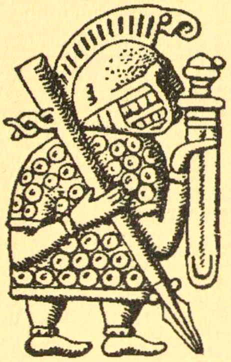

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A Comment on Beowulf – Gutarnas nationalepos *by Tore Gannholm*

Together with *Widsid* the *Lay of Beowulf* is the oldest of the surviving Norse poems. Even though translated several times it has long been out of print, as has the Gutasaga. Since they are both important to our understanding of Norse society in the Migration Age the new edition, prepared by Tore Gannholm, is welcome indeed. Tore Gannholm is to be congratulated for having achieved this, the following comments in no way detracting from the importance of his work.

It seems that the Norse royal families and also those of the local magnates each had a "family saga", listing the ancestors and their most important deeds, and that each of these sagas may have formed a "register" to a series of sagas recording the deeds and fates of individual heroes. One such saga, one of the very few to have survived, is the *Lay of Beowulf*. Set in the 6th century, it has survived in one version only, in an Anglosaxon manuscript of the 9th century. Like every other Norse saga *Beowulf* has been very severely criticized by historians, being usually considered to be nothing but "historical fiction of the 9th century".

The historical novel has a long tradition in Europe, flourishing already in the Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century sir Walter Scott turned fiction into literature, popularizing the genre. Today we are so used to "historical fiction", presented in paper-backs and on the TV simply to amuse the reader without the author having any ambition to be taken seriously, that we find it difficult to imagine a time when "fiction" was an unknown concept, when daily life was so full of dangers and of opportunities that fiction was not necessary to satisfy the public demand for thrills, and when legal as well as moral restraint was so limited that the men and women of each generation were more than likely to witness "deeds of arms" and, perhaps all too often, to take personal part in such or to suffer from them. We also tend to underestimate the importance of annalistic sagas as families' and individuals' political and social legitimation in society, we do not understand every man's need to keep the memory of his ancestors' gestae alive in a society depending on the spoken word for its history. It is extremely unlikely that any 9th-century Norseman or Anglosaxon wrote "historical fiction", fiction in the sense that the characters and the events described were the products of the "author's" imagination. Having been composed for a definite purpose the Sagas must be taken seriously and read critically. Their factual information must be taken seriously. Doing so, Tore Gannholm attempts to fit the *Lay of Beowulf* and the heroes' actions into the history of Gotland and Denmark.

In his introduction Gannholm reminds us that we still suffer badly from earlier generations' "Swedish-centered" historical research. History was always written by the victors, the "history" of the defeated and that of conquered territories usually being ignored or even misinterpreted. This is true, not only of Gotland but of all those landscapes which were conquered in the 17th century and also, mutatis mutandis, of those parts of the old Sweden which were lost. Who now knows anything about the Middle Ages of Karelia or of Ingermanland or, for that matter, of Finland? Gannholm reminds us that Gotland's history must be seen as that of Gotland and of the "gutar", the people of Gotland, not as part of Sweden's, at least not until after 1645.

One expression of the "Swedish-centered interpretation of history" is that the period from the "treaty of Aivar Strabein" to the Danish conquest of 1361 is usually interpreted as being one when Gotland "was Swedish, formed part of the Swedish realm". Even though the Swedish king at times exerted great influence in local politics, Gotland remained an independent "state", paying tribute to the Swedish king in exchange for certain trade privileges. Not until 1361 did Gotland lose its independence, did the people of Gotland become the subjects of a "foreign" king.

When considering Gotland, and developments in Gotland, we must always keep the island's unique geographical position in mind as well as its consequences for the islanders' economy. As Gannholm reminds us, Gotland was a very important trading centre in prehistoric and early historic times, one *through* which trade flowed. The abundant archaeological material from Gotland must not make us forget that a great part of the goods imported into the island, perhaps the greater part, was reexported, and that this transit trade was one of the sources of Gotland's wealth. A great proportion of this trade may have been in the hands of Gotlandic merchants and skippers, but Gotland is unique in one respect, one which has probably contributed to its position as a mercantile centre until the compass was introduced and reasonably accurate pilots' directions became available: in being accessible. The coasts of Sweden and Finland shelter behind an extremely complex labyrinth of islands, islets and rocks. In the sailing season the prevailing winds are from the sea towards the land, which means that the breakers fall away from the navigator of a ship approaching those coasts, being thus extremely difficult to see. By the time the mariner can see them it is too late, his ship is already among the rocks, being pounded to pieces. The land and the islands are of the same height, and of the same colour. From the sea it is almost impossible to discern the discrete islands and to spot the leading marks, if any. Only very experienced pilots, such as are thouroughly familiar with the particular stretch of coast ahead, can find their way in. This is true not only for the coasts of Finland and of Sweden—also the entrance to the Bay of Riga, the Irbensund, is an exceedingly dangerous one, winding between sandbanks far out of sight of any landmarks and around the infamous Domesnäs, and equally the mouth of the Neva shelters behind a maze of shallows.

