornment” or iron swords rather than by height, hair or eye color. Men are judged by the quality of their iron and heroism in battle, and kings by their ability to “gain and give” metallic treasure. Loyalty is best expressed by making good use of war gear and sharing the golden rewards of battle. In the Old English manuscript, the word *gold* is still recognizable, unchanged from the dawn of Anglo-Saxon literature to the present day: *g-o-l-d* then; *g-o-l-d* now.<sup>1</sup> In effect, gold is not just immortal chemically, but also linguistically, as shown below in poem’s original Old English:

Sinceaðemæg,  
gold on grundegumcynnesgehwo  
oferhigan, hyde se ðewylle.

And in many ways, the world revolves around it now, as it did then.

### *Genre, Origins and the Sutton Hoo Burial Ship*

*“A sharp-witted shield warrior who thinks well must be able to judge each of the two things, words and works.”—Danish Guard, thane of Hrothgar*

Scholars agree *Beowulf* is one of the earliest examples of Old English heroic poetry. Old English, the poem’s language of composition, is archaic, dialectic and subject to the vagaries of translation.<sup>2</sup> The manuscript survives in one 1,200-year-old document that went through a fire,<sup>3</sup> and the archaeological record, while providing artifacts that strongly resemble the metal goods, mead-hall and burials described in *Beowulf*, is “an incomplete witness.”

Current archaeological and linguistic evidence places the poem’s written composition in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD: scholars believe it derived from a series of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century orally transmitted poems.<sup>4</sup> The time and place of its action are thought to be around 500 AD in the neighboring courts of Denmark and Geatland (Scandinavia).<sup>5</sup> Archaeological artifacts and historical genealogies, which corroborate details of the poem, have led to its “general consideration” as a historical document.<sup>6</sup>

Most archaeological interest focuses on the search for origins; in this case the origin of the author, or rather the time and place of authorship. Essentially, people want to know: who owns *Beowulf*? The poem was generally believed to be of English origin until the 1970s when some scholars began to make a case for the Vikings.<sup>7</sup> Relatively recent work by Anglo-Saxon literary scholar Sam Newton “reclaims” it for England. Newton

carried out “an unprecedentedly detailed analysis” of the famous great early 7<sup>th</sup>-century ship burials at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk (in eastern England) and their relationship to the ship funerals described in *Beowulf*.”<sup>8</sup> Striking similarities were found between artifacts and the poet’s art: the burial goods from Sutton Hoo could have sprung from the pages of *Beowulf*. After evaluating the archaeological evidence,<sup>9</sup> and considering it in relation to linguistic and cultural research, Newton concluded the funeral account in *Beowulf* “was influenced by East Anglian royal burial rights.”<sup>10</sup> He also attributes the poem to the Vikings, and indeed, Vikings and East Anglians share a common Norse origin. However, the East Anglians emigrated 500 years before the Viking invasions, bringing their culture, literature and histories with them.

Some of the poem’s dynastic lineages enumerated by the poet’s illustrative side-stories have been confirmed, such as those of the honorable kings Hygelac and Hrothgar and Hrothgar’s wife Wealtheow.<sup>11</sup> Tantalizingly, the identity of Beowulf—if indeed there was a flesh-and-blood Beowulf (he is generally referred to as legendary)—is apparently undetermined. His people, the Geats, were a North Germanic tribe who inhabited Geatland in what is now Sweden. Over the years, their identity has been the subject of considerable debate. Some speculated that they were in actuality Jutes. That theory was discounted because the poem refers to the Jutes as a separate people: in old English, the *eotenum*.<sup>12</sup> Others suggested the Geats were Gotlanders or Goths (Old Norse: *Gautar*; Old Swedish: *Gotar*).<sup>13</sup> But geographical cues from the poem make this unlikely. The Goths of Vastergotland were an inland people whereas the Geats were frequently referred to as the “Sea-Geats” or “Weather-Geats” and in the poem *Beowulf* is said to be buried near “the cape of whales.”<sup>14</sup>

*Beowulf* scholarship has long demonstrated the many ways the historical and archaeological record enhances literary analysis—and vice versa. It is a natural topic for interdisciplinary study, in this case, the three disciplines of literature, history and archaeology. Also useful is a slight infusion of chem-

istry, centering on metals and man. This essay analyzes *Beowulf* by focusing on two of the poem's shining stars (Fe) and (Au), iron and gold, to show that these metals culturally and literarily played very similar roles. Further, this essay demonstrates how understanding the culture's relationship with metal leads to a new interpretation of the poem's conclusion.

