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COMMENTARY

A Window into the Anglo-Saxon Renaissance

Seamus Heaney's new translation of *Beowulf*—an Irish poet (and Nobel Laureate) translating *the* Anglo-Saxon epic—has gone through six printings so far this year in the United States, and more in Britain (where it came out last year), and has been on the bestseller list for weeks, an astonishing feat for a verse translation of a heroic poem of 3,200 lines written in Anglo-Saxon England sometime between the Seventh and Ninth centuries A.D.

Although it is unclear why so many people are buying this apparently rather esoteric work—as media coverage keeps reminding us, *Beowulf* is rarely read outside college courses in English literature—what *is* certain, is that this is a wonderful translation of a wonderful poem, the masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon high culture and earliest surviving epic poem in any Germanic language.

Beowulf is, in brief, a tale written down in English, in England, but set among the Danes, Swedes, and Frisians—the Anglo-Saxons' homeland before they migrated, during the great *Völkerwanderung* of the Germanic peoples, into Britain. *Beowulf* tells of warrior-heroes fighting evil, of loyalty and courage, of betrayal and doom—and, of a Christian sense of self and others. For, far from being a barbarian saga, or celebration of pagan Norse mythology, as one might suppose, *Beowulf* was written by a Christian poet, sometime in the first two centuries after the evangelization of the Anglo-Saxons.

It is for this reason, therefore, that *Beowulf* can truly be called an *epic,* in the best sense of the word: Because it *created a people,* using the already ancient "Beowulf matter" of oral poetic tradition, which celebrated the deeds of pagan ancestors, to transform the pagan tribal society the Anglo-Saxons brought with them to Britain, into what would become the Christian civilization of Anglo-Saxon England.

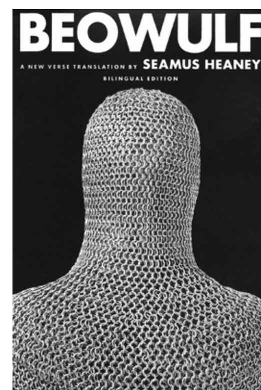
Hence, *Beowulf* stands in utter contrast to the Romantic, Nineteenth-century "revivalism" associated with Richard Wagner and the like, the supposed "return" to Germanic antiquities in the form of the *Nibelungenlied* and a nostalgia for the gods of Valhalla. In fact, those revivals, or, rather, modern constructs only tangentially related to the actual pre-Christian myth and folklore of the Norse peoples, are artificial in the extreme: The truth of the matter is, that the oldest epic poem we have in any Germanic language—namely, *Beowulf*—is Christian, and the literary products of the first literate Germanic language—namely, Gothic—are translations of the Bible.

The Translation

Heaney's verse gives us both the directness and the loftiness of the poem's heroic language, sometimes with gorgeous adjectives piled high; sometimes short, sharp, alliterative.

Consider the following passages. First, we are near the opening of the poem (lines 81-98), reading the description of the great hall Heorot, hall of the Danes' king Hrothgar:

> . . . The hall towered,
> its gables wide and high and awaiting
> a barbarous burning. That doom abided,
> but in time it would come; the killer instinct
> unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.
> Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
> nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him
> to hear the din of the loud banquet
> every day in the hall, the harp being struck
> and the clear song of a skilled poet
> telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
> how the Almighty had made the earth,
> a gleaming plain girdled with waters;
> in His splendour He set the sun and the moon
> to be the earth's lamplight, lanterns for men,
> and filled the broad lap of the world
> with branches and leaves; and quickened life
> in every other thing that moved.



Beowulf: A New Verse Translation
by Seamus Heaney
New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000
213 pages, hardcover, $25.00

Now, another passage from the Heaney translation, toward the end of the poem (lines 2417-2421). Here, the old king Beowulf readies himself for his fateful, fatal final battle. This is a passage Heaney himself quotes in his introduction, comparing Beowulf's mood to that "of other tragic heroes: Oedipus at Colonnus, Lear at his 'ripeness is all' extremity, Hamlet in the last illuminations of his 'prophetic soul' ":

> The veteran king sat down on the cliff-top.
> He wished good luck to the Geats who had shared
> his hearth and his gold. He was sad at heart,
> unsettled yet ready, sensing his death.
> His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain.

