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Book Review

Names and Naming in Beowulf: Studies in Heroic Narrative Tradition.

By PHILIP A. SHAW. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 2020. Pp. 228 (Paperback). £28.99. ISBN 13: 9781350211674.

Beowulf, an epic Old English poem of contested genesis, is well known in the English-speaking world. The historian and archaeologist of early medieval England often adopt it as evidence for the "heroic" period in English history; for the student of literature, it is often taken as evidence for oral and poetic traditions, and their interactions. It is certainly not unknown also to the student of onomastics, not least as part of the lively debate over whether the name of its eponymous protagonist should be translated literally ('bee-wolf', as a possible kenning for a bear).

To find a novel contribution to this great confluence of scholarship is no easy task. Shaw's solution is to shift both the focus and the methodology of many previous approaches. Perhaps wisely, the book is not concerned with the question of origin of the text in chronological terms; the thorny question of the dating of *Beowulf*, both the surviving manuscript and the oral tradition that lay behind it, is often discussed in hushed tones and must be one of the best-trod topics in early medieval English historiography. Instead, Shaw's aim is to address the broader question of the geographical origin(s) of the tale. To approach this, Shaw takes as his evidence the names of the human figures within the text.

The central thesis of *Names and Naming in Beowulf* proposes a fundamental shift in focus when studying the text, away from an emphasis on England (as a result of the text's language) and Scandinavia (as a result of the geographical setting of the tale) towards the "heroic narrative traditions" of Continental Europe: "[I]n order to appreciate the poem within its context of production, we need to acknowledge that it owes a very great deal to Continental Germanic heroic narrative tradition" (178).

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Given that *Names and Naming in Beowulf* falls within an extensive historiography, it is greatly appreciated that Shaw begins the book with a masterful (and mercifully short) introduction to the study of *Beowulf*, exploring the dating and palaeography of the manuscript. Shaw's introduction also lays out his complex onomastic methodology in refreshingly plain English. Germanic names appear often (but not exclusively) comprised of two combined name-themes, as in *Beo-* and *-wulf*. Given that these name-themes vary in form between areas within the Germanic-speaking world, the geographical origins of names can be suggested. Shaw provides the following example: the *Fraui-*, *Frowi-* and *Fro-* elements that appear on the Continent appears only as *Frøy-* in Scandinavia and are absent from English text (3).

Beyond this, Shaw draws on a wealth of previously compiled onomasticons to establish where name-forms are elsewhere attested. For names of Continental origin, Shaw turns to Ernst Förstemann's *Altdeutsches Namenbuch: Erster Band, Personennamen* (1900). While Förstemann's contribution is towering, it is now somewhat outdated. For Scandinavian runic evidence, Shaw turns to Lena Peterson's *Nordiskt runnamnslexikon* (2007) and her *Lexikon över urnordiska personnamn* (2004) for those names within textual sources. The latter of these, available freely online, is a valuable example of accessible scholarship. To identify English name-forms, Shaw relies primarily on two sources. The *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* (*PASE*) database, produced by King's College London and latterly Cambridge, is now the most complete collection of onomastic evidence within England before the Conquest of 1066 and among the first generation of conquerors. The second, the *Durham Liber Vitae*, represents a "book of names" associated with a religious community, the core of which stems from ninth-century Northumbria (Rollason and Rollason 2007).

With this double methodology for identifying a name's possible origin, the book progresses through the names within the text, sixty-nine in total, to examine their possible geographical origins. In order to tackle the wealth of onomastic data presented by the poem, Shaw groups the names together dynastically, with each chapter progressing through a family grouping. Chapter one covers the Geats, Brondings and Wylfings. Chapter two covers the Scyldings, Heathobards and Helmings. Chapter three covers the Swedish Scilfings. Chapter four focuses on the Finnsburh episode and the non-Scylding Danes. Chapter five focuses on the singular appearance of the mythological smith Weland and the descendants of Wæls. Chapter six shifts the emphasis to those Continental characters mentioned within the text. Finally, chapter seven focuses on the uniqueness of the name *Hondscio*, an unhappy victim of Grendel's attack, exploring the role of this novel name.

Although rarely definitive in his designation of geographical origin, as the ambiguities of his data necessitate, Shaw's findings are impressive and convincing. Of the sixty-nine names examined, around twenty examples appear to be Continental Germanic in origin, and a further twenty might be drawn from anywhere within the Germanic-speaking world. The result is a proposed shift away from an emphasis on a Scandinavian origin of the text towards a Continental European origin. Names definitively illustrating Scandinavian origin are rare even among the members of the Scandinavian Geat, Scylding and Sciffing dynasties, with the exception of *Healfdene* and his descendants. There is also notably minimal evidence for English onomastic contribution, consisting primarily of incorporated English royal genealogies and a few invented characters (for example, *Wiglaf*). Subsequently, Shaw finds it most likely that the great majority of the narrative was drawn from the Continent, with characters both created on the Continent and generated by the Scandinavia heroic tradition filtered through the Continent, with minimal elements created novelly by the English poet.

Of course, Shaw's conclusions have substantial implications for the study of *Beowulf* and early medieval literature more generally: the origin(s) of *Beowulf*, the possible role of written texts in transmission, the process of synthesizing multiple narrative elements into one, the (unclear) history of Continental Germanic heroic narrative traditions. But it is the illustration of the validity of Shaw's methodology that is most intriguing to the reader of *Names*. Shaw's use of onomastic evidence, in its own right, to tackle long-standing literary and historical questions should act as a shining example of a productive synthesis.

Shaw begins his book with the tongue-in-cheek cry of despair uttered by any scholar of early medieval England when faced with yet another book on *Beowulf*. What he goes on to prove, however, is that there is still much that scholarship can contribute to the study of *Beowulf* and that the well is far from dry. *Names and Naming in Beowulf* illustrates the utility of foregrounding onomastics in answering questions of textual origin and transmission, and the strength of conclusions can then be drawn from this methodology. It is a call to action for the student of history and literature to take onomastic data seriously when examining their sources.

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