

Beowulf: A Folktale and History of Anglo-Saxon Life and Civilization

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Abstract: *Beowulf gives us a vivid, realistic and factual picture of the Germanic life and manner. A vista of the social and cultural background of the first half of Six Century opens before our eyes when we read this epic. To say in brief, Beowulf is an experiment on Anglo-Saxon human conduct, an exhibition of Anglo-Saxon human motives. Beowulf is a fusion of folk-tale and history. Beowulf seems to have been a historical personage, nephew of Hygelac, the Chochilaicus whom Gregory of Tours mentions as raiding the Frisian shore, and slain by its defenders. Beowulf was present at the battle and avenged his "lord's death- Hygelac died in 520. Beowulf placed Hygelac's son on the throne and after his death reigned fifty years. This brings the historic Beowulf up to about 570.*

Keywords: *Anglo-Saxon, folktale, Hygelic, factual.*

I. Introduction

Anglo-Saxons were fierce in nature. They lived on the shores of the Baltic and the North Sea. They had to fight against the gigantic character of nature. Sometimes they would plunder the western coast of the sea. But they were hard working. They earned their livelihood chiefly by working in the field. They also were good hunters.

King occupied the most pivotal position at the head of the Germanic society. The poet has used numerous terms denoting kingship: theoden, ealder, brego, bildfruma, cvning, fengel, wizena, strengel etc. From these names and epithets, and various other compounds and combinations we can safely infer that the king had a significant position in the society. These terms have all been coined by the poet with a good deal of unctio, because the king was the symbol of certain positive values— the symbol of all that was good, noble and beautiful. The people were never tired to show their respect to their leader and king.

The king was not an autocrat, nor even a benevolent despot. He had limitations of royal power. He had his councilors. He had the lords, the thanes, and a band of attendants. His regular assembly would sit in a large hall like Heorot, in a well-fortified city. The followers were careful about their duty of showing respect to the king. They were ready to fight for him the king also was conscious about his responsibilities towards them. Beowulf was an ideal king and loved his people very dearly.

At the court ceremonies, feasting, drinking were the daily features. The court was a place where the king bestowed gifts, honours and the worthy had their dues.

In Anglo-Saxon period feuds among the kinsmen and bitter tribal fights were very frequent. Murder was held as great sin but they were accustomed to taking revenge. Blood feuds like these broke out between Horthuff, the nephew of Hrothgar and the Jailer's son.

II. Discussion

The Teutons were men of few words. Loving and affectionate they could be cruel and implacable, when the occasion demanded. They strove for fame and tried to uphold their honour and dignity. They rejoiced in deeds. After defeating the Finns, the Scylds bore to the ships all the treasures of the king. They also bore away the women. It was their custom that often both at home and in the field they should be ready for war. Treaty of peace could be signed. The coast-guards were always alert. They guarded the sea cliffs and watched from the height if the enemy was approaching. There were both infantry and cavalry in the war. The equipment and weapons generally used were the coats of mail helmets, shields, swords and spears. The poet has taken infinite pains to describe the equipment with loving care. They were after honour and glory, and these could be achieved only with such equipment. Besides these weapons, they used bow and arrow, horns and trumpets, and banners.

Women were assigned a very high position in the society. They would remain present in the feasts which were often held in honour of the brave fighters. They would often entertain the fighters with drink and honour. Beowulf was received in a befitting manner by the Queen of Hrothgar after he had returned after first victory. Women of the society had legal rights and certain privileges.

Fate appears as a refrain in the poem. The Christian monks may have lent religious and Christian colouring, but fatalism seems to be the dominant note. Fate has much to do with the death of Beowulf. Beowulf has used the term Wyrd before his encounter with Grendel. Yet the warriors seldom sat idle, even when pitied against fate. Death was inevitable, and, therefore, one crowded hour of glorious life was worth an age without a name. Beowulf also faithfully mirrors the moral side of the Germanic life.

