IS THERE AN ANCIENT GNOME IN BEOWULF LINE 4?

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Scyld scefing sceapen: the three words in this order and with no intervening words or syllables make the alliterating core of line 4 of Beowulf (= Ms. line 132R04).

Lines 1 to 3 of the poem form a sort of proem, an invocation of the past, of great kings and princes forward in brave deeds. But with line 4 the singer seems to find the right way to begin the great song.

Why begin with Scyld? In answer to such a question the Anglo-Saxon singer might have replied something like this: Scyld is the ancestor of the Scyldings, the Danes, the people whose hall was invaded by Grendel and Grendel's mother. Where better to begin? Then the singer proves his point with genealogy. Scyld begets Beowulf, Beowulf begets Healfdene, Healfdene begets Hrothgar, who builds the hall. It's really all very simple and orderly.

Or is it? In line 4 Scyld seems to be the son of Scef, for that is what the formative -in3 denotes in Anglo-Saxon genealogies. But Scef never ruled the folk, or at least the Beowulf-poet doesn't seem to know of his reign. At lines 15 and 16a the singer says that there was a time before Scyld when the folk endured aldor[le]ase—the lacuna between r and the second a is usually, correctly, I think, filled by le, giving aldor[le]ase, "lordless". But let me put this passage into its context, lines 12 to 19:
"To-that-one (and 'that-one' can only be Scyld) an offspring was brought-forth, young in the enclosed places. That-one (the offspring) God sent as consolation to folk. He (God) perceived that they previously endured lord(less) for a long time. To-them for-that Lord-of-life, glory's Wielder, gave support-in-the-world. Beowulf was famed; blæd widely sprang. Scyld's offspring was in Scede-lands."

Lines 43 to 46 further complicate the problem:

"Not-at-all did-they-provide him with less gifts, possessions of the people, than those did who him at the beginning sent forth alone over waves, being-a-child."

Who sent him forth at the beginning? Scef, his father? No, unnamed persons or beings, simply [ba]. Such treatment has often been taken to indicate that Scyld was an orphan. But in line 4 we have been told what seems to be the name of the father of this supposed orphan.

The riddle acquires another degree of complexity when we consult early genealogies, as scholars have been doing for a long time. The genealogy that is probably
closest in time to the poem is the one in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 855 A.D. According to the genealogy in texts B and C, Sceaf...paes 3eboren on 3ære earce Noës.... Five generations later, Itermon begot Sceldwea. It seems that the genealogist has a different notion from the Beowulf-poet's concerning Scyld's parentage. But perhaps the former offers a way out of the problem. Since the Beowulf-poet knows Heremod, and knows him as a king who, like Sigmund, became an exile, the time of Heremod's exile might be taken to account for the langæ hpile when the folk was aldor[ ]ase. Part of the riddle of the opening lines of Beowulf might be solved by Heremod's exile.

The cost of this solution, however, seems to be the bestowal of two fathers on Scyld--Scef and Heremod, unless, of course, the -in3 in scefìn3 here indicates either simply association with rather than paternity, or a remoter kinship.

We are left with these possibilities. The Beowulf-poet does not resolve them. The most we can say is that he tells us, first, that Scyld is an in3 of Scef; second, that there was a time before Scyld's reign when the folc was lordless; and third; that Scyld came over the waves while still a child. The Beowulf-poet says nothing more of Scef and nothing at all that might lead us to believe that Scef ruled the folk. Nor does the poet, unlike the West Saxon genealogists and the author of the prologue to the Prose Edda, place Heremod in any genealogy. The Beowulf-poet begins with Scyld Scefin3. And Scyld Scefin3--along with sceapan--as I shall try to show, is indeed a very important beginning for the folk.

scyld scefin3 sceape[na]: the three words alliterate. The Beowulf-poet takes the
first word, and probably the second, to be a proper noun, a name. But, as every student knows, all three words are also common nouns: shield, sheaf, scather. The first two members of the series have a reflex in Modern English directly traceable to the Old English simplexes. The third member of the series has a reflex that has been affected by the North Germanic form. So only two of the three now alliterate exactly as they do in Beowulf. But to alliterate in Beowulf all three words must have alliterated before Beowulf, or at least before the recording of that poem. And when we check the Indo-European roots of shield, sheaf, and scathe, we find that the roots alliterate.