The coast of Gotland is quite different, being open and easily accessible. The coastal shelf is dangerous, but leading marks are easy to see and to identify. In summertime the clouds over Gotland can be seen all over the Baltic, from Poland to Åland. Long before the compass came into general use, ever since man first sailed the Baltic, anyone could find his way to Gotland and land on Gotland—and anyone sailing to Sweden, Finland, the mouth of the Neva or into the Riga Bay had to pick up a pilot on Gotland, one who probably knew how to prize his services. This would automatically lead to a great part, or the greater part, of the trade between these coasts and the continent passing by way of Gotland—which made the men of Gotland wealthy.

Gannholm suggests that Beowulf's "real name" may have been Älfhere (Alvar, Avair) and that he may have been the last king of independent Gotland. This may be true, but quite literally the name, Beowulf, means 'bee-wolf', i.e. one who devours the nests of bees, i.e. 'bear'. His parents probably called the boy something like *rs.s*, that forgotten Norse word for bear which was replaced by the present noa-name, (which really means 'the brown one'). 'Bee-wolf' was another noa-name. There is nothing in the Beowulf epic to suggest that its hero may have been the last king of independent Gotland—indeed, had such been the case he would have had no successors interested in perpetuating his story! Neither is there anything in the poem to suggest that Beowulf concluded a peace with the king of the Svear.

Gannholm stresses the intimate connections between the Goths on the continent and the Gauts of Gotland, as well as the military and political consequences of the Heruls' return to Sweden. However, the archaeological material suggests that "Sweden" formed one polity already in the Roman Iron Age, long before the time when Herul power collapsed on the Continent in the late 5th century. *Beowulf* leaves little doubt that the Gauts of Gotland were involved in the wars against Clovis' Franks, those which ended with the collapse of the Visigothic kingdom in France. According to Procopios the Heruls returned to Scandinavia after the collapse of the Herul state in Hungary. Gannholm suggests that they settled in the Mälar valley in the 6th century as "Svear", founding a Swedish state, one whose rulers imitated Roman dress and used Roman coins. He also believes that the surviving Ostrogoths joined them after the final collapse of the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy.

There may of course have been an immigration to Scandinavia at this time, but the Roman influence was very strong already several hundred years earlier, and the great import of East-

Roman currency seems to coincide with the time of the Hun Empire in Europe. Byzantine records tell of very large payments to the Huns but little is said of such payments to the Goths. It seems more likely that most of the gold coins were the savings of Swedish mercenaries returned after having served with the Huns. It seems unlikely that any immigrants could have brought the "Asa-gods" north in the 6th century, since the days of the week were named for them at a time when Sol Invictus was still the supreme god of the Roman pantheon, i.e. sometime in the third century A.D.

Gannholm means that *Beowulf*'s "wedergeats" should be understood as "vädur-gautar", "ram-gauts", implying that Gotland's heraldic ram may have been the pagan islanders' totem beast. Perhaps Jordanes referred to the same people when writing of the "vagoth" in Scandinavia?

Gannholm also assumes that the returning Heruli not only "founded" the Swedish realm but also brought the "new" religion, with Odin and Tor as the most important gods, and that the tradition of these gods originally hailing from Asia was a Herul one. But *Ynglingatal* and the *Ynglinga Saga* tell a different story. The saga lists the Ynglinga kings up to the time of Ragnvald, in the 9th century. If Egil lived in the early 6th century, as seems probable, Gannholm's theory leaves no room for all the Ynglinga kings preceeding him. They may, of course, be apocryphal—but if so, why is Vanlande's death by tetanus (and, later, old Adils' death by stroke) described in so clinically correct and detailed a manner? But *if* the early Ynglinga kings are factual the "beginning of the story" would fall sometime in the 3rd century, which would fit the archaeological material much better than does an "invasion by the Heruli". Some continental Heruli probably did "return" to Scandinavia—but, no matter where they originally came from, by the middle of the 6th century the Heruli had been active on the continent for about 500 years, or at least 20 generations, a time during which they had been "genetically diluted". It has not been possible to pin them down by ordinary archaeological means!

Most of the hill-forts of continental Sweden seem to have been fortified settlement sites, dating from the end of the 5th and the early 6th century. Such do not testify to a strong government but to the opposite. In the Middle Ages private castles were built when the king could not guarantee peace and security, and everything points to the majority of the hill-forts having been built for the very same reason. When queen Margaretha had consolidated her power and reestablished order she razed the private castles, and it seems possible that the century or so when hillforts were built and occupied in Scandinavia was a time when the central kingdom had collapsed or, at least, lost a great deal of power, and that this anarchic period came to an end, the "kingdom" being re-established, sometime in the 6th century.

