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**“Widsith came to talk”:
Preservation of the Scop within Old English Poetry**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
English.

By
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Under the mentorship of Dr. Carol Jamison

ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the role of the Old English scop in the context of the transition from orality to written works in Old English society. Scops, the storytellers, historians, and moral authorities within Old English society, utilized oral-formulaic composition to share the Germanic poetic tradition with the largely illiterate population. When Christian missionaries arrived in England and introduced the written language of Latin, the necessity of the scop gradually dissipated; many stories were written down in Latin and the authority on moral and historical teachings fell to the church. Orality continued in many regards, but the occupation of the scop was no longer as prominent. However, the legacy of the scop was preserved through the written works that followed. In this thesis, I discuss the historical role of the scop and the transition from orality to written works, analyze the scop as a character in poems such as *Beowulf*, “Widsith,” and “Deor,” and pose questions regarding the compositional choices of Christian scribes.

Keywords: *scop*, *runes*, *oral-formulaic theory*, *Beowulf*, “*Widsith*,” “*Deor*”

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From bringing people together in the mead hall to boasting heroic epics, the scop was an integral part of Old English life.¹ These traveling storytellers kept the Germanic poetic traditions alive through oral stories and lyrical songs in a highly illiterate society, and acted as the authority on historical and moral matters. When an effective writing system arrived with Roman Catholic missionaries in the late sixth century and an educational renaissance took hold in the ninth century, the role of the scop began to change. With the increase in written texts and the shift of authority on moral and historical matters to the church, the profession of the scop was no longer as prominent within Old English society. This is not to say that the desire for orality ended in any regard; other forms of preserving narratives just became increasingly common. Instead of the wandering storytellers performing their tales aloud to courts and lords, the transition from orality to written works introduced scops as characters within works such as *Beowulf*, “Widsith,” and “Deor.” While the profession of the scop slowly disappeared, their legacy was preserved within their poetry itself.

Runes and Orality

Prior to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and the written language that came with it, the sole method of writing for the Old English was runes. The term *rune* comes from the Old English word *ryn*, meaning “furrow,” since the act of plowing characters into wood or stone left small trenches in the material (Oxford English Dictionary). Runes were often associated with aspects of the unknown, namely secrets and incantations—the acts of reading and writing in general likely would have seemed

¹ I use the term *Old English* to refer to the Germanic tribes who settled in England in the fifth century, however, these tribes were not cohesive until the eighth or ninth centuries. This is discussed in more depth later in this paper.

magical to the largely illiterate Germanic population. The Futhorc, the runic system brought to Britain by Germanic tribes in the fifth century, was especially confusing; each of the twenty-six similarly-formed characters relayed multiple, varying meanings, and the task of carving the symbols into wood or stone would have been quite tedious.² With the Futhorc, merchants would make simple etchings on coins and warriors would carve their names into weapons, but evidence of its use does not veer far from these small inscriptions (Curran 34-7).³ Despite the limited uses of this runic system, the Old English populace relied on the Futhorc as their primary form of writing for nearly six centuries.

Scholars have, however, discovered some artifacts that contain more complex uses of the Futhorc than the simple engravings mentioned above. For example, the seventh- or eighth-century artifact known as Franks Casket was engraved with a short riddle in the Futhorc.⁴ A larger collection of riddles containing runes can be found in the Exeter Book, a manuscript that dates back to the late tenth century. The most intriguing use of the Futhorc that scholars have found is the Ruthwell Cross, which will be discussed later in this paper. Despite these more complex artifacts, the majority of Old English society would not have been able to understand these runes. The few who were able to decipher the crude characters of the Futhorc were not using the language to record intricate, lengthy narratives, but rather making claims of ownership along with the occasional cultural quip, like the riddle on Franks Casket.⁵

² Some scholars say that the Futhorc contained between 26-33 characters.

³ At least based on the artifacts that have survived. The Futhorc could have been used for other purposes, but we do not have any evidence thereof.

⁴ The box is made of whalebone, and the answer to the riddle is “whalebone.” The artifact also contains both pagan and Christian storytelling.

⁵ Like all artifacts, Franks Casket and the Ruthwell Cross are records of history and culture, but they are both rather brief, using either singular characters or recording only fractions of narratives. In comparison to the lengthy texts that will be discussed later in this paper, these artifacts only convey cultural narratives in a much smaller sense.

Without a widely understood writing system, the Old English relied primarily on the oral transmission of poems and songs as a way to share their stories. Storytellers utilized a predictable, repetitive composition that the twentieth-century classicists Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and their followers termed the oral-formulaic theory.⁶ This form of composition relied on particular structures, such as repetitive metrics and recurrent idioms, which allowed stories to be easily remembered and recited. These formulas were not used out of mechanical necessity alone, though. John Miles Foley, a successor of Parry and Lord, explains that the oral-formulaic theory held an artistic and “inimitable significative power” that allowed a storyteller to interact with the traditions they shared (“Signs” 24). Rather than merely memorizing and repeating narratives, the storyteller “harnesses the word-power of traditional referentiality [...] and introduces situation-specific departures [...] that are all the more striking because of the resonant background against which they appear” (“Signs” 25). With the oral-formulaic theory, storytellers could remember the familiar tales of their people, reinforce important aspects of these narratives to their audiences, and integrate happenings particular to their time and people.

