

The Finn Episode in *Beowulf*: Line 1085(b) *ac hig him gepingo budon*

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This paper reconsiders that elusive section of the Finn Episode in *Beowulf* which concerns the offering of a treaty in lines 1080–96¹ after the slaughterous fighting at Finnsburh. The difficulties of the Episode are notorious.² The identification of the pronouns in lines 1085–87 has proved as much a battlefield for editors as the *meðelstede* of line 1082 proved for Finn and Hengest. This section of the narrative is further complicated by a group called the 'Eotenas', whose identity is one of the longest standing debates in the study of *Beowulf*. This paper takes issue with one received method of examining the cruces in this section of the narrative and proposes a new reading of line 1085(b), the point at which the terms are first offered.

The Finn Episode is a narrative within a narrative. It is recounted by a Danish minstrel, Hroþgar's *scōp*, who, at a banquet to celebrate Beowulf's defeat of the monster Grendel, sings of the fighting between a certain Finn and a hero of the Half-Danes, Hnæf Scyldinga. This long account is contained in ninety lines commencing from line 1068 and concluding at line 1169. What is the mode of narration of this episode? What occurs in the narrative? What features of the narrative are placed in the foreground by the mode in which it is recounted in *Beowulf*? A discussion of the difficulties in lines 1080–96 raises such questions, but, in the course of exploring these lines, one needs to remember also the mode in which the narrative was received by an audience of listeners. Since the narrative was orally delivered, I ask the reader to forgo one of the usual advantages of the printed page and to imagine that the narrative unfolds itself phrase by phrase, without that reassuring support given by a stretch of subsequent printed text which tacitly promises to explicate any immediate obscurity.

One can, of course, examine these lines in the Finn Episode in an attempt to answer questions other than those with which this paper is concerned. One can examine the lay in *Beowulf* in an attempt to reconstruct 'the Finn legend'. Such an attempt will take cognizance of the poetic fragment which was printed for the

¹*Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, edited by Fr. Klaeber, third edition (Boston, 1950). All subsequent references are to this edition.

²For discussions of the Finn episode see Alistair Campbell, 'The Old English Epic Style', in *English and Medieval Studies Presented to J. R. R. Tolkien on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, edited by Norman Davis and C. L. Wrenn (London, 1966), pp. 13–26; J. R. R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode*, edited by Alan Bliss (London, 1982); T. A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London, 1972), pp. 19–24.

seventeenth-century antiquarian, George Hickes, and which is today generally known as the Finnsburh fragment. The fragment has often been appended to editions of *Beowulf*, on the premise that one needs access to the fragment in order to tell what is happening in the Finn narrative in *Beowulf*. This paper rejects the idea that one must necessarily reconstruct 'the Finn legend' as the Anglo-Saxons knew it in order to discuss the lay and also rejects Klaeber's reformulation of that idea: 'by a comparison of the Finn Episode of *Beowulf* the perplexing obscurities of both may be cleared up, at least to some extent'.³ It is equally possible that certain obscurities in *Beowulf* might become even more perplexing were one to follow such a procedure.

One reason to avoid elucidating the narrative in *Beowulf* by a comparison with the fragment lies in the very assumption that there is a legend of Finn 'as the Anglo-Saxons knew it'. Such an assumption commits the so-called fallacy of homogeneity, the idea that all Anglo-Saxons knew a legend equally well, when either their genealogies or the fidelity of scribes show that this was far from the case.⁴ One cannot assume that because the lay was often sung before an audience of Scyldings, it was frequently recounted to audiences of Anglo-Saxons. One must particularly avoid the assumption that the Anglo-Saxons were fully familiar with, and eager to supply any needed background from, our modern reconstruction of a story.

What are we told, then, in the Finn Episode in *Beowulf*? Lines 1068–70 seem to identify the lay, where two warriors (whom we assume will be the leading participants) are named. We note that Hnæf is a Scylding, and this, for the moment, provides sufficient reason for a story to be told of his fateful expedition. The story itself appears to begin in lines 1071–72(a): 'Ne huru Hildeburh herian porfte / Eotena treowe'. Some questions have presented themselves: who is Hildeburh? Why should she have no reason to praise the good faith of the Eotena? Who, or what, are the group whose genitive plural is specified?