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Bottom left: *Oldest extant Beowulf manuscript, written on vellum c. A.D. 1000.* **Left:** *10th century Viking ceremonial axe-head.* **Below:** *Dragon-head of the wooden stem-post of a Viking ship, c. A.D. 700.*

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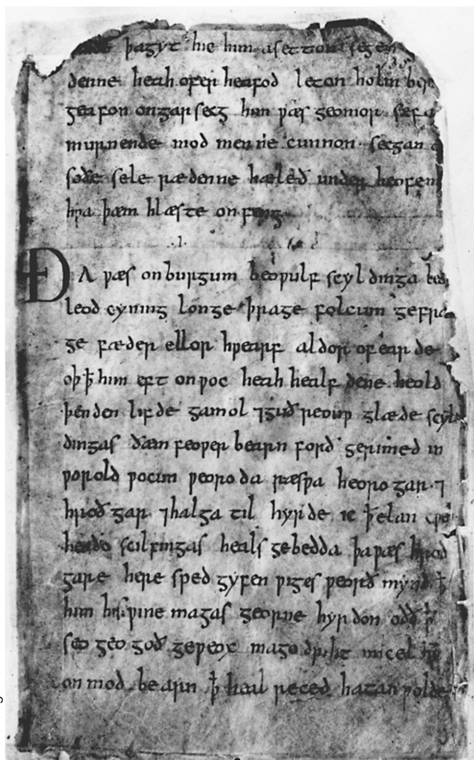
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Anglo-Saxon, or Old English, deploys a marvelously powerful musicality dominated by alliteration, rather than rhyme. Alliteration in Anglo-Saxon poetry is, as Anglo-Saxon scholar Robert Diamond puts it, not an embellishment, but a structural necessity; one in which verses are arranged in alliterating pairs, with the first half of a line (the "on-verse") having two alliterating pairs of syllables, and the second half ("off-verse") only one.

To translate this directly, or literally, into modern English *poetry,* is impossible. The effect would be something like the spoof "Witan's Wail" in the comic history *1066 and All That.* Heaney solves the problem beautifully, not (necessarily) adhering to the alliteration scheme the *Beowulf* poet uses, but evoking it in richly intricate patterns which echo, rather than mimic, the Anglo-Saxon.

Here is an example from the very outset of the poem; the poet is telling the story of Scyld Scefing (pronounced Shield Sheafing, translated by Heaney as Shield Sheafson). Scyld is described as flourishing:

> wēox under wolcnum, weorD-
> myndum þah.

or, transliterated and slightly modernized:

> *w*ax under *w*olcnu*m,* *w*orth-*m*yndu*m*
> thah.

Wax means to grow, to flourish—as it still does today. Under has not changed meaning. Wolcnum has become the rarely used modern English word welkin (sky, heaven)—and there is at least one modern translation of *Beowulf* that renders that phrase as "wax under welkin"—great for etymologists, but unintelligible to most readers. (Another modern translation supplies "prosper under heaven"—accurate as to meaning, but dead as to the poetry of the passage.)

In the "off-verse," worth means worth; myndum means mind or remembrance, and so worth-myndum has the connotation of fame, praiseworthiness.

Here is how Heaney translates it:

> as his *p*owers *w*axed and his *w*orth
> was *p*roved.

The alliteration (signified in both cases by italic) is no longer paired in the same way as in the Anglo-Saxon verse architecture, but it is paired, and cross-connected, just as in the original; the meaning is intact, and the line is metrically satisfying.

Another striking feature of Anglo-Saxon poetry lies in its rich use of metaphor, combinations of thoughts or things which make us see the world differently, offer new analogies, possibilities, ironies; and incidentally, enable us to see through the eyes of the Anglo-Saxons in an age long past. Thus, the now-famous images for sea—"whale-road" (hron-rade); or sail—"sea-shawl" (mere-hraegla); or ship—"wave-crosser" (weg-flotan); or language—"word-hoard" (word-horde); for skeleton, "bone-cage" (ban-cofan).

These and many more occur frequently, as fixed phrases, part of the poetic stock (or word-hoard) that is characteristic of ancient epic poetry (readers of Homer will recall some of his fixed phrases: the wine-dark sea, rosy-fingered dawn, grey-eyed Athena, Zeus Cloud-Gatherer). The recurring fixed phrase points back to an oral tradition, in which repetition, and the use of fixed matter to fill out a poetic line, enable the minstrel or singer reciting the poem to remember it more easily.

Heaney handles this material deftly, using these images where they will be compelling and exciting, or evocative, but not enslaved to them, able to abandon them if they threaten to become simply doggerel or cant, or impede the flow of *the poem he has created* through his translation.