Metal was vital to the Germanic warrior culture and vital to the poem *Beowulf* since it acts as metaphor and symbol; i.e., metal is both the thing itself and stands for the meaning of the man who possesses it.<sup>15</sup> Metal treasure or war gear represents both a man's identity and a vital cultural value. *Beowulf* scholar John D. Niles explains, "Treasure give(s) moral value to their possessors . . . . We may define the function of treasure as that of a tangible, material symbol of the intangible, abstract qualities of virtue in a warrior."<sup>16</sup>

In the tribal world of post-Roman Europe, where men pledged allegiance to kings rather than nation-states, metal goods—primarily made from iron and steel and/or gold and silver often accented by jewels—were used to "form alliances and fulfill binding obligations."<sup>17</sup> Without question, these metals made the Germanic warrior culture possible, providing the societal "underpinning(s) and sustaining (its) power bases."<sup>18</sup> The society functioned by *reciprocity*, a ritualized system or code in which kings reward worthy warriors (*thanes*) with treasure and superior war gear called *heriot*, as Niles explains:

[*Heriot*] was a strictly reciprocal relationship whereby every thane received his weapons when he entered his lord's service . . . normally [this] consisted of a helmet, a coat of mail, a sword, a shield and one spear . . . .not a gift outright but it was contingent upon the thane's providing military service under terms clearly spelled out in the laws.<sup>19</sup>

The thanes were fully expected to put their war gear to good use in defense of king and kin—and turn over to the king any resultant war booty "as proof of glory."<sup>20</sup>

As one might expect, there is plenty of room for subjec-

tivity in a reciprocal economy. Reciprocity was, quite literally, the ultimate honor system, dependent upon finding the right balance between gold and iron. Hence the importance of wisdom, loyalty and generosity on the part of king and thane is repeatedly stressed by the poet. If a king does not rule wisely, he and his nation will fall and others will “take their treasure.” Here treasure is not just golden adornments but symbolizes the moral people of a civilized society, something clearly valuable and worth preserving at any cost, indicative of a warrior people who exist on the edge of chaos, searching for something solid and immutable—iron and gold.

Like most heroic epics, *Beowulf* dramatizes the struggle between good and evil, between those who seek to preserve human civilization; good kings and their people fight against those evil deviants outside the code who would seek to destroy it. This is why the poet creates an artistic balance throughout the narrative, devoting as many lines to communal celebration, to the joyful awarding of “treasure” (gold), as he does to battle scenes (iron), a significant anomaly since war was a large part of Anglo-Saxon life. The poem “stresses not only threats to social order but [also] the nature of social order.” Rather than primarily commemorating individual heroic exploits as an epic would commonly do, *Beowulf* celebrates “the exaltation of peace and peace-keeping through the rule of powerful kings.”<sup>21</sup>

### *Pætwæs god cyning! [that was a good King!]*

Throughout the narrative, the poet instructs his audience in the virtues of a good king, which generally involve the wise acquisition and dispensation of treasure. Setting the theme early, the poet opens with the story of Scyld Scefing, a Swedish king of legendary strength. Scyld didn’t take gold by raiding or as the spoils of war; rather neighboring tribes were happy to offer it outright just to keep the peace: “Sheer military might is a major peacekeeper in such troubled times.”<sup>22</sup> Clearly, metal

can be used for purposes of good or evil, to wisely maintain peace or wantonly make war.

All of the good kings in the poet's parables ruled wisely and "wide(ly) with words," and were reciprocally loved by their people. When "at the fated time Scyld the courageous went away into the protection of the lord,"<sup>23</sup> his funeral was as magnificent as he was munificent:<sup>24</sup>

Then they laid down the ruler they had loved, the ring-giver, in the hollow of the ship, the glorious man beside the mast. There was brought great store of treasure, wealth from lands far away. I have not heard of a ship more splendidly furnished with war-weapons and battle-dress, swords and mail-shirts. On his breast lay a great many treasures that should voyage with him far out into the sea's possession. . . .<sup>25</sup>

Scyld's funeral is an example of the respectful "reciprocity" awarded to a beloved king by his people, who send him off in a burial ship full of the treasure he had given to them.