We have always tried to draw conclusions concerning the course of events and concerning the development of prehistoric economy from the graves and from the grave goods. "Rich" graves are usually taken to prove the society of the time to have been a rich one, whereas poorly equipped graves are believed to testify to poverty and political decline. But can this possibly be right? In mainland Sweden "rich" and "poor" graves often occur on the same grave fields. At those times when some of the dead were buried under barrows on the grave fields the contemporary graves under flat ground seem mostly to have been rather poorly equipped. "Rich" graves under flat ground usually date from times when no barrows were built in the district. "Rich" graves prove certain members of society to have had the material means to equip their dead lavishly. "Rich" graves, whether under barrows or under flat ground, seem to have been the means of the leading families to mark their social position, to acquire prestige, and they seem to occur only when, and where, the leaders in society *felt the need* to mark their position. Thus, *the lack of rich graves from any one period or area does not prove the period to have been a poor one, does not prove the society to have been an "egalitarian" one.* Per se, poorly equipped graves prove only that they were poorly equipped. But at any time the predominance of simple graves lacking elaborate equipment may equally suggest that the period was a peaceful and possibly a prosperous one, that society was stable, that no one felt the need to mark his territory and his position in society.

Gannholm quotes Srigley (*Tor* 22, 1988–89) who sees scenes from the *Iliad* on certain Gotland "picture stones". Srigley may be right, but it is equally possible that these pictures illustrate certain passages in Norse tales or sagas. The scenes on the picturestones are like pictures cut from films—unless we know the plot we cannot make anything out of the picture—and most likely we do not know, and shall never know, most of the tales! To understand the Iron-Age pictures we must understand the frame of reference, much as we can only understand most quotations when we know the context from which they have been culled. Even though the picture-stones were not grave-markers perhaps we should understand some of these pictures as "kennings", as references and pictorial "paraphrases" for events in the life of dead men, for their heroic deeds? If so, to understand the pictures of such a stone we must know the whole saga to which the picture refers in order to be able even to guess at the meaning of the picture-stone as a monument.

Gannholm quotes the old hypothesis of the runes having been invented by the Goths on the Continent. At the moment it seems that the runic alphabet was invented somewhere in south Scandinavia rather than in southern Europe. It is unlikely that the runes were created by learned men using several ancient alphabets as a pattern—the runes were probably a literate Norse-man's modification of the alphabet with which he was familiar, to fit new and unconventional writing media.

The whole question of the "Götar" has caused rivers of ink to flow. In actual fact there is no reference to a "göta kingdom" until well into the Middle Ages, when "Sweden" was already well established. Only, in the ninth century, Rimberth called Birka a "town of the Gothi, situated in the land of the Swedes". Perhaps Gannholm makes a point when suggesting that there may have been a sufficient number of merchants from Gotland in the town to make Rimberth feel that the population differed from that in the surrounding countryside?

The *Gutasaga* tells of two important events in the island's history: the expulsion or voluntary emigration of a considerable part of the population, and the conclusion of peace and of a trade agreement with the king of the Swedes. The context puts the former tale somewhere in the time of the Roman Empire, which would fit well with the emergence of the Cherniakhov culture on the continent, that culture generally ascribed to the Goths, even though it is also possible that it reflects memories of Gotland mercenaries taking service with the Romans.

Avair Strabein's trade agreement with the Swedish king may have been concluded already in Vendel times but there is nothing in *Beowulf* to suggest that anyone on either side visualized the possibility of peace and of a trade agreement in the early 6th century, and there is little Gotland material, if any, in the Swedish graves of the time.

As it is described in the *Gutasaga,* the general spirit of the treaty with the Swedish king was much the same as that of the treaty concluded with Henry the Lion in the 12th century, but it seems likely that we would have heard of such a treaty with the Swedish king also from other sources had it been concluded in the 12th century. Also the archaeological material suggests that already in the 7th and 8th centuries Gotlanders were active in many parts of Sweden and in Swedish settlements east of the Baltic. It seems rather likely that Avair Strabein should be dated sometime in the 7th or early 8th century.

It is interesting to note that, according to the *Gutasaga,* the sailing season was from Valpurgisday, May the first, to All Saints, November the first, and that "they (the men of Gotland) could not row across the sea (to the lands on the eastern shore of the Baltic) but had to await suitable winds for their crossing".

I can only agree completely with most of Gannholm's conclusions, even though I harbour some preconceived ideas which differ from his. This does not mean that my preconceived ideas are any better than his, and I must recommend everyone interested in Scandinavian events during the first millenium A.D. to read the book and to form his or her own opinion!

Gad Rausing