Pokorny links the Greek word ἀγαθή, "uninjured"--the a-prefix is privative--and Middle Irish scéith, "fatigued", with several Germanic forms, such as Gothic skapjan, that are related to the third member of the series, sceapa. These few but significant cognates are listed under the root skēth-, skōth-.³

Pokorny lists only Serbian čupa, "bunch", and Russian čupъ and Czech čup, "tuft"--again a short but significant list--under (s)keup-, skeub(h)-, the entry under which Old English sceaf appears.⁴ Watkins adds Old Norse skoft, "hair of the head" and, with loss of s-, Middle Dutch hoppe, the hop plant.⁵ The sheaf word, Pokorny says, is derived from a root for which cognates are known only in Germanic and Slavic.⁶ Cognates for the scathe word, as we have seen, are recorded in three Indo-European languages, again all of them Western, that is, European rather than Asian, branches.

The many cognates of I. (s)kel-, including Old English sciëld, take up three and a half pages in Pokorny.⁷ The meaning
of the root is "to cut". A shield is, then, something cut, something sliced off, sometimes a "small piece", as in Sanskrit kalā. The cognate Greek verb σκάλλω means "scrape, chop, dig", whereas the Thracian cognate σκάλμη means "sword" or "knife". Latin culter, "knife", shows, as do a number of cognates, loss of the initial s-.

The loss in some cognates of the first phoneme of the cluster, s- before the -k-, points up the familiar but very important fact that a simple s, or s plus any other consonant, does not alliterate with sc (pronounced $s$) in Beowulf. The sc-, from earlier sk-, is, then, a heritage from Indo-European times, a heritage passed down to the Beowulf-poet and on to us.

The Indo-European roots of scylæ-scefe-sceapa (i.e., (s)kel-, (s)keup-, and skēth-) could have been bound together during the period of the Indo-European linguistic community. But, at whatever point the alliterative binding took place, it was the people who were to become the proto-Germans who worked out a way to keep the words together. Alliterating formulas occur in other early traditional poetry. ἔρατος and ἔργος, for example, are collocated a number of times in the Iliad and Odyssey. Their Indo-European roots, *ykōs- and *erg-, alliterate. But the collocation of ἔργος τε ἔρατος τε, to quote one of its forms, does not control the line in which it appears; that is, Homer can use this formula without having to build his line around it. Homer's tradition had selected syllable length as the most basic feature of the poetic line.

The proto-Germans, on the other hand, selected from the features inherent in the Indo-European syllable first stress and then alliteration as the bases of their traditional poetic line. This selection made it possible
for them to keep together (s)kel-, (s)keup-, and sketh- both as the core of a verse line and as a capsule of information.

The meaning of each of the three words from line 4 of Beowulf, taken individually, seems both clear and ancient. The possibility of ancient association exists. The question now is, do the three words, none of which is a verb, convey or seem to convey meaning as a group? But before I take up this question with scyld-scefin3-sceap[na], I want to try to establish the idea of the capsule of information. To do so, I turn to another alliterative group in Beowulf, this time not a trio but a pair.

There are two instances in Beowulf of the alliterating pair I shall designate by their infinitives, habban and healdan. The first instance occurs in line 658: hafa nu 7 3eheald husa selest (147R04). The second instance occurs at line 2430: heold mec 7 hæfde hrecael cyn[in3] (187R03). The pair also occurs in line 2 of the metrical portion of the charm listed in Dobbie as #9: and hafa paet feoh and heald paet feoh. What is interesting about this capsule is that we recognize it not because we learned it from Beowulf or the Old English charm, but, most probably, because we have heard it or read it in the marriage ceremony. It has come to us from a very different source, but we certainly recognize the pair "to have and to hold" as a pair when we hear or read them, whether in Beowulf or elsewhere. What Beowulf confirms for us is that the alliterative binding has held through more than a millennium of linguistic change.

