Leonard Neidorf, ed., The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment
The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment by Leonard Neidorf
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The dating of Beowulf has long been one of the most important and controversial issues in Anglo-Saxon studies. The proliferation of competing views had left the field in a state of complacent agnosticism, until Leonard Neidorf aroused it from its slumber, first in a series of stimulating philological articles, and now in The Dating of “Beowulf”: A Reassessment.1 This collection brings together work from leading researchers on Old English literature, with contributions both from prominent senior scholars and promising junior scholars.

The volume begins with Neidorf’s valuable introduction, which relates the history of the dating debate and reviews scholarly developments from the past three decades. He observes that the methodology and reasoning employed in dating scholarship has moved away from efforts to reconstruct the poem’s literary context and has instead headed toward the probabilistic examination of chronologically significant evidence. Neidorf lucidly explains the significance of scholarship generated in this framework, notably that of Cronan, Wormald, Fulk, and Lapidge, which uniformly concludes that Beowulf is a relatively early composition.

The collection begins with an article by R. D. Fulk, who provides an insightful overview of the linguistic evidence relevant to the dating of Beo-


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By reaffirming the main theses offered in his much acclaimed *A History of Old English Meter*, Fulk explains this complex body of evidence and demonstrates that the many archaisms observed in *Beowulf* demand a date of composition close to 700.² Fulk’s conclusion receives compelling support in the following essay from Neidorf, which examines evidence for the circulation and transmission of Germanic legend. Neidorf’s survey of legendary references in Anglo-Latin testimonia, the onomastic record, vernacular poetry, and royal genealogies reveals that the material in *Beowulf* circulated in England during the seventh and eighth centuries but was forgotten during the ninth and tenth centuries.

Tom Shippey builds on Neidorf’s work in the following essay, which discusses the onomastic evidence at greater length, demonstrating its chronological significance. Megan Hartman, in turn, draws on Fulk’s contention that the language of *Beowulf* is genuinely archaic, not the product of a late poet’s attempt to recreate an early style. Hartman shows, in essence, that no archaizing late poets were able to do what the *Beowulf* poet did. Thomas Bredehoft tracks the distribution of stylistic innovations in the corpus of Old English poetry, noting that every poem composed in the tenth century exhibits at least one of these innovations, whereas *Beowulf* is entirely devoid of them.

The essays by Fulk, Neidorf, Shippey, Hartman, and Bredehoft align to offer a powerful battery of solid philological evidence for the early composition of *Beowulf*. The next two essays by Dennis Cronan and Frederick M. Biggs contain highly nuanced explorations of *Beowulf*’s relationship to Anglo-Saxon political history, separately concluding that its politics situate the poem in the earlier period. Michael D. C. Drout’s essay convincingly contends that scholars who argued for a late date of *Beowulf* “gave the people what they wanted.” They manufactured a controversy, which spread an agnostic attitude to the poem’s origins and effectively disassociated it from constructive historical approaches. Some scholars might want unencumbered interpretive freedom, but, as Drout wisely warns, philological restraint is necessary to prevent scientific stasis and to promote instead the healthy regeneration of academic views and the advancement of our knowledge of *Beowulf*.

Joseph Harris and Thomas D. Hill both provide fine essays that relate *Beowulf* to aspects of early Anglo-Saxon culture and offer illuminating theological and institutional contexts. Rafael J. Pascual’s essay on the semantics of *scucca* and *þyrs* continues the book in this enriching vein by showing that the use of these terms to connote material monsters accords with the early glossaries but differs sharply from later texts, where such words are syno-

nym for “devil.” Building on Tolkien, Pascual also adumbrates a brilliant history of the representation of monsters in Anglo-Saxon literature, in which *Beowulf* arises once more as an eighth-century product.

George Clark’s essay eloquently defends the validity of Fulk’s linguistic arguments and Lapidge’s paleographical arguments for an early dating of the poem against objections leveled by other scholars.3 Allen J. Frantzen’s article brings the book to a close with a profound meditation on the significance of the dating of *Beowulf*. Frantzen rightly states that this issue is essential because it affects the treatment of “everything else”—that is, the rest of the corpus of Old English poems. Like Drout, Frantzen argues for the importance of historicism in literary criticism, contending that much is to be gained when scholarship is restrained by a work’s probable date and context.

*The Dating of “Beowulf”: A Reassessment* is bound to become one of the most influential books in Anglo-Saxon studies. The first-rate essays in this volume will steer the course of *Beowulf* scholarship in many productive directions, supplying the field with a secure foundation for future literary-historical research. Indeed, Leonard Neidorf, whose position as a leading scholar in the field of Old English literature is significantly cemented by this volume, must be congratulated for editing a book that will move the field forward and occupy, together with Klaeber’s fourth edition, a privileged place in the history of *Beowulf* scholarship.4

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