In Old English society, the use of the oral-formulaic theory can be seen in the Germanic poetic tradition. The Germanic poetic tradition and the narratives that make it up stretch back at least seven centuries to the European continent.⁷ When the Germanic tribes that brought the Futhorc to England, namely the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, arrived in the fifth century, they also carried with them the traditions of their ancestors through

⁶ Milman Parry and Albert Lord are twentieth-century American Classicists whose theories regarding oral traditions revolutionized Homeric studies. Their theory has come to be understood by scholars as a theory of language itself rather than a theory contained by its media—whether that medium is oral or written (Foley “Signs” 25).

⁷ Scholars have arrived at this general timeline by dating historical events that are preserved in these narratives and in other historical records.

this method of oral-formulaic composition.⁸ This poetic tradition was not a “static product” but rather an ongoing process that each storyteller contributed to through their songs (Foley “Signs” 24). Storytellers would draw on their knowledge of the poetic tradition to create dynamic compositions during their oral performances, intertwining stories of classic heroes with the current happenings of their kingdom or land. Through the repetitive melodies and memorable phrases of the oral-formulaic theory, oral storytellers and singers were able to maintain the histories and heroes of the Old English’s Germanic heritage without having to memorize the entire poetic tradition word-for-word or physically preserve the tales through crude runic writing.

The Scop

The authoritative oral storytellers and singers who kept the Germanic poetic tradition alive in Old English society were known as scop.⁹ Like the Greek Muses or the Norse Saga, the name scop alone invoked the honor and ardor associated with something almost divine—whether that be the scop as a creator who magically revealed aspects of the poetic tradition, or the poetic tradition itself as a divinely inspired source. The term *scop* comes from the Old High Germanic word meaning “poetry,” “fiction,” or “jest,” which all address the medium or act of the scop rather than the scop himself (OED). In other words, the scop was named after his role as a poet, a singer, and a storyteller. He was preceded by the tradition of Germanic poetry that came before him, and his importance was found therein.

⁸ There were seven main Germanic tribes in England, but these three were the most prominent.

⁹ The profession of the scop was a strictly gendered role in Old English society, and the existing scholarship on the subject, which uses strictly he/him pronouns in reference to scop, reflects this. To remain consistent, I follow the terminology of existing scholarship and refer to scop using he/him pronouns.

And draw on the poetic tradition he did. The scop used the stories of mythical heroes, tragic battles, and victorious kings that made up the Germanic poetic tradition to form his own stories. To do so, the scop would begin his career by “traveling, listening, and gathering a repertoire” under the influence of mentors across the land (Horton 50-1). However, the scop did not learn the poetic tradition or the art of storytelling solely through the memorization of his mentor’s songs or even those of his creation. Instead, he would appeal to the existing traditions and compose his own verse through the oral-formulaic theory (Magoun 447).

With these skills in lyrical composition, scopos would travel from court to court in search of the patronage of a single king or nobleman with whom to share their songs. This was a vitally important part of the scop’s career; a court was much more than a residence, and a king or nobleman was much more than merely a retainer. Thus, the acceptance of a patron was of the utmost importance. In his analysis of the scop, W. H. French writes, “To attract a patron, the poet must achieve two successes: he must persuade possible employers that he was thoroughly competent; and he had to assure them that they might count upon a fitting return for their liberality” (623).¹⁰ The scop would use his knowledge of the Germanic poetic tradition to find the support of a patron, whom he would then serve and represent through carefully crafted verse.

Once welcomed into a court, the scop performed three major functions: entertainer, observer, and story maker (Horton 47-50). As the entertainer, the scop served a similar role as a jest or bard, theatrically performing their songs, often with the

¹⁰ Here, French is specifically referring to the process of the scop in “Widsith,” but his remarks apply to the role of the scop in general.

accompaniment of a lyre, to amuse, distract, and unite their audiences.¹¹ Kings, drunken warriors, and nobles would gather in the mead hall to delight in the performances of the scop during grand feasts or after great battles. Through these performances, the scop had the power to create a sense of comradeship amongst diverse groups of individuals—warriors, nobility, queens, and visitors traveling from abroad.¹² This entertaining power of the scop's performances can be seen throughout *Beowulf*, particularly in the celebratory narrative that follows the slaying of Grendel. Here, "Hrothgar, leader in battle, was entertained / with music—harp and voice in harmony," and a scop pleased the mead hall with his song (Crossley-Holland 100).

However, these snippets of the scop's performances like the one above in *Beowulf* are accessed now through written media. Foley notes that "we do not have a performance of *Beowulf*; we have a manuscript [...] with the encoded version of the poem having been composed [...] as long ago as 300 years before that manuscript copy" ("Word-Power" 291). All of the power associated with the act of performance—the visual art, the music, the copious amounts of alcohol—is lost. While scholars can use texts like *Beowulf* to extrapolate these aspects of the scop's performances, the extent of their entertainment cannot be captured completely in the written form.

In addition to entertaining, the scop also served as the observer within Old English society. As Old English scopas traveled across Britain, they often witnessed great battles and political happenings that they would record through their songs, relay to their

¹¹ The term "scop" is often confused with the term "bard." Although these two terms are quite similar, the term "bard" is a Celtic word that refers to a poet in the more general sense across England, Ireland, and Wales, whereas a scop is more specific to the Old English people and serves a more specific role than just poet.

