Royal Names in Old English Poetry

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In the first number of *Names* we read that "the Danish Scyldings" got their name "from their shields" (p. 27). Here our revered Robert Ramsay echoes an old explanation of *Scylding* which I believe to be wrong. I will begin this paper by setting forth my views about this name, and I will proceed by taking up other names found in our oldest poetry and best explained as royal epithets.

Scylding occurs twice in *Beowulf,* both times in the sense 'descendant of Scyld.' The corresponding plural usually has the sense 'Danes' but in at least one passage (line 1069) it means 'Danish royal house.' The plural meaning 'Danes' is thus explained by Klaeber in his edition of the poem: "(descendants of Scyld, members of Danish dynasty), Danes" (p. 439). Here the meanings set in round brackets give us the first two stages in the semantic development of the plural, the meaning 'Danes' being the third and last stage. This is the usual explanation found for the tribal or national sense of the plural, and I think it is correct. In other words, the Scyldings of *Beowulf,* the Skjöldungar of the Scandinavians, were properly a royal family, and their name could be applied to the Danes as such only by extension, on the rhetorical principle of a part for the whole. In fact, the Danes are called Scyldings only in poetry; we have no evidence that the Scylding name was ever thought of as properly belonging to the Danish people.

Beowulf begins with some account of King Scyld, the traditional founder of the Scylding dynasty. We learn that he was highly successful in warfare, defeating all the neighboring tribes and forcing them to pay tribute. The poet sums up the matter for us in the words, "that was a good king" (line 11). It is clear that Scyld lived up to his name: he served most effectively as the shield of his people. It is equally clear that he belongs to legend, not to history. Students of story agree that no such king ever in fact reigned in Denmark.

Scyld was a creation of the poets, an ideal figure made for a specific purpose: to play the founder's part in the story of a famous historical dynasty of Danish kings. And the ideal king was given an ideal name. The word *scyld* 'shield' may have the abstract sense 'protection' and the personalized sense 'protector' (see the dictionaries). In giving the name *Scyld* to their creation, the poets took an epithet proper to royalty and made of it a royal name.

We have reason to think that the Scylding dynasty of Danish kings originally went by another name; that the dynasty was first named after its historical founder King Healfdene, the Halfdan of Scandinavian story. For a brief treatment of this matter see my paper in Vol. 70 of *Englische Studien,* with the references there given. But in time the poets gave to Healfdene illustrious ancestors, in order to exalt him and enhance the glory of his house. In this way he lost his historical role as founder, a part taken over by the legendary Scyld. If this is how the story grew, *Scylding* was derived from *Scyld* in a perfectly normal way, and *Scyld* is epithet turned into proper name as explained above.

The *Beowulf* poet calls the Danish king Hrothgar a Scylding; that is, a descendant of Scyld. He calls Hrothgar's wife an *ides Helminga* 'lady of the Helmings' (line 620); that is, a descendant of Helm. In *Widsith,* line 29, we find Helm set down as ruler of the Wulfings. Here again, I take it, a royal epithet has been made into a royal name, bestowed upon the legendary founder of a dynasty. *Helm* 'helmet,' like *scyld* 'shield,' may have the senses 'protection' and 'protector' and thus may serve as a royal epithet.

Parallel to the royal names with the literal meanings 'shield' and 'helmet' one might expect to find a name that means 'sword' and such a name in fact appears. The versified genealogy of the kings of Wessex includes a grandson of Woden named Brond or Brand, and the same man is to be found in the pedigree of the Bernician line of Northumbrian kings. The word *brond* or *brand* means 'sword' and makes a perfectly suitable royal epithet: any good king might be thought of as (among other things) the sword of his people and in *Beowulf* the epithet *brand* is actually applied to King Hrothgar (line 1020). The name *Brondingas,* recorded twice in Old English poetry, is presumably a dynastic name meaning 'descendants of Brond' and used by the poets instead of the true name of the particular tribe that had the Brondings for royal family, much as