The moral aspect of the Germanic life concerns itself with the finer sentiments and nobler qualities of the Anglo-Saxons. The Anglo-Saxons were the most law-abiding and disciplined citizens. Allegiance to the king and unflinching devotion to various codes in all circumstances were valued high. These people had strong sense of duty and had a passion for honour and glory. But this historic personage has not much to do with the poems. Its main story (with folklore admixtures from earlier and savage times) is the transference to the hero of the mythical deeds of Beowa, who is one of the presentations of the sun and the Summer, and whose fight with the winter and the Darkness, with the frost-giants, the destroying sea and the poisonous mist of the moor-land, imaged in the poem by the monster Grendel and the Dragon, was sung in the ancient England over the sea. The destruction of Grendel and his dam by Beowulf is said to be the destruction of the winter powers of the sea coast as they attack one of the Danish settlements which felt alike the charging of the icy sea and the deadly cold and venom of the fenland. The story of Beowulf overcoming in his last fight the Dragon is probably the story of the aging summer contending with the powers of incoming winter, who attempts to grasp the treasures of the harvest. The summer-god saves the golden hoard, but dies in the struggle. These myths are embodied in the story of Beowulf, and through them his personality is built up by the poet. He becomes the English and North Germanic ideal of a king and the ideal is historic. The manners and customs both in war and peace, the picture of the young men sailing on adventure, the town with its hall and meadows and garts, the etiquette and feast of the hall, the daily songs of the settlement from morn to night, the position of women, the home-life, temper of mind, the thoughts and feelings of our forefathers, are all portrayed in this poem, and there are few historical records so vivid and so interesting. It is also a great sea tale, fit for the origin of the poetry of the mistress of the seas.

Beowulf, the heroic legend, is entangled with a set, or several sets, of tails we find in other, later, Germanic histories, sagas and poems. For example, the death of Beowulf's lord, Hygelac, in a raid on the Franks is recorded as occurring in about the year 521 in Bishop Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum*, written only a generation later than the event. Other kings and tribes of the poem are likewise known to history, though Beowulf himself does not appear elsewhere. The tales of his exploits against Grendel and Grendel's mother, ultimately drawn from folklore, is related, under a different form, of Grettir the strong, the eleventh-century Icelandic outlaw. In various ways, Germanic history or legend of the heroic Age of Migration illuminate and make meaningful almost every incident and name in Beowulf- and there are many of them. The network of stories around the three central encounters lends the life of the monster-slaying hero much wider and more complicated significance. The richness and importance of these references are also responsible for the poem's initial difficulties of allusion and structure.

It is one thing to believe that the ancestor king Beow may be a weakened form of an ancient divinity, a mere name surviving from the figure of an old corn-God Beow it is quite another to assume as Mullah off did, that what we are told about Beowulf was told about Beow and that therefore we are justified in giving a mythological meaning to it, Beowulf rose to the rank of a truly ideal hero and his contests were veined in the light of a struggle between the powers of good and evil, thus assuming a new weight and dignity which made them appear a fit subject for the main narrative theme.

Beowulf typifies the growth of agriculture and civilization and his fight with Grendel and his mother symbolizes the successful checking of the inundations of the sea in the spring. The death of Beowulf means the onward march of winter. Nature myth or season myth lies behind the culture myth conception. We need not hesitate to recognize features of the Christian Saviors in the destroyer of halite friends, the warrior brave and gentle blameless in thought and deed, the king that dies for his people. Another interpretation is found in' Tokin. He says that it is essentially a balance and apposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and settling an elaboration of the ancient and intensely, moving contrast between youth and age, firths achievement and final death.

III. Conclusion

Beowulf is a veritable treasure-house of information on Germanic antiquities. The authenticity of its description has been in various ways confined by rich archaeological finds later. It opens a new era to our eye to our eyes about the civilization that time has gobbled up. Human history lends scale and scope to Beowulf : the rise and fall of both Danish and Geatish races are recorded in-some fullness, and we hear the history of the swedes over three generations, plus some part of the heathobards, Frisians and Franks. This is the historical world of the Baltic and North Sea over the two or three centuries that end the Age of Migration and history is supplemented by legend with the figures of Eormenric, Sigemund, the Brisings and Wayland.

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