

V

The Old Tradition: Courtly Poetry

So far, we have dealt with verse that reflects the traditional lore of oldest *Scop* or England. Such verse was popular in that it belonged to the people as a *Gleeman* whole. We come now to verse more personal in character and more limited in aim. At an early date Germanic kings began to keep professional poets, with functions not wholly unlike those of the poet laureate or official poet of later times. Among the English a court poet was called a *scop* or *gleeman*? We are lucky enough to have in *Widsith* an early English poem on the Widsith scop.² From this poem (named after its hero) we learn something of the career and the repertory of an ideal gleeman, creature of a seventh-century poet's fancy.³ The poem consists of a prologue (9 lines), a speech by Widsith (125 lines), and an epilogue (9 lines). The speech is built up round three old thulas and a thula-fragment (47 lines in all; see above, p. 32), which the author puts in his hero's mouth; to these are added 78 lines of the author's own composition.⁴ Structurally the speech falls into five parts: an introduction, three fits or main divisions, and a conclusion. Each fit comprises (1) a thula and (2) passages added by the author.⁵ The thulas were put in Widsith's mouth to bring out his knowledge of history, ethnology, and heroic story. Several of the added passages serve the same purpose. Other passages bring out the hero's professional experience and first-hand information (as do the second and third thulas); more particularly, they emphasize his success in his chosen calling. Thus, we are told of his professional performances :

When Scilling and I, with sure voice, as one,
made music, sang before our mighty lord,
the sound of harp and song rang out;
then many a man, mindful of splendor,
those who well could know, with words spoke and said
that they never heard a nobler song, (lines 103-8)

¹ See L. F. Anderson, *The Anglo-Saxon Scop* (Toronto, 1903).

² Recent edition: K. Malone, *Widsith* (1936). See also Lascelles Abercrombie, "Widsith as Art," *Sewanee Rev.*, XLVI (1938), 124-128. The edition of R. W. Chambers (*Widsith*, Cambridge, 19x2) will always remain the best presentation of nineteenth-century Continental Widsithian scholarship. This scholarship is now largely out of date, because of the great advances made during the present century in our understanding of the poem; for crucial particulars, see K. Malone, *JEGP*, xxxviii (1939), 226-228, XLIII (1944), 451, and XLV (1946), 147-152. But Chambers' book still has more than historical interest.

³ For recent speculations about the author of *Widsith*, see especially W. H. French, *PMLA*, LX (1945)-623-630.

⁴ Or 74, if lines 14-17 be rejected, as they commonly are.

⁵ For a fuller analysis, see K. Malone, *ELH*, v (1938), 49-66.

Even the critics thought highly of Widsith's art! From this passage we learn, incidentally, that the scop sang his poems to the accompaniment of the harp. Whether Scilling was Widsith's harpist or a fellow scop (in which case the performance was a duet) we cannot tell; it has even been conjectured, indeed, that Scilling was the name of Widsith's harp.⁶ The author makes it clear that his hero was composer as well as performer (though he would hardly have understood the distinction we make between these offices). Widsith sings in mead-hall about his own experiences (lines 54-56), and he composes and sings a poem in praise of his patroness, Queen Ealhild (lines 99-102). We may safely presume that an actual scop would do as much for the kings who made him welcome at their courts and gave him gifts. The relationship between a scop and his royal patron comes out in the epilogue of our poem:⁷

As gleemen go, guided by fortune,
as they pass from place to place among men,
their wants they tell, speak the word of thanks,
south or north find someone always
full of song-lore, free in giving,
who is fain to heighten his favor with the worthy,
do noble deeds, till his day is ended,
life and light together; below he wins praise,
he leaves under heaven a lasting fame, (lines 135-43)

The word of thanks is to be taken as a poem in honor of the prince, whose fame could hardly have been expected to last unless celebrated in song; poetry was then the only historical record. We conclude that the scop had the important function of immortalizing his patron by singing his praises. These poems of praise, handed down by word of mouth, and making part of the repertory of many a gleeman, were meant to keep the prince's name and deeds alive in the minds of men forever.

But the scop had another function, older and even more important: that of entertainer. In *Beowulf* we get descriptions of the entertainment. From these we gather that a gleeman's performance was short, and made part of a celebration which included amusements of other kinds. Thus, the royal scop sang one morning out of doors, in an interval between horse-races (864-918); the day before, he had sung at a feast in the hall (489-498). A given song might deal with contemporaries (witness the gleeman who celebrated, the morning after the deed, Beowulf's triumph over Grendel), or it might deal with figures of the past. But always, so far as we know, its theme was high and its tone earnest. The entertainment which the scop had to offer made demands on the audience; it could not be enjoyed without keen participation in thought and feeling; there was little about it restful

⁶ W. J. Sedgefield, *MLR*, xxvi (1931), 75. In humbler circles the performer played his own accompaniment, as we learn from Bede's story of Cardmon.