In a reciprocal economy, a good king holds a society together, repaying debts, rewarding loyalty and strengthening alliances through the judicious use of metal, whether dispensing golden treasure or defending it with iron weapons of war. In the "hall-celebration" following Beowulf's defeat of Grendel and the end of a 12-year reign of terror, Wealtheow, Danish King Hrothgar's gracious "gold-adorned" queen, says gently to her husband:

Take this cup my noble lord, giver of treasure. Be glad gold-friend of warriors, and speak to the Geats with mild words, as a man ought to do. Be gracious to the Geats, mindful . . . Heorot is purged the bright ring-hall.<sup>26</sup>

Conversely, a community breaks apart if its king is corrupt, greedy or foolish. In his formal farewell to Beowulf, Hrothgar relays the history of failed King Heremod who—blessed by power, health and wealth—succumbs to pride and greed. Heremod "recklessly gives precious gifts, does not fearfully guard

them.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, weapons and treasure poorly used cannot sustain civilization. As Mitchell notes:

As in Odysseus, ‘a hero who does not win treasure does not deserve to be called a hero, a king who does not distribute treasure scarcely deserves the title of king.’<sup>28</sup>

A king’s generosity and proper use of treasure is reciprocated by his thanes’ loyalty and bravery. How well he does that reveals his moral character as well as his place in society, not just his wealth but his worth. As Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson explain:

. . . a man’s weapons were what identified his status most visibly: a thane would possess the full *heriot* (war gear), while an ordinary freeman would normally just have the spear and shield. The material weapons thus virtually stood for the abstract quality of being a thane.<sup>29</sup>

Thus the iron war gear symbolized the concept of being a thane and was necessary to make the thane. When Beowulf first arrives in the land of the “Spear Danes,” his battle armor immediately identifies him to the Danish guards as a warrior of consequence, a good thane, one who has earned his armor:

What are you, bearers of armor, dressed in mail-coats . . .  
I have never seen a mightier warrior on earth than is one of you, a man in battle dress. That is no retainer made to seem good by his weapons—unless his appearance belies him, his unequalled form.<sup>30</sup>

Beowulf’s appearance foreshadows his heroic deeds, which show he is worthy of his metal.

The importance of war gear and “treasure” in Germanic culture is verified by the archaeological record, especially through recovered treasure-hoards and burial artifacts from Sutton Hoo, discovered in 1938.<sup>31</sup> These artifacts bear a truly remarkable similarity to the war-gear painstakingly detailed by the Beowulf poet, from the ringed metal of the protective mail shirts to the boar imagery over the brows and crests of mask-like battle helmets.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Sutton Hoo treasure in-

cludes “Frankish gold, Byzantine silver, Swedish armor,<sup>33</sup> evidence of the king’s gaining treasure from distant tribes. The artifacts—helmets, gold cups, shields, swords and more—are dated late 6<sup>th</sup> to early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, fitting within the time frame of the poem.<sup>34</sup>

Content of the *heriot* is supported archaeologically as well, although some inconsistencies have been noted. According to Mitchell and Robinson, the poet portrays chain mail shirts and helmets as common accoutrements, but such pieces are rare in the otherwise abundant record. On the other hand, swords, which are well-represented archaeologically, seem “confined to those of the highest status” in the poem.<sup>35</sup> But the multiple weapon sets found at Sutton Hoo “are well-represented at the ship burials, symbolizing the arming of the warrior band (for their journey into the next world) with treasure neon and ferran.”

As well as the large excavations of the ship burials, examples of mead halls have been uncovered in eastern England and in Scandinavia, providing archaeological evidence of shared roots.<sup>36</sup>

The concepts of the good king and worthy thanes are linked to the concept of the mead-hall, which is where the “joy of the community” is expressed. A king’s mead-hall is a symbol of success and a site of merriment and celebration, existing apart from the outside world, almost like a sanctuary—only with considerably more drinking. It was the place where treasure was ritually awarded, formal speeches were made, feasts were enjoyed and bravery was celebrated. In other words, it was the very heart of the reciprocal warrior culture.

