

BEOWULF AS SELDGUMA: *BEOWULF*, LINES 247-51

When Beowulf arrives in Denmark with his followers, he is accosted by a coast-guard who rides to meet them as they disembark. The coast-guard's opening address is a long and measured speech in which he urges these surprising guests to make known their origins and intentions. In the course of his speech it is evident that he is very impressed by the appearance of Beowulf, since he explicitly comments on how striking Beowulf seems among his men.

Næfre ic maran geseah
eorla ofer eorþan ðonne is eower sum,
secg on searwum; nis þæt seldguma
wæpnum geweorðað, næfne him his wlite leoge,
ænlic ansyn. (247-51)

The general purport of these lines has never been questioned as far as I am aware, but the fact that the term *seldguma* is a *hapax legomenon* complicates the issue. Klaeber in his notes discusses a number of attempts to sharpen our understanding of these lines,² and there has been further discussion of them since the 1950 edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf*.³ Various suggestions have been more or less persuasive, but no scholar has cited any specific Anglo-Saxon parallel to these lines. There is, however, an illuminating analogue in an Anglo-Saxon legal text.

The coast-guard's remarks are concerned with rank and status. Beowulf is of higher rather than lesser status, unless his appearance belies him. One of the concerns of the Anglo-Saxon laws was with status, with making exact the distinctions between noble, free-man, and slave; and in the treatise which Dorothy Whitelock entitled "A Compilation on Status,"⁴ in the particular section entitled "Norðleoda laga", there are clauses which seem directly relevant to the point the coast-guard is making.

9. And gif ceorlisc man geþeo, þæt he hæbbe V hida landes to cyninges utware, ond hine man ofslea, forgilde man hine mid twam þusend þrimsa.

10. And þeah he geþeo, þæt he hæbbe helm ond byrnan ond golde fæted sweord, gif he þæt land nafað, he bið ceorl swa þeah.

11. And gif his sunu ond his sunu sunu þæt geþeoð, þæt hi swa micel landes habban, siððan bið se ofsprinc gesiðcundes cynnes be twam þusendum.

12. And gif hi ðæt nabbað, ne to þam geþeon ne magon, gilde man cirlice.s

9. And if a *ceorl* prospers, that he has five hides of land on which he discharges the king's dues, and anyone kills him, he is to be paid for with 2000 *thrymsas*.

10. And even if he prospers so that he possesses a helmet and a coat of mail and a gold-plated sword, if he has not the land, he is a *ceorl* all the same.

11. And if his son and his son's son prosper, so that they have so much land, then the off-spring is of *gesith-born* class, at 2000 [*thrymsas*].

12. And if they have it not, and cannot prosper sufficiently, one is to pay at the *ceorles* rate.

As so often in dealing with Anglo-Saxon law, the translation is relatively simple, but the interpretation is more difficult. In this passage, the *wergild* assigned the ennobled *ceorl* in clause nine does not correspond to that in the other codes, and there are textual difficulties.⁵ But the general purport of these clauses is clear. The compiler is concerned with defining those circumstances in which a man or family born into *ceorlisc* status can be assumed to have become elevated into noble status – that of the *gesiðcund cynn*. This transition can be assumed to have taken place when the individual has acquired five hides of land – roughly speaking, land sufficient to support five households. The relevant clause for the coast-guard's speech in *Beowulf*, however, is clause ten, which specifies that even though a *ceorl* acquires a helmet, a coat of mail, and a gold-plated sword, he is still to be accounted a *ceorl* unless he possesses the land. Any law presumes some transgressors, and this clause is a powerful testimony to the symbolic value of weapons in Anglo-Saxon society. The mere fact that a *ceorl* possessed a helmet, sword and coat of mail, the weapons of an aristocrat, instead of the more plebeian shield and spear,⁷ might enable him to claim that he was exalted to the

status of a nobleman, a change in status defined in the *Norðleoda laga* as the ratio of 266 *thrymsas* (the wergild of a *ceorl*) to 2,000 *thrymsas* (the wergild of a thegn). An individual who made such a claim and had it allowed would be *wæpnum geweorðad* indeed. The compiler of this treatise thought such a claim excessive, but the very fact that it was necessary to legislate against it shows that some Anglo-Saxons must have thought it a reasonable one.

To return to *Beowulf*, when the coast-guard approaches Beowulf he is struck by the physical appearance and aristocratic bearing of the hero. He recognizes that Beowulf is a *þegn* indeed. One is reminded of the account of the physical appearance of Sigurðr Fafnisbana in *Volsunga saga*, in which his size, physical beauty, and aristocratic accomplishments are expatiated on at great length.⁹ But the coast-guard does not know Beowulf, and in remarking upon his appearance he rhetorically raises the possibility that Beowulf is a *seldguma*, only to dismiss it. I would accept the conventional gloss “retainer” for *seldguma*, but suggest that the poet meant a man who was not an aristocrat, but who nonetheless served in a king’s retinue. When such a retainer was given the weapons of an aristocrat by a king, or acquired them in some other way then of course he would not appear different from royal retainers of *gesiðcund cynn*, and there would arise the awkward possibility that a foreigner might mistake a *ceorl* for an aristocrat. It is this possibility that the coast-guard raises, and then confidently dismisses – Beowulf’s aristocratic and heroic stature are so obvious that he must be what in fact he is – a man born to high status and the descendant of kings.