⁷ The metrical translations of *Widsith* 103-108 and 135-143 are taken, by permission, from K. Malone, *Ten Old English Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941).

or relaxing. The scop held his hearers because he and they were at one: schooled and bound in the traditions of a poetry that gave voice to their deepest loyalties and highest resolves. The theme that moved them most was the theme of sacrifice, dominant in the old poems and strong in the life which these poems reflected and glorified. King and dright⁸ made a company of warriors held together by the bond of sacrificial friendship. The king shared his goods with the dright and took them into his very household; the dright shielded him with their bodies on the field of battle, and if he fell they fought on, to victory or death, deeming it base to give ground or flee when their lord lay slain. The famous speech of Byrhtwold in *Maldon* tells us more than pages of exposition could:^{9 10}

*King and
Drigh*

Thought shall be the harder, heart the keener,
mood shall be the more, as our might lessens.
Here lies our earl, all hewn to earth,
the good one, on the ground: He will regret it always,
the one who thinks to turn from this war-play now.
My life has been long. Leave I will not,
but beside my lord I will sink to earth,
I am minded to die by the man so dear, (lines 312-19)

But the theme of sacrifice need not take the form which it takes in *Maldon*. And other themes might be used, as we have seen. Whatever the theme, the old poems had strength in them to stir the heart and steel the mood. The scop sang of heroes and called his hearers to the heroic life. He held out no false hopes: heroism leads to hardship, wounds, and death. But though all must go down in defeat at last, the fight is worth making: the hero may hope for a good name among men. The value set upon the esteem of others, and in particular upon fame, marks this philosophy social and secular (heathen is hardly the word). The gleemen who taught it in song were upholding the traditional morality of the English people, a way of life known to us from the pages of Tacitus. The entertainment that the scops gave was *ei blot for lyst*.TM The old poems, and the new ones composed in the same spirit, kept alive for hundreds of years after the conversion to Christianity the old customs, conventions, and ideals of conduct. In so doing they did not stand alone, of course; many other things in English life made for conservatism. But they had a great and worthy part to play in the preservation of the nobler features of our Germanic heritage. It must not be thought, however, that the scops were conservators and nothing more. It was they who made the important stylistic shift from pre-classical to classical; the clerics who produced most of the classical poetry extant simply carried on and elaborated a style the basic features of which had already been set by the scops. Moreover, the personal themes which the scops favored,

⁸ Gomitatus, body of retainers.

⁹ From K. Malone, *Ten Old English Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), by permission.

¹⁰ "Not merely for pleasure," the old motto of the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen.

courtly though their setting and heroic though their appeal, opened the way to the lyricism of *Wife's Lament* and *Eadtvacer*.

Deor

Only one poem definitely attributed to a specific scop has come down to us. This poem, commonly called *Deor* after its reputed author, is recorded in the Exeter Book.¹¹ The *terminus ad quern* of its composition is therefore A.D. 980 or thereabouts; a *terminus a quo* will be set below. The poem belongs to the first stage of the run-on style. It is 42 lines long, and falls into seven sections of varying length. The sections are all mutually independent; each is complete in itself and could perfectly well stand as a separate poem, without change. Nevertheless the seven sections make a well-knit whole, as we shall see. We quote the last section, where the reputed author speaks in the first person:

That I will say, of myself to speak,
That the Heodenings had me a while for scop,
the king held me dear; Deor they called me.
For many winters my master was kind,
my hap was high, till Heorrenda now,
a good man in song, was given the land
that my lord before had lent to me.
That now is gone; this too will go. (lines 35-42)

The last line is the so-called formula of consolation. It tells us (1) that the misfortune set forth in the other lines of the section has now been overcome or outlived, no matter how; and (2) that the misfortune, whatever it may be, of the present moment will pass likewise. The moral is: bear your troubles in patience; they cannot last forever. In the section quoted, the author mentions a misfortune of his own; in the first five sections, he mentions as many pieces of adversity that befell others; each section gives us a new victim (or victims), but ends with the same formula of consolation. The various misfortunes taken up were drawn from Germanic story. This parallelism in theme, source, and treatment links the sections and gives unity to the poem.

The sixth section, however, goes its own way. It reads,¹²

The man that is wretched sits bereft of gladness,
his soul darkens, it seems to him
the number of his hardships is never-ending;
he can bethink him, then, that through this world
God in his wisdom gives and withholds;
to many a man he metes out honor,
fame and fortune; their fill, to some, of woes, (lines 28-34)

¹¹ The only separate edition is that of K. Malone (1933). See also K. Malone, *Acta Phil. Scand.*, ix (1934). 76-84, *English Studies*, xix (1937)- 193-199, and *MP*, XL (1942). 1-18; L. Whitbread, *MLN*, LV (1940). 204-207, LVII (1943)- 367-369* LX« 0947)- 15;20.