When such difficulties confront us at the outset, a modern reader is indeed tempted to feel excluded from the story, tempted to believe that the Anglo-Saxon audience must have known a full Finn legend in its entirety. But other explanations of the episode's highly elusive style can be offered, and the narrative itself does after all provide some immediate answers. Hildeburh is identified for the audience as 'Hoces dohtor' (l. 1076), and she certainly had no need to praise Eotenas if she

³Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, p. 243.

⁴Kenneth Sisam, 'Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 39 (1953), and, by the same author, 'The Authority of Old English Poetical Manuscripts', *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953). The scribe has, in fact, written *Finnel* at line 1128; he is, at least, one Anglo-Saxon not thoroughly familiar with the Finn legend.

has lost son and brother. Identifying the Eotenas is a notorious difficulty for modern scholars, but it may have been a difficulty for the Anglo-Saxons, too.

There are two words which can have this genitive plural form, *eoten*, 'giant', and *Eote*, which appears to have been the Old English form of 'Jute'. A third possibility has been suggested by R. E. Kaske, that *eoten*, where it occurs, can mean 'enemies' as well as 'giants'.⁵ A form of the word *eotena* occurs four times in the Finn Episode, at lines 1072, 1048, 1141, and 1145: Kaske argues that the meaning 'enemies' should be supplied in each case. This reading gained currency when W. F. Bolton chose to adopt it in the glossary to his revision of Wrenn's edition of *Beowulf*.⁶ Bolton found difficulty in accepting the once usual gloss, 'Jutes', arguing that one would then expect the word to refer to the one tribe throughout the narrative, whereas, at least in some interpretations, each warring party seems to be called Eotena. But, whoever this group is, and on whichever side they fight, there are problems with Bolton's preferred reading. In the phrase 'Eotena bearn' at lines 1088 and 1141, it is difficult to see how 'Eotena' could denote anything other than some race or kindred; 'the descendants of enemies' does not give good sense in context. Wrenn's solution, which was also argued by Tolkien, was that the Hocingas, who were ethnically Jutes, were known as Half-Danes: there were indeed Jutes on both sides of the battle. R. W. Chambers (citing W. W. Lawrence) had earlier summed up the matter magisterially:

'The Danes and the Frisians [were] not compact political units, but groups of tribes, held somewhat loosely together, and known by tribal names.'

He argues that we cannot then work on the assumption that we are dealing with two compact tribal units, concluding

That the King of Frisia should have had Jutes under his rule is likely enough. And this is all that the words of the *Episode* demand.⁷

Whoever the Eotena are in line 1072, whether Jutes, or giants, or enemies, we know this about them: that Hildeburh had no need to praise their fidelity.

The opening lines of the Episode are clearly preoccupied with Hildeburh; in lines 1079–80 we are told that the slaughter of her kin took place where she had previously obtained the greatest worldly joy. The narrative then shifts to the fight in

⁵R. E. Kaske, 'The *Eotenas* in *Beowulf*', in *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*, edited by R. P. Creed (Providence, Rhode Island, 1967), pp. 285–310.

⁶*Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment*, edited by C. L. Wrenn, third edition, fully revised by W. F. Bolton (London, 1973), note to l. 902.

⁷R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn, with a supplement by C. L. Wrenn*, third edition (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 288–89.

which Finn's thegns were slaughtered. The pronoun *he* in line 1082 has Finn for its antecedent, and so Finn, presumably, is the agent of the verbs which follow; it is Finn who could not bring the fight against Hengest to a conclusion. But who is Hengest? We are not told at this stage of the narrative; his name alliterates with the Hocingas, which may or may not suggest kinship to them, or alignment with them. We know, however, from apposition, that he is 'peodnes ðegne' (l. 1085), and a participant in the *wig*.

