Beowulf, Ynglingatal and the Ynglinga Saga: fiction or history?
Rausing, Gad
Fornvänn 80, 163-178
Ingår i: samla.raa.se
Beowulf, Ynglingatal and the Ynglinga Saga

Fiction or History?

By Gad Raising


Can Beowulf be used to test the value of the earliest Norse sagas as historical sources?
Since at least one, and possibly two, of the persons and of the events mentioned in Beowulf can be corroborated and dated with the help of contemporary chronicles we must, until the opposite can be proved, accept the rest of the accounts as historical.
Since several persons who figure in Beowulf are also mentioned in other, independent sagas, Ynglingatal, the Ynglinga Saga and Widsid, we must assume them to be historical and, if so, also the rest of the cast of these sagas.
The geographical notices in Beowulf also appear to fit reality and the conclusions appear to be confirmed by the distribution of the archaeological material. Thus, those modern historians who have denied the historical value of the sagas appear to be wrong, since they have not taken into account all the material available. Beowulf should be taken as "history" and so should all the sagas with the same cast, Ynglingatal, the Ynglinga Saga och the Sköldunga Saga.


Our conventional and arbitrary division of the past into "prehistoric" and "historic" times is misleading, there being no clear borderline between the two. Man has never experienced a "prehistoric time" since there neither is nor has ever existed any tribe or nation which has not been acutely conscious of its own history, of its own ancestors, of their ambitions and activities and of the effect which these have had on the actual situation. The perspective may have been long or short but man has always seen himself as acting in a historical continuity, fully conscious of and usually fairly well informed about its more recent part. Within such a historical continuity the transmission of knowledge between generations could be interrupted by political upheavals. Such seems to have been the case in Viking-age Scandinavia, where new families came into power, apparently in the upheavals during the "missionary period", (tenth to twelfth centuries), families without a vested interest in keeping the "old" traditions alive, those dynastic and family sagas which had constituted the political authorization of their predecessors in power. However, some sagas have survived, in Scandinavia and elsewhere, affording glimpses of the course of events in northern Europe, in Denmark and in Sweden, during the Migration Period and even during the Late Roman Iron Age.

The Sagas
Our most important sources of knowledge concerning conditions and events in Scandinavia are Ynglingatal, the Ynglinga Saga, Beo-
wulf and Widsid. Is there any kernel of fact in these tales, as we now know them?

In the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries all the Norse sagas were taken at face value, as contemporary accounts of actual events. In the present century, a more critical approach has predominated. Thus Weibull and his school challenged the traditional approaches and the accepted orthodoxies of Swedish history in many areas from the Middle Ages on. By the mid-century, they dominated Swedish historiography, denouncing the assumption by historians of "national, political or religious attitudes" and waging war on research which "deals with loose presumptions and rests on the shifting sands of romantic hypothesis".

Since, by definition, all historical research must deal with more or less loose presumptions, such as eyewitnesses' subjective accounts, with the consequences of actions and the interpretation of motives, and since consequently historical research can only result in hypothesis it appears that, at least sometimes, the baby is thrown out with the bath for the sake of the method — that it is more important to demonstrate "modern" methods than to evaluate all available sources without prejudice.

Thus, no historian discussing Beowulf or any of the other sagas has tried to fit the action into a geographical setting — except on maps. No one has actually sailed all the waters discussed nor walked all the shores and no one has taken all the archaeological material into account. Neglecting such sources, simply because they are unwritten ones, is bad science.

In the Ynglinga Saga, Snorre quotes extensively from Ynglingatal. The latter is held to have been composed by Tjodolf of Hvin, towards the middle of the ninth century, as the dynastic saga of the Vestfold kings, who claimed descent from the Swedish Ynglinga dynasty. It is extremely succinct, devoting but a few lines to each king and to his fate.

As we know it today, the Ynglinga Saga forms part of Snorre's Heimskringla, being his introduction to his history of Norway from the time of Harald Fairhair to the year 1177. The composition of the Ynglinga Saga differs completely from that of the Heimskringla proper. In the latter, the theme is the conflict between the chiefs and the king, Snorre quite clearly siding with the chiefs. Ynglingatal and the Ynglinga Saga mirror an entirely different ideal; they are the works of "poets laureate", the official historians' summary of the course of events, as seen from the kings' points of view. It is thus most unlikely that Snorre was the "author" of the Ynglinga Saga. But who was, and how old was the Saga when included by Snorre in his great work? Is it a single poem, composed by one man, or is it a chronicle, composed and amended over the years by many bards?

Is it conceivable that, long after the time of the incidents described, a prose saga like that of the Ynglingar could be composed with the aid of "registers" of Ynglingatal's type, as believes Sune Lindquist, or with the aid of a series of sagas of Beowulf's type, attached to the "register sagas"? If such is not the case, the prose sagas must date from very early times and must have been composed not long after the events described. If so, even those episodes which are mentioned in the Ynglinga Saga but not in Ynglingatal must be treated as acceptable historical events.

The fact that Snorre included the Ynglinga Saga verbatim in the Heimskringla, in spite of the former's political message being the very opposite of the latter's, suggests that, by Snorre's time, the Saga had already attained "canonical status", i.e. that it was accepted by everybody as being true. Apparently Snorre also utilized other sources, since he quotes Håloygjatal in the passage on Jorund and Erik.

The Beowulf poem, which appears to be quite independent, confirms the information gleaned from Ynglingatal and from the Ynglinga Saga, several persons and episodes mentioned in the latter also appearing in the former.

The Widsid poem also refers to several of the personages mentioned in Beowulf, at least two of whom, Egil-Ongentheow and Hrotulf-Rolf Krake, also appear in the Ynglinga Saga and in Ynglingatal. This is strong, al-
though circumstantial, evidence indicating that the Ynglinga Saga’s, Ynglingatal’s and Beowulf’s relations of the course of events in the early sixth century do render historical reality. If such is indeed the case, we must also accept the testimony of the sagas for the whole of the rest of the time covered by them.