¹² The metrical translations of *Deor* 28-34 and 35-42 are taken, by permission, from K. Malone, *Ten Old English Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941).

This poetry is timeless and nameless. The victim of misfortune stands for mankind in general, and his troubles are left unspecified. The consolation offered has a correspondingly generalized character. We are told (1) that woe, like weal, comes from God, who knows what is best for us, and (2) that our troubles are of this world (and therefore sure to come to an end). The marked differences between this section and the others have led many to reject it as interpolated. But it sums up admirably the theme of the poem and seems appropriate enough as a concluding passage. We incline to the opinion that it was composed for that purpose. If so, the section with which the poem now ends is best taken as an afterthought on the part of the poet. Certainly it differs from the first five sections in that it is no allusion but a plain summary account of the particular misfortune with which it deals.

Deor bears no likeness to the poems of praise that we hear about in *Beowulf* and *Widsith*, and cannot be reckoned typical of the gleeman's art.

The last section comes under the head of personal experience, however, and verses dealing with such experiences are credited to *Widsith*, as we have seen. The theme of *Deor*, then, does not lie outside a scop's traditional range, though the treatment shows marked originality and the poem therefore makes difficulties for historians of literature, who can find no pigeon-hole into which it will fit. If the reputed author actually composed the poem, the date of composition could hardly be set later than the sixth century, and only one section of his poem (the last) has survived: a sixth-century poet could not have composed the general section with its Christian coloring, nor yet the first five sections, which belong to a later stage of English poetic tradition, a stage marked by the use of German sources (compare *Waldere* and *Genesis B*). Most recent commentators have been unwilling to take the consequences of a sixth-century dating, and therefore make the scop *Deor* into a literary fiction, or, if historical, into a mere mouthpiece of the poet, not the poet himself.¹³ ¹⁴ The problems involved are too formidable for discussion here. It will be enough to say that *Deor* as it stands cannot plausibly be dated earlier than the ninth century and may have been composed as late as the tenth.

Another poem composed by a scop is that to which scholars have given Finn the name *The Fight at Finn's Borough*TM ~~*Finnor*~~ short. Only a fragment of this poem has survived: 46 lines and 2 half-lines. If the whole came to about 300 lines,¹⁵ ¹⁶ then we have somewhat less than a sixth of the text; if the poem was longer, the part we have is proportionately smaller. Our fragmentary text of uncertain date is known to us only from the faulty

¹³ R. Imelmann, *Porschungen zur ae. Poesie* (1920), pp. 254-257, contends that the *Deor* poet was familiar with the ninth eclogue of Virgil and gave himself a pen-name in imitation of Virgil.

¹⁴ The text of Hickes reads *Pinnsburuh* (one word), but this can hardly be right; see F. P. Magoun, Jr., *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, LXXVII (1940), 65-66. The poem is included in most editions of *Beowulf* by way of appendix. B. Dickins also includes it in his *Runic and Heroic Poems* (Cambridge, 1915).

¹⁶ For this bold and doubtful conjecture, see F. Klaeber, *Beowulf* (fled., 1936), p. 236.

transcription of Hickes;¹⁶ the manuscript leaf from which he took it has vanished. A poem which dealt with the same events (possibly the very poem of which we have a fragment) was known to the *Beowulf* poet, who calls it a "gleeman's song" (1160a). The author of *Beowulf* does not give us the text of this song, in whole or in part, but from his own treatment of the theme (1063-11593) we learn something of the events on which the song was based. In style the Finn episode of *Beowulf* is consonant (for obvious artistic reasons) with the poem of which it makes a part, and differs correspondingly from the Finn fragment, which belongs to the early stage of the run-on style (see above, p. 27). Episode and fragment are not directly comparable in plot, since they deal with different stages of the action. It is customary to reconstruct the plot of the old tale by putting fragment and episode together. Unluckily the beginning of the action nowhere survives, and can be reconstructed only by conjecture. In the following summary of the plot, the conjectural items are bracketed:

King Hnxf of the Danes, with 60 followers, is in Frisia, [on a visit to] his sister Hildeburh, wife of King Finn of the Frisians. [Trouble arises between hosts and guests. The Danes take possession of a hall at Finn's seat, possibly Finn's own hall, and make ready to defend themselves. A Danish sentry (or wakeful warrior) rouses King Hnaef before dawn to report that he sees a light outside and to ask what it means.] Hnaff replies that an attack upon the hall is about to begin? He rouses his men and they take their appointed places to await the onslaught. The Danes hold the doors of the hall without loss to themselves for five days. *Here the fragment ends and the episode begins.* The Danes go over to the offensive [presumably in a sortie] but lose heavily, being reduced to a *wealaf* "remnant of disaster"; King Hnsef himself falls in the struggle. The Frisians too have had severe losses, including Finn's own son. The fight is a stalemate and Hengest, the spokesman for the *wealaf* and its informal leader, comes to terms with Finn. The Danes swear allegiance to Finn and are guaranteed the same rights and privileges that Finn's other followers have. In particular, anyone who taunts them for following their lord's slayer is to be put to the sword. The bodies of the fallen on both sides are then burned with appropriate rites. Life at Finn's court on the new basis continues the winter through. With spring, travel by sea again becomes possible, and Hengest is eager to go but his thoughts are not so much on the voyage itself as on the vengeance he would like to wreak on the "children of the Eotens" [i.e., the Frisians]. Eventually Guthlaf and Oslaf [presumably with the rest of the *wealaf*] get away by sea [to Denmark] and whet their compatriots at home against Finn. A Danish fleet-army attacks and slays Finn at his stronghold and bears off much booty to the ships. Queen Hildeburh goes back to her native land with the Danish victors. We are not told what became of Hengest.