¹² I use the term *diverse* here lightly; this would have been a rather homogenous Germanic setting. However, there would have been a mixture of social classes and roles that the scop would have to bring together through his verse.

retainers, and contribute to the poetic tradition. The Battle of Brunanburh, for example, is preserved through the digressions of the scop in *Beowulf*, but the story is also documented historically in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Similarities between the two highlight the accuracy of their retelling. Scops also used their songs to record the genealogies of their retainers and other great peoples, as seen in *Beowulf* and “Widsith.”

However, the scop would not simply retell these historical narratives and genealogies as he learned them; instead, he would carefully craft a tale about the events or people that best represented his patron—focusing on the heroic exploits of his king or relating them to mythical warriors. In *Beowulf*, for instance, the scop “walk[s] a difficult edge between the propriety of praising the savior of the community and the impropriety of seeming to censure their erstwhile unsuccessful protector” (Horton 49). Through this process of observing historical narratives, the scop shows his authority as the historian within Old English society.

The third, and arguably most significant, function of the scop was as the story maker. The scop not only retold stories from the preexisting Germanic poetic tradition, but he also composed his own verse through oral-formulaic composition. After the scop gained a patron, became a part of a court, and witnessed historical events, he would craft his own tales. This act served three major purposes: to bolster their king, promote aspects of Old English morality, and preserve the narratives of current happenings. These three purposes can be seen in the Finnesburh Fragment, where the scop crafts a narrative about a legendary battle. In this fragment, the scop preserves a historic battle, impresses the image of the king, and emphasizes the heroic code by which his men abide (Crossley-Holland 8).

Through these functions, the scop was revered for more than his verse alone. By gathering, crafting, and sharing the stories that contained the Germanic heroic code, outlined major societal duties, and acted as general moral guidance, scop held a large influence over the courts and individuals to whom they performed. Stopford Brooke, the nineteenth-century writer and scholar, states, “Even great kings are but little [...] without their singer. In his hands their history lies, and their honour” (5). Without the scop to entertain the people, interact with the oral tradition, craft original verse, and act as the historical and moral authority, Old English society would seem to be missing something integral.

Christian Missionaries and the Introduction of Latin

However, the significance of the scop soon began to change. When Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in Britain in the late sixth century, they brought with them the written language of Latin. These missionaries traveled across the lands to spread the message of the church, subsequently introducing the written language of Latin to the Old English people. As the prominence of the church grew within Old English society, so did the reliance on the Latin language. This new language and the “universal” Roman alphabet of which it was formed quickly became the dominant writing system in Britain, winning out over the often confusing and rather limited Futhorc runes (Curran 37). The relative ease of the Latin language allowed stories and histories to be preserved through writing to an extent that had not been possible with the Futhorc.

Despite the increase in written works that occurred during this time, literacy rates were still very low. There were no printing presses or other forms of mass production

available for the Old English people, and creating even a singular manuscript was an arduous task. Roman Catholic scribes wrote on vellum in dark monastic scriptoria to reproduce specific tales chosen by their patron (Curran 43). These manuscripts would then be preserved in Christian libraries or other sacred spaces to be used only on special occasions. Because of this, even when stories and poems were written down by the clergy, the necessity for orality by the populace continued in many regards.¹³ Stories still had to be read aloud or retold through oral-formulaic composition for the majority of Old English society to listen and interact with the existing Germanic poetic tradition. Orality remained a prominent aspect of Old English life through the Middle English period with authors like Chaucer, whose *Canterbury Tales* centers on an oral storytelling competition, recognizing the continued need for orality within their written works.¹⁴ Works such as those of Chaucer emphasized the ongoing transition from orality to a more literate culture in Britain, which had been occurring since the introduction of Latin centuries prior.

Those who could read and write Latin during this time were mostly contained within the clergy, though. This caused the church to take a prominent role in the preservation and dissemination of Old English works—effectively replacing the scop as the observer and historian within Old English society. Works such as Bede’s ecclesiastical *History of the English Church and People* captured the history of the Old English people from the perspective of the Christian clergy members who recorded them. Christian missionaries then took these works, along with Christianized stories from the Germanic poetic tradition and letters from members of the clergy, like Cuthbert and Pope Gregory,

¹³ It is important to note that orality never really “ended.” We still tell fairytales and other stories of this nature that follow traditions of orality and utilize aspects of the oral-formulaic theory. From the works of Chaucer to modern works, such as *Bedtime Stories* (2008) and *Barbie* (2023), oral storytelling is still present.

¹⁴ Chaucer also utilized specific words and phrases that emphasized the intended orality of his written works (Crosby).

and spread them throughout Britain and Europe. Many of these works were also preserved in ecclesiastical libraries and Christian monasteries, such as Lindisfarne and Jarrow (Crosley-Holland 178-81). These Christian works and collections allowed the church to gather, shape, and share the happenings in Old English society.