Unlike Ynglingatal and the Ynglinga Saga, Beowulf is no family chronicle. Where the former, and apparently also the Sköldunga Saga and Håløygjatal, cut vertically through time, with laconic references to each generation, Beowulf is a sweeping description of the course of events in various parts of Scandinavia, during a whole generation. Beowulf survives in one version only, a manuscript of about 1000 A.D., in late West Saxon dialect. The apparently strong Christian influence permeating the poem has been taken to prove that it could not have been composed until the eighth century. It has also been taken for a romance, composed in a monastery by aristocratic monks, men with a thorough knowledge of their families’ early history in pagan times. However, the Christian references are limited to a small number of passages which could, conceivably, have been transsubstantiated into a Christian form from a pagan one. Changing but a few words would turn Beowulf into a thoroughly pagan poem.

For a poem, it is remarkably consistent. All the objects described, such as swords, rings and goblets, are typical of the Migration Period. There is nothing whatever in these descriptions of actual objects to point to later periods.

Norse sagas, describing events and persons of the Viking Period, have almost invariably been accepted as historical sources, in spite of not having been put to parchment until several centuries later. However, there are many of these sagas, with numerous cross-references to people, places and events, and the main course of events is also attested by Continental contemporary chroniclers. In some cases, there are even contemporary Norse written sources, rune-stones. Until recently, no such cross-references have been possible in the case of Ynglingatal and of the Ynglinga Saga.

However, “source criticism” is not only a matter of comparing and of weighing written sources against each other, it is a matter of evaluating and of weighing all the evidence relating to the problem under study. This includes the internal evidence of the sagas themselves as well as any archaeological material which can be brought in. Every archaeological investigation, every historical study, is like a trial. Elementary justice requires that all relevant evidence be brought in, that all witnesses be found and called.

The value of the early sagas as historical sources has long been disputed, in a reaction against the tendency of nineteenth-century scholars to regard them as authoritative. Here, Sune Lindqvist’s stand, although rather ambivalent, has become normative. According to him, the Ynglinga Saga is Snorre’s own creation, a poem pure and simple, a work of fiction around a framework culled from Ynglingatal. Knut Liestöl’s studies of recent Norwegian traditions having apparently shown that such have not survived for more than at most four hundred years in the setting afforded by Norwegian farming communities, Lindqvist considered the information found in Ynglingatal to be acceptable only when dating from the last four hundred years before Tjodolf’s own time, i.e. from the middle of the fifth to the middle of the ninth centuries. Against this must be weighed those cases of factual information having passed down over one or more millenia listed by Gjessing (1977 p. 102) and those related by Schwantes. (Pers. comm. 1946.) In support of his view Lindqvist pointed out how short is the list of law-speakers given by the Lidhem priest in the early Västgöta Law, but this is irrelevant, as is Liestöl’s study, since both refer to the Christian period, both are prosaic and neither is a family saga. Wessén (1917 and 1924) was even more critical of the sagas and of Beowulf:

As is well known, the poem is based in south Swedish and Danish sagas from the Migration Period ... It is inherent in heroic poetry that politics are forgotten or changed into tragic motives of a different kind. Only when actual history has been forgotten does purely human drama emerge to cap-
tivate audiences throughout the centuries. All too often we forget that a poem remains poetry, that it is never historical document and that the south Swedish and Danish lays which constituted the sources differed in style, content and poetical construction from the epic which the unknown British poet composed to a pattern borrowed from classical Antiquity. The geographical references in Beowulf do not permit any conclusions whatever. They are free inventions by the “Beowulf poet” himself, describing features in his own country . . .

This is the very antithesis of the research philosophy of the last century — nothing is accepted, no statement believed.

Widsid is a poem of yet another type. It begins with an enumeration of north Germanic peoples and of their rulers, a geographical mnemotechnical list. This part of the poem, which appears to be homogenous, should be dated to the beginning of the sixth century, to the time of Theodoric I, king of the Salic Franks from 511 to 534. That part of the lay which deals with Ermanaric, king of the Goths, (dead in 375 or 376 A.D.) and with the Hunnic wars, is probably considerably older. Remarkably enough, in view of the criticism directed at Beowulf, at the Ynglinga Saga and Ynglingatal, Widsid, or at least the greater part of Widsid, has generally been accepted as factual.

There is no reason to doubt that Ynglingatal, although put to parchment in Iceland, was originally a dynastic saga set in central Sweden. The “nationality” of the actors is a good indication as to the ethnic and geographical background of any drama. In Beowulf the geographical setting is equally clearly indicated, Denmark and the land of the Geats.

But what about the cast? No Angles, Saxons or Jutes appear. It is thus unlikely, to say the least, that the lay of Beowulf was first sung in England or in the continental homelands of the Angles, the Saxons or the Jutes. The principal characters are Beowulf himself and, to a certain extent, Hygelac, both Geats. Even when the stage is set among the Danes or the Swedes, these are the main actors. Even the short reference to the Finnsburg battle is inserted as a quotation, (in which Offa and Hengest are mentioned), as a poem recited at the feast to celebrate Beowulf’s victory over Grendel. A manuscript fragment, containing part of this poem, survived into the seventeenth century, proving the poem to have existed as an independent one. Several heroes mentioned in Beowulf and in Widsid also appear in the lay of Finnsburg, additional evidence that these characters were historical and contemporary.

In all probability, the lay of Beowulf was originally composed in the land where the action took place, among the Geats or the Danes, in some Scandinavian dialect, only later to become the common property of the north-west Germanic linguistic area. Apart from the fact that the only surviving manuscript was written in England, in a local dialect, there is nothing whatever in the poem to suggest a west Germanic origin. Making Beowulf an “English” poem is as logical as making Ynglingatal an Icelandic one!

The Beowulf saga seems to have formed one “chapter” in a series of epics, the “index” or framework of which was a dynastic saga of Ynglingatal’s type. Beowulf being the main actor, the saga was, most likely, a Geatic one, associated with a Geatic royal dynastic saga.