Gabled, gleaming, roofed in gold, and filled with golden mead benches, Hrothgar’s grand hall, Heorot, was the ultimate early-medieval mega-structure:

Then Hrothgar was given success in warfare, glory in battle . . . It came to his mind that he would command men to construct a hall, a mead-building larger than the children of men had ever heard of, and therein he would give to young and old all that God had given him . . . Then I



have heard that the work was laid upon many nations,  
wide through this middle-earth that they should adorn  
the folk-hall. In time . . . it was finished, the largest of hall-  
dwellings. He gave it the name of Heorot (Hart) . . . He  
did not forget his promise: at the feast he gave out rings,  
treasure. The hall stood tall, high and wide-gabled . . .<sup>37</sup>

Heorot sounds almost too grand to be true, but its “lofty splendor” can be verified by archaeological examples.”<sup>38</sup> A 7<sup>th</sup>-century royal palace at Yeavering in Northumbria “provides an excavated Anglo-Saxon example of the kind of massive hall described by the poem.” According to Mitchell and Robinson, even grander halls are known from Danish and other Germanic medieval finds. Further, a recent discovery of an Anglo-Saxon “high-status hall” complex at Cowdery’s Down, Hampshire, dated from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century, provides in Building C12 a “concrete idea” of Heorot’s appearance. All such buildings show evidence of a raised wooden floor, which would have echoed, a detail related in *Beowulf*, in Grendel’s heavy step in the mead hall. Also, “an elaborate scheme of external supporting timbers braces was indicated,” possibly like those from which Grendel’s severed arm was hung.<sup>39</sup>

Further details from C12 present possible explanations for aspects of Heorot’s external appearance as described in the poem, such as the shining “golden plated” exterior. While there is no archaeological evidence for the embellishment of Germanic halls with gold, it is speculated that the golden tone could have come from thatching or gleaming shingles, both of which are accounted for in Cowdery Down. Other construction details that appear in both the poem and the archaeological record include the iron hinges and clench-bolts<sup>40</sup> that almost burst during the battle between Grendel and Beowulf.

Over the course of the narrative, Beowulf’s battle scenes are marked by a progression of opponents: the monster Grendel, the mother of Grendel, and a fire-breathing dragon. All symbolize evil, greed or some other perversion of the reciprocal code. By constructing the tale around the killing of monsters, as opposed to human foes, the poet is able to keep Be-

owulf unassociated with raiding or the taking of other tribes' treasure, keeping him unambiguously in the realm of a good king. Although his fights with the monsters are graphically described, hearing about a fantastic creature spurting blood is somehow more tolerable than the human equivalent. The poet includes additional tales of gore to please his audience through stories of other kings and tribes. The involvement of war gear follows a progression as well, with Beowulf fighting first in hand-to-hand combat; next, with a sword; and finally with sword, shield and another warrior by his side.

Significantly, it is his first battle, the one that will establish him as a hero of legendary stature, which Beowulf elects to fight without a weapon. This is partially because his foe has "a charm" that makes weapons useless but also, as seen in Beowulf's formal boast (a convention of epic poetry), to place Grendel as "the one without glory," so far outside the reciprocal warrior code that even metal weapons mean nothing to him:

I have also heard say that the monster in his recklessness cares not for weapons. Therefore . . . I scorn to bear sword or broad shield, yellow wood, to the battle, but with my grasp I shall grapple with the enemy and fight for life, foe against foe. The one whom death takes can trust the Lord's judgment.<sup>41</sup>

Beowulf goes on to defeat Grendel: "the awful monster had lived to feel pain in his body, a huge wound in his shoulder was exposed, his sinews sprang apart, his bone-locks broke. Glory in battle was given to Beowulf."<sup>42</sup> Beowulf's victory strongly asserts the epic triumph of good over evil, civilization over anarchy, but also the ascendance of man over metal. Thematically, it is important that he defeat Grendel without the use of his iron blade. In a reciprocal culture "where precious ornaments, human lives and services can be equated . . . are functionally equivalent, for they can be exchanged in a variety of ways spelled out by law and custom,"<sup>43</sup> the concept of a "good king" or "good thane" in essence, means being a master of metal. Ac-

According to the poet, the wielder of metal must matter more than the metal itself.

