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Beowulfian Echoes in the Icelandic *Ectors saga*

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ABSTRACT

For as long as the study of the Old English *Beowulf* has existed, scholars have searched for sources and analogues to the epic poem as a means of understanding the genesis and development of the work. The present article is concerned with analogues from the corpus of Old Norse sagas, which have long occupied an important place in the debate. This discussion proceeds by providing an account of the research currents in this area of *Beowulf* studies over the last one and a half centuries. With the appropriate context established, two previously unidentified analogical episodes are adduced from the Icelandic romance *Ectors saga*. The connections between these episodes and the first half of the *Beowulf* narrative are assessed in turn, and their shared basis in folktale is established. This paper concludes with some reflections on the importance of *Ectors saga* in the debate about *Beowulf*'s Scandinavian analogues.

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The epic poem *Beowulf* is unique in the history of English literature for being at once so famous and so obscure. Its poet did not draw in an obvious fashion upon any other English text which survives, nor does the core narrative of his work appear to have been based squarely on an earlier Anglo-Saxon tradition. Unlike the great literary heroes of post-Conquest England, the tradition of *Beowulf* seems to have faded shortly after it was committed to vellum and never came to be enconced in English legend. *Beowulf* survives in a single, damaged manuscript—the so-called Nowell Codex—written in the first years of the eleventh century, and is not thought to have had any notable influence on other literature produced in England or elsewhere in the Middle Ages.

The student of *Beowulf* is, then, left remarkably few breadcrumbs as to the origins and development of the poem. As the bibliographies attest, this has proven little impediment to research on the topic. To date, a great many texts have been adduced as possible sources for, analogues of and influences on the poem, from the works of Virgil and Homer to Old English homilies and saints' lives to Irish sagas. The body of scholarship on these connections is enormous, but the fruits of this research have failed to achieve a consensus in *Beowulf* studies.¹ Of all the material discussed to date, it is arguably the analogical evidence from the corpus of Icelandic sagas, preserved in manuscripts from the

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thirteenth century onwards, that has most impacted our understanding of the origins of *Beowulf*.²

In the first half of *Beowulf*, the eponymous hero—a warrior from the land of the Geatas in what is now Götaland in southern Sweden—travels to Denmark and slays the marauding monster Grendel and his mother.³ The narrative outline of this part of the poem finds striking parallels in the Old Norse corpus. The most frequently discussed analogue is contained within *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. In the relevant episode, the hero and outlaw Grettir slays a pair of gigantic adversaries—the first in a hall, the second in a cave behind a waterfall. Within this conspicuously Beowulfian narrative frame, there also exist features which invite comparison with the Old English epic. These include blood swelling to the surface of the water after the slaying of the second adversary and the presence of the word *heptisax* (“hafted shortsword”), a *hapax legomenon* in Old Norse which parallels the unique *hæftmēce* (“hafted sword”) mentioned in Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother.

The similarity between *Grettis saga* and *Beowulf* was first noted in print by Guðbrandur Vigfússon in his 1878 edition of *Sturlunga saga*, where he claims to have observed the link earlier in 1873.⁴ It was Hugo Gering, however, who in 1880 first seized upon and elaborated the importance of this finding, followed shortly after by Charles S. Smith.⁵ Guðbrandur Vigfússon returned to the topic with F. York Powell in 1883.⁶ However, the idea of a relationship between Beowulf’s fight with Grendel and Icelandic saga material was not new. Peter Erasmus Müller had pointed to just such a link as early as 1815 in his review of Thorkelín’s edition of *Beowulf*, and Jacob Grimm had drawn a link between Grendel and the demonic *Grímr ægir* of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* in 1835. A specific relationship between the poem and *Hrólfs saga kraka* was then countenanced in 1852 by Gísli Brynjúlfsson.⁷ However, these observations had failed to garner much attention. It was the discovery of *Grettis saga* which first prompted serious consideration of Icelandic material in the debate surrounding the origins of the Old English epic—a category of evidence which directly challenged the prevailing view spearheaded by Karl Müllenhoff that the poem was based on a nature myth surrounding the god Beow.⁸ Many early commentators took the parallels between Beowulf’s monster-fights and those of Grettir as an indication that both narratives sprang from a common oral original, though some were convinced that such striking details could only have arisen in *Grettis saga* through direct borrowing from *Beowulf*.⁹ The latter position would prove untenable, and was eventually abandoned.