Even today, family sagas are being continually created, in Africa, in New Zealand and in Iceland, sagas composed with one stanza per generation. Apparently, family chronicles of Ynglingatal’s, and probably also of the Ynglingasaga’s, type grew in the same manner. There was no single “author”. The poem grew gradually, the verses being composed and added, generation after generation, even if the man who finally edited the saga and put it to parchment, in this case Tjodolf of Hvin, has been taken to be its “author”.

In spite of being orally transmitted, these sagas did not constitute an “oral tradition” such as we now understand the term. Rather, they constituted a metric, living, quite unchangeable literature, even if unwritten. In the same manner, the Songs of the Old Testament survived for many centuries before being put in writing during the Babylonian Captivity. Societies, where families do not make history generation after generation but where certain individuals can make their mark felt, support a litera-

Fornvännen 80 (1985)
ture of an entirely different type. The best examples are the legends of the missionary saints. Undoubtedly, saints Sigfrid, Botvid, Staffan and Eskil, to mention but a few, did exist. Although, at the time, the ordinary clergy was not required to lead a celibate life, monks and bishops were. Thus, most of the missionaries left no descendants whose position in society depended upon the memory of the ancestors and of their feats being kept alive. For a different reason, however, the church had a vested interest in keeping the memory of its heroes alive. No longer were their individual feats of real interest, the details of their struggles with the heathens, but the stories of their martyrdom, of their death for their faith, were told over and over again, to inspire volunteers and to convince lukewarm converts of the advantages of faith.

Like the Odyssey and the Iliad, the Norse sagas were not intended to be read but to be sung or scanned before an audience familiar with the events described in the stanza last added, an audience which could thus check any attempts to manipulate the “historical facts”, an audience, most of whose members were blood relations of the actors in the drama and who could thus make certain that truth, as understood by everybody concerned, was neither strained nor violated.

Versified historical material, thus orally transmitted before an engaged audience, is probably considerably more stable over long periods of time than is the corresponding material surviving as manuscript copies of manuscript copies, in surroundings where changes in the contents of the manuscripts being copied, whether deliberate or not, could not immediately be checked and corrected by the unengaged reader. Anyone who has read young children to sleep knows how an illiterate but engaged public will react. Any deviation in content or in phraseology calls for an immediate correction. Also, the bards’ mnemonic technique made it very difficult to introduce any change. Paradoxically, a written text is far easier to corrupt than is the memory of a bard who has learned a million words by rote and who dares not change one of these words for fear he will lose all the rest.

In the early thirteenth century, Snorre used poems dating from the ninth for his history of the times of Harald Fairhair. By that time, twice the number of years separated him from his sources as separated the assumed date for the composition of the Beowulf from that of Beowulf himself. Snorre’s own evaluation of his sources is worth quoting, and it can just as well be applied to Beowulf:

We put our faith in those poems which have been recited before the chiefs themselves or before their sons. What these songs tell of their voyages and of their battles we hold to be true. Certainly, every bard will praise him most whose guest he is but, in the chief’s own presence, no one would dare to tell of deeds which both the audience and the host know not to be true. That would be derision, not praise.

For similar reasons, there is no cause to distrust the sagas’ geography. Every member of the audience knew the localities referred to and many probably maintained personal contacts with kinsmen or friends there.

Of course, such unwritten history suffered from one of the weaknesses of modern historiography: those episodes which did not contribute to the glory of the bards’ own families or of their hosts’ were passed over in silence or mentioned in such a way that the negative impression which straightforward truth might cause is not noticeable. We find examples of this both in Ynglingatal and in the Ynglinga Saga. Onela, the “usurper” who expelled his nephews, the “legitimate” claimants, and whom we know from Beowulf, appears in Ynglingatal only as “Egil’s enemy”. In the Ynglinga Saga, Onela, residing in Uppsala, has been transmogrified into Ale, king of Oplanden, in Norway. This discrepancy goes far to prove that Snorre, that careful historian, did not compose the Ynglinga Saga around the frame of Ynglingatal. Probably there was once a king Ale of Oplanden, more or less contemporary with Onela, whom a very much later Norwegian bard and Norwegian audiences mistook for Onela of distant Uppsala, probably at the time when the dynasty and the sagas moved from Swedish into Norwegian linguistic surroundings.

This brings us back to the problems of the first generations of kings mentioned in Ynglingatal and in the Ynglinga Saga, those gene-

Fornvännen 80 (1985)
The World of the Sagas

We usually see the early Germanic tribes or nations through the eyes of Roman historians, without knowing how well informed the latter were nor how able they were to understand Germanic institutions. Thus, quite evidently, Tacitus’ description of conditions in Germany forms part of a political message and may be much less (or more) than realistic. He makes the Germanic “rex” a tribal leader but notes, en passant, that the reges knew how to use freed-men, (Wallace-Hadrick, 1980, p. 3) i.e. by implication, that the Germanic kingdoms of his day had established administrations, run by freed-men. Society is never static, Tacitus’ Germans were not those of Caesar one hundred years earlier, nor those of Ammianus, of Prokopios or of the sagas. Possibly and probably, current Roman and Byzantine ideas of kingship were reflected in Continental Germanic “political theory” and practice, and Continental Germanic ideas in Scandinavian ones. But we must not forget that many Scandinavians served in the Roman and, later, in the Byzantine army and that there may have been a direct influence.

It might be argued that, as late as in the 370ies, the Visigothic leader Atanarik did not style himself “king”, “rex”, “since he was not consecrated”, but only “judge”, “iudex”. However, Schreiber (1979, p. 80.) points out that the Gothic term for “king” was “thiudans” and suggests that Atanarik used this title when meeting Roman ambassadors, perhaps to mark his independent position. Did Atanarik feel that the latin title, “rex”, only went with an oath of fealty, and thus “consecration”, to the Emperor? Schreiber reminds us that, to Roman ears, “thiudans” may have sounded confusingly like “iudex”. If so, the Roman author may have made an honest mistake, and the Visigoths may have been organized as a monarchy already in Atanarik’s time, as they undoubtedly were a few years later.