I think this is an extraordinarily important fact. To have has been bound to to hold in both verse and prose for a traceable period of a millennium and more. The next step is to try to discover whether
habban and healdan joined forces even before Beowulf. Again it turns out that we are dealing with a pair that had the possibility of teaming up even before the proto-Germanic period. Habban is derived from the root kap-, "to grasp", exemplified by Latin capiō. Pokorny lists other cognates, all beginning with the appropriate k sound, ranging from Sanskrit to Irish. Healdan is derived from the root kel-, "to drive, to set in rapid motion". Pokorny relates Sanskrit kā́līyati, "he drives", Greek κέλλαω, "I drive (a ship onto land)" and Latin celer, "rapid"—all beginning with the k sound. (I wonder whether what has become a formula for marriage might not have begun as one for cattle-lifting!)

It is, of course, not only the alliterative bond that has kept to have and to hold together. It is the meaning (or meanings) of these words as well. To have is one thing—possession—but to hold probably suggests one area or field of meanings for us—embracing, supporting, clinging to—and a partially overlapping but somewhat different field of meanings for the Anglo-Saxons, a field in which the sense of guarding and ruling dominates. But regardless of some semantic shifting over the last millennium, the alliterating pair remains a pair for us as for the Beowulf-poet.

What meanings work along with the alliterative bond to bind scyld-scef-sceapa together? Pokorny gives us the most generalized sense: cut, bunch or tuft, and injure. If it were not for the third idea, injure, it would be possible simply to take cut and bunch as a reference to the technique of harvesting. But the series ends with the image of harming. And it begins with the image of cutting, perhaps later of slicing something off that becomes, in Germanic at least, a means of defense.
The middle term is the easiest to deal with. It is an Indo-European agricultural word. In Beowulf line 4, that word is flanked by the cutter-defender and the injurer. Cut or shield, sheaf, scather: can we read these words as a capsule? Let me try the following: the sheaf, symbolizing agriculture, is likely to tempt those who would either destroy the crops or steal the harvest for their own use. The sheaf therefore requires—"begets", the -in3 of scefin3 seems to say—a shield, originally one who cuts: something which or someone who will defend the crops from the scathers.

Now there is no question that the Beowulf-poet knows of Scyld as a person, a vigorous warrior. But, apart from, possibly, lines 4 and 5, the poet says nothing about him either as a defender in general or as a defender of crops in particular. But perhaps nothing need be said, or said directly, of Scyld's defense of the sheaf. It is, after all, the mead-seats from which Scyld deprives crowds of scathers. And mead, we know, is an Indo-European word with cognates as far east as Sanskrit and as far west as (Old) Irish. The cognates of médhu designate both honey and a sweet alcoholic drink usually made from honey. In Homer the cognate word, μέθυ, designates a sweet wine. Whether wine or mead, it is a drink that draws men together. It is also a drink that takes time to prepare and thus requires some settling down. Now the very word from which our settle is derived is the second element of meodusetla in line 5. And its kin-word, the verb sittan, will soon be heard in line 9, ymbsittendra.

In the Beowulf-poet's telling, Scyld arrives in the midst of a settled community that contains certain persons who gather to drink mead. If there are mead-drinkers,
there must be mead-makers, but there is no Anglo-Saxon Hesiod to sing of such work. The poem is concerned not with the makers, whether farmers who gather in the sheaves or the makers of mead from honey, but rather with those who defend, who shield, the workers. If there are those who shield, there are also the scathers, who must be driven from the community. Still others must be frightened (e3sode); others must be taught to obey even across the waters (ofer hronrade). Scyld does all these things and thus becomes the 3od cýning of line 11. He is, as I see him, the bringer of order to the gatherings of men. He must use force to do so, as lines 4 to 6a make clear. But he is also the bringer of a peaceful succession when his son, Beowulf, is born. When he has accomplished all these things, he departs in his own ripeness, to 3escæðhpile (132V04). All will be well for more than two generations, until his great-grandson, Hrothgar, builds the great mead-hall in which to gather around himself the warband his harrying-luck (heresped, 133R17) has drawn to him.