Scyldingas was used as a poetic name for the Danes. It need not follow that the Brondings traced their descent from the Brond of the genealogies; more than one legendary king may conceivably have borne the name. But the poetic records know only one Brond, just as they know only one Scyld and only one Helm, and it is therefore not unreasonable to connect the Brond of the West Saxon and Bernician pedigrees with the Brondings of *Beowulf* and *Widsith.*

From the West Saxon genealogy we learn, further, that Brond had a grandson Frēawine and a great-grandson Wīg. Like Brond, these kings are poetic fictions and their names reflect their origin. *Frēawine* 'lord and friend' is a familiar royal epithet. It occurs thrice in *Beowulf,* where it is applied to princes whose true names are duly recorded. In the genealogy this epithet has been turned into a royal name. *Wīg* answers to the Icelandic adj. *vígr* 'good at fighting' and as an epithet befits any outstanding warrior, whether king or follower.

Breca, a legendary king told of in *Beowulf* and mentioned in *Widsith,* has for name a word that may be taken in two ways: it may mean 'breaker (of rings)' or 'breaker (of the ranks of the enemy).' If we take the first interpretation, *breca* means 'dispenser of treasure' (i.e. king). If we take the second, it means 'invincible fighting-man' or the like. Whichever meaning we take, it is best interpreted as an epithet, seized upon by the poets and used to name a fictitious royal personage.

In *Widsith,* line 30, occur two royal names: *Wōd* and *Wald.* The first represents the adj. *wōd* 'furious, raging,' applicable to a fighter whose attack in battle was like that of a *berserkr.* See my discussion in the *Review of English Studies,* Vol. 3 (1927), p. 269. The second may represent either the adj. *weald* 'powerful' or the abstract noun *weald* 'power, dominion' in its personalized sense 'ruler' (i.e. person having power or dominion). The use of *wōd* and *wald* as royal names indicates that the bearers of these names were creations of the poets. The Scandinavian equivalent of *Wōd* is *Óðr* and a god so named in fact appears in Scandinavian mythology. See further in *RES,* Vol. 4 (1928), pp. 259 ff.

The legendary founder of the Burgundian royal house, the Gifica of *Widsith,* line 19, has for name a word meaning 'man whose characteristic quality is munificence.' Here the king is thought of as a dispenser of treasure to his followers. In Scandinavian story he is

called Gjúki and the royal family descended from him is known as the Gjúkungar. In my edition of *Widsith* (p. 149), I took it as "not unreasonable to believe that Gifica actually lived" but I now reckon this king a creation of the poets. Another such creation was King Henden of *Widsith,* line 21. The name in all likelihood means 'king,' as I have explained in my edition of the poem (p. 15). To it answers the *Hendil* of Saxo Grammaticus (Book VIII), a name that shows final *l* for *n* by dissimilation. For further discussion see my paper in the *Germanic Review,* Vol. 14 (1939), p. 251.

In *Widsith,* line 33, we are told that Hūn ruled the Hætwere (a tribe of the lower Rhine, the Hattvarii of classical antiquity, the Hetware of *Beowulf*). The name *Hūn* probably means 'high one' (i.e. king); if so, it is a royal epithet in origin, and the king so named presumably flourished in story rather than in history. King Hūn answers to the Húnn of Scandinavian legend, one of the champions killed by Starkaðr in the Battle of Brávellir. In the story of this battle he serves as the poetic representative of his tribe. From the forebodings recorded in *Beowulf,* lines 2910 ff., we may legitimately infer that the Franks and Frisians sent out an expeditionary force to punish the Gauts for the raid that this Scandinavian tribe had made on the Low Countries in A.D. 520 or thereabouts. A contingent from the Hætwere, the chief victims of the Gautish raid, doubtless took part in the punitive expedition, and one would expect Húnn to appear in the legendary tale that grew out of the historical event. In my study of the accounts of the battle, however (published in *Classica et Mediaevalia,* Vol. 8, pp. 116 ff.), I missed the significance of Húnn and passed him over in silence!