This reading of these lines is not greatly different from that proposed by Klaeber, but the parallel from the *Norðleoda laga* permits us to understand the phrase “*wæpnum geweorðad*” more precisely. Beyond this immediate point, understanding these lines from *Beowulf* in these terms permits us to perceive once again the intensely aristocratic, royalist views of the *Beowulf*-poet. The authors of the Icelandic sagas were prepared to claim that plain Icelanders of relatively low social status were the moral, intellectual, and athletic equals of the great aristocrats and kings of the Norwegian courts. But the *Beowulf*-poet has a radically different perspective in that both his hero and the other major figures in the poem are at the apex of their social world, and the poet is so little interested in the lives of ordinary people that there is no single reference to any economic exchange in the entire poem.

A second aspect of the poem which this clause from the *Norðleoda laga* illuminates is the *Beowulf*-poet’s almost obsessive concern with weapons and adornment. This concern underlies some of the odder moments in the poem—the quasi-elegiac lament for the failure of the sword Hrunting during Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother (lines 1522-28), or to cite the most notorious example, the digression on the “genealogy” of Wiglaf’s sword in the middle of the dragon fight (lines 2610-25). If weapons and armor are such precious objects that the mere possession of them could conceivably ennoble a man (were it not for the wise provisions of the law-speakers), it is obviously appropriate to interrupt a narrative poem to inform one’s audience in as much detail as possible about each of the weapons which the various heroes use.

Beowulf is a very beautiful poem, but it is also a very strange one in some ways. It is a poem which reflects the world-view of a Christian Germanic aristocrat of the early middle ages. Whether the poet was such an individual or simply wrote to please one, cannot now be determined. But whatever milieu and social context we imagine for the *Beowulf*-poet (and very diverse milieus have been imagined) we must be sensitive to how differently from us he may have imagined his society.

Cornell University

THOMAS D. HILL

Notes

1. All quotations of Anglo-Saxon poetry are from the *ASPR* by line numbers.
2. *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Fr. Klaeber, 3rd ed. (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950), pp. 138-39.
3. See for example Cecil Wood, “*Nis þæt seldguma: Beowulf 249*,” *PMLA*, 75 (1960), 481-84; Marjorie Rigby, “*The Seafarer, Beowulf 1.769 and a Germanic Conceit*,” *NQ*, n.s. 9 (1962), 246.
4. *English Historical Documents*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, 2nd ed. (London, New York: Methuen, Oxford 1979), pp. 468-71. For discussion with regard to Wulfstan’s involvement with the compilation of legal texts see, Dorothy Bethurum. “Six Anonymous Old English Codes,” *JEGP*, 49 (1950), 449-63.
5. All quotations from Anglo-Saxon laws are from *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, hrsg.

Felix Liebermann (1903-16; rpt. Scienta Aalen, 1960) by title, clause number, and volume and page reference: "Norðleoda laga," 9-12; I, 460. The translation is that of Whitelock, 469-70.

6. See the comments of Whitelock, p. 469, and Liebermann, I 460-61; one version printed by Liebermann states that the *ceorl* is enobled by possession of armor.

7. See, for example, David M. Wilson, *the Archeology of Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 15-17, and N.P. Brooke, "Arms, Status and Warfare in Late Saxon England," in *Ethelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. David Hill, BAR British Series 59, Oxford: BAR (1978) pp. 81-103.

8. *Norðleoda laga* 5-6; I, 460; Whitelock, p. 469.

9. *Volsunga saga*, ed. and trans. R. G. Finch (London: Nelson, 1965), pp. 40-41 (cap. 23). Cf. also *þiðreks saga af Bern*, ed. Henrik Bertelsen S.T.U.A.G.N.L. 34 (København: Møllers 1905-11) I, 344-47 (cap. 291).

10. The term *ceorl* could, of course, be used for men of high rank in *Beowulf*. The counselors who advise Beowulf about his journey to Hroðgar's court are *ceorlas* (line 416) and the poet refers to king Ongentheow as a *ceorl* (line 2972). Again, one of the heroic figures at the battle of Maldon is specifically referred to as a *ceorl*, see *Maldon*, lines 255-59; for commentary and bibliography on the phrase "unorne ceorl," see *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. D. C. Scragg (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1981), p. 82. See also Helmut Gneuss, *Die Battle of Maldon als historisches und literarisches Zeugnis*. Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften: Sitzungsberichte (München, 1976) pp. 41-42, et passim.