¹For summaries of research into the sources and analogues of *Beowulf*, see Andersson, “Sources and Analogues”; Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon*, 9–23.

²Although the sagas are only attested on vellum from the thirteenth century, many likely have a long and complex oral prehistory; see Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga*. Orality in medieval literature more generally is treated in Reichl, *Medieval Oral Literature*.

³For a recent reconsideration of the location of *Beowulf*’s Geatas, see Gräslund, *Beowulfkvädet*, 59–74, 123–33.

⁴Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *Sturlunga saga*, xlix, n. 1. Credit for the original discovery may, in fact, be due to Guðbrandur’s contemporary and countryman, Eiríkur Magnússon; see Spray, “Missing Links”; Wawn, “Hunger-Response Criticism.”

⁵Gering, “Das Beowulf”; Smith, “Beowulf Gretti.”

⁶Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Powell, *Corpus Poeticum*, 501–3.

⁷Müller, “Untitled Review,” 442–3; Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 570; Gísli Brynjúlfsson, “Oldengelsk og oldnordisk,” 130.

⁸Such a school had, according to one of its main critics, garnered “almost universal acceptance” (Lawrence, “Disputed Questions,” 247). This so-called “mythological school” is addressed in Chambers, *Beowulf*, 45–8.

Guðbrandur's discovery caused a stir in *Beowulf* studies, and scholars at once began searching for and discussing further Old Norse analogues to the Old English epic. The first new text to receive substantial exposure in the wake of Guðbrandur's findings was *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar*, treated at length by Sophus Bugge in 1887.¹⁰ *Gull-Þóris saga* was adduced four years later by Axel Olrik, and in 1898 R. C. Boer brought *Örvar-Odds saga* to the table in connection with *Orms þáttr* and *Grettis saga*.¹¹ Olrik added *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* in fine print in 1903.¹² *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* followed, referred to at some length in a footnote by Chester N. Gould in 1909.¹³ All the while, commentary on *Grettis saga* continued, and has been the subject of intensive treatment in *Beowulf* studies to the present day.¹⁴ This first period of research into *Beowulf* analogues is characterised by its eclecticism: there appears to have been no rationale or guiding principle behind the introduction and analysis of analogues besides, perhaps, a desire to reproduce Guðbrandur's famed discovery. In the event only *Orms þáttr* managed to attract serious interest, and it is nowadays not discussed with the same enthusiasm in *Beowulf* studies as it once was. The scattergun approach in this early period is a product of the fact that a framework for understanding *Beowulf*'s Scandinavian analogues had not yet been established.

This all changed in what might arguably be considered the "golden age" of research into Scandinavian *Beowulf* analogues, beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century. This new era of *Beowulf*-analogue studies was ushered in by two seminal contributions to the field. First was Friedrich Panzer's study of 1910, *Studien zur germanischen Sagengeschichte I: Beowulf*. Panzer argued at length that *Beowulf* and the Scandinavian analogues identified up until that point were related reflexes of the widespread "Bear's Son" folktale, generally known outside of *Beowulf* studies as "The Three Stolen Princesses" (ATU 301).¹⁵ Panzer also introduced some Icelandic analogues of his own.¹⁶ This towering addition to the debate was not without opponents in the years following its publication,¹⁷ but most scholars readily accepted the view that the

⁹Prominent supporters of an English origin for these details in *Grettis saga* included Sophus Bugge, R. C. Boer and Carl von Sydow; for a detailed discussion see Liberman, "Beowulf-Grettir," 355–6 and, for counterarguments, see Chambers, *Beowulf*, 50–3; "Beowulf's Fight with Grendel," 88, n. 2.

¹⁰Bugge, "Studien," 58–68. This text was also discussed in Olrik, *Danmarks heldedigtning*, 248 and Panzer, *Studien*, 344–63.