In addition to the church writing, spreading, and preserving Old English works, the moral authority that once belonged to the scop shifted primarily to the church, as well. Many oral narratives and written works preserved by the clergy began to contain Christian references that seem to have been included after the original Germanic stories had circulated for centuries.¹⁵ The epic *Beowulf*, for example, contains many instances of biblical allusions, Christian imagery, and Catholic morality interspersed throughout the originally Germanic narrative.¹⁶ One scene that encapsulates these Christian references is the introduction of Grendel, the hero Beowulf's monstrous foe. The speaker begins by describing Grendel's rule over the court of the Danes, impressing the monster's connections to Germanic traditions and pagan worship (Crossley-Holland 77-8). The speaker then contrasts this with a description of what will happen to Grendel and anyone else who does not worship the Christian God:

Woe to the man who,
in his wickedness, commits his soul to the fire's embrace:
he must expect neither comfort nor change.
He will be damned for ever. Joy shall be his
who, when he dies, may stand before the Lord,

¹⁵ Christian groups had occupied England prior to the arrival of these Germanic tribes, but their influence did not persist as did the influence of the later missionaries referred to here.

¹⁶ Although many scholars speculate that these Christian references were added by the Christian scribes who recorded the narrative because of their often sporadic interjections into the story, some scholars have argued that the whole of *Beowulf* mimics a biblical narrative and thus might not be quite as Germanic as was once believed.

seek peace in the embrace of our Father. (78)

By connecting the Germanic traditions and pagan worship to the monstrous Grendel, the Roman Catholic scribes who recorded this story were able to promote their Christian morality—if whoever hears this story is not Christian, they will be associated with the monster. Introductions of Christian morality like these found in *Beowulf* allowed the church to share their morals as they spread and preserved these Germanic narratives.

The influence of the church on storytelling, both morally and through the Latin language, can also be seen in “Cædmon’s Vision.” This is the story behind the earliest surviving English poem, “Cædmon’s Hymn,” from the late seventh century, which were both later preserved in Bede’s ecclesiastical *History of the English Church and People*. The story begins at a feast where farmhands share in the Germanic oral tradition by singing secular songs to one another. Cædmon, a Northumbrian cowherd, is embarrassed by his inability to sing and leaves the hall before it comes his turn. Later that night, an angel visits Cædmon and instructs him to sing a hymn about God, which he does. Cædmon then is taken in by the monks at Whitby Abbey, and his song, “Cædmon’s Hymn,” among other religious verse, is written down (Crossley-Holland 161-3, 197).

Although “Cædmon’s Vision” does not directly include the performances of a scop, the story does depict the once illiterate, secular setting in which oral-formulaic storytelling was so important. Cædmon “followed a secular occupation” and gathered with other cowherds at drunken feasts, where traditions and moral expectations were shared through often crude songs. “Cædmon’s Vision” also emphasizes the beginnings of the transition to written works and the Christian environment in which they were preserved. Cædmon flees the secular world and is met with an angel who gives him the

gift of religious verse; when he is then taken into the monastery, the monks praise him and preserve his songs, just as the Roman Catholic clergy Christianized and recorded the secular Germanic narratives. Thus, Cædmon and his story can be seen as a representation of the introduction of Christianity as a whole. As Cadmon's songs were recorded by the church, so were the Old English narratives recorded by the Roman Catholic clergy.

Another intriguing example of the church's influence on what and how works were recorded in Old English society can be found in the poem "Dream of the Rood." This poem, recorded two centuries after the arrival of the Roman Catholic missionaries in Britain, tells the story of Jesus' persecution from the perspective of the cross. As with narratives like *Beowulf* and "Cædmon's Vision," the poem "Dream of the Rood" uses a mixture of pagan and Christian imagery that emphasizes the church's moral authority within Old English society. Unlike these other narratives, however, fractions of the poem were recorded in the Futhorc and engraved on an eighth-century Northumbrian stone cross, known as the Ruthwell Cross. Since these runes posed more difficulties and limitations to scribes, it is interesting that "Dream of the Rood" was recorded in the Futhorc rather than the more common Latin characters. This use of runes, along with the heavily Christian content of the poem, raises questions regarding the choices and motives of Christian scribes.

Although the "Dream of the Rood" is preserved on the Ruthwell Cross in the Futhorc runes, another version of the poem can be found in a tenth-century Old English manuscript known as the Vercelli Book. This manuscript includes "Dream of the Rood," poems by the Old English poet Cynewulf, and various Christian narratives.¹⁷ Despite the

¹⁷ One of the poems that is attributed to Cynewulf, the first riddle in the Exeter Book, also uses runic characters to spell the name Cynewulf in the poem itself.

amount of Old English works within the Vercelli Book, the manuscript was found in Italy. While scholars do not know if the scribe of the Vercelli book was familiar with the poem's inscription on the Ruthwell Cross or an earlier oral version of the tale, the physical movement of "Dream of the Rood" from England to Italy (or vice versa) highlights the role of the church in disseminating and preserving Old English works.

From recording and preserving to disseminating and Christianizing Old English works, the introduction and influence of the Roman Catholic church had an overwhelming effect on Old English life. Since the church took the roles of observer and story maker from the scop, the scop was left as largely just an entertainer. Despite their diminished role, the scop seems to still have been a valuable part of society even though the majority of the authority that the scop had once held moved primarily to the church. Because of this shift in authority and the influence of the church in general, it is interesting that the scop was preserved at all. In manuscript making, being the difficult, expensive task that it was, "practicality (as well as piety) dictated choices of how and what to transcribe" (43). While narratives such as "Cædmon's Hymn" and "Dream of the Rood" share many Christian themes and morals, narratives like *Beowulf* are still heavily Germanic. Even *Beowulf* still represents the influence of the church in many ways, but these written works were not broadly accessible to the illiterate populace. All of this raises questions regarding the reasons these non-Christian works were recorded in the first place.