I highlight the above with emphasis because, at bottom, that is what Heaney has done: create a new poem, and for good reason. One cannot translate a poem *literally,* and have it still be poetry, since in poetry, evocation and metaphor are everything. There exist perfectly respectable, and extremely useful, prose translations of great poetical works; but really to translate a poem, to give us in our own time and idiom, the poetic impact of the original, means essentially to *write a new poem,* which will, as closely as possible, create in our minds the experience that the original poem created in the minds of its first hearers or readers.

That, of all the translators of *Beowulf* thus far, Heaney is uniquely qualified to do.

The Poem

But, why *Beowulf* at all?

There is no doubt that *Beowulf* is a great work of art. In the "ringing, singing" language of Old English, as one reviewer called it,[1] it is the story of the young man Beowulf who, defeating the monster Grendel, frees the Danes from the monster's thrall; the story of Beowulf fifty years later, an old man and king, defeating the dragon that menaces his people, and dying in the attempt.

Against this remote and barbarian backdrop, the poem examines the great issues of man in his relations among men, and his relation to God: the transience of life, mortality, and one's life's work; the roles of freedom and necessity; of the individual person, and of Fate. Some of the poem's strangeness and its power, lie in the fact of its combining the pagan world of the Northern heroic age, with an unmistakably Christian outlook, transmuting the Anglo-Saxons' grim Nordic view of inexorable Fate,[2] into something freer and more forgiving.

Beowulf was written perhaps only decades after the Anglo-Saxons were evangelized (a process whose beginning is traditionally dated to 597, and the arrival in England of missionaries from the Rome of Pope Gregory the Great), composed by an artist who was looking back on the pagan days with new eyes. It simultaneously honors the past, and polemicizes for the new faith, being composed for an England whose population is perhaps half-Christian, half-pagan. Its author takes every opportunity to *teach* his hearers, to remind them of the superiority of the new religion of the "All-Father," over one-eyed, sinister Wotan/Odin, and hammer-wielding Thor/Thunor. It is therefore a *civilizing* undertaking.

As a work of art, it remains with us because the character of Beowulf remains with us, a man who at first seems to embody the heroic old Norse marauders, but who instead, we come to realize, is an expression of something much higher: a hero, yes, but more important, a "Christian," generous and gentle, and in protecting others, great-hearted. This portrait is the antithesis of the Northern beserker-hero so beloved of the Romantics, the battle-axe-swinging champion actuated by rage. At first, before he performed his great feats, Beowulf's countrymen regarded him as a weakling, precisely because of this gentleness:

> . . .
> he was formidable in battle yet behaved with honour
> and took no advantage; never cut down
> a comrade who was drunk, kept his temper
> and, warrior that he was, watched and controlled
> his God-sent strength and his outstanding
> natural powers. He had been poorly regarded
> for a long time, was taken by the Geats
> for less than he was worth: and their lord too
> had never much esteemed him in the mead-hall.
> They firmly believed that he lacked force,
> that the prince was a weakling; . . .

The viewpoint of the poet is made beautifully clear in the following passage, in which he describes the practices of his pagan ancestors:

> Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
> offerings to idols, swore oaths
> that the killer of souls might come to their aid
> and save the people. That was their way,
> their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
> they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge
> of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
> Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
> was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he
> who in time of trouble has to thrust his soul
> in the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;
> he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
> who after death can approach the Lord
> and find friendship in the Father's embrace.

Perhaps most moving of all, is the advice the old king Hrothgar gives the young Beowulf, embarking on his great battle against Grendel. Hrothgar teaches the lesson—to Beowulf, and to the poem's readers and hearers—to avoid the sin of overweening pride, the lust for power, for blood, for gold, and to be ever-mindful of the bounty of God, the transitoriness of this life, and the importance of how we live these short lives of ours, to make a difference:

> " . . . It is a great wonder
> how Almighty God in His magnificence
> favours our race with rank and scope
> and the gift of wisdom; His sway is wide.
> Sometimes He allows the mind of a man
> of distinguished birth to follow its bent,
> grants him fulfillment and felicity on earth
> and forts to command in his own country.
> He permits him to lord it in many lands
> until the man in his unthinkingness
> forgets that it will ever end for him.
> He indulges his desires; illness and old age
> mean nothing to him; his mind is untroubled
> by envy or malice or the thought of enemies
> with their hate-honed swords. The whole world
> conforms to his will; he is kept from the worst
> until an element of overweening
> enters him and takes hold
> while the soul's guard, its sentry, drowses,
> grown too distracted. A killer stalks him,
> An archer who draws a deadly bow.
> And then the man is hit in the heart,
> the arrow flies beneath his defences,
> the devious promptings of the demon start.
> His old possessions seem paltry to him now.
> He covets and resents; dishonours custom