¹¹Olrik, "Røverer," 236–9; Boer, "Zur Grettissaga," 68–71. Boer, working along the same lines as Bugge, was in fact using *Örvar-Odds saga* as corroborative evidence to dismiss the independent value of *Orms þáttr* as an analogue. He was in fact securing its place in the debate; see Chambers, *Beowulf*, 460; Stitt, *Bear's Son*, 60–4.

¹²Olrik, *Danmarks heldedigtning*, 248.

¹³Gould, "The Source of an Interpolation in the Hjalmtérs saga ok Ölvis," 207–16.

¹⁴The most extensive bibliography of relevant literature is provided in Liberman, "Beowulf-Grettir," 367–83. For more recent work see Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 140–2.

¹⁵The folktale character of *Beowulf* was acknowledged at least as early as 1817, when Grundtvig ("Om Bjovulfs drage," 279) referred to its "dobbelte Eventyr" ("double folktale"). The poem's similarity to the "Bear's Son" folktale was advanced in 1826 in Croker, *Irische Elfenmärchen*, cxix; in 1836 in Mone, *Untersuchungen*, 287 and in 1889 in Laistner, *Das Rätsel der Sphinx*, 22–9. On these see Panzer, *Studien*, 254. However, the folktale heritage of *Beowulf* was only taken seriously following Panzer's seminal work. The question of whether *Beowulf* and its Scandinavian analogues can actually be characterised as "Bear's Son" tales remains important, and in the author's view ought not be taken for granted. For relatively recent caution see Stitt, *Bear's Son*, 194.

¹⁶Panzer (*Studien*, 325) brought attention to *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, a late text based on the fourteenth century poetic cycle *Griplur*. He also appears to have been the first scholar to highlight the connection between *Beowulf* and *Gullbrá og Skeggi*, a late Icelandic folktale (342–4). This analogue, though late, has since occupied a place in the debate, and is featured in the most important collections (Chambers, *Beowulf*, 459–60, 494–8; Garmonsway and Simpson, *Beowulf and its Analogues*, 328–31; Stitt, *Bear's Son*, 187–8). He also adduced stories concerning Grimur Helguson and Ásmundur *flaḡðagæfa* (332–44).

first half of *Beowulf* was constructed largely on the basis of material sourced from the “Bear’s Son” folktale.¹⁸ Second was William Witherle Lawrence’s article of 1912, “The Haunted Mere in *Beowulf*”, in which he suggested that the mere of the Grendels was an imperfect realisation of an earlier waterfall setting preserved more clearly in *Grettis saga*. Lawrence’s conclusions were received with great enthusiasm in their day and conditioned the treatment of the episode “in all subsequent commentaries and editions”.¹⁹ The work of Panzer and Lawrence convincingly revealed that Scandinavian analogues could be used to gain a glimpse into the murky prehistory of the epic, and scholars searched for parallels with unprecedented zeal. Lawrence’s discussion of the mere encouraged a focus, above all else, on analogues which preserved features resembling what was thought to be the “original” landscape of the Old English epic, which in practice meant episodes containing a watery setting. In 1917 Schröder drew attention in passing to the waterfall settings of the monster fights in *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*, *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns* and *Bærings saga*, as well as analogues discovered earlier.²⁰ Lawrence himself adduced *Samsons saga fagra*, which had been noted in passing by C. G. Child at the end of the nineteenth century.²¹ The detailed treatment of Scandinavian analogues in Frederick Klaeber’s edition of *Beowulf* as well as in the landmark volumes of Lawrence and Chambers established once and for all the relevance of this material in *Beowulf* studies.²² Discoveries and discussions with a focus on setting peaked at Margaret Schlauch’s introduction of *Florés saga konungs ok sona hans* and the oddly neglected material concerning *Andri jarl* in the early thirties.²³

Once analogues containing aquatic combats had dried up, scholars searched for new episodes in the then-as-now understudied corpus of Old Norse *fornaldarsögur* or “sagas of ancient time”. If the first and second periods of research into *Beowulf*’s Scandinavian analogues are defined by a small number of paradigm-shifting contributions, the third is characterised instead by a communal effort on the part of many scholars to broaden the anthology of relevant texts.²⁴ Alan Binns introduced *Þorsteins saga úxafóts*, *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds* and *Harðar saga ok hólmsverja* in the mid-fifties, the last of which had already been briefly mentioned by Boer in 1912.²⁵ Nora Chadwick followed this

¹⁷Panzer’s two chief opponents were Boer, *Die altenglische Heldendichtung*, 149–99 and von Sydow, “Untitled Review,” 123–31; “*Beowulf* och Bjarke,” esp. 23–46.