King Meaca of the Myrgings, mentioned in *Widsith,* line 23, has a name that means 'comrade' and may be interpreted as a royal epithet in origin. As such it is to be compared with *wine* 'friend,' a frequent royal epithet in Old English poetry. The form *meaca* is a Kentish variant of the more familiar *maca.* A dynasty or family of which Meaca was the traditional founder would have gone by the name *Macingas* or *Mecingas* in Old English and Essex place-names yield evidence that such a family in fact existed; see P. H. Reaney, *The Place-Names of Essex,* pp. 45 and 396 and cf. p. xxiii. But the Essex forms indicate that the derivative *(ge)mæcca* 'comrade' might be substituted for its etymon *maca.* The Myrgings were a Saxon subtribe of West Holstein and may well have taken part in the settlement of Essex.

The Hagena mentioned in *Widsith,* line 21, has a name traditionally connected with Old High German *hagan* 'thorn-bush.' This etymology makes excellent sense if we take *hagena* or *hagona* (the variant English form) to have been in origin a royal epithet meaning 'protection' or 'protector.' A corresponding verb *hegna* 'protect' (literally 'enclose with a thorn-bush hedge') occurs in Icelandic. King Hagena belongs to heroic story but hardly to history. Another king whose name may well mean 'protector' is the Holen of *Widsith,* line 33. As a common noun *holen* occurs in line 80 of the Gnomic Verses of the Exeter Book. I take it to mean 'protector' (i.e. ruler, prince, king); see my discussion in *Medium Ævum,* Vol. 12 (1943), pp. 65 f. To be compared is the *geholen* 'protector, shelter-giver' (i.e. lord, king) of *Wanderer,* line 31. The corresponding verb *helan* 'cover' (i.e. protect) is familiar, as is the noun *helm* 'cover, protection, helmet' already taken up. We may reasonably think that King Holen's name was a royal epithet to start with. This king is otherwise unknown and in all likelihood owes both his existence and his name to the poets.

The *Widsith* poet tells us (line 22) that Witta ruled the Sweves, Wada the Halsings. From Bede we learn that Witta was a grandson of Woden, and we may suspect that he was a legendary figure. His name is a derivative of *witt* 'intelligence, understanding' (the modern *wit*), and means 'the intelligent one.' Such a name is obviously a descriptive or characterizing epithet in origin, but would be applicable to anyone properly so described, whether king or subject. In the same way *Wada* would befit any bold, aggressive fighting-man; it means 'one who goes forward (in battle).' The corresponding verb is *wadan* 'advance' (the modern *wade*). In heroic story Wada figures largely, but we have no evidence that he was a historical character, though the author of *Widsith* may well have thought him to be.

King Ætla (in Gothic, Attila) of the Huns, mentioned twice in *Widsith,* figures in history and story alike, but the name by which he was known in the west is to be explained as an epithet. *Attila* means 'little father' in Gothic, and we have good reason to think that it was first of all the Ostrogoths who addressed him in this way. The Huns early overran the Ostrogothic kingdom and made the Ostrogoths into a subject people. Thenceforth, until the overthrow of the Hunnish empire (after the death of Attila), the Ostrogothic

branch of the Goths served their Hunnish masters loyally in war and peace, and their use of the epithet *attila* for the King of the Huns indicates that they thought of him as the father (i.e. ruler and protector) not only of his Hunnish but also of his Gothic subjects. We do not know what Attila's true name was, but we may be sure it was a Hunnish name, even though he is known to fame by the name the Goths gave him.

The Beadeca of *Widsith,* line 112, has a name that means 'battler, fighting-man' and may well have been a characterizing epithet to start with. In my edition of the poem I identified Beadeca with the historical Ostrogothic king Totila, otherwise known as Baduila. Etymologically the connection is plausible enough, since *Baduila* and *Beadeca* have the same base and the suffixes *-la* and *-ca* are synonyms. But the passage in which Beadeca is mentioned deals with the fourth century, whereas the historical King Baduila flourished in the sixth. I am therefore now inclined to think that Beadeca was a fourth-century Gothic king or hero otherwise unknown to us or known under another name.