The *wig*, which cannot be fought to a conclusion, occurs on or in a *meðelstede*. This word is glossed as 'battlefield' and derived from 'place of assembly'; the first element appears to be related to *mapelian*, so it looks like a site where formal speaking took place. It is therefore possible that the *meðelstede* is either a place of assembly in an open area, or in a hall; either of these sites could be a field of battle. A truce, or some kind of settlement, is reported in line 1085(b), one of the conditions of which is that a second *flet* be cleared for one of the groups in the conflict. Whichever side holds the *oper flet*, it is demanded that Folcwalda's son, (Finn, presumably) is to honour both sides equally. Did the *meðelstede* mentioned above refer to a first hall? Is Finn's own hall destroyed? Why must the occupants of the second hall share it with 'Eotena bearn'? These points have been the subject of much scholarly debate, but the narrative is not specific at this point.

There is a further problem in lines 1084–85: it is not clear what Finn is not able to do — the sense of these lines depends upon the way *forþringan* is glossed. This verb is syntactically parallel to *gefeohtan*, and it is clear that Finn is the agent, but does it mean that Finn could not rescue the wretched survivors, or that he could not crush them utterly? Klaeber suggests that although the element *-þringan* means 'to press', the compound, like *forstandan*, may mean 'defend' or 'protect'. Klaeber's predilection derives from his own overview of the entire episode, he sees Finn's own men trapped inside a hall with the party led by the prince's *þegn*. Wrenn, later followed by Bolton, believes *forþringan* means 'to crush utterly' and sees Finn as unable to clear the hall by dislodging those who still survive with the prince's *þegn*. Wrenn's reading gains some support from the repetition of *wealafe* in line 1098, where it clearly refers to the survivors with Hengest, but, since the word can be used neutrally for either side in a battle, it cannot conclusively limit the narrative possibilities at an earlier stage of the Episode. One of the most recent editors, Donald K. Fry, while noting that *forþringan* is most often translated as 'defend, protect', summarizes the case for both sides and, in fact, records both

meanings in his Glossary.⁸ Whichever overview of the Episode one finds persuasive, the context does not decide between possibilities decisively.⁹

The debate over *forþringan* highlights a methodological defect in the explication of the Episode, which derives from the received assumption that it is valid to employ the Finnsburh fragment to unravel what might be occurring at a disputed stage of the Episode in *Beowulf*. Most attempts at reconstructing a full 'Finn legend' have been concerned with assigning culpability to one side or another, to determine the nature of that critical first betrayal from which hostilities followed. Preoccupation with this concern over culpability has enticed editors into attempting to align the pronouns in the crucial half-line, 1085(b), with one or other of the hostile parties. The argument presupposes that *hig* and *him* are plurals, and that one side, we cannot tell which, offers terms to the other. Then the question is asked, given the totality of some reconstructed account of the Finn legend, 'Which side is likelier to have offered terms?'. The pronouns are then matched to whichever reading best accords with that predetermined overview of the Finn legend. Such a methodology is clearly circular, and while such procedures are sometimes revealing, the results of this method cannot claim either to identify the opposing sides in *Beowulf* or to provide independent support from *Beowulf* for any given reconstruction of the Finn legend.

It is arguable that the narrative in *Beowulf* unfolds to listeners in a highly elusive way, so that, as with a riddling game or as in Border ballads, one has to guess at the importance of characters introduced and delight in the narrative possibilities which remain tantalizingly open. Alistair Campbell, noting the abrupt transitions in the narrative and in the focus of the Episode, concluded, after examining similar styles in Norse literature, that a style appropriate to the genre of the lay was distinguishable in those literatures from epic style.¹⁰ The narrative style of the Finn Episode need not, then, force a modern reader to assume that the Episode is only ever readable if the audience is acquainted with the details of a Finn legend in its entirety; it is at least possible that the narrative style admits of another explanation.

⁸*Finnsburh Fragment and Episode*, edited by Donald K. Fry (London, 1974), p. 39.

⁹Fred C. Robinson insists that the grounds of lexicographic authority for such meanings be made clear: 'an analogous example from *Beowulf* is that of *forþringan* in l. 1084. The expected meaning of this verb would be "to crowd out" and it is documented with this meaning in the OE translation of the *Benedictine Rule* . . . but the *Beowulf* occurrence is glossed by the dictionaries with a precisely opposite meaning, "protect" . . . purely on the grounds that satisfactory literary interpretation of the episode seems to require such a meaning', 'Lexicography and Literary Criticism: A Caveat', in *Philological Essays: Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature in Honour of Herbert Dean Meritt*, edited by James L. Rosier (The Hague, 1970), p. 102, note 6.