¹⁸Apart from that of von Sydow, enthusiasm for Panzer’s findings is unanimous in the detailed reviews of his book; see Heusler, “Untitled Review”; Brandl, “Untitled Review”; Sedgefield, “Untitled Review”; Kahle, “Untitled Review”; Lawrence, “Untitled Review”; Binz, “Untitled Review.” Contributions on the topic of *Beowulf*’s analogues in the next few decades generally took the existence of the “Bear’s Son” folktale in *Beowulf* for granted in light of Panzer’s work; see Lawrence, “Haunted Mere”; Bolt and Polívka, *Anmerkungen*, 316; Berendsohn, *Zur Vorgeschichte des ‘Beowulf’*, 82, 201; Schneider, *Germanische Heldensage*, 5; Hübener, “*Beowulf* and Germanic Exorcism,” 164–5; Fischer, “Deutsche *Beowulf*-Forschung,” 425–7 and see references there; Kennedy, *Beowulf*, xxi–xxvii.

¹⁹Mackie, “The Demon’s Home,” 455. Lawrence’s conclusions were questioned by Mackie, and Lawrence responds in his article “Grendel’s Lair.” Further dissent is also found in Hulbert, “Psychology”; Brodeur, “Design for Terror.”

²⁰Schröder, *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*, 138.

²¹Child, *Popular Ballads*, 50. Lawrence’s discussion of this saga is extensive; see *Epic*, 188–91; “*Samson the Fair*.”

²²Fulk, Bjork and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, xxxvi–xlili (hereafter K4); Lawrence, *Epic*, 171–203; Chambers, *Beowulf*, 47–54, 62–8, 451–78, 491–503.

²³Slauch, “Another Analogue,” 20–1; *Romance in Iceland*, 109–12. See also Dehmer, *Primitives Erzählungsgut*, esp. 51–69; and Liestöl, “*Beowulf* and Epic Tradition.” In 1929 Chambers published a short discussion entitled “*Beowulf* and Waterfall-Trolls” in the *Times Literary Supplement*. This was met some years later by Katherine M. Buck’s “*Beowulf* and Grendel,” in which she adduced *Gautreks saga* as an analogue. This contribution seems to have gone largely unnoticed in the field.

²⁴For extensive references see Orchard, *Critical Companion*, 123–4.

²⁵Binns; Boer, *Die altenglische Heldendichtung*, 166.

up shortly after in 1959 with *Bósa saga ok Herraud̄s*, and gave greater attention to some of the texts listed earlier by Schröder.²⁶ The wealth of material adduced in the mid-twentieth century seems only to have strengthened the conclusions of Panzer, and the idea that *Beowulf* and its saga analogues were variants of the “Bear’s Son” folktale rose to orthodoxy.²⁷ The collection of analogues was further crystallised in G. N. Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson’s volume.²⁸ New discoveries continued to trickle in, as with George Clark’s location of a relevant episode in *Njáls saga* and Richard Harris’ introduction of Grettir’s death to the debate.²⁹ The champion of this third phase of research was Peter Jorgensen who, in a series of short articles from the 1970s and 1980s, adduced an unprecedented number of new Scandinavian analogues to *Beowulf*’s monster-killings.³⁰ His most enduring contribution, and the one for which this era of *Beowulf*-analogue scholarship is best known, was his identification of the “Two-Troll” *oikotype* or local variant of the “Bear’s Son” folktale. This widely attested variant includes, as in *Beowulf*, a fight between a Scandinavian hero and two related monsters, usually a husband-wife or mother-son couple. The definitive work which capped off this period was the now-classic investigation by J. Michael Stitt, *Beowulf and the Bear’s Son*. This volume presents synopses of the majority of *Beowulf*’s saga analogues and provides commentary on their structural and folkloric significance. Despite its title this work does not engage often with *Beowulf* or relevant scholarship, but it does present the most complete collection of Scandinavian analogues produced to date.