From Scyld's mead-seats to Hrothgar's mead-hall is a matter of about 62 lines and four generations in Beowulf. I think it took somewhat longer than that. I have been hinting that Scyld symbolizes what has been called "the Neolithic Revolution," the time of the settling down of humankind to grow crops. I believe that it is possible that these early lines in Beowulf keep a memory of those distant times and a reminder that agriculture needs protection and thus breeds warfare. The Neolithic Revolution seems to have come to the Indo-Europeans while they were still a community, before the period of migration. The evidence lies in common terms for sowing, for grain or corn, grind-
ing, and so on. Such words make it clear that the Indo-European speakers talked of sowing, for example.

But sowing seed is only the beginning of the process. The end comes months later and requires some settling down to await the harvest. How many times on their way to becoming the proto-Germans did these Indo-European speakers settle down to sow and wait? How many times did they do so only to have their harvests stolen or burned by their enemies? Of course, we simply do not know. What we do know is that there is a capsule in line 4 of Beowulf that seems to deal with the problem by turning it into a gnome. We also know that, eventually, this branch of the Indo-European linguistic community settled down on the shores of the Baltic and North Sea to farm.

A long time later, perhaps two and a half millennia, some of the descendants of these seaside settlers began to move further westward, crossing the North Sea into Roman Brittania, forced by various pressures to become nomads again. Once more, I suggest, the most important part of their baggage was the alliterating gnome scyl<s>c<s>e<s>fin<s>3<s>-sceab</s>an.

It should be kept in mind that Beowulf is an old song sung in a new land. It is an old song because it sings not of the folk fighting in and for Brittania, the new land, but first of Scyld and then of Beowulf fighting and winning in Denmark, whence some of the folc came. I take it as proven that not only does the language of the song have ancient roots, but so also does the verse-dialect, the special dialect every performer, would-be performer, and, to some extent, silent listener learned in order to keep in mind and mouth at least some of the things that were important to the folc. Some proof
of the prior existence of the verse-dialect is carved on the Gallehus horn, made before the Anglo-Saxons crossed the North Sea heading westward, and in cognate Germanic, particularly Scandinavian, verse-lines recorded after the Anglo-Saxon crossing.

Much more can be said about this verse-dialect. I shall only say that, if you do not think this dialect is one that an illiterate can learn to speak properly—observing the metrical constraints—you should listen to the great Yugoslavian singer Avdo Međedović, speaking decasyllabic line after decasyllabic line, many of them bound together by elaborate sound-patterning, and singing faster than we normally speak. Like Avdo Međedović, the early Indo-Europeans were illiterate. A community has to invent a language and is likely to speak it for a very long time before getting around to inventing or adapting a system of notation—what we exalt as writing.

Through traditional poetry, which was first and for a very long time a most important survival mechanism of the folk, I have tried to make my way back to one of the most important beginnings of the folk. The magic words are, again, scyld-seafing-sceapæ. One of the ways that survival mechanism operates is by turning concepts into characters, a shield into King Scyld. "Sheaves beget scathers and need shields," one of our linguistic forebears may have remarked to another as they struggled to defend their crops against the people in whose land they had begun to settle. The memory of such an alliterating gnome survives, I think, in Beowulf, in the old song sung in a new settlement.

In Beowulf the song is set around the northern waterways, ofer hronrade. That is far enough back for the tradition as the
singer knew it. But Scyld, as we have seen, could not have brought the knowledge of agriculture for the first time to the Germanic folk settling in Denmark. The proto-Germans had brought that with themselves on their trek across Europe. Scyld's message is older than King Scyld, just as his ship is a later addition to the telling. The ancient tale was, however, neither forgotten nor obscured; it was relocated. Such a process of relocating may well have gone on in every Indo-European poetry as the singers moved further and further from each other in time and space.