Educational Renaissance

The significance of the scop and the role of orality continued to dissipate in the ninth century with the reign of King Alfred the Great (871-899). Throughout his rule, Alfred emphasized the importance of education for the Old English people, not just those connected to the church.¹⁸ In 890, he commissioned a secular history of the Old English people to be recorded in the English vernacular, which was titled *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. This new history of the Old English people began as a translation of Paulus Orosius' Latin work, *Compendious History of the World* (420), and grew to include many of the historical narratives from Bede's ecclesiastical *History of the English Church and People* (731). The *Chronicle* also recorded events that took place across England in the two centuries since the composition of Bede's *History* and incorporated secular tales that are not found in Bede's work. *The Voyage of Ohthere and Wulfstan*, for instance, captures the journey of a Norwegian trader's voyage around the Scandinavian peninsula. This narrative, which was an addition to the *Chronicle*, gives a much more accurate geographical account than other medieval travelers' tales commonly do and moves away from the overtly Christian themes of previous works.

With this shift in literature to more secular matters, compositions in the English vernacular became more common and an educational renaissance ensued. Unlike earlier compositions, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* relied heavily on the English vernacular as opposed to the high Latin of the church. This linguistic transition caused literacy to expand outside of the clergy and allowed members of the noble class access to a written language other than the brief runic inscriptions of the Futhorc. Curran writes,

¹⁸ King Alfred the Great was devoutly Christian, but he was highly educated. Because of this, he was concerned that the common person could not understand the Latin of the church.

Alfred's stimulation of education marks the beginning of English literacy. From his viewpoint, educational reform had to be based in the vernacular and on translation because even many churchmen—the teachers and preachers—could not read Latin and thus were ignorant of Christian tenets. (33)

This subtle rise in literacy among nobility during the educational renaissance led to the final extinction of the scop.¹⁹ As mentioned earlier, orality continued to persist as a necessary aspect of Old English life up through the Middle English period; the extinction of the scop was more so an ending to the authority of the scop as the sole entertainer, observer, and story maker.

Preservation of the Scop

Although the profession of the scop dwindled with the introduction of written works and the growing authority of the church, the legacy of these influential traveling storytellers persisted. Scops found a new home within the stories themselves, acting as characters performing within the digressions of a larger story or as narrators sharing their own poetic journeys. The scops within the story of *Beowulf* recite well-known stories that capture historical events and showcase each scop's excellence according to their kings. Widsith, the wandering narrator of the poem with the same title, boasts the vast repertoire and deep value of the scop across the land. Lastly, “Deor” shares the significance of the scop compared to great (and woeful) stories of terrible kings, exiled heroes, and a renowned blacksmith, and how quickly that significance can fall away. All of these

¹⁹ Again, orality itself still persists to this day. Some stories did maintain their authoritative roles, such as medieval French and English *lais* that promoted chivalrous romances, but these stories were no longer attributed solely or specifically to scops. Instead, writers and narrators would often appeal to orality in general. Marie de France, for instance, claims that she heard her *lais* from a previous, oral source. This appeal to orality could connect back to the mythical or divine aspect of story telling, where God alone was attributed to creation of any kind.

stories, and most other Old English tales containing the mention of a scop, would have once been recited by a scop themselves—creating a meta-fictional realm in which the scop tells a story of a scop who tells a story.

Beowulf

Beowulf is one such work that preserves the scop as a character. The Germanic epic is found in the eleventh-century manuscript known as the “the *Beowulf* manuscript” or more commonly the Nowell Codex, which is speculated to have been produced by two separate scribes and combined with other medieval manuscripts in the eighteenth century (“The *Beowulf* Manuscript”). Although this story was recorded near the end of the first millennium, the story was composed and passed down through the Germanic oral-formulaic tradition long before the creation of the codex. The story of *Beowulf* takes place in the sixth century in the pagan land of Scandinavia, where bearded Vikings, bejeweled queens, and gruesome monsters are depicted in their native land. However, the poem also incorporates many Christian elements, including the references to the Lord and Hell that are discussed earlier in this paper. Scholars acknowledge that these Christian elements could have been added during the poem’s oral circulation, but it seems more likely that these bits of biblical teachings were added later by the Christian scribes who preserved the tale.

This epic follows the grand adventures of the mythical hero, Beowulf, from fighting a wolf-like foe in the nude to winning the mother’s head in an underwater brawl. Between such monstrous battles, though, scopos find their way into the mead hall to entertain the warriors within Heorot’s walls with tales of vicious battles and moral

deterrents. By placing these digressions within the broader tale, the scop who originally shared the story of Beowulf could have the chance to boast all of their tangential knowledge and influence moral teachings in a more precise and direct manner. Despite their often pagan teachings, these digressions and the scop who told them were preserved in the manuscript, meaning that the scop and their stories were deemed important enough to be included in this Christian retelling. These written-scops capture the significance of their real-world counterparts from an outside perspective (that of the church), which allows a modern-day audience to see the true influence that the scop held over Old English society.