Or could possibly the Christian Roman have had other wandering tribes in mind when writing about his mission to the Visigoths, those of Israel? Though a common kindred, these remained for
centuries independent tribes, governing themselves after the patriarchal manner. The “shophet”, or “judge”, was, at one and the same time, commander-in-chief, priest and arbiter of disputes just as, some twenty-five years ago, my late friend Salahadin Inan was the commander-in-chief, the religious leader and the supreme judge of the Kurds in Turkey, although the Turks simply called him the “chief of the Kurds”.

Neither Caesar, nor Pliny, nor Tacitus mentions the system of succession among the Germans but all later Roman historians agree that, in Imperial times and during the Migration Period, all the Germanic tribes or nations, with the possible exception of the Visigoths in Atanarik’s time, were organized as hereditary monarchies, and so were also those described in the Ynglinga Saga and in Beowulf.

Hereditary monarchies may be of several different types, and so may elective ones. Usually we tend to think of “hereditary monarchy” with the modern concept in mind, where primogeniture in the male line is the usual model. However, in the kingdoms of Dark-Age Britain, the king was elected from among those members of the royal family who happened to be present at the ruling king’s deathbed, by those members of the withangemot who happened to be present. We do not know whether other Germanic peoples also had such a council of elders, but such seems not unlikely. In an elective monarchy, the circle of potential candidates for the crown is not limited to the members of the ruling royal family, but it does not necessarily comprise every citizen. In actual practice, the number of candidates and the number of voters were probably always very small. Thus, in the early Caliphate, any Moslem was a potential caliph, and every Moslem a potential voter. In reality, the choice was always one between two or three qualified leaders who happened to be on the spot at the critical moment, and the votes were cast by those, or some of those, citizens who happened to be present. Universal suffrage was unknown. In all probability the pattern was much the same in any elective monarchy of the period.

In the Middle Ages, Sweden was an elective monarchy, the only one among the Germanic nations. (Iceland and Greenland were unique. Being so far outside the reach of ordinary European military operations, they could survive, for a time, without a strong executive power and thus remained aristocratic, anarchic republics.) It seems likely that the Swedish “constitution” was the result of a revolution by the nobility towards the end of the Viking Age, probably caused by political pressure by the Carolingian Empire and fanned by the introduction of Christianity. At the time of the sagas, Sweden was still a hereditary monarchy.

To all the Germanic peoples, the royal dynasty and its successful military background seems to have been important, being the main means of national identity. Thus, the defeat and destruction of the Vandal kings, in war, by Justinian’s generals, caused the disappearance of the Vandal nation since, whatever Vandal kingship had been, the Vandals themselves were identified with it in war and in peace. In the same way the Ostrogoths disappeared when the last member of the royal family, Teja, had fallen in battle in 552, as did the Visigoths after Roderic’s death at Vadi Beka, in 711.

Thus, the Herules must have faced a very critical moment in their history when the last member of their royal family died without issue. Another branch of the family surviving in Scandinavia, the Herules sent an embassy there for a new king of the old dynasty. (Procopios, Hist. VI. XV. 27–30.) In all probability, Sweden survived the fall of the Ynglinga dynasty only because of its geographical position, too distant from the great powers of the period.

The sagas describe extremely complex family relationships and a society where family loyalties and liege loyalties formed a complicated maze. The importance attached to blood relationship is often stressed, not least by the weight attached to dynastic marriages, and it also finds expression in the system of hostages. Quite evidently Beowulf himself had, in his younger days, been a Geatic hostage among the Danes and in the Lay of the Battle at Finnsburg it appears evident that Hengest stayed as a hostage with Finn.

The king’s legal position appears to have been entirely different from that in medieval Sweden. It is expressly stated (concerning Dyggve) that
We do not know when or where the Ting institution originated nor whether it was adopted by all Germanic peoples, no contemporary continental source ever mentioning it. In the Norse world we know it only from the late Viking Age onwards. It had no political power but was an assembly with legal functions only, a court of justice. The passage in Heimskringla where Snorre tells the story of Torgny the Lawspeaker and king Olof (Skötkonung) describes an extraordinary situation, an incipient rebellion rather than a democratic process. Within the limits set by economy and by available manpower the kings in Scandinavia appear to have been absolute monarchs as were, apparently, the kings of the Franks, of the Ostrogoths and of the Visigoths. Half a millennium earlier, Tacitus had referred to the absolute power of the kings of the Sveones.

In late Imperial times, many Germans reached high offices in the Roman services and not all of them elected to remain within the Empire after retirement. Did the Germans adopt the Roman idea of the Caesar, the head of state, as the personification of the state, thus deified and thus an absolute ruler? But, whatever it was, at any one time the political organization was, most likely, much the same among all Germanic nations and the sagas suggest that the political ambitions of the Scandinavian kings were much the same as those of the Germanic kings known from "history". Contemporary historians hardly ever described the relations between the Germanic peoples of Western Europe and those of Scandinavia, being mainly concerned with their own nation's relation with the old culture of Rome.

According to the Ynglinga Saga, Sweden was united long before the time of the kings mentioned in Beowulf, (probably ever since the Roman Iron Age). There is no reference to any Göta kingdom. However, at one time or another (the saga mentions the generation of Alrek and Erik), various offshoots of the royal family tried to make themselves independent. This led to the country eventually consisting of a number of small kingdoms, with a "high king" at Uppsala, just as Merovingian France was ruled by a high king with a number of sub-kings, as were several of the Anglo-Saxon states in England. From time to time, the king at Uppsala managed to extend his authority over the whole country. Thus Aun, having recovered his throne, "made his kinsmen bleed" and died in his bed at an advanced age, in spite of having been twice dethroned. Also Egil had to fight a rebellion although his adversary Tunne, unlike Aun's enemies Halfdan Frodesson and Ale Fridleifsson, was not of royal blood — unless he was identical with that Hlod who, according to the Herwarar Saga, was Egil's half-brother and against whom Egil fought a great battle.