Most scholars are now content to cite Stitt’s book and consider the matter of Scandinavian analogues to the poem settled. The work of the previous century and a half seems to have produced widespread agreement that *Beowulf* shares a common folktale source with a variety of saga analogues, despite the significant chronological and geographical gulf between the two. Magnús Fjalldal’s recent attempts to dismiss these links as coincidences appear to have found little support.³¹ The implications of these findings are significant, and ought to be spelled out clearly. They demonstrate that the *Beowulf* poet drew the narrative for his hero’s first two monster-fights from an ancient Scandinavian folktale which circulated orally at the time of the poem’s composition.³² This folktale continued to circulate for as long as five centuries between the composition of *Beowulf* and the appearance of the earliest saga analogues.³³ To judge from later sagas and ballads it also remained active in Scandinavia throughout the later medieval period and into the modern era. The striking similarities between *Beowulf* and certain analogues, such as Grettir’s fight with the Sandhaugar trolls, indicate that the Scandinavian folktale

²⁶Chadwick, “The Monsters and *Beowulf*.” For Schröder’s analogues, see p. 4.

²⁷The mid-twentieth century saw a rapid increase in discussions of “Bear’s Son” material in relation to *Beowulf*. See Danielli, “Initiation Ceremonial”; Genzmer, “Quellen”; Colgrave, “A Mexican Version”; Fisher, “The Trials of the Epic Hero”; “*Vishnu Purana*”; Barakat, “John of the Bear”; Jones, *Kings, Beasts, and Heroes*, 7–11.

²⁸Garmonsway and Simpson, *Beowulf and its Analogues*, 301–31.

²⁹Clark, “*Beowulf* and *Njáls saga*”; Harris, “A New Parallel.” Other analogues in *Grettis saga* also received renewed attention in this period; see McConchie, “Kárr the Old”; Wachslar, “Grettir’s Fight with a Bear.”

³⁰Jorgensen, “Two-Troll Variant”; “*Beowulf*’s Swimming Contest”; “Useless Weapon”; “Additional Icelandic Analogues.”

³¹Magnús Fjalldal, *Coincidence: “Old Norse Two-Troll Analogues.”* In the same year as the latter contribution, Magnús undermined his own position by adducing a *Beowulf* analogue of his own (“An Unnoticed *Beowulf* Analogue”). The analogue in question is *Pórodds þátr Snorrasonar*, which had in fact been noticed (and discussed) in two works he uses in his book: Stitt, *Bear’s Son*, 197, 204 and Jorgensen, “Additional Icelandic Analogues,” 206–7.

³²This has recently been dated to around 700AD; see Neidorf, *The Dating of Beowulf* esp. 1–18.

³³*Pórodds þátr* is perhaps the earliest Scandinavian witness to this folktale. This source is contained within Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, which dates to around 1230.

complex was conservative and retained many features of impressive antiquity.³⁴ At the same time, the variety of motifs exhibited across the Icelandic analogue corpus suggests that the oral folktale which the *Beowulf* poet knew was likely broader and more varied than one might imagine from reading the poem in isolation.

Contemporary scholarship continues to bring the shape of the folktale source of *Beowulf* more sharply into focus. With the notable exception of *Grettis saga*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Samsons saga* and *Orms þáttr*, it has been a tendency in the field for saga analogues to enjoy a brief debut—often in a single paragraph or footnote—and to garner little subsequent attention. The result has been that many pertinent episodes have received insufficient consideration. In the most recent work on *Beowulf*'s Scandinavian analogues, new and overlooked texts tend to be examined in greater detail and are the subjects of their own discussions.³⁵