¹⁰Campbell, 'The Old English Epic Style' (see note 2).

If one comes to line 1085(b) without the burden of a reconstructed legend, the lines are perhaps not so obscure as has been supposed. There are larger rhetorical indicators which signal how the pronouns might be read. Finn, as I have argued above, is the grammatical agent from line 1081 onwards in the narrative; grammatically, it is also Finn who stipulates further conditions in line 1096. This section of the Episode is contained within a rhetorical envelope where Finn is dominant in the syntax. The only reversal to this pattern comes in line 1085(b), where the conjunction *ac*, used adversitively, is followed by the plural pronoun *hig*. Since the narrative has been concerned with Finn over the immediately preceding lines, listeners, noting the conjunction, the plural pronoun, and the change of agent, would expect to hear of some concession or reversal or restriction regarding that former subject.¹¹ There is no reason for a listener not to assume that the second preposition heard in line 1085(b) is anything but dative singular, *him*, referring to Finn, the subject of the lines to which they have just been listening. The syntactic and rhetorical likelihood that *him* is dative singular, not plural, is supported by Finn's prominence in the larger envelope running from lines 1081–106. This possibility has been overlooked because of the encumbrance of the received methodology; editors searching to discover which side initiated hostilities and which side consequently offered terms will carry over the assumption that line 1085(b) must concern a 'they' and a 'them', two plural groups with which the warring parties can be aligned. This blinds such readers to the possibility that *him* is the likelier dative singular form.

How does the subsequent narrative support this proposed reading? If anything, it confirms it. The group offers terms directly to Finn: would it be usual for the survivors to offer terms to anyone but the opposing leader?¹² Why would terms be offered to another group, when it is only Finn who can agree (or disagree) to carry them out? Only Finn, for example, can agree to show the hostile side exactly the same honour he shows to his own retainers, or to dispense his gifts to both sides equally. Finn's *weotan* are mentioned in line 1092, but only Finn himself dispenses gifts. If one looks at the terms of the treaty in lines 1089–90, one finds they are offered explicitly to Folcwalda's son, whom all audiences, from the alliterating consonants, have deduced was Finn, King of the Frisians, without

¹¹Tolkien argues that here '*Ac* "but, on the contrary" — as often, [is] implying a complete reversal', *Finn and Hengest*, p. 101.

¹²Tolkien thought that the terms were between 'Hengestes heap' and Finn himself, but to bring out that emphasis proposed to emend *hie* in line 1086 to *he* on the grounds of scribal error, *Finn and Hengest*, p. 101. R. A. Williams saw the word *him* as dative singular, but, arguing from what he claimed was the statement [of the treaty] 'put in simplest form', assumes that *him* refers to Hengest, *The Finn Episode in Beowulf: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1924), p. 29. I read the line, for the reasons which I have advanced, as 'they offered terms to Finn'.

necessarily having recourse to the much-cited line in *Widsith*, 'Finn Folcwalding [heold] Fresna cynne'.¹³ Finn, accepting the terms, apparently adds his own rider in the stipulations from lines 1096–104 at the end of this section of the Episode.

While I believe this argument is grammatically more plausible and better supported contextually than other readings of line 1085(b), it carries one implication which not all *Beowulf* scholars will be willing to accept. If *him* in line 1085(b) is not plural, the pronouns could be seen as setting up a contrast between Finn and some plural group referred to by *hig*. Is there any reason why, once set up, such a difference would not be maintained throughout the Episode? A listening audience, having heard a plural pronoun mentioned, would expect it to have a consistent referent unless the language signalled some kind of reversal.