Egil was by-named Tunnadolgr, "Tunne's enemy". Hlod or, in normalized spelling, Hlodr, means "killer" or "murderer" (Prof. Bertil Ejder, Pers. comm. 24.3.1980). This appears a descriptive sobriquet which might have been used for Tunne by his enemies — or by admiring sycophants. Egil is also called Ongentheow or Angantyr. Here, Ongentheow is a transformation of Agilpewar, with Agilar as a short form. This became Egil in old west Norse (Prof. Bertil Ejder, pers. comm. 6.2.1980). This suffix "pewar", anglosaxon "thow", means "servant". We do not know the meaning of the first part of the name, "Agil" or "Ongan" (Ångan), whose "servant" Egil was, but most likely it was one of the gods.

The last Ynglinga king to attempt to reestablish the central power was Ingjald, whose ambitions were also evidently aimed at Scania. He failed, his reputation suffering in consequence.

Beowulf
Can the Beowulf epic be used to test the value of the sagas as historical sources? Is there any reality behind them — or are they but "poetry which can never be a historical document"? The poem describes how Beowulf struggles with and defeats the monster, Grendel, in Denmark, continues to tell of the wars between the Geats and the Swedes and ends with a description of Beowulf's death during an attempted tomb robbery. It is taken for
granted that the audience be familiar with contemporary history, many persons and events mentioned en passant being relevant to the context. Thus, the public was expected to know how Hama, hundreds of years earlier and half a world away, had stolen the Brisinga jewel from king Ermanarik.

In the same way, family relations and dynastic relationships are often described in a manner which could only be understood by an audience familiar not only with the whole complex genealogical system but also with events caused by personal conflicts. It seems fairly evident that Ynglingatal, and also the Ynglinga Saga, are mnemotechnic lists of kings and of their deeds, chronological frameworks for other sagas of Beowulf's general type, spanning a limited time but with a vast geographical setting. Of all the sagas of this type which may be presumed to have existed, Beowulf is the only one preserved. That others did, in fact, exist is proved by the short Rolf Krake's Saga which probably dates from the sixth century, although not written down until the High Middle Ages. It describes Hrothulf's career — as seen from his supporters' point of view.

In the last century, Beowulf was seen as a personification of the sun-god and Grendel as that of the North Sea. Later, Tolkien turned both Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon into symbols of evil and of death. Lately, the Christian influence has been stressed and Christian symbolic language has been assumed to be the key to any attempt at interpretation. It is difficult to believe that recently converted Anglo-Saxon warriors were so confirmed in their new faith that they would build one of their great poems on a foundation of Christian symbolism. It is even difficult to believe that the average Anglo-Saxon noble warrior to be at all familiar with Christian symbolism. But, as previously pointed out, these Christian formulae may very well have been pagan ones, barely given a Christian form when the poem was first put to parchment.

Is there any other possible explanation? Could the story of the struggle with Grendel and his mother be a tale, coloured by political propaganda, of a contest against an usurper, against a man who had, perhaps, also plundered a bog sacrifice, where the bard used a by-name for a hated adversary? It should be noted that no bog sacrifices of the period have been found in Britain, whereas they are well-known from Denmark.

"Grendel" appears to be a weak derivation of "Grand", meaning "gravel" or "small particles" (Prof. Bertil Ejder, pers. comm. 6.2.1980). Eight hundred years later, "Grand" had been adopted as a family name, (perhaps originally a pejorative one,) by one of the greatest families of Denmark. Without for one moment suggesting any relationship between "Grendel" and the medieval archbishop one can not help wondering whether "Grendel" or "Grand" may have been the rebel's real name, later misunderstood, as was the name of king Dag's ambassador to Gotland, "Sparrow"?

Even today, "Sparrow" and "Sperling" are common names in Britain and Germany.

To his enemies, Grendel may have appeared an inhuman monster but he appears to have been human enough, and even a blood relation of king Hrothgar's, since the latter paid blood money for Beowulf's retainer Hanscio, killed by Grendel — in spite of Beowulf and his men having volunteered to fight the latter.

The tale of the dragon-fight is something entirely different, the story of a tomb robbery. Since it contained gold, the tomb presumably dated from the Early Roman Iron Age, i.e. it was 300–400 years old in Beowulf's day. Thus, the "dragon" could conceivably have been a descendant of the dead man's, who attempted to prevent the sacrilege. Was the "dragon" the defendant's battle standard, or was the man's name mistaken for the animal itself?

The sagas refer but briefly to wars between Geats and Danes, between Geats and Friesians, between Swedes and Danes, between Danes and Friesians and between Danes and Heathobards. The only conflicts about which we learn anything in detail are three wars between Geats and Swedes, described in a "tale within a tale", similar to the lay about the battle of Finnsburg. We know that there was once a song about this battle and very
probably a similar lay described the Swedish wars. There may have been a long series of such wars and there is no indication whatever that the poem quoted described or predicted the final battle of the Geats.

Since several persons who figure in Beowulf are also mentioned in other, independent sagas, we must assume them to be historical and, if so, also the rest of the cast to be so.

Already Grundtvig dated Beowulf, and thus also the associated persons in Ynglingatal and in the Ynglinga Saga, by Gregorii of Tours reference, in the Historia Francorum, where he states that Hygelac fell in battle, in Friesland, in 521. There is another reference to the same man in an eight-century Frankish chronicle, with the additional information that he was killed in a raid on the Attuarii, the Hethwars of Beowulf and the Chatti of the Romans. He is also mentioned in an English Liber Monstrorum of the eighth century, as Higlacus, Rex Getarum.

A passage in Jordanes appears to confirm a date in the 520ies for the end of Hrothgar’s reign, thus indicating the war against Grendel to have been slightly earlier. According to the sagas Hrothulf, Halga’s son, Hrothgar’s nephew, seized power after Hrothgar’s death, expelling Hrothgar’s sons. (According to the Ynglinga Saga, Halga succeeded his brother Hrothgar and was, in turn, followed by his son Hrothulf.) Both sources make it appear Hrothulf won the throne in a civil war, that Hrothulf who is identical with the Rolf Krake of the Sköldunga Saga. Is he possibly also that Rodulf who, according to Jordanes, joined Theodorik at Ravenna?