It is in this same vein that the present article introduces a new source to the aged debate concerning *Beowulf*'s analogues. This text is usually known by the title *Ectors saga* (“the saga of Ector”).³⁶ This is a *riddarasaga* or “chivalric saga” likely composed in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century and extant in some thirty manuscripts.³⁷ The saga concerns the battles and trials of Ector, son of King Priamus, and his six companions. It is a tightly structured work which sequentially narrates the individual adventures of these seven heroes and ends with their reunion and a monumental battle with the knights of a certain King Troilis.³⁸ Despite its popularity in medieval Iceland, *Ectors saga*, like many *riddarasögur*, has received little attention in modern times. Scholarship on the text to date has mostly probed the relationship between *Ectors saga* and other Icelandic saga material, and with medieval European romance more broadly.³⁹ In what follows, the adventures of two of Ector's knights, Vernacius and Alanus, will be discussed, and their relationship with the folktale material underlying *Beowulf* will be established. This will allow in turn for reflections on the circulation of such material in Iceland, and the importance of *Ectors saga* to the debate concerning *Beowulf*'s Scandinavian analogues.

The Trial of Vernacius

The first of the two relevant episodes constitutes the adventure of Ector's companion Vernacius, which is the first to be related in the saga. As *Ectors saga* is little known, a summary of this episode will serve to orientate the reader.

³⁴The retention of ancient material in Germanic oral tradition is evident not only in the preservation of narrative patterns, but also character archetypes; see Neidorf, “*Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied*.”

³⁵Hobson, “Courtly Analogue”; Grant, “*Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*”; “Beow in Scandinavia.”

³⁶The title of this saga exhibits much variation across its manuscript witnesses. The protagonist's name is also spelled *Ektor*, *Hector* and *Hektor*, and *ok kappa hans* (“and his champions”) is sometimes found appended. See Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, 250.

³⁷The earliest extant manuscripts are Stockholm perg. 7 fol. and AM 589d 4to, which date from 1450–1500 (Kalinke, “*Ectors saga*,” 67). Jürg Glauser (*Isländische Märchensagas*, 76) has suggested on the basis of the Stockholm manuscript that *Ectors saga* was composed, along with ten other *riddarasögur*, for the Icelandic chieftain Loptr *riki* Guttormsson, who died in 1432. See also Barnes, *Bookish Riddarasögur*, 15–16. The version of the saga quoted here is from Loth, *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 81–186 (hereafter Loth), which is based on AM 152 fol.; on this manuscript see ix.

³⁸A plot summary and discussion of *Ectors saga* is provided in Kalinke, “*Ectors saga*,” 68–86 and Barnes, *Bookish Riddarasögur*, 88–93.

³⁹An overview is provided in Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, 250.

Vernacius parts from his companions and sets off to seek his fame. He comes across a magical goblet in a clearing and drinks from it. A knight, Loricus, appears and chastises him for drinking from the vessel and thus violating the decree of his lord, King Nocerus. Vernacius and Loricus fight, and Loricus is thrown from his horse and run through. At that the giant Nocerus appears and engages Vernacius in battle. Vernacius strikes Nocerus with his lance, but it fails to inflict any harm. Vanquished, Vernacius is taken back to Nocerus' castle and cast into the dungeon. A princess named Almaria visits him there and frees him on the condition that he kill Nocerus, who has slain her father and is pressing her to marry him. Vernacius agrees. She informs him that Nocerus can only be harmed using the sword that he himself uses in battle, and only at his navel. Having procured it beforehand from under his headboard, she gives the sword to Vernacius, and instructs him how to perform the killing and escape. At that Vernacius strips off Nocerus' bedclothes, stabs into his navel, and pulls the sword back out. He flings the sword across the hall and climbs up onto a beam. At the racket from the falling sword Nocerus leaps up and thrashes around. He finds the door and falls across the threshold, smashing the wainscoting. Vernacius picks up the sword and exalts in his prize. Once Nocerus is dead Vernacius rolls him out of the hall and leaves him. Nocerus' men arrive. Some are dismayed at his death, and others rejoice. Vernacius returns to the princess, who is delighted to hear of his success. The two agree to marry.