Portraying Beowulf as worthier than his weapons is high praise indeed. The poet, his audience and Germanic society as a whole had an ingrained respect for the science and art of metallurgy. Interestingly, nowhere in *Beowulf* does the poet renounce material goods as part of his heroic message but rather, “dwells lovingly on the beauty or value of precious objects and speaks of the honor they lend their possessors.”<sup>44</sup> The golden gifts from Hrothgar are “not introduced casually, but at length, as if the listening audience were expected to take a connoisseur’s interest in them.”<sup>45</sup> They include a gilded board’s-head standard, a helmet, byrnie, a precious heirloom sword, eight horses, one with war saddle and 12 other unspecified but impressive gifts. “Wear this ring, beloved Beowulf . . . with good luck and make use of this mail-shirt from the people’s treasure, and prosper well, make yourself known by your might, and be kind of counsel to these boys . . .” says Queen Wealtheow, who also gives him a robe, two gold arm-bands, and a stunning bejeweled necklace which the poet describes as “the largest of necklaces of those that I have heard spoken of on earth.”<sup>46</sup> Even here, the gifts are lavish but the counsel is wise.

Although he uses the concept of metal rhetorically throughout his narrative, the poet has a genuine respect for the real thing. He speaks respectfully of the craftsmanship, the “collaboration of noblemen and artisans that resulted in glorious material artifacts.”<sup>47</sup> He peppers his manuscript with praise for the work of the “wondersmiths,” specifically referencing Weland—a metalsmith no doubt known to the audience—who crafted Beowulf’s ringed mail, gleaming and strong, a “most prized war good, best of all battle shirts.” The metallurgical skill required to make such a shirt is also supported by the find of a knee-length mail-coat from Mound I at Sutton Hoo. “Clearly an example of the highest quality smithy-work,” the coat’s construction entails the alternating use of

welding and copper riveting to “lock” rows of interlinked rings, a process described by the *Beowulf* poet.<sup>48</sup>

The poet’s detailed descriptions of 6<sup>th</sup> century metallurgy preserve the archaeological record through words. Consider the details in this description which evoke the sight—and sound—of the ancient metal armor:

War-corselet shone, hard and hand-wrought, bright iron rings sang on their armor when they first came walking to the hall in their grim gear. Sea-weary they set down their broad shields, marvelously strong protections . . . They sat down on the bench—mail-shirts, warriors clothing, rang out. Spears stood together. . . . The armed band was worthy of its weapons.<sup>49</sup>

The iron-edged sword is perhaps the warrior’s most important weapon, as evidenced artistically by the sword’s frequent personification. Swords are often named and described as allies in battle rather than tools of the trade: “My sword point, my battle-blade . . . the war stroke destroyed the mighty sea-beast through my hand.”<sup>50</sup> In reality, the sword probably was a warrior’s closest companion and often his most reliable ally. Combat in 500 AD, although between bands of warriors or tribes, was nevertheless personal, face-to-face, one-on-one.

Like the decorative battle helmets described by the poet and uncovered by the archaeologists, Iron-Age swords also combine treasure and weaponry, marrying elaborate golden cloisonné, bejeweled hilts and hardened steel blades.

The most prized swords were said to be those “made by giants” (or ogres in some translations), dangerous creatures such as Grendel and his mother. Rather than a testament to the quality of miscreant metallurgy, the intrinsic value of these swords was perhaps a reflection of the prowess of the warriors with the moxie to attain them. *Beowulf* acquires such a prize while battling Grendel’s mother, when his own heirloom sword fails, and he is forced to grab the ogre’s giant sword to strike the fatal blows. Swords have been found at Sutton Hoo that closely resemble those described in this battle.