But the kernel of the tale was not lost. At moments of crisis we are apt to cast our memories back to similar situations in the past. So may the embattled Anglo-Saxon farmers attempting to settle in Brittania. But those farmers had something that we do not, a verse-dialect that puts actions into a coherent narrative. Such putting-together must, I think, have been one of the functions of traditional epos. And that function was not only to keep information but also, as line 14 says, to provide *folce to frofre* (132R13, "consolation for the folk").

While I was preparing this paper and mulling over what I have called the gnomic capsule in line 4, I happened to read Richard E. Leakey's and Roger Lewin's *People of the Lake*, a scientific narrative that begins with a hominid community of some two and a half million years ago and ends with the Neolithic Revolution. The final chapter of *People of the Lake* seems to me to provide the best possible commentary on the gnomic capsule in *Beowulf*.

The turning point in our history (that is, the history of humankind) came with the invention of an economy that allowed a previously nomadic people to
live in large numbers in villages supported by an abundance of husbanded food (when the harvest was good). Gatherer-hunters generally live in small bands (around twenty-five people), move around regularly, and have no more possessions than they can carry on their back. They also limit their birth rate to once every four years so as to fit in with...the band's mobility in moving to new locations every few weeks. Once an abundant supply of food is available in a single place, these constraints are lifted. Birth rate can increase, the population therefore starts to grow, and people can accumulate possessions.\textsuperscript{13}

Leakey and Lewin continue:

As soon as people depend on anything so discrete as a standing crop, then there is advantage to be had in purloining one's neighbor's crops. Naturally, the community under threat will fight furiously to keep what is theirs because without the harvest they are lost: a new crop of food takes at least a year to be ready...\textsuperscript{14}

Enter, into the Leakey and Lewin scenario, the \textit{sheaf} and the \textit{scather}! The third character waits only a moment in the wings. Leakey and Lewin present him just a few pages later:

When human communities become large, social stratification, including chiefs and leaders, appear inevitable, especially in societies placing particular emphasis on material wealth. Such a social structure is, of course, well suited--even essential--to waging organized conflict. Without a powerful leader it would be impossible to rouse the enthusiasm of the masses into an efficient army. Ironically, the one characteristic that must have been vital in the evolution of a gathering-and-hunting economy in early humans--cooperation--was also crucial to organized warfare!\textsuperscript{15}

I am well aware that Leakey and Lewin are sketching here part of their argument against Raymond Dart, Konrad Lorenz, and so on--against those who main-
tain that humankind is naturally aggressive. I find it worthy of further rumination that line 4 of Beowulf, possibly because of alliteration and certainly after a semantic shift, suggests that sheaves need to be shielded, not stolen. There is aggression elsewhere in Beowulf. Indeed, Hrothgar in the days of his vigor has success in harrying (herespēd, line 64 and 133R17), that is, aggressive warfare. Yet even he wanted to lock his people about (be[l]eac, line 1770 and 171V16-17), to bend (for this seems to be the meaning of the Indo-European root, I. leug-16) protection around the folk. And the folk turn out to be, in the very next line, maniȝu mæʒba (line 1771, 171V17), a reflex all but identical with the first half of line 5. The old story repeats itself!

In putting together this paper and an earlier one, I have begun to follow a certain method. The method makes three requirements of the passage studied. All three requirements must be met before one can have some assurance that he has found an ancient gnome. The first requirement is that the source be in the earliest recorded form of the language. In cases in which the document itself seems to be a copy of an earlier document, as is the case with the extensive Homeric texts or Cotton Vitellius A. xv, the language of the document must be close to that of the earliest records. The second criterion or requirement is that the syllables of the passage be linked in the manner of the traditional verse-dialect of the language. The third criterion is the significance of the word-group or capsule as a group, admittedly the hardest criterion to define. I have tried to give an example of significance in the foregoing paper. I think that significance will usually mean social, ethical, or econom-
ic information, or some combination of these
categories.