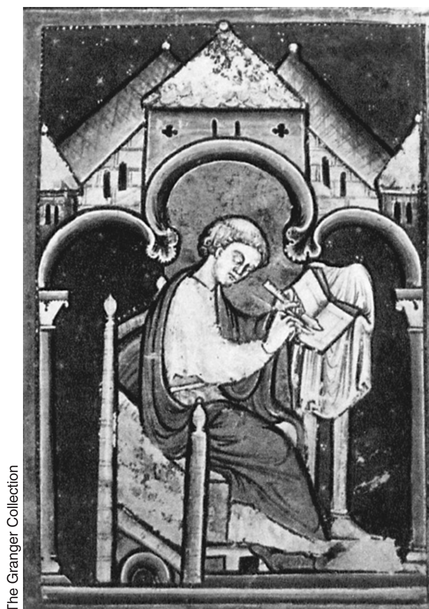
and bestows no gold; and because of
good things
that the Heavenly Powers gave him
in the past
he ignores the shape of things to come.
Then finally the end arrives
when the body he was lent collapses
and falls
prey to its death; ancestral possessions
and the goods he hoarded are inherited by another
who lets them go with a liberal hand.

"O flower of warriors, beware of that
trap.
Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,
eternal rewards. Do not give way to
pride.
For a brief while your strength is in
bloom
but it fades quickly; and soon there
will follow
illness or the sword to lay you low,
or a sudden fire or surge of water
or jabbing blade or javelin from the
air
or repellent age. Your piercing eye
will dim and darken; and death will
arrive,
dear warrior, to sweep you away."

The Cultural Context

Broadly, *Beowulf* was part of the process of the Christianization of all Northern Europe—for the English, once converted, played a central role, as did their neighbors the Irish, long Christian, in the evangelization of the continent. It was the product of a period of tremendous literary fertility among the Anglo-Saxons, which was, in turn, the result of the Anglo-Saxon Renaissance (sometimes called the Northumbrian Renaissance, in deference to one of its geographical foci; less often, but usefully, called the Anglo-Irish Renaissance, in recognition of the role of Irish Christianity in helping to civilize the English).

When, at length, and after many reversions and scrappy civil wars, the English people overall did become Christianized—primarily from Rome, but in part thanks to the impact in northern Britain of the Irish missionary saints, foremost among them St. Columba and his foundation at Iona off northern Scotland; and Aidan and his



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Left and above: *The Venerable Bede, and an 8th century manuscript page of Bede's "Ecclesiastical History."* **Below:** *Manuscript pages from the Lindisfarne Gospels, A.D. 698 (right), and Alcuin's revision of the Latin Vulgate Bible (left).*

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monastery at Lindisfarne, off the coast of English Northumbria—religion and letters took hold fast and deep among the English, such that, within a short time of the founding of the Irish monastery at Lindisfarne, St. Cuthbert, an Englishman, was widely recognized as the monastery's greatest son. This was so much true that within a century of the very beginning of the conversion, there had arisen in Northumbria one of the very greatest of the early medieval scholars and saints: the Venerable Bede (673-735). His greatest work (in Latin) is his *History of the English Church and People,* sometimes called the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* probably the first history written by a Northern European, and certainly one of the greatest.

Bede was the product of twin centers of learning at Wearmouth and Jarrow, by the eastern end of Hadrian's Wall, near where Newcastle-on-Tyne stands today. He was regarded, especially in the Carolingian age, as one of the great Church fathers. He was the author of numerous commentaries on Scripture, of scientific treatises, and of books on technical chronology and astronomical calculation. His *History* continues to this day to be a vital source of information on the Coming of the English to Britain, as it was called, on the life of the "Old Saxon" relatives left behind on the continent, and on the history of the English adoption of Christianity.

From the same area as Bede, in the city of York, came the great scholar Alcuin, the intimate of Charlemagne. Thirty years after Bede published his *History,* Alcuin, in 767, took over the church school established at York by his teacher and master, Aethelbert. Fifteen years after that, Alcuin embarked on the second half of his career—in the court of Charlemagne at Aachen, where he created and directed the Palace School, which he oversaw from 782 to 796. He was joined there by many of his English circle, to help him teach King and court the "English learning" of York; he

became chief adviser to Charlemagne on doctrinal matters, and his agent in all his relations to England.