This is not the place to discuss the many problems of fragment and episode.¹⁷ We limit ourselves to the literary treatment of the theme. Both

¹⁶ G. Hickes, *Ling. Veit. Sept. Thesaurus* . . . (1705). 1-192-193.

¹⁷ For recent discussions, see K. Malone, *ELH*, x (1943). 257-284; *MA*, xm (1944). 88-91; *RES*, xxi (1945). 126-127; and *MP*, XLIII (1945). 83-85, together with the references to other studies there given.

fightings are mentioned in the episode, but obviously the interest of the *Beowulf* poet centered, not in the fighting but in the tragic situation of Hildeburh and Hengest during the period between the two battles. The hapless queen makes a pathetic figure; husband and brother wage war against each other, and son and brother fall, fighting on opposite sides. Hers is a woman's tragedy; she can do nothing to keep her nearest and dearest from killing each other. The poet lays stress on her sorrow and her innocence. She did not deserve the fate that befell her.

The tragedy of Hengest (and of the *wealaf*¹⁸ as a whole, for whom he stands) strikes deeper. The Danes not only made terms with their lord's slayer; they actually entered that slayer's service, became his men. This debarred them from carrying out their last and most solemn obligation to Hnsef: that of avenging his death. Indeed, they were now honor-bound to defend Finn against attack. The poet pictures Hengest in a kind of mental rebellion against his unhappy fate. He is eager to see the last of Frisia, but above all he yearns to wreak that vengeance on the Frisians which he cannot honorably wreak. We are told nothing more about him, and we need not speculate on his further activities. The tragedy of the *wealaf* as a whole, however, seems to have been resolved by the voyage of Guthlaf and Oslaf to Denmark. Though the Danes in Finn's service could not honorably turn upon him themselves, they could incite their fellow Danes to do so; such was the legalistic ethics prevalent in those days among the Germanic tribesmen. Whether Finn let the *wealaf* go that summer or whether they took advantage of an opportunity to desert, we have no means of knowing. In any case Guthlaf and Oslaf could hardly have made the voyage to Denmark without a crew, and the *wealaf* was the only crew available.

What of the gleeman's song on which the episode is based? Did its author see eye to eye with the *Beowulf* poet? Here we must go by the fragment. From this it would seem that the scop did not dwell on the early events and was hurrying on to something else. Hnaef's answer when he saw the light outside,^{18 19}

Here day dawns not, here a dragon flies not,
and here the horns of this hall burn not,
but here they bear forward, birds of prey croak,
the greycoat yells, the gory spear shouts,
shield answers shaft. Now shines this moon,
wandering, on the earth; now woe-deeds arise,
that will bring to a head this hatred between peoples.
But waken now, warriors mine,
take up your shields, think only of fighting,
join battle in front, be bold-hearted (lines 3-12),

¹⁸ Danish survivors.

¹⁹ The metrical rendering of lines 3-12 of the *Finn* fragment is taken, by permission, from K. Malone, *Ten Old English Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941).

the manning of the doors (13-17), the challenge and reply with which the fight begins (18-27), are done with breadth and leisure, but then the tempo changes. The fight between challenger and defender, though elaborately introduced, is not reported in detail; the scop finds it enough to tell us that Garulf, the challenger (Finn's man), lost his life, and even this information is not given separately, but is incorporated in a brief description of the sounds and sights that go with battle (28-36). The course of the fight for five days is then disposed of in six lines (37-42) taken up chiefly with praise of Hnsef's following. The tempo slows again with the last lines of the fragment (43-48), which report, in indirect discourse, a dialogue between Hnxf and a wounded Dane. We surmise that the crisis of the battle is at hand, but here the fragment breaks off. The *Beowulf* episode makes clear the further course of the struggle. The Danes took the offensive after their long and successful defensive stand. The object of their sortie may have been to win through to the shore and take ship for home, or perhaps they had run short of water and needed a fresh supply. Whatever their reason for sallying forth, the sortie cost them dear: their king and many others fell and the company of sixty was reduced to a mere *wealaf* of, say, twenty or thirty men. As total destruction loomed before them, one of the retainers, Hengest by name, took command, not by inherited right but as a born leader who rose to the emergency. Under his leadership the Danes rallied, fought Finn to a standstill, and regained the shelter of the hall, where they held out against all the forces Finn could bring to the attack. In all likelihood the major part of the old lay was devoted to this stirring, heroic struggle, with Hengest as hero. The expression "Hengest himself" in line 17 of the fragment points to the centrality of this character in the poem, and his actual centrality in the *Beowulf* episode completes the demonstration. But we have no reason to think that the fighting proper was played down in the lay as it is in *Beowulf*. On the contrary, the lay first of all told the story of the battle, though of course the scop's interest was not in military tactics but in heroic deeds.