"... suetidi quamvis et Dani ex ipsorum stirpe progressi Herulos propriis sedibus expulerunt qui inter omnes Scandiae nationes nomen sibi ob nimia proceritate affectant preacipium sunt quamquam et horum postitura Grannii Augandzi Eunuxi Taetel Rugi Arochi Ranii quibus non ante multos annos Roduulf rex fuit qui contempto proprio regno ad Theodorici Gothorum regis gremio convolavit et ut desiderabat invenit."

Since the manuscripts are notoriously at variance concerning the division of the text into sentences and concerning punctuation the text is quoted without stops. There are several possible interpretations. Thus, Mommsen understood "... sunt quamquam et horum postitura... Ranii" as an informative subordinate clause, making quibus refer to Herulos and thus making Rodulf king of the Herules. Weibull, on the other hand, introduced a full stop after preacipium, thus letting quibus refer to the whole group Grannii... Ranii, making Rodulf king of these tribes.

In late Latin the distance between the relative pronoun and the antecedent could be much greater than in classical Latin (Prof. Birger Bergh, pers. comm. 27.2.1984). The whole passage "... Herulos propriis... Ranii..." may thus be such an informative subordinate clause. The translation would then be: "... the Swedes, taller than other peoples, as are the Danes (who have branched of from them and who drove the Herules, who called themselves the tallest of all Scandinavians, from their land, and as are also the Grannii... Ranii), whose king Rodulf few years ago disdained his country and came to Theodorik’s court and obtained what he wanted...".

According to Procopios, a certain Hroduulf became king of the Herules in 493, in which year he made war on the Lombards, under king Tato, but suffered defeat. He fled (according to the Origo Gentis Langobardorum and to Paulus Diaconus, he was killed in the battle) and found shelter with Anastasius I "in partibus Romanis".

In 493 Theodorik defeated Odoaker and captured Ravenna, making himself master of Italy. Had a fugitive Herule king appealed to him for help in that year it seems unlikely that contemporary authors would interpret this as his having been granted shelter by Anastasius "in partibus Romanis". The Hroduulf referred to by Jordanes seems to have been a different person who joined Theodorik at Ravenna some time before 525, the year when Theodorik died, and "whose wishes were granted". This sounds even more likely when we know that Theodorik tried to find allies against the Franks among the north-Germanic princes. It would then be very natural for a Danish pretender to apply to Theodorik for help in his struggle with his cousins.

It seems obvious that Jordanes did not refer to a Herule king of the early 490ies since he wrote "non ante multos annos", a few years ago. Writing in around 550, he can very
well have used this expression for an event of the early 520ies but hardly for one of 493. This argument applies even if Jordanes, as has often been suggested, has borrowed part of his material from Cassiodorus or from Prokopios. The former only started to write in 540 and the latter not earlier than 540. When Prokopios, in Constantinople, wrote of Hro­duulf, king of the Herules, without giving any date he, as a Roman author, wanted to glorify the Emperor and the Imperial power. He thus mentioned a king of the Herules who had sought shelter with the emperor several gene­rations previously. In the same way the Gothic historian Jordanes glorified his sovereign by describing how a Ger­manic “king” or pretender had sought refuge with him, even if only temporarily, and how he had received the support for which he had applied. Appar­ently, there were two different Roduulfs; Hroduulf, king of the Herules in 493, and Hrothulf Hal­gasson, pretender to the Danish throne and future king of Denmark, in about 520 to 525.

One further indication as to the date is afforded by the lay of the Battle of Finnsburg, where several heroes are mentioned whom we know also from Widsid and from Beowulf, in addition to Offa and to Hengest. These may possibly be the same men who figured so prominently in the Anglo-Saxon conquest of England and who can be dated to the begin­ning of the sixth century.

Since at least one of the events described, Hugleik’s death, and possibly a second, Hrothulf’s winning the throne, can be corrobor­ated and dated with the help of contemporary chroniclers, it must be taken for good and consequently, for the time being, we must accept the rest of the course of events as “his­torical”.

The setting

How does the geographical description in Beowulf fit reality? Is there anything in the lay to tell us where the scene is set? The question has been debated for years. All the text critics except Lukman agree in localizing the country of the Swedes in present-day Svealand, there being nothing in the text to contradict so obvious a conclusion. Three hundred years after Beowulf’s times, in king Alfred’s days, even Blekinge formed part of the Swedish realm. Unless “Geats” is but another name for ”Götar”, an independent Götaland is nowhere mentioned, being appar­ently already a thing of the past.

The country of the Danes, on the other hand, has been more elusive. It has been taken to be in Zealand, in Scania or in south Jutland, the land of the Heathobards in Jut­land or in Zealand. The country of the Geats has been assumed to be present-day south Sweden, “Götaland”, and the tales of the battles between Geats and Swedes supposed to refer to the wars which led to Sweden being united.

What conclusions do the actual geographi­cal conditions and the distribution of the ar­chaeological material justify? The question is important because should not only the frag­ments of personal history preserved in Beo­wulf but also the geographical notices de­s­cribe a reality and should the conclusions reached be confirmed by the archaeological material, if neither history nor geography are invented, then the critics are all wrong, then we must discuss Beowulf anew and, with Beo­wulf, those sagas with the same cast, Yng­lingatal and the Ynglinga saga — and the Sköldunga saga.

We must not assume the sagas to be all fiction except for those statements which can be verified. This would be bad scientific method. If all those statements in the sagas which we can check mirror reality, as we know it, then all other statements in the same saga which cannot as yet be verified must also be assumed to be true, until the opposite can be proved. The burden of proof is on him who doubts.

The lay of Beowulf describes the court of king Hrothgar, who resided in the largest and most magnificent of halls, who rewarded his warriors with golden rings and with magnifi­cent arms, among which ring-swords are specifically mentioned (verse 2042), in terms which suggest the Roman Iron Age or the Migration Period. Apparently the Sköldunga kings had conquered Denmark some genera-
tions earlier and the dynasty appeared well established when an enemy, Grendel, attacked. "So Grendel became ruler". The war lasted for a long time, twelve years being mentioned. Finally Beowulf, with fourteen companions, came from Geatland to Hrothgar's aid. The description of his voyage and of his landfall is quite clear:

Away she went over the wavy ocean, boat like a bird, breaking seas, wind-wetted, white-throated, till the curved prow had ploughed so far — the sun standing right on the second day — that they might see land loom on the skyline, then the shimmer of cliffs, sheer fells behind, reaching capes.