Along with Beadeca the *Widsith* poet mentions the Herelings, whose name is obviously a derivative of **Herela.* This name is not on record in Old English, but it appears in the twelfth century, in the syncopated form *Herla,* as the name of the leader of the so-called Mad Host. See my discussion in *English Studies,* Vol. 17 (1935), pp. 141 ff. In Germanic mythology Woden was the leader of the Mad Host and *herela* 'man of the army' is an epithet well suited to Woden in this capacity. Another name with religious overtones is *Hālga,* recorded in *Beowulf,* line 61. The name is properly an adj. meaning 'holy' and therefore must have been an epithet to start with. The same may be said of *Alewīh* 'the most holy one,' the name of a legendary Danish king mentioned in *Widsith,* line 35. Such epithets were applicable to a king in his sacerdotal capacity or to a king reckoned semi-divine. But *Hālga,* at least, early came to be used as a true name, and we have no reason to think that the prince so named in the English poem was looked upon as holier than the other members of the Danish royal family. Again, King Oswine of the Eows, mentioned in *Widsith,* line 26, has a name made up of *ōs* 'god' and *wine* 'friend' (i.e. lord) and the name may well have been a royal epithet in origin, meaning 'divine lord' (i.e. lord who through his descent from the gods had something divine about

him), but by the time of the *Widsith* poet it had doubtless become a true name, used with little or no regard to its etymological meaning. Similarly *Oslāf,* the name of a warrior mentioned in *Beowulf,* line 1148, means 'leaving (i.e. offspring) of a god' and in all likelihood was once a royal epithet but if so it early became a true name and lost its restriction to royal families that traced their ancestry back to a god.

In some of the English genealogies Woden is given ancestors; his father has the name *Frēalāf,* which means 'leaving of a lord, royal leaving' (i.e. prince, man of high birth). Woden's father is of course a fiction and the name he goes by was presumably a royal epithet in origin; certainly it has no place in Old English name-giving, no historical character of the name being on record. We have already taken up another name that begins with the element *frēa,* namely *Frēawine,* and have found it used in *Beowulf* as a royal epithet meaning 'lord and friend.' Here *wine* 'friend' has its courtly poetical sense 'lord, protector' and the epithet is equivalent to the modern formula "lord and master." Other Old English words of like structure and meaning are *frēadrihten* and *frēareccere,* both of which mean 'lord and master,' but these words are not used as proper names. A parallel feminine formation is *frēawaru;* it occurs once only, as the name of a Danish princess mentioned in *Beowulf,* line 2022. See my discussion in *ELH,* Vol. 7 (1940), pp. 39 ff. The element *-waru* means 'protection,' and, by personalization, 'protector.' Since *frēawaru* is a feminine noun it is to be translated 'lady and protectress' rather than 'lord and protector.' One may reasonably presume (though not, of course, with certainty) that it served as an epithet, applicable to queens and princesses, before the *Beowulf* poet took it and made of it a royal name. The other possibility is that the poet simply invented the name. Be it added that *frēa* 'lord' is akin to the names of the Scandinavian deities Freyr (god) and Freyja (goddess), as also to German *frau* 'lady.'

A number of royal names end in *-rīc.* This element appears in Gothic as an independent word meaning 'ruler, king' but in English it is found only in compounds. The word *hererīc* 'army-ruler' (i.e. captain, commander or the like) occurs in *Beowulf,* line 1176, as an epithet descriptive of the hero, but in line 2206 it is a proper name, that of the uncle of King Heardrēd. Again, the royal name *Heathorīc* recorded in *Widsith,* line 116, keeps its original function

as an epithet in *Beowulf,* line 2466. See my discussion in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology,* Vol. 50 (1951), pp. 19 ff. Other names in *-rīc* that may plausibly be explained as royal epithets in origin are *Æthelrīc* 'noble ruler,' *Eormenrīc* 'great (or strong) ruler,' *Hrēthrīc* 'glorious ruler,' *Osrīc* 'divine ruler,' and *Thēodrīc* 'national ruler.' These names differ from the two in *-rīc* first given in that we have no evidence that they were actually used as epithets and reckon them epithetic in origin simply because their meanings make such an origin plausible. Further names in *-rīc* might readily be added.