Hengest's heroism, however real, was far from ideal, as the *Beowulf* episode shows. The greatness of the man was marred by a tragic flaw. He and his fellows of the *wealaf*, rather than throw away their lives round the dead body of Hnsef, as the code prescribed, chose to live on, and even to enter the service of their lord's slayer. Why should a scop celebrate such a man in song? One may surmise that, the lay of Hengest was first composed and sung by a scop in service at the Kentish court. If the Hengest of story was the man who began the English settlement of Britain (and many scholars have been of this opinion),²⁰ the scop of the kings of Kent might be expected to sing his virtues and to overlook or minimize his faults. And it is not without weight that the hero Hengest appears in English but not in Continental story.

²⁰
pp. 60-61.

See especially E. Bjorkman, *Studien über die Eigennamen im Beowulf* (Halle, 1920),

The famous English scholar Alcuin in a letter of the year 797 (No. 124 *Lost* in Duemmler's edition)²¹ bears incidental witness to the existence of a song *Songs* about Ingeld, the unfortunate king of the Heathobards mentioned in *Beowulf* and *Widsith*. This king sacrificed honor, love, and life itself in a fruitless attempt to avenge a defeat which the Danes had inflicted upon his tribe.²² From allusions in extant literature and elsewhere we may infer with certainty that many other songs composed by scopos were once current in England, though their texts have not come down to us. Sometimes the allusions give us a good idea of the events celebrated in an old poem, but often we must go to Iceland or Denmark or Germany for the story, and often we search in vain for further information. It would be interesting and worth while to make a list of songs once sung by English gleemen, but now lost. We find it safer, however, to list some of the heroes that were celebrated in these lost songs. In so doing, we begin with the Goths. The Gothic heroes fall into three groups: early, middle, and late. The early heroes are those mentioned as such by Jordanes, the sixth-century historian of the Goths, who tells us²³ that their deeds were celebrated in song. Three of these heroes, Emerca, Fridla, and Wudga (Widia), find place in *Widsith*; presumably they became known to the English through the scopos. We add King Eastgota and his son Unwen to the early group; they are later in date than the ancient heroes in Jordanes' list, but lived too early (third century) to be put with the middle group, and the *Widsith* poet associates them with Emerca and Fridla. The chief hero of the middle group, and of the Goths in general, is King Ermanric, who figures largely in *Widsith*, and is mentioned in *Beowulf* and *Deor*. He flourished in the fourth century. To the middle group also belong Wulfhere and Wyrnhere, mentioned in *Widsith* as leaders of the Vistula Goths in their warfare against the Huns; these heroes presumably flourished c. A.D. 400. The case of Hama makes difficulties; in *Widsith* he goes with the early hero Wudga, while in *Beowulf* he goes with Ermanric. In all likelihood *Widsith* gives us the older tradition here, while the *Beowulf* allusion reflects the beginning of a process carried through in later times, a process whereby the gigantic figure of Ermanric drew various Gothic heroes into his circle, irrespective of chronology.²⁴

²¹ *Monumenta Germaniae Historica ... Epistolarum*, iv (Bcrolini, 1895). 183. The passage may be translated thus: "The words of God are to be read at a corporate priestly meal. There it is proper to hear a reader, not a harper; sermons of the fathers, not songs of the heathen. What [has] Ingeld [to do] with Christ? Narrow is the house: and it cannot hold both. The heavenly king will not have to do with so-called kings, heathen and damned, because that king reigns in heaven, world without end, while the heathen one, damned, laments in hell. . . ." See also No. 21, *ed. cit.*, p. 59: *audiantur in domibus vestris legentes, non ludentes in platea* "readers in your houses, not players in the street are to be heard."

²² The tale of Ingeld is the subject of a *Beowulf* episode (lines 2014-20693) and a *Widsith* passage (lines 47-49). See K. Malone, *MP*, xxvii (1930), 257-276; *Anglia*, LXIII (1939), 105-112; *GR*, xiv (1939), 235-257; *ELH*, vn (1940), 39-44; *JEGP*, xxxix (1940), 76-92; and *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown* (1940), pp. 1-22.