Apparently they sailed across the open sea, making their landfall as planned on the second day out, on a coast of high white cliffs with capes reaching far out into the sea. Modern commentators have always found this description incompatible with their ideas of Danish geography and topography, the site of Heorot usually thought to have been Leire, far inland from a coast conspicuously lacking in cliffs and headlands.

Few commentators, if any, have been sailors familiar with northern waters and few, if any, appear to be familiar with Danish topography. The passage has been taken to be a late addition to the saga, since it appears to describe a crossing of the North Sea and a landing beneath the white cliffs of Dover. Actually, the passage proves the waters crossed not to have been the Channel and thus strongly suggests that the poem was not composed in Britain. Either you cross at Dover, where the Channel is narrow and the crossing a matter of hours, even in an open row-boat, to land beneath the famous cliffs, or you cross elsewhere, either north or south of the narrows, where the passage might require two days, but where there are no white cliffs.

Can any conclusion be drawn from the actual distribution of the Danish archaeological material of the Iron Age, in conjunction with the geographical features described in Beowulf? Obviously, mere map-reading is not good enough — for any conclusion to be valid the observations must have been made in the field or at sea, the geographical features being seen as Iron-Age man saw them, on foot, from horse-back or from a comparatively small, open boat.

In Denmark, the richest burials of the early Iron Age are concentrated in the south part of Lolland island. This concentration of wealth probably marked the political centre of the country or, at least, the territory of the politically and economically dominant families.

In the Later Roman Iron Age, the fourth and fifth centuries, the rich burials were concentrated in south-east Zealand, with Himlingoje as the type locality, with seven "royal" mounds and a great number of rich burials without mounds. There is a number of rich cemeteries in the area, such as Valsøby, Varpelev and others. The same district, centering on Stevns, appears to have remained the richest part of Denmark all through the Migration Period, sixth and seventh centuries. At least, it has yielded the greatest number of gold objects of this period, including the largest of all gold rings known from Denmark, found at Hellested on Stevns. The numerous paved roads and fords which cross the valley and the stream almost separating Stevns from the rest of Zealand also indicate that the area was of special importance, nothing similar having been found anywhere else in Scandinavia.

The centre of economic and, probably, also of political power shifting from Lolland to east Zealand may have been caused by the first appearance of the Danes in the country. According to the sagas, they came from central Sweden, where they can be traced in many place-names, such as Dannemora, Danderyd and even Danmark, now a parish in Uppland. Beowulf is silent on this point, even though Hrothgar only belonged to the fifth generation of the Sköldunga family, (i.e. the fifth generation after the conquest?) and five generations cover no more than 100–150 years. However, the riches described do fit what we know of economic conditions on Stevns in late Roman Times or in the early part of the Migration Period. Everything suggests that, at this time, the royal residence
had not yet been moved to Leire but was still somewhere in southeast Zealand.

The description of Beowulf's landfall and of his subsequent march to Heorot leaves little doubt:

\[\ldots\text{the shimmer of cliffs, sheer fells behind, reaching capes.}\]

A coastguard, usually posted on these cliffs, met the hero on the beach and accompanied him and his companions to Heorot. Paved Roman roads being still in use in eight-century England, there would have been no particular reason for mentioning them, had the poem been composed in that country. Denmark was different. There, paved roads of Iron Age date are few indeed, and there is but one single area in Scandinavia, corresponding to the description: high white cliffs jutting into the sea, a neighbouring beach for landing, a paved road leading to the royal residence of late Roman times or of the early Migration Period: Stevns Klint in Denmark.

The white chalk cliffs of Stevns rise straight out of the sea, more than 40 m high, facing east. Behind them stretch downs, bordered in the west by a river valley about 500 m wide, running almost the whole way from Koge Bay to Faxe Bay, separating Stevns peninsula from the rest of Zealand. This valley and its river is crossed by a number of prehistoric paved roads and fords, those at Varpelev, Elverhøj, Harlev and Karise I dating from the end of the Late Roman Iron Age and the beginning of the Migration Period. Down one of these marched Beowulf and his companions on their way to king Hrothgar. "There was stone paving on the path that brought the war band on its way." This passage also proves that the scene can not have been set on Rügen, the only other place where white chalk cliffs face the Baltic, since it lacks the paved roads and the rich Iron Age of Beowulf's tale. The description fits the picture of the Iron Age settlement pattern outlined by Nylen, a situation where sea-borne attacks might be expected at any moment and where, in consequence, farms and settlements were always at some distance from the shore.

But what conclusions can be drawn as to the land of the Geats, Beowulf's country? As mentioned previously, the account of the voyage has been taken to describe a crossing of the North Sea and a landfall in Britain. The factual evidence of the saga having been thus disposed of, the land of the Geats could be located anywhere in south Sweden or in Denmark and it has even been suggested that the waters separating the land of the Geats from that of the Swedes might have been lake Vänern and the lakes of central Sweden. But if we accept the description of the actual voyage, with the wind directions prevalent in the South Baltic in early summer, and the time stated, a different explanation appears more plausible. Apparently, Beowulf made his landfall on the second day out from the land of the Geats. It is expressly stated that he used sail. There is no indication as to the size of the ship. However, since the band comprised but fifteen men, the vessel must have been quite small, nothing to compare with the Nydam boat or with the Sutton Hoo ship. The Nydam vessel, some 25 m between perpendiculars, and close on 18 m on the waterline, appears to have had fifteen pairs of oars. The minimum crew must then have been 62 men, two watches of 30 oarsmen and one helmsman each. The Sutton Hoo vessel appears to have had 20 pairs of oars, and consequently a minimum crew of 82. Beowulf's vessel must have been very much smaller, presumably a square-rigged boat with 3 pairs of oars, with an overall length in the order of 10 m. Such a boat would have had a waterline of about 7-7.5 m.

