

## Ling 103: Language Structure and Verbal Art

### Dating Beowulf

The date of composition for *Beowulf* is not known for certain. A variety of types of evidence can be used to date the composition of the poem.

*Traditional considerations:*

**manuscript**

**content of the poem**

**loanwords** in the poem

**names** of places and people

**spelling** conventions in the manuscript

**meter**

*Evidence from syntactic change:*

The order of words changed from Old English to Middle English. This change occurred over several hundred years during which there was *syntactic variation* — both word orders were possible. We can detect approximately how old a text is by examining the **rates of variation** — what percentage of clauses have the old word order versus the new word order.

#### I. Traditional considerations

##### A. Manuscript ca.1000

2 scribes. Handwriting typical of late 10th or early 11th cent. Same scribes copied prose pieces and the poem *Judith*. Conclusion: neither was the author of **B**.

Late 10th century is the *terminus ad quem* (date before which) for the composition of **B**.

##### B. Content.

- i. Action is in Denmark and Southern Sweden. Why is this for an English poem? Possible answers:
  - a. Poem composed to flatter Danish rulers of England, incl. C(a)nute (ruled 1016-1035).

b. Poem composed by English author in Danelaw after the Danish invasion of 865 (cf. Anglo-Saxon chronicle excerpt).

c. Poem composed in East Anglia prior to late 8th cent., when the rulers there were related to Swedish rulers.

d. Poem is very early and reflects 'golden age' prior to migration of English to Britain.

ii. Warrior ethos of pagan Germans → early date?

Men are loyal, courageous, aggressive, and strong. Women are domestic, graceful and kind. The king leads only a *small* warrior-band with shallow social hierarchy. Blood-feuds. But parts of the ethos remained intact all during OE period.

iii. Christianity → late date?

References to Christian beliefs. Old Testament references, well-integrated into poem. Sin and morality. Criticism and anxiety over pagan sacrifices and rites.

Conclusion: Composition by a Christian after conversion of English began in early 7th cent. Possibility (ic) above ruled out since East Anglian rulers of the time were pagans.

iv. Grendel story → conflicting evidence

'Bear's Son': Germanic folk tale, parallels Grendel story. Grendel probably a water-monster in OE folk belief.

OE *grund* > NE *ground*

English place names with *Grendel*-:

*Grendelsmere* the grendel's pool

*Grindelsbec* the grendel's brook

*Gryndelssyle* the grendel's swamp

## C. Loanwords

## 1. Words from contact with the Roman army

camp 'battle' < \*kamp < Lat. campus 'field > battlefield'

cempa 'warrior' < \*kampījo < LL. campiō (acc.) < campīōnem

draca 'dragon' < \*drakō < Lat. dracō 'python, dragon' (Used as battle-standard by late Roman soldiers)

mīl 'mile' < \*mīliju < L mīlia (passuum) 'miles, a thousand paces'

seġn 'banner' < \*seġn < L signum 'sign; legionary standard'

## 2. Words probably acquired through trade

ancor 'anchor' < \*ankr < L ancora

candel 'luminary, light, candle' < L candēla

ċeap 'price, merchandise, trade' / ġeġeapian 'to trade'

kaup/\*(ga)kaupōjan < L caupō 'small tradesman, innkeeper'

disc 'dish, plate' < \*disk < L discus 'discus > flat plate'

orc 'pitcher' < L orca 'pot'

wīn wine' < \*wīn < L. vīnum (NB. L v still pronounced as ⟨w⟩ cf. later borrowings L versus > OE fers)

## 3. Words relating to Roman towns and engineering

træf 'building' < \*trab < L trabs 'beam'

stræt 'paved road, street' < \*strātu < L (via) strāta 'straight road'

weall 'wall' < L vallum 'earthen rampart'

wīċ 'settlement' < \*wīk < L vīcus 'village'

## 4. Other loanwords

dēofol 'devil' < L diabolus. Not Proto-West-Germanic. Either borrowed into Germanic languages individually or spread from one to another

ġīgant 'giant' < L gigās, acc. gigantem.

orc 'hell' < L orcus. Apparently a borrowing from pagan Latin.

scrīfan 'to decree' < \*skrīban < L scrībere 'to write'.

5. Old Norse loanwords: None. Poems written in OE after first Danish invasion usually have some. Suggests composition before 880.

D. Names.

Scandinavian names, but OE in form, and do not reflect contemporary Old Norse pronunciation.

OE	ON
Hrōðgar	Hróarr
Hrōðulf	Hrólf (9th cent. runes <i>rulufR</i> , <i>rhuulfR</i> )
Ōthere	Óttarr
Onela	Áli
Scedenīg	Skáney (reborrowed into OE <i>Scōneġ</i> )

Is composition early based on the name evidence?

E. Spelling

Ms. contains many instances of letter *d* written for *ð*. This was a scribal practice which was discontinued starting around 740 and was completely gone by the 9th cent. Thus, the original ms. of **B** was probably from the 7th or 8th cent.