Referred to frequently in the *Beowulf* epic are gold- and gem-encrusted weapons such as Beowulf's 'mathumswæord' (treasure sword) and his other sword, his 'sincmathum' (inlaid jeweled treasure). The sword unearthed at Sutton Hoo parallels these descriptions exactly—especially the latter term. The gold decorated hilt and scabbard of the Sutton Hoo royal sword are indeed 'inlaid' with cut garnets.<sup>51</sup>

Much of *Beowulf's* intrigue derives from its strange conglomeration of historically accurate detail and fantastic evil-doers. For instance, there could actually be some chemistry involved in the midst of the fantastic fight scenes. Both of the swords that failed Beowulf did so in conditions that involve extreme heat—that of Grendel's mother's blood, described as able to "burn away (the blade), the hottest of battle sweats" and later, the fire-breath of the dragon. Both swords were "heirlooms" and presumably older. The stresses of oxidation  $4\text{Fe}(\text{s}) + 3\text{O}_2(\text{g}) \rightarrow 2\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3(\text{s})$  could have weakened the metal just as age can weaken the man. In Beowulf's last great battle, the poet tells us ". . . the sword of Beowulf failed in the fight, old and steel-gray,"<sup>52</sup> leaving it to the audience to determine whether it is Beowulf or the sword that is "old and steel gray" or whether they both are. Metaphorically and chemically, the relationship between youth and age and their corollaries of strength and wisdom are another prominent thematic juxtaposition underlying the action of the narrative and fit reasonably into the poem's heroic milieu of metallic symbolism, with wisdom being the positive ion to offset the great negatives of age.

The poet illustrates this juxtaposition through the parallel careers of Hrothgar and Beowulf. Just as the young Beowulf helps the mighty but aged King Hrothgar when his people are threatened, the young warrior Wiglaf comes to the aid of an aged Beowulf. Both Hrothgar and Beowulf ruled wisely for 50 years, keeping their people safe, prosperous and peaceful. And both are threatened not by other tribes, but by singular nemeses, enemies of civilization who live outside the code of reciprocity. Grendel destroys treasure and kills men without pay-

ing compensation, and the dragon hoards—rather than distributes—treasure.

The dragon's hoard is a cautionary tale. Left by the last survivor or a warrior society, it has lain useless for centuries with "no one to polish it." Symbolically, the weapons (war-gear) have rusted but the gold (human rewards for goodness) still glistens. It is that glisten which tempts member of Beowulf's kingdom to steal a golden cup, and brings the dragon's wrath down upon them (not that the dragon cares about the cup; it's the principle of the thing).

As he prepares for his last battle, Beowulf reluctantly decides to rely on weapons to supplement his own compromised strength. In his boast, Beowulf presents a synopsis of his epic battles that he won with only his "warlike grip." Now he says, "I would not bear sword, weapon, to the worm (dragon), if I knew how else according to my boast, I might grapple with the monster, as I did of old . . ." For this battle, against a dragon that exhales flames, Beowulf is well-armed. His shield is specially plated with iron because "linden against fire" would have been a poor match. He wears a mail-shirt, war-helmet and carries his sword "the old heirloom, not blunt of edge." Thematically expected but ironic nonetheless, it is the sword—the metal—that fails, not the man, not Beowulf's strength or wisdom.

The Lord of the Geats raised his hand, struck the shining horror [the dragon] so with his forged blade that the edge failed, bright on the bone, bit less surely than its folk-king had need, hard-pressed in perils . . . the war blade failed, naked at need, as it ought not have done, iron good from old times.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, the young warrior Wiglaf, who joins the fray and comes to Beowulf's aid, is also armed with an heirloom sword—which does not fail. New warrior mettle can wield old metal effectively, it seems. Thus, weaponry contributes to the victory, but the poet first honors the man and then the metal. "His heart's courage did not slacken, nor did the heirloom of his kinsman fail in battle. That the worm found when they

came together.”<sup>54</sup> Collaboratively, “They felled the foe, courage drove his life out, they felled him together.”