While the scop appears throughout *Beowulf*, he does so most notably in the digression of Sigemund the Wælsing. This digression takes place in the mead hall after Grendel has been slain, and an unnamed scop

who brimmed with poetry, and remembered lays,
a man acquainted with ancient traditions
of every kind, composed a new song
in correct metre. Most skillfully that man
began to sing of Beowulf's feats
to weave words together, and fluently
to tell a fitting tale. (Crossley-Holland 95)

These lines frame the breadth of skills that both this specific storyteller and the profession of the scop as a whole entail: entertainer, observer, and story maker. The scop “skillfully” performed poetry that showed his familiarity with “ancient traditions” and was told in the “correct metre”—what is now referred to as oral-formulaic composition. By “weav[ing]

words together,” or crafting tales through the influence of the Germanic poetic tradition and his own historical observations, the scop told a “fitting tale” that boasted the heroic feats of the victorious Beowulf.

The scop’s song that follows mirrors the heroic feats of Beowulf through the Icelandic tradition of Sigemund, “the best known / warrior in the world,” and foils him through Heremod, a king who “was stained by sin” (Crossley-Holland 96). The comparison of these two men emphasizes the moral duties of a good, prosperous king under the influence of the heroic code. For example, the scop describes Sigemund as a “courageous” warrior filled with “bravery” who defeated the “prowess, strength and daring” of Heremod (Crossley-Holland 96). The scop concludes his song by putting Beowulf’s name in Sigemund’s place. This is followed by a direct contrast between Beowulf, the new courageous warrior, and Heremod. The scop sings, “Beowulf, Hygelac’s kinsmen, / was much loved by all who knew him, / by his friends; but Heremod was stained by sin” (Crossley-Holland 96). In these lines, the scop does not merely hint at a connection between the two men, but instead overtly places them in direct contrast with one another, which emphasizes their moral differences. By sharing the stories of both Sigemund and Heremod, those within Heorot are given an example of the heroic code to strive towards (Sigemund) and Beowulf is given a direct warning of what path to avoid (that of Heremod). Through these actions, the scop establishes his position as the moral authority within the court.

As his moral authority is depicted in the song of Sigemund, the historical authority of the scop is preserved in the Finnesburh digression. In this digression, which once again takes place in Heorot, the scop tells the tale of a battle between the Finns and

the Jutes: “He sang of Finn’s troop, victims of surprise attack, / and of how that Danish hero, Hnæf of the Scyldings, was destined to die among the Frisian slain”

(Crossley-Holland 100). The scop’s song tells of the Danish prince Hnæf’s visit to his sister Hildeburh, who is married to the king of the Frisians. Hildeburh is struck with grief when her husband’s men attack those of her brother—killing Hildeburh’s son in the assault. After the warriors agree to a “peaceful settlement,” Hildeburh watches as the bodies of her loved ones are engulfed in the flames of a funeral pyre, where “The warriors’ voices / soared towards heaven. And so did the smoke / from the great funeral fire” (Crossley-Holland 103).²⁰

While this song emphasizes the moral actions of good warriors and aspects of the heroic code as the song of Sigemund does, it also highlights the scop’s role as an observer and story maker. The same battle is recorded in a fragment of a longer poem that has since been lost, and the events of the poem have been identified by the inclusion of the hero Hengest, who historically led Germanic settlers to England in the fifth century (Crossley-Holland 3). The retelling of the battle of Finnesburh in *Beowulf* shows the scop’s role as an observer and his authority as a historian. However, Hrothgar’s scop does not capture the story of Finns’ assault word-for-word as it appears in “The Finnesburh Fragment.” The version preserved in *Beowulf* presents this narrative from the perspective of the grieving Hildeburh after the events of the battle have taken place. “The Finnesburh Fragment” captures a snippet of the same battle but from the perspective of warriors in the midst of battle—active dialogue included. Brooke writes,

[The battle of Finnesburh] is but the outline of a story, but it is of that quality in

the events which is capable of fresh development as singer after singer took up the

²⁰ The reference to “heaven” here highlights the Christian influence present throughout *Beowulf*.

theme. The situations are passionate, and the events; and every singer could refit them as he pleased and create new ones. (66)

As the unnamed scop in *Beowulf* shows, the scop's function as the historian does not limit him to the memorization of events. Rather, the scop learns of the poetic tradition, relates it to current happenings, and retells the narratives through his own verse—verse that has been preserved through the written text of *Beowulf*.

Widsith

While *Beowulf* records the image of the scop as a character, “Widsith” transcribes the scop himself into poetry. This poem, preserved in the Exeter Book, tells the story of a fictionalized scop named Widsith. Widsith, whose name translates to “Wide Traveler” in Old English, sings his story of being just that. The poem begins with an introduction by a speaker that establishes Widsith as a scop:

Widsith came to talk, unlocking his wordy hoard,
 he who had traveled furthest across the earth
 among men and tribes and peoples
 often he had prospered on the hall-floor
 with agreeable treasures. (Hotstetter lines 1-5)

His profession is that of speaking from the “hoard” of the Germanic poetic tradition.

Widsith's travels are posed as an almost mythical feat, having “traveled furthest across the earth,” and his songs recount the tales of people from these mythic travels. Because of this, he is rewarded fruitfully within the halls of kings.

These lines are followed by a lineage that further proves Widsith's worthiness as a scop. By connecting him to peace weavers, noblemen, and kings such as those from the Myrgingas, a Saxon clan whose story is only preserved through this poem, Widsith inherits not only their literal heritage but also their reputations (Hotstetter 6). While the feats of the Myrgingas do not survive outside of this poem, a modern audience can still infer the power these names must have held if the scribe of "Widsith" chose to include them before any others. After Widsith's lineage has been shared, the first stanza concludes with the statement, "He began to speak many words:" (Hotstetter 9). Like an Old English Ulysses, Widsith begins to share his journeys and the experiences he had along the way.

