



the students' approaches to literary translation: they moved from a position of dismissing it as a highly derivative activity, to appreciating its creative and generative potential.

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Reviews

Leonard Neidorf (ed.), *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*. Anglo-Saxon Studies 24. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014. x + 250 pp. Hardback. 978-1-84384-387-0. £60.00.

The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment comes nearly thirty-five years after the publication of the highly influential volume *The Dating of Beowulf*, edited by Colin Chase (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), which drew upon contributions to a conference held in Toronto in 1980. The Toronto conference and the resulting edited collection expressed a wide range of contrasting views about the date of the original composition of *Beowulf* but had the effect of paving the way for a new consensus among scholars (particularly literary scholars), which regarded the issue of dating as undecidable. The previous consensus had been for an early date for the composition of *Beowulf*, somewhere in the span 650–800, but the Toronto volume led to a period of 'dogmatic agnosticism' (in Patrick Wormald's phrase) on the whole

question of the poem's dating. Such agnosticism was reinforced by the impact of Ashley Crandell Amos's *Linguistic Means of Determining the Dates of Old English Literary Texts* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1980), which came out just before the Toronto volume. Amos concluded that linguistic tests could not bring certainty to attempts to date Old English poetry. Some scholars continued to insist on an early, or earlyish, *Beowulf*, notably including, in a 2007 monograph unfortunately overlooked in the present volume, Richard North, who would place the poem in the early ninth century (specifying 826–7 as the time of the poem's composition) (*The Origins of Beowulf* [Oxford: OUP]), while others argued that the poem must come from later Anglo-Saxon England, but many decided that the question should be left open or set aside.

Agnosticism concerning the date of *Beowulf's* composition has widely prevailed among critics down to the present. Perhaps its most categorical expression came from James Earl in 1994, who stated, 'I now consider it axiomatic that the problem of the poem's date is insoluble' (*Thinking about Beowulf* [Stanford: Stanford University Press], p. 16), but a host of critics have proceeded on the same assumption. In my own assorted comments on *Beowulf* I have tended to steer clear of the issue of the date of composition and have preferred to attend to the reception context of the poem's unique manuscript in the early eleventh century. A similar approach is evident, I see, in the excellent recent monograph by Peter S. Baker, *Honour, Exchange and Violence in Beowulf* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013). An early date for the poem would actually suit Baker's argument but he does not engage with the issue, writing, 'For the purposes of this study it does not matter much' (p. 34).



Instead, Baker refers to the audience of the late manuscript.

But agnosticism can surely no longer be justified. The *Reassessment* volume brings together a battery of strong contributions which taken together conclusively demonstrate that it is overwhelmingly probable that *Beowulf* was composed before about 800 and overwhelmingly improbable that it could have been composed much later (North's 820s dating might be considered to be just about possible, at the extreme end of the proposed time-frame). This book synthesizes and builds upon existing writings by Michael Lapidge, R. D. Fulk, Tom Shippey, Leonard Neidorf and others which had each argued for an early *Beowulf* by taking a specific methodological angle, palaeography in the case of Lapidge, metrics in the case of Fulk and so on. Publications by these early daters have been spiritedly critiqued by late daters and by dating agnostics but contributors to the *Reassessment* volume impressively counter these critiques and advance additional arguments in support of an early date. Throughout, the volume deploys meticulous scholarship, close reasoning and analytical rigour to reinstate convincingly the case for an early *Beowulf* and in doing so to open up the question of the dating of other undated Old English poems.

The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment consists of an introduction by Leonard Neidorf, followed by thirteen chapters, the last of which is an afterword by Allen J. Frantzen. The introduction presents a synthesis of the history of scholarship on the subject, noting the influence of the 1981 volume and highlighting studies of the past thirty years that have collectively 'changed the terms of the debate' (p. 16) by introducing chronologically significant evidence for an early *Beowulf* based on

philology, metrics, onomastics and palaeography. Neidorf characterizes the present volume as consolidating and augmenting the efforts of these studies.

The following chapters all conclude that *Beowulf* was composed early but they use a wide range of methodological approaches in doing so. R. D. Fulk focuses on linguistic history with some reference also to metre to demonstrate the archaic nature of the language of *Beowulf* and finds it difficult to believe that the poem's archaisms could be the result of later stylistic artifice. Leonard Neidorf argues that the *Beowulf* manuscript presents a late copy of an old poem, in which the scribes show evidence of unfamiliarity of heroic names that would have been well known in the early period but not after the eighth century. Tom Shippey refers to the host of names in *Beowulf* and argues that even though many of them have no meaning for us (and often seem redundant) the poem preserves memories of real historical events and personages from a traumatic period, implying early composition. Megan E. Hartman complements Fulk's findings on archaisms, explaining that late poems such as *Judith* and *The Battle of Brunanburh* which cultivate a conservative style do so in a partial and incomplete way in contrast to the demonstrably 'genuinely' archaic diction of *Beowulf*. Thomas A. Bredehoft identifies a metrical conservatism in *Beowulf* so varied and consistent as to indicate strongly that the poem must be placed among the very earliest surviving narrative poems, 'probably in the eighth century'; Bredehoft tabulates a catalogue of metrical innovations that can be observed over the history of Old English poetry and finds that none of them features in *Beowulf*.