Beowulf remains a good king to the end, instructing Wiglaf to show him the treasure won by this his final battle that he may see what his death has “bought” for his people:

Now quickly go to look at the hoard under the gray stone,  
beloved Wiglaf, now that the worm lies sleeping from sore  
wounds, bereft of his treasure . . . so that I may see the an-  
cient wealth, the golden things, may clearly look on the  
bright curious gems, so that, because of the treasure’s  
richness, I may the more easily leave life and the nation I  
have long held.<sup>55</sup>

The poet soon returns to thematic concerns with Beowulf’s dying words, which solidify his commitment to reciprocity and enduring stability: “I speak with my words thanks to the Lord of All for these treasures . . . for what I gaze on here, that I might get such for my people before my death day.”<sup>56</sup>

Beowulf turns his treasure, weapons and the ancient trust they represent over to Wiglaf: “Now that I have bought the hoard of treasures with my old life, you attend to the people’s needs hereafter: I can be here no longer . . . .”

Critics have argued that Beowulf is a flawed hero and attribute his death and the subsequent demise of the Geatish people to Beowulf’s prideful behavior, the unwise and vain pursuit of treasure. This interpretation ignores the fact that Beowulf died defending his people against an immediate danger: the dragon’s nightly attacks. The acquisition of the treasure, also part of his duty, was to provide the means to strengthen his people in the future, not to enrich himself. In fact, Beowulf has ruled as a model king, one who does not go out raiding for treasure, but is willing to seize it from vanquished enemies.

It is Beowulf’s thanes who upset the balance of gold and iron by not fulfilling their end of the reciprocal bargain. The poet calls them “the battle-slack ones.” Wiglaf calls them “hall sitters on ale benches.” In his formal condemnation speech,

Wiglaf shames them, saying Beowulf's generosity was not repaid by loyalty and that heriot was sadly wasted on them. Wiglaf tells them, "the folk king had no need to boast of his war comrades."

He who will speak the truth may say that the liege lord  
who gave you treasure, the war-gear that you stand in  
there . . . that he quite threw away the war-gear, to his dis-  
tress when war came upon him.

The poet makes clear the "hall sitters" will soon learn the consequences of their intransigence, the devolution of all that's been built:

Now there shall cease for your race the receiving of treas-  
ure and the giving of swords, all enjoyment of pleasant  
homes, comfort. Each man of your kindred must go de-  
prived of his land-right when nobles from afar learn of  
your flight, your inglorious deed. Death is better for any  
earl than a life of blame.

The Geats' cowardly behavior makes them vulnerable to attack, thereby proving the poem's heroic message: if the honorable and wise use of treasure and war gear is not observed, civilization will not survive. And judging from their obscurity in future historical records, the poet's message was prescient.

Irony is heaped upon iron—and gold—when Wiglaf decides to bury the treasure with Beowulf. When the poet tells us "there it still dwells as useless to men as it was before," he is not saying the treasure is useless, as some have argued. The operative words in that statement are "to men." Set in 500 AD, Beowulf straddled the end of paganism and the early institution of Christianity in Europe. According to pagan beliefs that co-existed with Christianity, the hoard was now meant to sustain and define Beowulf in the next world. As the metals did in life, they became the mark of the man in the afterlife, the "material counterpart to the abstract qualities of the person at whose side they lie. They are the moral equivalent to the life (Beowulf) sacrificed for his people"<sup>57</sup> and the final expression of reciprocity.

The poem's yin and yang of treasure and war gear demon-



strate that Beowulf's death was neither in vain nor due to prideful recklessness, but was an inevitable consequence of a reciprocal relationship between a king and his people. Therefore, Beowulf dies in adherence to a strict code meant to preserve the delicate balance that enabled society's tenuous existence. So, far from useless, the formerly hoarded and meaningless treasure now honors a worthy man, a good king, metaphorically and materially representing the ideals that guided his life.

### *Conclusion*

Over the centuries, literary critics, troubled by the poem's outcome, have argued that Beowulf died in a vain pursuit of treasure, an unworthy king, leaving his people vulnerable to invasion. However, a different and perhaps more accurate interpretation, drawing from multiple disciplines and considering the poem's controlling theme and multiple metaphors of metal, points to metal's larger role within the warrior culture. Metal provides tangible evidence of a code in which "treasure" and "war gear" go hand in hand with the preservation of peace and assurance of stability. As "a good king," Beowulf dies trying to fulfill this code. He should be understood as his people memorialized him:

The people of the Geats, his hearth companions,  
lamented the death of their lord. They said he was of  
world-kings the mildest of men and the gentlest, kindest  
to his people, and most eager for fame.<sup>58</sup>

The poet leaves no doubt. The wielder of the weapon and the integrity of his purpose matter more than the integrity of the ore.

### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> In some versions, I have seen it written "golde" but it is still recognizable.

<sup>2</sup>I used the translation by E. Talbot Donaldson with some cross-referencing to Seamus Heaney's. Donaldson elected to forego the Old English poetic meter but maintain the poetic flavor through prose.

<sup>3</sup>The Nowell Codex, believed to be a copy from the tenth century.

<sup>4</sup>David Keys. "Beowulf Belongs to England After All: An Early Literary Epic has been Reclaimed from the Vikings." Accessed November 18, 2010. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts/entertainment/archaeology/>

<sup>5</sup>Joseph F. Tuso, ed. *Beowulf: The Donaldson Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. (New York, NY: WW. Norton & Co., 1975) 65–67.

<sup>6</sup>Jane A. Leake. *The Geats of Beowulf*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967) 3–14.

<sup>7</sup>Keys.

<sup>8</sup>Keys.

<sup>9</sup>The artifacts closely resemble what the poet has described. The helmet has a boar's crest, the sword's hilt is jewel-encrusted.

<sup>10</sup>Keys.

<sup>11</sup>Sam Newton. x.

<sup>12</sup>Nerman, Birger (1925). "Detsvenskariketsuppkomst". 108–109. Accessed December 1, 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geat>.

<sup>13</sup>Leake, 5.

<sup>14</sup>Nerman.

<sup>15</sup>*Metaphor* means "a figure of speech that associates two distinct things; the representation of one thing by another;" *symbol* means "something that, although it is of interest in its own right, stands for or suggests something larger and more complex." See Murfin, Ross and Ray, Supryia M. Ed. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003. 260; 504.

<sup>16</sup>Niles, 213–214.

<sup>17</sup>Leake, 96–97.

<sup>18</sup>Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson. *Beowulf: An Edition*. (Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 1998) 185.

<sup>19</sup> John D. Niles. *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Traditions*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 215.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Niles, 228.

<sup>22</sup> McMaster. “*Beowulf* Project: Archaeology and Culture.” <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~beowulf/archeology.html>. Accessed December 1, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Tuso, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Mentions of the Christian beliefs of heaven, hell and the beneficence of God are scattered throughout the poem. It has been speculated but is not known that they may have been added by scribes who recorded it from the oral tradition.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–31

<sup>28</sup> Niles, 214.

<sup>29</sup> Niles, 215.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph F. Tuso, ed., 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 215. Other finds include those in Scandinavian countries and from the afore-mentioned grave goods from Suffolk and Taplow in Northumbria.

<sup>32</sup> “British Museum Explore: Online Tours.” Accessed November 14, 2010. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/families\\_and\\_children/online\\_tours/suttonhoo/sutton\\_hoo.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/families_and_children/online_tours/suttonhoo/sutton_hoo.aspx)

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 185–187.

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, 185.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 186–187.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell, 189.

<sup>37</sup> Tuso, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchell, 186.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Tuso, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Niles, 219.

<sup>44</sup> Niles, 223.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>46</sup> Tuso, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Niles, 223.

<sup>48</sup> Sam Newton. *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia*. (Rochester, NY and Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1993) 33. Accessed via Google Books November 20, 2010. [http://books.google.com/books?id=5a\\_WO4rcTBkC&printsec=frontcover&dq=origins+of+beowulf+by+sam+newton&source=bl&ots=allqON7N6m&sig=uQVNQmrTXzFYMmVWQrCJBGaflaI&hl=en&ei=7ynpTIjiOIednwfVzommmDQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBMQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=5a_WO4rcTBkC&printsec=frontcover&dq=origins+of+beowulf+by+sam+newton&source=bl&ots=allqON7N6m&sig=uQVNQmrTXzFYMmVWQrCJBGaflaI&hl=en&ei=7ynpTIjiOIednwfVzommmDQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBMQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false).

<sup>49</sup> Tuso, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Tuso, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Mitchell, 186.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 46

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>57</sup> Niles, 222.

<sup>58</sup> Tuso, 55.

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