²³ *Getica*, cap. v.

²⁴ Monograph: C. Brady, *The Legends of Ermanaric* (Berkeley, 1943); reviewed by K. Malone, *MLN*, LIX (1944), 183-188 and *JEGP*, XLIII (1944), 449-453; by P. W. Souers, *Speculum*, xx (1945), 502-507.

The only Gothic hero of the late period is Theodric, the conqueror of Italy; he is mentioned in *Wald ere*?²⁵

Three Burgundian heroes are mentioned in *Widsith*: Gifiga, GuShere and Gislhere. The fall of GuShere in battle against the Huns may well have been the subject of an English song. The Frankish hero Sigemund, son of Wads, together with Sigemund's nephew Fitela, was celebrated in song by a scop, according to the *Beowulf* poet, who gives us (lines 874-897) some idea of the deeds celebrated. But Sigemund's famous son Sigfrid or Sigurd seems to have been unknown to the English, and the tale of the Waelsings was not combined with that of the Burgundians as it was in the Icelandic *Völsungasaga* and the German *Nibelungenlied*. The Frankish king Theodric, eldest son of Clovis, appears twice in *Widsith* and his rule over the Maerings (the Visigoths of Auvergne?) is mentioned in *Deor*. He answers to the Hugdietrich of German story.^{25 26} The Langobards held a high place in English song, if we may judge by *Widsith*, where no less than six Langobardish heroes appear: the ancient kings ^Egelmund and Hun(d)gar, of whom a tale is told by Paulus Diaconus, the historian of the Langobards;²⁷ another ancient king Scaefa; two later kings, Eadwine and ^Elfwine, the Audoin and Alboin of the historians; and a king or kemp Elsa otherwise unknown. Hagen, King of the Rugians, appears in *Widsith* 21, where he is coupled with a certain Henden, King of the Glomman. The line may well be an allusion to the Hild story, in which father and lover fight about the lady.²⁸ Wada, King of the Haelsings, was still sung in Chaucer's day, and his inclusion in PKft/krM indicates that the scops sang him too. Many Scandinavian heroes, besides, figured in English song. We learn of them chiefly in *Beowulf*, the major Old English poetic monument. Only one English hero found much favor with the scops, it would seem, but they made amends by composing two songs in his honor. King Offa, who ruled the English in Sleswick, before their migration to Britain, won fame both as a fighter and as a wife-tamer. His fight is told of in *Widsith* (38-44); his marriage, in *Beowulf* (1933-1962). At the opposite extreme from Offa stands King Attila of the Huns, the only non-Germanic hero whom the scops celebrated in song. We end our list with Weland the smith, the only mythological character included (unless Wada and Scaefa are mythical, as some scholars think).²⁹

The heroes listed have much in common. First of all, their nationality is Germanic; even Attila may be looked upon as Germanic by adoption. For

²⁵ If the Beadeca of *Widsith* is rightly identified with King Totila, we have another Gothic hero of the latest or Italian period.

²⁶ See K. Malone, in *Acta Phil. Scand.*, ix (1934), 76-84, and *ESL*, LXXIII (1939), 180-184.

²⁷ The tale answers, in part, to the "HelgakviSur" of the *Elder Edda*; see K. Malone, *Amer. Jour. Philology*, xlvii (1926), 319-346, and *MLQ*, I (1940), 39-42.

²⁸ For the various versions of this and other tales referred to here, see M. G. Clarke, *Sidelights on Teutonic History in the Migration Period* (Cambridge, 1911).

²⁹ Many other names might be added (e.g., those of eponyms and others from the royal genealogies), but we have given enough to serve the purposes of this history.

many centuries the English had enjoyed political independence, but culturally they still belonged to a commonwealth of nations, the Germania of their Continental forefathers. Within that commonwealth they were at home, and felt the Goth, the Swede, the Langobard alike to be cultural fellow-countrymen. Secondly, the heroes all flourished in a period thought of as heroic in some special or exclusive sense, though without definition. This period ended with TElfwine, the Langobardish conqueror of Italy. When it began we cannot say with precision. The heroic period answers roughly to the great migration of the Germanic tribes in the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, a migration which overthrew the Roman Empire in the west and ushered in the Middle Ages. For the Romans and the Romanized peoples of western Europe this period was one of disaster; for the Germanic tribes it was a period of glorious achievement, a heroic age indeed. Thirdly, the heroes all fought their way to glory: their reputation was based on prowess in battle. A king might win martial fame, it is true, by good leadership or good luck in warfare, but personal courage remained the chief virtue of every hero, be he king or kemp. Along with courage a king must have generosity; his dright, loyalty to him. The two virtues went together: a niggardly king could not win or keep loyal followers, and faithless followers could not expect generous gifts from their lord. The king gained riches through inheritance and war; he gave land, weapons, and other valuables away in order to build up a large and loyal body of followers, by whose help he could win new victories and fill or swell his hoard. A dright was recruited from the whole Germanic world; the fame of a generous and victorious king would draw to his court many a *wrecca* "adventurer" from many a tribe. The king's fellow-tribesmen nevertheless made the backbone of his following. Fourthly, the heroes nearly always belonged to the upper classes of society; they could and did boast of distinguished fathers and forefathers. The society in which they lived, however, aristocratic though it was, had hardly begun that differentiation of classes so marked in the modern world: high and low thought and acted much alike; they had much the same cultural background, viz., that of the peasant. One may compare the peasant culture reflected in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, a way of life simple and dignified, with much form and ceremony upon occasion, but with many freedoms (e.g., boasting) that good manners now forbid.