In the following line, Widsith himself announces, "I have heard tell of many men ruling their tribes!" and goes on to list the names of approximately sixty various figures and twenty-five historical events that he claims to have witnessed (Hotstetter 10). Widsith begins this extensive list with the names of many historical figures, such as Atilla, ruler of the Huns (18), the Greek Caesar (20), and Offa, King of the Angles (35). From here, he begins to share the stories of great and often legendary people. For instance, Widsith introduces the familiar tale of Hrothgar, Beowulf's king:

Hrothulf and Hrothgar ruled the longest
at peace together, uncle and nephew,
after they drove away the kindred of Vikings
and humiliated the spear-tips of Ingeld,
chopping down at Heorot the majesty of the Heathobards. (Hotstetter 45-49)

Widsith's mentions of well-known people in these first few stanzas show that he is clearly well-versed in the Germanic poetic tradition. Thus, Widsith begins to share the observations from his own travels, including everyone from the Sword-men of the Saxons to the Hebrews, the Egyptians, and the Persians (Hotstetter 60, 83-4).

Widsith's allusions to these kings, queens, heroes, and peace weavers would enact a central quality of the oral-formulaic tradition. When one hears the name of the Greek Caesar or Hrothgar, King of the Danes, they call upon all of the other stories to which those names are connected (Hotstetter 20, 45). Thus, "All the great figures rise before our eyes as we read their names in the dry detail of the catalogue," and we experience more than merely the words that are sung aloud or written on the page before us (Brooke 4). Although many of the names and historical events span more than a single lifetime, it does not seem as though they were supposed to be understood as literal experiences of the scop (just as Widsith's introduction as the man who had "traveled furthest across the earth" conveys some level of myth (Hotstetter 2)). Rather, if we take the allusions as a catalog of all of the tales the scop knows, then the issue in chronology falls away and we are left with the grandeur of the performer's knowledge.

The extent of Widsith's knowledge also reflects his authority. Widsith claims witness to many historical events that he has reported reputably to a vast array of retainers. He states, "Therefore I can sing and speak of tidings, / base things on account of the multitude in the mead-hall, / how made myself useful among the chosen and the excellent" (Hotstetter 54-56). Because of all of the things that Widsith has seen and experienced on his journey of being a scop (along with his extensive knowledge of the poetic tradition), he is looked to as a historical and moral authority within the courts to

which he performs. He is so well respected as an authority figure that kings and noblemen have rewarded him extensively with everything from ornate rings to pieces of land, which could surely compete with the gifts warriors such as Beowulf received (Hotstetter 73, 95). The fact that Widsith is rewarded with gifts that could rival those of Beowulf emphasizes the importance of the scop within Old English society: the skills of the scop seem to have been equally as valued as the feats of the most courageous warriors.

All of this stands to prove that Widsith was an accomplished scop. He was skilled in the poetic tradition and lyrical composition, observed and brought news of many happenings, and was revered as a figure of authority on historical and moral matters. His significance in Old English society can be seen clearly in the last stanza. The same speaker who introduces Widsith in the first stanza returns to praise the “minstrels of men” for their “wise song” and “authority” (Hotstetter 135-141). The speaker then comments on the glory of the scop’s art and the joy that Widsith seems to have experienced in his life. Although Widsith had received many gifts along his journey, “the gifts are little in comparison with his joy in his work, and his reverence for it” (Brooke 5).

“Widsith” does not simply record the story of a renowned scop boasting about his own accomplishments and the treasures he received, but it places these words in another’s mouth. In his article “Widsith and the Scop,” W. H. French discusses accepted theories about the origins and purposes of the poem and proposes some interpretations of his own. He writes,

Perhaps when divested thus of its awe-inspiring allusions, the poem may seem an unfamiliar creation indeed. But one of the writer's chief objects may have become

apparent—his insistence that a generous lord's duty includes patronizing minstrels, and that there will be an appropriate reward: the celebration of such liberality. (624)

Since rewards, gift-giving, and acceptance of patrons are mentioned repeatedly throughout “Widsith,” French raises questions of authorship.²¹ Would a Christian monk, the usual identification of a scribe, be this intrigued by the idea of reward? French states that a monk or cleric would likely have little interest in the profits of the scop. Instead, French proposes a different writer: “Now the probability that a scop, in a poem of one hundred and forty-three lines, would mention rewards a dozen times is very strong” (625). If French’s proposition is correct and a scop did record this tale, “Widsith” would capture the actual “wordy hoard” of a scop (Hotstetter 1). Even if a scop did not record this tale, someone recognized the significance of the “Wide Traveler” and chose to preserve his legacy for him through this poem.