Alcuin and his colleagues from York played a crucial role in the Carolingian Renaissance. Under Alcuin, the Palace School became an important factor in Frankish national life, a magnet for the sons of patrician and plebeian alike. Any boy with talent, no matter how humble his station, was welcomed. Alcuin taught the classes in person, drawing other intellectuals in to follow his example, and Charlemagne set the tone by taking classes himself.

Alcuin bought books widely for the school, but also wrote numerous primers covering, among other subjects, orthography, grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, "astrology" (more akin to cosmology and astronomy, than to the present-day mumbo-jumbo) and theology—works which are still extant. Under Alcuin's direction, students of marked talent were selected for further training to become abbots of the Frankish monasteries, and great monastic schools were set up at Fulda, Tours, and the like. Scribe-monks working in the Carolingian scriptoria preserved the writings of authors of Classical antiquity.

At the same time, the Northumbrian English were the first to undertake missions of evangelization to Northern Europe, their mandate being to convert their cousins in Frisia, among the "Old Saxons," and in Central Germany. English missionaries set up foundations at Fulda, Echternach, Regensburg, Eichstatt, as far south as Salzburg, as far north as Bremen. With them they brought beautiful illuminated Gospels, done in the Anglo-Saxon scriptoria—like the Echternach Gospels, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. (Among the illuminated manuscripts created in Anglo-Saxon England were the famous Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells, now both in the library of Trinity College, Dublin.)

An almost exact contemporary of Bede was the Apostle of the Germans, St. Boniface, born around 675. His Anglo-Saxon name was Wynfrith; he was raised in a monastery in Exeter, later headed the monastic school at Nursling in Hampshire near Southampton, and then, in 716, left England for Frisia and the very beginnings of his mission. In 722, at Rome, he was consecrated Bishop to the Germans, whereupon he returned to his work, by now in Hesse and Thuringia, bringing to Germany numerous Englishmen to help in his task of founding churches and suppressing heathen sanctuaries. By 742 he had founded sees at Wurzburg, Buraburg, and Erfurt, and had brought over Englishmen to be their first bishops. He died a martyr in 754, massacred with more than fifty of his companions by a heathen band in Frisia, to which he had returned at the end of his long life.

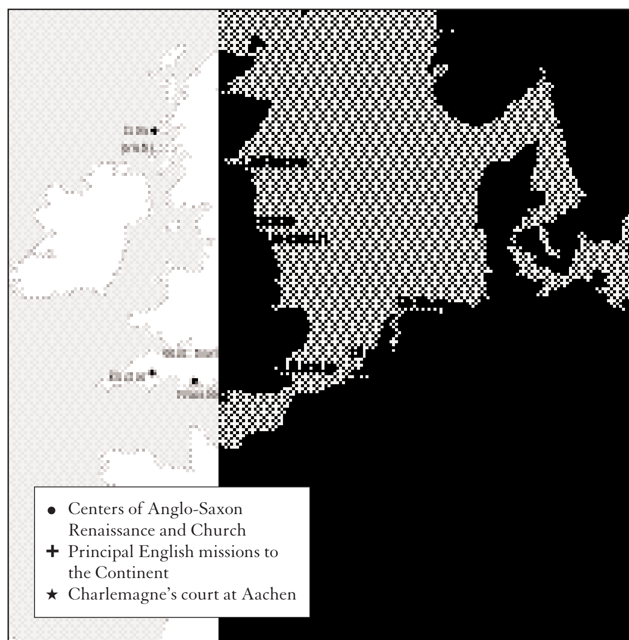
Although Bede wrote exclusively in Latin, there is a passage so famous from his *History,* concerning the conversion in 627 of the Northumbrian English King Edwin and his thanes, that we reproduce it here, mostly for the way it conveys the early Anglo-Saxon worldview in transition from paganism to Christianity, the same view illuminated so perfectly in *Beowulf.*

Bede recounts the argument one of Edwin's thanes gives, for acceptance of the new faith proposed to them by the Roman missionaries:

"Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of the lone sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you sit in the winter months to dine with your thanes and counsellors. Inside there is a comforting fire to warm the room; outside, the wintry storms of snow and rain are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms, but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the darkness whence he came. Similarly, man appears on earth for a little while, but we know nothing of what went before this life, or what comes after. Therefore, if this new teaching can reveal any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it."