Moving from the 'hard' evidence of philology, palaeography and metre to



internal considerations, Dennis Cronan notes the contrast in the treatment of Scyld in *Beowulf* and in the Alfredian and later West Saxon royal genealogies. In the latter Scaef is privileged and Scyld 'constrained': the 'unconstrained' Scyld of *Beowulf* cannot derive from the genealogies, which suggests a pre-Alfredian milieu for the poem. Similarly, Frederick M. Biggs argues that the poem's preoccupation with the theme of royal succession suggests that *Beowulf* comes from earlier Anglo-Saxon England, when the succession of sons (which brings the danger that there may not be a suitable heir) replaced the older Germanic system according to which members of a wider kin group could succeed; such concerns would be less relevant in the later period. Joseph Harris draws attention to references, largely unnoticed by scholars, in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, to a place and structure in Northumbria with Hart/Heorot in its name; for Harris these references provide 'an additional piece of the puzzle' (p. 189) supporting the likelihood of an early date for *Beowulf*. T. D. Hill argues that the 'Noachite' religious world of *Beowulf* places the poem in the early period, close enough to the era of conversion for a syncretic approach to the pre-Christian world to be relevant on the part of the poet.

The final two evidence-based chapters bring us back to the harder evidence of language, metre and palaeography. Rafael J. Pascual identifies semantic shift in the history of two Old English words for monster (*scucca* and *pyrs*), from 'material' in early Anglo-Saxon England to 'spiritual' by the ninth century and end of the eighth century, respectively. And George Clark refutes the objections of Roberta Frank to Fulk's arguments for an early *Beowulf* (based on the metrics of Kaluza's law) and to Lapidge's (based on palaeography and the confusion of letter forms). Employing statistical

analysis of the relevant metrical patterns and contrasting the kinds of transcription errors found in *Beowulf* with those found in texts of Cynewulf poems, particularly in the Exeter Book, Clark concludes, in support of Fulk and Lapidge, that metrically *Beowulf* 'cannot be regarded as an artful attempt to evoke a bygone era' and that the transcription errors point to an 'eighth-century poem, but with the imperfections of an eleventh-century transcription' (pp. 233, 234).

One chapter different in theme from the others is that of Michael Drout (about two-thirds of the way through the book), which steps back from questions of primary evidence to offer a penetrating analysis of the scholarly debate about dating. It presents a survey of discussions of the dating of *Beowulf* from the 1970s on and deconstructs the rhetoric of the 1981 book, which is perceived as exaggerating the amount of dissent against the eighth-century dating; Drout notes that some critics even celebrate the uncertainty about dating that became widely accepted in recent decades. And Allen Frantzen returns to questions of scholarly history in the volume's afterword. Frantzen places the debate about *Beowulf* in the context of wider developments in literary studies in the second half of the twentieth century when a preference for ahistoricizing, formalist approaches emerged, de-emphasizing specific historical context. The date of the composition of *Beowulf* matters little for such approaches, but, writes Frantzen, 'If we are concerned with a more structured kind of knowledge within the poem, the date of *Beowulf* does matter' (p. 246). Frantzen is right in seeing the chapters in the *Reassessment* as demonstrating the validity of rigorous philological and other dating criteria with respect to *Beowulf* but he looks beyond *Beowulf* to the critical



construction of Old English verse in a diachronic rather than a synchronic pattern.

The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment is an exciting and substantial volume, consistently interesting, with alert individual items that cumulatively build to a powerful overall case. The discussion is lively and invariably well focused. I found myself regretting the absence of a general bibliography in such a tightly themed collection but the editing is excellent throughout and it is evident that editor and contributors engaged in fruitful dialogue in the preparation of this important book.

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M. R. Rambaran-Olm (ed.), *John the Baptist's Prayer or The Descent into Hell from the Exeter Book: Text, Translation and Critical Study*. Anglo-Saxon Studies 21. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014. ix + 249 pp. + ills. Hardback. 978-1-84384-366-5. £60.

This new volume in the Anglo-Saxon Studies series falls into two parts. The first is an extended introduction, including in the first chapter a discussion of the manuscript, and in chapter two analysis of the literary and theological ideas relating to Christ's descent into and harrowing of Hell. The third chapter is a literary analysis of the poem and discussion of possible sources and analogues. To complete the introduction, chapter four compares the poem more closely with treatments of the descent into Hell theme in Old English poetry and prose. The second part of the book consists of an edited text—some damaged parts of it are excitingly reconstructed using digital replication of the scribe's hand—a translation, commentary, transcription and glossary, with appendices outlining treat-

ments of the descent into Hell motif in first-millennium Christian commentary, biblical references related to ideas in the poem, and some sources and analogues.

One of the main objects of the work is to suggest that the traditional title of the poem, *The Descent into Hell*, as in the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, obscures the purpose of the text, which is (according to the writer) to urge the audience to be baptised. In support of this, Rambaran-Olm points to liturgical expressions in the poem which involve the audience in response. She also suggests that the text might also have a dramatic function, similarly eliciting the participation and involvement of the audience. Overall this is perfectly plausible, but the writer tends to overstate the case for the poem not being concerned with the descent into Hell: 'the poem of the Exeter Book gives one brief line to Christ's actual entrance into Hell' (p. 55) is one of several statements of this kind. However, taken a little less dogmatically, lines 33–51 are essentially focused on Christ's 'journey' and arrival in Hell, and thus the old title is not so outlandish as the writer would like to represent it. Much of the book also focuses on discussing the motif, isolating some differences from the more conventional forms of its expression, but nevertheless confirming it as a 'descent into Hell' type of text.

The strength of this work is that it explores the biblical, patristic, theological and Anglo-Saxon background and context of Christ's descent into Hell: this was a popular and malleable idea, partly because it is so tangentially referred to or represented in Scripture. The work shows the variety of forms the motif took, and illustrates the fascination it exercised in the minds of early medieval writers. In addition to that, the work places this particular poem in a