Much more might be said about these heroes and the songs in which their heroic deeds found record, but we must go on to the tenth century, when nameless followers of the tradition of the scop composed two poems of praise which posterity has found worthy of admiration. These poems deal with contemporary events, not with events of the heroic age, and so far as we can tell they give us accurate historical information. They illustrate, therefore, a feature not always found in works of literary art, but characteristic of the tradition which the scop set going: the poet as historian.

Brunanburg Under the year 937 in the *Old English Annals* is recorded a poem of 73 lines in praise of King Athelstan of England and his brother Edmund.³⁰ The occasion for the poem was a battle which the brothers fought and won “at Bruna’s borough (stronghold),” against an invading force of Scots and Vikings, led by Kings Constantine and Anlaf. The poet, after praising the brothers and telling of their foes’ losses on the field of battle, goes on to praise the English army:³¹

The West-Saxons

pressed on in force all the day long,
 pushed ahead after the hostile army,
 hewed the fleeing down from behind fiercely,
 with mill-sharp swords. The Mercians withheld
 the hard handplay no whit from a man
 of those that with Anlaf came over the waves,
 by ship invaded our shores from abroad,
 warriors doomed to die in warplay. ... (lines 20-28) .

He continues with the flight of Constantine and Anlaf, told with relish and elaborated with passages of exultation. The last section (lines 57-73) falls into three parts: (1) the triumphant homecoming of the brothers; (2) the fate of the bodies of the slain; and (3) the following historical comment:

So vast a slaughter
 of men never yet was made before this
 on this island of ours with the edge of the sword
 (if we take for true what is told us in books
 or by the old and wise), since from the east hither
 the Angles and Saxons came up, to these shores,
 over broad waters sought Britain out,
 the keen warsmiths, overcame the Welshmen,
 the worshipful kemps, and won the land, (lines 65-73)

The poem is done with high technical skill. The transitions in particular show the poet’s mastery of his medium. Noteworthy, too, is a nationalism which goes beyond loyalty to the king’s person or to the reigning dynasty. The reference to books, alongside oral tradition, marks the poet a clerk rather than a scop and his poem a writing rather than a speaking.³² The verses belong, however, to the tradition of the scops in matter and manner. Like the scops, the author is not concerned to describe the course of the battle in any detail; he has made a poem of praise which happens to be a battlepiece as well because victory served as an occasion for praise. If this poem falls short of greatness, brilliant though the poet’s performance, its

³⁰ The best edition of *Brunanburg* is that of A. Campbell (1938).

³¹ The metrical translations from *Brunanburg* here quoted are taken, by permission, from K. Malone, *Ten Old English Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941).

³² Reference to sources is of course a conventional feature, in writings and speakings alike.

occasion must take the blame, in part at least. Defeat, not victory, found the old poets at their best.³⁸

Such a defeat was the battle of Maldon, and the poem so named rises Maldon magnificently to the tragic occasion. The battle was fought in the year 991 at the estuary of the Blackwater (or Panta) in Essex near Maldon. The hero of the poem is Byrhtnoth, Earl of Essex, leader of the English fyrd (militia); the poet does not name the leaders of the Viking invaders. The text of the poem, preserved in the Oxford MS Rawlinson B 203 (eighteenth century),³⁴ has come down to us incomplete: it wants both beginning and end. The beginning presumably told of the arrival of the Viking fleet and the measures for defense taken by the Earl. We have no way of knowing what form the end took; possibly the author left his work unfinished. It seems unlikely that any great proportion of the poem has been lost: the 324*4 lines that survive give us the meat of the matter. *Maldon* (like *Brunanburg*) was presumably composed shortly after the event which it commemorates: the fall of Byrhtnoth and his dright in battle against the Danes at Maldon. The later differs from the earlier poem markedly—much more than the difference in theme would lead one to expect. We illustrate with the transitions. The *Maldon* poet leans heavily on the connective *pa* “then.” In *Brunanburg* this connective does not occur (unless line 53 gives us an instance); the earlier poet does his structural dovetailing so deftly that he must shun a crude device like *pa*—it would spoil the finished effect he aims at. But such deftness would defeat the purpose of the later poet, who is telling a tragic tale with high simplicity; he gains his effects the better for his loose composition.⁸⁵ The action of *Maldon* divides naturally into two parts: the course of the battle before (1-184) and after (185-325) the fall of Byrhtnoth. Another two-fold division, equally natural, is that made in terms of the hero's generalship; here the turning-point comes at line 96, when the Earl has made the mistake of withdrawing the holders of the