Is it possible that *hig(hie)* in lines 1085(b), 1086, and 1087 consistently refers to the one plural group which is consistently contrasted with Finn? That plural group, through grammatical parallels in lines 1090 and 1091, is identified first as the 'Dene' and then as 'Hengestes heap' whom Finn is supposed equally to honour.¹⁴ Some will find difficulties with this reading, even while attracted to the consistency of referent in the pronouns. Why should 'they', in line 1086, clear an 'oper flet' for Finn? The narrative in the Episode does not allow us to decide between the multiple possibilities here. Finn's hall might have been destroyed (if *meðelstede* in line 1082 denotes a hall); 'they' now propose to clear a second hall; or 'Hengestes heap' may be in control of Finn's hall, unable to be ousted (if *forþrigan* in line 1084 means 'dislodge'), and they might be offering to clear another hall if Finn comes to terms; or it may be that 'oper flet' simply refers to the lower half of the same hall, which the group in possession are offering to vacate for Finn, as in the reading preferred by Johannes Hoops.¹⁵ Not wishing to arbitrate between these possibilities, it is enough to note that in each case the plural group offers to clear the 'oper flet' for Finn. So, in terms of the passage, there is nothing to impede the plural pronouns in lines 1085–87 referring to the same group in each successive case.

If, as has been argued, the narrative consistently contrasts singular and plural pronouns, then implications also follow for the identity of the Eotenas. In the reading proposed, the second occurrence of the term 'Eotena bearn', line 1088,

¹³*Widsith: A Study in Old English Heroic Legend*, edited by R. W. Chambers (Cambridge, 1912), l. 27.

¹⁴Several editors have suggested that the *hig* of line 1085(b) is Hengest's party, but few, perhaps, would wish to go as far as C. L. Wrenn did in arguing that Hengest offered terms 'for his own secret purposes of vengeance', *Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment*, edited by C. L. Wrenn (London, 1958), cited by Else von Schaubert in her revised edition of Heyne-Schücking's, *Beowulf*, 3 vols, II, seventeenth edition (Munich, 1961), p. 75.

¹⁵*Beowulfstudien* (Heidelberg, 1932), cited by Donald K. Fry, *Finnsburh Fragment and Episode* (London, 1974), p. 39.

references to 'Eotenas'? In line 1141, Hengest is obviously opposed to the 'Eotena bearn', while at line 1143 *hildeleoman* (if it is a sword with a murderous reputation) may be equally well-known to Jutes or giants, Frisians or enemies. Hildeburh, in line 1072, may have no reason to trust the fidelity of any of these groups, but it would sharpen the tragedy had her son and brother been slaughtered by her husband's retainers. In sum, this reading of line 1085(b) has the consequence that two of the references to 'Eotenas' must refer to Finn's followers, and the other two may reasonably do so.

To this extent the proposed reading upholds a principle of consistency in which the one word refers to the same side throughout the Episode. If there is no need to assume that *Eotena* must be glossed in a way which permits it to refer to either side in the conflict, then Kaske's gloss 'enemies', while intriguing, is not mandatory. They who wish to see the Eotenas of the Finn Episode as Jutes on the side of Finn can find support in the present reading; the King of the Frisians is still as likely to have had Jutes under his command as when Chambers proposed it.

If, given the arguments advanced in this paper, there is no puzzle in line 1085(b) over who first offered terms to whom, then the alleged need to speculate over which side started the slaughter disappears. The problem of which group began hostilities does not arise in the Episode in *Beowulf*; rather, it is a problem which results only from the attempt to reconstruct in full 'the legend of Finn'. The narrative in the Episode leaves this question aside, insisting instead, at lines 1095–96, that both Finn and Hengest's parties had put their trust in the firmness of treaties. In this, both parties are shown to be unwise. Such a treaty proved as brittle as the pledges of the Eotenas at the outset of the narrative (whatever those pledges may have been) in which Hildeburh had no cause to trust. For what Leslie Rogers once wrote about the 'moral idea' implied by the 'treatment in [Beowulf's] three great fights of the motives of weapons, treasure, and society' also applies to the Finn Episode in *Beowulf*: 'that a man should not trust in the things of this world, for they will fail him'.¹⁶

¹⁶H. L. Rogers, 'Beowulf's Three Great Fights', *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 6 (1955), 342, reprinted in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, edited by Lewis B. Nicholson (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1963) p. 237.