Deor

As “Widsith” depicts the scop in his joy, “Deor” crafts an image of his sorrows. This elegiac poem, found also in the Exeter Book, consists of the reflections and laments of a scop named Deor. The first five stanzas of “Deor” invoke the legendary woes of various notable figures such as Weland the Smith and Ermanaric, the cruel king of the Goths (Crossley-Holland 7). As in “Widsith,” these names would call up more stories from the Germanic poetic tradition with each mention. Although the poem itself is rather

²¹ It is important to note that the modern understanding of authorship often refers to a singular, authoritative creator of a text. While the narrative likely can not be attributed to the imagination of a single figure, it is probable that one individual did write the poem down. Here, I use the term authorship simply in reference to the scribe or recorder of this tale.

brief, the invocation of these familiar names expands each short stanza into a sweeping narrative of its own. Weland's exile, for instance, would not be contained to the meager words of the first stanza, but would instead extend to include the legendary smith's enslavement, revenge, and escape from his cruel captor Nithhad.²² Likewise, the tale of Theodric, King of the Ostrogoths, stretches past his two lines in the poem to include the entirety of his tumultuous reign in the late fifth century.

In the final stanza, Deor departs from the elegies of these well-known individuals and considers his own sorrows:

I will say this about myself,
that once I was a scop of the Heodeningas,
dear to my lord. Deor was my name.

For many years I had a fine office
and a loyal lord, until now Heorrenda,
a man skilled in song, has received the land

that the guardian of men first gave to me. (Crossley-Holland 8)

While Deor was once a prominent scop under the patronage of a noble lord, he was replaced and left to roam in despair, "deprived of all pleasure" (Crossley-Holland 7). In comparison to the deaths and exiles mentioned at the beginning of the poem, Deor's sorrows seem slight. The scop has lost his loyal retainer, but the others have been forced into wintry exile (the worst fate for the Germanic) or lost those they loved most. Deor's loss, though, would have been comparable to exile or the loss of a loved one. As was discussed previously, the scop seemed to place all of his value in his patronage; losing this would be the worst fate for the scop, and in this case, for Deor.

²² Whose name translates to "evil nature."

Nonetheless, as Deor “mourns in his song, and he compares his fate to that of others who have suffered, [...] he may have some comfort” (Brooke 6). The “comfort” Brooke speaks of appears in the refrain: “That passed away, this also may” (Crossley-Holland 7). Although Weland, Ermanaric, and all of the others suffered greatly, their sorrows soon “passed away.” By contemplating their stories, Deor is able to emphasize their woes as having occurred in the past; Weland “suffered,” Beadohild “discovered,” Theodric “ruled,” and so on (Crossley-Holland 7). From this, Deor seems to find a sense of reassurance; even in his suffering, he concludes that his sorrows, too, will pass.

In addition to the past sufferings of these great figures, Deor also finds comfort in the workings of God. As he sits in despair, Deor remembers that

the wise Lord

often moves about this middle-earth:

to many a man he grants glory,

certain fame, to others a sad lot. (Crossley-Holland 7-8)

While the Lord grants good things to some people, such as the patronage that Deor himself once received, others receive “a sad lot.” Even though Deor is no longer under the patronage of his loyal retainer, maybe one day he will again receive the gift of patronage from another. This reference to the Lord also offers a reason as to why this narrative may have been preserved. Brooke writes, “I suspect we owe the preservation of this lyric to the zeal of the interpolator who saw in the sadness of Deor an opportunity for introducing his gentle phrases on the vanity of life and the mercy of God” (7).

While Deor's reference to the Lord, and with that Christianity, offers a viable reason as to why his poem was recorded, other narratives do not provide such clear reasons. Narratives such as "Widsith" do not contain as overt Christian references, and in contrast, contain often heavily pagan components. This raises a variety of questions regarding what, how, and why Germanic narratives, specifically narratives of the scop, were preserved. Some of these questions have already been discussed in this paper, such as why many pagan aspects of *Beowulf* were preserved within the heavily Christianized epic, and how scribal choices affected these largely Germanic tales. Other questions, such as the transcription of orality, remain. How do we best interpret these once-oral narratives of *Beowulf*, "Cædmon's Hymn," and other tales from the Germanic poetic tradition that now survive only through text?²³ Foley offers that these textual reproductions are mere cenotaphs of their original tales: "they memorialize and commemorate, but they can never embody" ("From Performance" 92). This applies in some sense to the preservation of the scop, as well. Heorot's unnamed scop remains in the pages of *Beowulf*, but his performances to crowds of drunken warriors do not escape the mead hall. Widsith's "wordy hoard" may be preserved on paper, but his songs are trapped in the 143 lines of written text. Deor's sorrows can still be felt when reading his elegy, but, like Deor himself, the sounds of his despair have been exiled.

Deor's reassuring refrain—"That passed away, this also may"—applies not only to Deor but to the role of the scop as a whole (Crossley-Holland 7). With the arrival of written works, the increasing authority of the church, and King Alfred's educational renaissance, the profession of the scop was no longer an essential part of Old English

²³ Foley discusses this question in more depth in his articles "From Performance to Paper to the Web: New Ways of (Re-)Presenting Told Stories" and "Word-Power, Performance, and Tradition."

society. As Deor lost his retainer, so did the vocation of the scop lose its necessity among the courts of Old English kings. However, the significance of the scop survived through the very stories the oral poets left behind. The character of the unnamed scop in *Beowulf* and the narrators who call themselves Widsith and Deor allow us to recognize the importance of the scop a thousand years after the profession “passed away.” Lisa Horton sums up the significance of the scop as such: “Through his words, his music, and his performances, [the scop] preserves the culture and personalities of his society and of the lost peoples of legend, and when his music is silenced, joy departs from the community” (55). While the scop may have been silenced within Old English society, their legacy is preserved within the stories they left behind.

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