The element *-wald* (*-weald*) or *-walda* (*-wealda*) likewise means 'ruler' and a number of compound names made with this element may well have been epithets to start with. Thus, the royal name *Hringwald,* found in *Widsith,* line 34, means 'ruler of rings' (i.e. owner of a royal hoard, king). Neither Hringwald nor his tribe is known to history. One may reasonably suspect that the king's name was originally a kenning for *king* and that the king so named is a poetic fiction. The Folcwalda of *Beowulf,* line 1089, has a name that means 'national ruler' and the late R. W. Chambers suggested in 1921 (in his *Beowulf, An Introduction,* p. 200) that this name was properly a title which displaced the king's true name because "it alliterated conveniently" with *Finn,* the name of Folcwalda's son. This is possible enough, and I should be the last to deny that *Folcwalda* was an epithet or title to begin with. But the father of Finn might perfectly well have had *Folcwalda* for true name, even though the name is epithetic in origin, witness *Thēodrīc,* which means the same thing and which without question served early and often as a true name, whatever its origin. Other names in *-wald* that may have been epithets in origin are to be found but I need not list them here.

The element *-mund* means 'protection' and 'protector' and names ending in *-mund* like *Æthelmund* 'noble protector,' *Cynemund* 'royal protector,' *Ealhmund* 'protector of the holy place,' *Hrōthmund* 'glorious protector,' *Osmund* 'divine protector,' *Sigemund* 'victorious protector,' and *Wærmund* 'faithful protector' may be interpreted as epithets in origin, though not necessarily royal epithets. But since they occur only as true names we cannot prove that they ever served as epithets and their origin may be otherwise explained.

King Heardrēd of the Geats, mentioned thrice by name in *Beowulf,* has a name that answers to the adj. *heardræd* 'firm, constant,' and in fact constancy to his duty as host is the chief feature of his story, a constancy that cost him his life. One is tempted to conjecture that the king's true name has not come down to us, the poet having used characterizing epithet for name. Students of English history will remember that King Harold of Norway, who in 1066, at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, lost his life at the hands of King Harold of England, had for by-name the same epithet, *harðráði* in Icelandic. In this case we know that the adj. had the function of an epithet, and we may reasonably believe (though we cannot prove) that the name the Geatish king goes by in the English poem was originally and properly an epithet too. As a true name *Heardrēd* is otherwise unexampled.

It would take a book to deal adequately with the onomastic material relevant to this paper. Here I have limited myself almost wholly to the royal names found in a few Old English poems and genealogies, though now and then I have overstepped these self-imposed limits. Within the bounds set I have taken up a number of names but have left the bulk of the material untouched, for want of space. The names discussed above are to be taken as illustrative only. They fall into three groups: (1) words that occur both as epithets and as proper names; (2) words that occur only as proper names but that (a) are readily explicable as epithetic in origin and (b) belong to legend or to poetry, being very rare or unknown in real life; (3) names more or less familiar in actual Germanic name-giving. Examples of (1) are *Helm, Frēawine,* and *Hererīc.* Examples of (2) are *Breca, Herela,* and *Frēawaru.* Examples of (3) are *Hālga, Thēodrīc,* and *Sigemund.*

By way of appendix let me say that many if not most compound names cannot plausibly be explained as epithetic in origin. Thus, the princess Beadohild, whose misfortunes are told of in the second section of the Old English poem *Deor,* has a name made up of two elements, both with the meaning 'war.' Obviously the name as a whole does not mean 'war-war' and in truth it has no meaning at all, properly speaking; it is merely a woman's name. For a brief discussion of the matter see H. B. Woolf, *The Old Germanic Principles of Name-Giving,* pp. 263 f. But a good many of the old names do make sense; that is, their elements make a meaningful phrase.

Some of these meaningful names were epithets originally; others in all likelihood were not; of yet others we cannot speak with confidence. Each name must be studied for itself, and its history traced, so far as this is possible, if we are to find out whether or not it began as an epithet. Moreover, each name must be interpreted in terms of its various contexts, and these contexts must be diligently compared and weighed, before we come to any definite conclusions. The present paper does not pretend to do all this; it merely opens the way to further investigation of a fascinating but difficult branch of onomastic science.

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls:
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed.

—William Shakespeare

One of the few, the immortal names
That were not born to die.

—Fitz-Greene Halleck