That haunting image, of the lone sparrow flying from darkness through light and warmth into darkness again, has resonated throughout centuries, perhaps the most remembered of the all the speeches, letters, and colloquia recorded in Bede's *History.*

Nor did Anglo-Saxon literature written in English (as opposed to Bede's and Alcuin's Latin), lag behind this efflorescence of culture and evangelization. From this general period come the beautiful and haunting elegaic poems, like "The Wanderer," "The Seafarer," or "The Ruin"; the great religious poems, of which "The Song of the Rood" (Seventh or Eighth century) is certainly the greatest (rood is an Anglo-Saxon word for cross); the work of the poet Caedmon, and so on.



Anglo-Saxon missionaries brought learning and Christian civilization to the homelands of their Germanic ancestors.

Alfred's Translation Project

Then, in the great crisis of Anglo-Saxon England, as the Danes were invading and pillaging their English cousins, came the most remarkable cultural achievement of Anglo-Saxon high culture. That achievement is associated with

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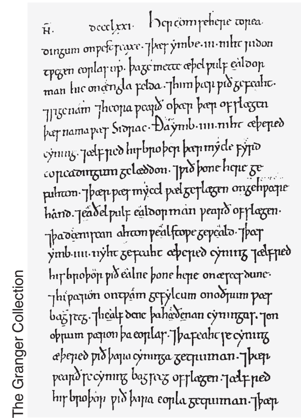
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King Alfred the Great (849-899). Alfred launched a project to translate Classical works into Anglo-Saxon, and initiated the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" (above right, 11th century manuscript).

the name of King Alfred the Great (b. 849), of whom historian Peter Hunter Blair writes:

"In 878 this remarkable man had little left"—because of the Danish advances in eastern England—"but an island fortress in the Somerset marshes, but ten years later, then a man rising forty, he ruled a wide kingdom and was learning Latin, so that he could make those translations of ancient books which can now be recognized as the foundations of English prose literature. It was a very sound instinct which bestowed on this man alone of all the kings of England the title of The Great."

A number of the books Alfred chose to translate in this project, show his intense desire to give the English people, in the dark days of the Danish invasions, a national identity, a sense of their history, origins, and evangelization. This preoccupation with national history and national identity was a precocious development, with the Anglo-Saxons stepping directly, as it were, from Nordic barbarism, into a sense of nation.

Among the works Alfred translated were the *Dialogues* and the *Pastoral Care* of St. Gregory (Gregory the Great). Translating Gregory into English was a project Bede had recommended in a letter of 734, and Alcuin in 796; Alfred took those admonitions to heart. From the fathers of the Church, he translated St. Augustine's *Soliloquies,* Orosius's *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans,* and Boethius's Platonist *Consolation of Philosophy.*

Alfred also translated Bede's *History,* so that the people could read their own history in their own tongue. He directed the compilation of the material that inaugurated the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,* a monumental work of national recordkeeping. Completed in 890, the compilation incorporated material reaching back to the mid-400's, and covered items of history on the continent, before the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians migrated. It continued to be kept as a national history until 1154 and the death of King Stephen, nearly 100 years after the Norman Conquest of 1066 put an end to Anglo-Saxon England.

So, returning to *Beowulf.* It is not just some curiosity for musty antiquarians. As one of the beacons of European culture, it inspires us today, just as it did 1,400 years ago, with an understanding of how poetry can uplift and re-create a population; that is, bring civilization out of barbarism.

In its history, and as a living work of art, *Beowulf* teaches us that human minds and human culture are not fixed and predetermined things, but processes open to transformation. Although the predicates of today's great global crisis, and concomitant cultural degeneration, are different from those of that earlier time, *Beowulf's* example, and its capacity to inspire, can yet be used by those of us who are fighting today for a new, ecumenical evangelization of the human spirit.

—*Molly Hammett Kronberg*

1. Blake Morrison, writing in *The Independent.*
2. The word "grim" is originally an epithet for the Norse god Wotan (Odin), one of the chief gods in the Anglo-Saxon pagan pantheon. And the Anglo-Saxon word for Fate is *Wyrd* (modern: weird). Thus, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* when we meet the "Three Weird Sisters," we are not meeting simply witches, but the three Fates—whom we have seen before in Greek and Roman mythology; or as the Norns, the three sister-Fates of Norse mythology.

Additional illustrations appear on the inside front cover of this issue.

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