⁸³ No less than 13 other poems, occasional in theme, were included in the *Old English Annals*. Seven of these deal with events of the tenth century; six, with events of the eleventh. Some of them resemble *Brunanburg* in that they are panegyrics, done in correct classical verse. They lack the brilliance and fervor of *Brunanburg*, however, and their shortness gives them something of an annalistic character. The other poems incorporated in the *Annals* have a certain interest because of their departure from the classical tradition in style and technic; one notes in particular the growing use of rime and the growing freedom in alliteration (e.g., *st* need not be an alliterative unit). Their artistic worth is negligible. Some of the 13 poems were presumably composed or quoted by the annalists themselves (more precisely, by the original compilers of the annalistic material sent round to the monasteries); others seem to be interpolations, or insertions made by readers. Note K. Jost's demonstration [*Anglia*, XLVH [1923], 105-123] that two of the poems were composed by Archbishop Wulfstan of York. Such compositions led to the metrical chronicles of Middle English times.

³⁴ Cotton Otho A XII, the old MS in which *Maldon* found record, was badly burned in the fire of 1731; only fragments remain. Luckily J. Elphinston had copied the poem several years earlier. His copy, now in the Rawlinson collection at Oxford, has served directly or indirectly, as the basis for all editions of the poem. The latest and best separate edition of *Maldon*, that of E. V. Gordon (London, 1937), is based directly on Elphinston's transcript.

** The same striving for naturalness comes out in the *Maldon* poet's preference for the early stage of the run-on style; and in his departures from the rigorously classical versification and technic favored by the *Brunanburg* poet. The freedoms found in *Maldon*, be it added, mark no breakdown of the classical tradition; they exemplify, rather, normal and proper variation within that tradition.

ford and letting the Vikings cross the river. The two schemes of division may be combined into a threefold scheme: first the English have the upper hand (1-95); after Byrhtnoth's mistake in generalship but before his fall, the issue of the battle hangs in the balance (96-184); after his fall the English lose the day (185-325). The hero's fatal error grew out of his martial spirit, to which the foe cunningly and successfully appealed. Here lies the tragic flaw which made possible the catastrophe. But it was the flight of the cowardly Godric, mounted on the hero's horse, that precipitated and ensured defeat for the English. Others followed his example (many misled by his mount into thinking it was the Earl himself that fled) and the faithful retainers who stood their ground were left in hopeless case. To their stand lines 202-325 are devoted, over a third of the poem. But this proportion should not mislead us. The thane who dies fighting to the last by his lord's body makes a noble figure, a figure that the scopps loved to draw, but he is not a hero in his own right. His devotion typifies that of the dright as a whole, and serves to exalt the lord who won such loyalty. Earl Byrhtnoth is the hero of *Maldon*. But the poet does more than glorify a hero. He glorifies the institution: the relationship of lord and dright that gives rise to the heroism which he celebrates. The poem belongs to the tradition of the scopps, and most of it might be put back into heathen times with little or no change in word or thought. Only one truly Christian passage occurs, the prayer of the dying hero:

I thank thee, O God, Governor of peoples,
for all the blessings that on earth were mine.
Now, mild Master, I most have need
that thou grant to my ghost the grace of heaven,
that my soul have leave to seek thee out,
depart in peace, pass into thy keeping,
Prince of angels. I pray it of thee
that the fiends of hell afflict her not.⁸⁶ (lines 173-80)

These moving words befit the hero, who, as we know from history, was a man of deep Christian piety. He and the cleric who composed the poem in his praise held warfare righteous if in a good cause, and what better cause could be found than defense of church and state, hearth and home against heathen invaders? Our poet upheld and glorified the heroic traditions of his forefathers with a clear conscience; he felt no conflict (in Byrhtnoth's case, at least) between these traditions and Christianity.

The heroic point of view, and the stylistic conventions that go with it, are manifest in the poet's account of the fighting. The battle in *Maldon*, like the battles in the *Iliad*, takes the form of single combats between champions; the common soldiers are ignored. Over a fourth of the poem is made up of speeches. Contrast *Brunanburg*, where neither single combats nor

⁸⁶ Taken, by permission, from K. Malone, *Ten Old English Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941).

speeches occur. Both poems are properly described as poems of praise, but they evidently represent different species of this genus. *Maldon* bears some likeness to the epic, *Brunanburg* to the panegyric of the ancients. The differences, however, are too great to admit of southern inspiration in either case. We must presume, rather, a differentiation within the tradition of the scops.