How much of what I have been saying
would the Beowulf-poet have understood?
How conscious might he have been of the
importance of the capsule I have been
analyzing? The obvious answer is, of course,
that we don't know. But there is another
way of phrasing the question: what did the
Beowulf-poet need to know or understand
about the Indo-European linguistic commu-
nity and the beginnings of Indo-European
agriculture? The answer—exactly as much
as the Germanic tradition, with its power-
fully suggestive capsules in the verse-
dialect, told him.

This is in no sense to belittle the
Beowulf-poet. The best way to do that, I
think, is to imagine him listening to Vergil
and attempting to borrow from the Roman
poet. Beowulf is, simply, more significant
than the Aeneid, because the Beowulf-poet
was, as Vergil was not, directly in touch
with the oral tradition of his forefathers.

There is another dimension to the
question I have raised. David Bynum in
a brilliant recent book, The Daemon in the
Wood, has reminded us that one touchstone
of Milman Parry's analysis of traditional
oral style was what Albert Lord was later
to phrase as "a tension of essences."17 As
I understand the matter, a singer will feel
this tension whether or not his conscious
mind can deal in any rational way with
every detail of what he sings. The tension
will lead him, at times, to sing of things
that puzzle him when he is prosaically
asked about them.

I think that, if we asked the singer
of Beowulf to explain just why he began
with scyld scofing sceap[na], he might
have answered, because that is where the
song begins. There is no need for him to speculate, as I have been doing, on Indo-European paleoanthropology. As the bearer of oral tradition, as a performer in the verse-dialect that held fast to important information even as the shape of that information subtly shifted over millennia, he is the bearer of much more than he need consciously speculate about. It is enough that he, as one voice of his tradition, has kept so much in the telling.

NOTES

1 The unbracketed letters and symbols of the text of Beowulf quoted in this paper are always those visible in the photographs of Beowulf Reproduced in Facsimile from the Unique Manuscript British Museum Ms. Cotton Vitellius A. xv, transliterated and annotated by Julius Zupitza, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Early English Text Society, Oxford University Press, 1959). The bracketed letters are supplied from a single additional source, the photographs on pp. 1 to 90 of The Thorkelin Transcripts of Beowulf in Facsimile, ed. Kemp Malone (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1951), the first volume in Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile. Line numbers are of two sorts: first, the standard verse-line numbers as in, e.g., the edition of Fr. Klaeber, Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1950f.), and, second, manuscript line numbers according to the following code: three numerals indicate the manuscript folio number followed by R or V to indicate recto or verso; the letter is then followed by a two-digit line indicator, 01 for line 1, 11 for line 11 and so on. The folio numbers follow the new official British Museum/Library numbering listed on pp. xvi-xvii of Zupitza-Davis.
For example, "scyld sceling sceap[na]" is verse-line 4 and 132804.

2 See *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, ed. John Earle, revised by Charles Plummer, reissued with a Bibliographical Note by Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952f.), p. 67, where the entries of two (texts B and C) of many of the variant chronicles record the ancient genealogies of the Anglo-Saxon kings.


4 Ibid., p. 956


6 Pokorny, p. 956.

7 Ibid., pp. 923-27.


10 Ibid., p. 548.

11 Ibid., p. 707.

12 It is a pleasure to acknowledge here my thanks to David E. Bynum, Curator of Harvard’s Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, for making available to me a tape of Avdo Međedović performing a lengthy passage from his 13,331-line song, *Osmanbeg Delibegović and Pavićević Luka*, recorded by Milman Parry and Albert Lord on July 17-20 and August 1-3, 1935. Professor Lord discusses Avdo Međedović’s traditional oral art in Volume 3 of *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*, Albert B. Lord and David E. Bynum,


14 Ibid., p. 279.

15 Ibid., pp. 280-81.

16 Pokorny, *l. leug-*, pp. 685-86.