The distance from Cape Hoburgen, the southern tip of Gotland, around the southern tip of Öland and Utklippan island, between the Hammers of Scania and of Bornholm, the latter a high cape visible from a great distance, and onwards, along the Scanian coast but largely out of sight of it, to the cliffs at Stevns, is 229 nautical miles. For this distance to be covered in 48 hours, an average speed of no more than 4.8 knots is required, well within the capability of Gotland sixem (tre-männen) of today in the prevailing fresh easterlies of early summer.

However, when returning home, Beowulf is
reported first to have sighted the "cliffs of the Geats", probably cape Hoburgen and the "raukar" at its foot. If Beowulf calculated his landfall as do modern sailors, i.e. from the moment the 36 m high Hoburgen sank into the sea to the moment he raised 40 m high cape Stevns and his eye-level, in an open boat, was about 2 m above the waterline, his sailed distance was no more than 198 nautical miles and the required average speed no more than 4.1 knots.

It thus appears likely that the island of Gotland was the land of the Geats.

Today, the natives of Gotland, in high Swedish the "Gotlänningar", call themselves "Gautar". In the early Middle Ages, the spelling of Gutalagen, the Gotland Law, proves the pronunciation to have been "Gutar", without av diphtong. This has been taken to prove that the name "Geats" can not have referred to the Gutar but only to old norse "gautar", modern high swedish "götar", the people by the "Gautelfr" in modern Västergötland. This may be true—but we do not know how Beowulf himself pronounced the word written "geat". This spelling, which indicates a diphtong, is recorded from the Beowulf manuscript, whereas the Liber Monstrorum, also from an anglo-saxon scriptorium but older by 200 years, has "Getae", without a diphtong. The scribes spelled the names as they, themselves, pronounced them, in their own local dialect. We can not draw any conclusion as to how the Geats of the early sixth century pronounced their name or that of their country from the way west-Saxon scribes of the eighth and tenth centuries spelled them.

In Scandinavia, summer nights are very short and never quite dark. Even so, in the days before light-houses, any prudent sailor would schedule his passage so as to pass cape Öland, Utklippan and the Hammers in daylight. This means setting out from cape Hoburgen in the late afternoon, spending the first night at sea between Gotland and Öland, passing cape Öland and Utklippan in daylight, with a second night between Utklippan and the Hammers, passing the latter in the early morning hours and making a landfall at Stevns in the afternoon of the second day, at the expected time, "the sun standing right on the second day".

There are numerous large mounds and cairns on Gotland, mostly dating from the Bronze Age. However, Ugglehaug in Stenkyrka parish dates from the Migration period and so probably also do the mounds at Havor in Hablingbo and a few others, all of a size to compare favourably with the contemporary royal mounds of Sweden, those of the Ynglinga kings, thus testifying to the power and wealth of the families who built them.

There are but three kinds of men: the living, the dead and those who sail the sea. After his final battle, lying mortally wounded on Earnanes, the cape of the eagles, the childless Beowulf felt no ties to the living. He chose to rest where his monument could be seen from afar and where he would be remembered by his equals, those who sailed the sea, rather than being buried inland, close to the settlements, as was the usual custom. He ordered young Wiglaf:

Bid men of battle build me a tomb
fair after fire, on the foreland by the sea
that shall stand as a reminder of me to my people,
towering high above Hronesnes
so that ocean travellers shall afterwards name it
Beowulf’s barrow, bending in the distance
their masted ships through the mists upon the sea.

Today, one of the southern parishes on Gotland is named Rone. Beowulf’s "Hronesnes" has been taken to be derived from anglo-saxon "hron", whale. This word is not known from any other Germanic language. Although whaling is usually associated with the Atlantic, until recent times it played a very important part in the economy of south Scania, of Öland and of Gotland. The dolphins, (Phocaena phocaena, L.) who enter the Baltic in spring and leave in the autumn, were netted by the thousand. Their meat, fat, bone and hides were all utilized.

The derivation of the name "Rone" is not known. It appears as "Ronum" and "Rone" in the fourteenth century (Karl Inge Sandred, pers. comm. 10.2.1984). It may be no more than a coincidence, there being no linguistic evidence either way: can possibly "Rone" be derived from "hron" as "the place where dolphins are caught?" It is suggestive that a
hill on the next headland to the north, now called cape Nabbu, is called Arnkull, Eagle Hill.

Postscript
By definition proof, a means of conviction, must lend itself to being expressed in figures and in formulas. This is impossible in archaeology and in history, nothing but circumstantial evidence and eye-witnesses’ testimony being available. The latter is notoriously unreliable, as any judge can testify, but it remains our best material.

Each reader will have to make up his own mind whether the Beowulf epic is to be considered an eye-witness’ account. If it is accepted as such the other sagas dealing with the same persons will also have to be brought into account and will thus also have to be treated as valid “historical documents”. If so, in Sweden the centuries from about 250 A.D. to about 800 A.D. should be classified as “Dark Ages”, to borrow a British term, rather than as “prehistoric”.

References
Åkerblom, A. Nordiska Forntidens. I. Stockholm 1899.
Collinder, B. Beowulf, Stockholm, 1934.
 — Sutton Hoo and Beowulf: Antiquity, 22.
 — Olrik, A. Danmarks Heltediktning. I. Copenhagen, 1903.
 — Geschichte der Wandalen. Munich, n. y.
Kan Beowulf användas för att kontrollera de tidigaste nordiska konungasagornas historiska värde? Eftersom åtminstone en, och möj- ligen två, av de personer och de händelser som omtalas i Beowulf kan beläggas och date- ras genom uppgifter hos samtida kontinentala krönikörer måste man, till dess motsatsen kan bevisas, antaga att även resten av dikten byg- ger på verklighetsunderlag. Eftersom flera av de personer som omtalas i Beowulf även skildras i de därav oberoende dikterna Wid- sid, Ynglingatal och i Ynglingasagan måste vi antaga dem för historiska och, om så, även de övriga personer som uppträder i dessa sagor.