This account contains several motifs which betray its reliance on the same *oikotype* of the "Bear's Son" folktale which gave rise to *Beowulf* and its saga analogues. However, these have become obscured by the accretion of elements from the story's chivalric frame. Much of the *mise-en-scène* of the episode—the presence of a magical goblet, knights, a castle complete with a dungeon—are common and expected features of Old Norse *riddarasögur*, and ought to be separated from the underlying folktale complex.⁴⁰ It is more difficult to account for the presence of the princess in this adventure as a generic convention, however, as this is an almost ubiquitous feature in the "Bear's Son" folktale. Of the 202 examples which Panzer uses as a basis for his study, all but six contain a princess or princesses.⁴¹ Princesses are rarer in medieval Scandinavian reflexes, and they are absent entirely from *Beowulf*'s monster-fights. This may suggest that they accrued to the Scandinavian folktale gradually in the late medieval period and were not originally present in the *oikotype* of the "Bear's Son" which gave rise to the Old English epic and its saga analogues.⁴² In this sense it is of interest that the princess met in Vernacius' adventure is not as fully integrated into the narrative as in post-medieval versions of the folktale. The episode is not motivated by the theft of the princess and, though likely having been abducted, Almaria does not appear to be Nocerus' prisoner. She is also alone, rather than being one of three princesses.⁴³ She better fulfils the role of the

⁴⁰See Chadwick, "The Monsters and *Beowulf*," 178; Jorgensen, "Beowulf's Swimming Contest," 52; Grant, "*Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*," 10.

⁴¹Panzer, *Studien*, 122.

⁴²To this effect McConchie ("Kárr the Old," 484) suggests "perhaps the princesses are a later accretion, designed to provide an audience no longer familiar with the heroic code with some motivation." See also Chambers, *Beowulf*, 381. This view is problematised by the fact that the freeing of women may have been an ancient feature of the folktale (for examples see Panzer, *Studien*, 235, 241). One fact supportive of the suggestion that princesses accrued later to the Scandinavian reflexes is that they overwhelmingly occur in Icelandic romance and not in more sober analogues such as *Grettis saga*. This would seem to suggest that the *riddarasögur*, which regularly employ the "damsel in distress" of medieval European romance, borrowed the princesses later from such traditions or, possibly, from continental versions of the "Bear's Son." The alternative—that the *Beowulf*-poet and a range of Icelandic saga authors consciously excised princesses that were originally in their source—seems less credible.

⁴³This fact makes the account atypical of the "Bear's Son" pattern. Of the 196 examples of the folktale cited by Panzer (122) which contain princesses, just twenty feature only one.

helper in bringing Vernacius the sword, much as Unferð gives the sword Hrunting to Beowulf prior to his own conflict.⁴⁴

There are certain parallels between the actors in this episode and in Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother. Vernacius is introduced as “þeim er minnst háttaðr er reiknaðr” (“he who is counted least prominent”), that is, of his companions.⁴⁵ Beowulf, similarly, was considered an unpromising youth until given the chance to prove his worth through the slaying of Grendel: “hēan wæs lange, | swā hyne Geata bearn gōdne ne tealdon”. (2183–4) (“long was he lowly, such that the sons of the Geatas did not count him good”).⁴⁶

Nocerus takes on the trappings possessed by many adversaries in medieval romance literature: he is mounted, dark-skinned, and is lord of a castle. Nevertheless, he retains characteristics which link him to other foes encountered in Old Norse “Two-Troll” narratives. He is no human but a *jötunn*—a giant—which aligns him with the *eoten* Grendel and his monstrous mother.⁴⁷ Nocerus is also invulnerable to all weapons except his own. The princess relates that “engi járn bíta á hann, nema þat sverð er sjálfir hann berr í orrostum” (“no iron harms him, save for that sword which he himself bears in battle”).⁴⁸ This is made clear earlier when Vernacius' lance breaks: “spjótskaptit brotnaði í sundr í miðju en ekki beit á hold jötunsins” (“the lance-shaft broke apart in the middle but did not harm the body of the *jötunn*”).⁴⁹ Chivalric trappings aside, this configuration is matched in *Beowulf*, where Grendel's mother is impervious to the sword Hrunting but is vulnerable to her own blade.

Further recognisable parallels exist in the narrative progression of the episode. As in *Beowulf* and many “Two-Troll” accounts, the sword which is able to harm the monstrous adversary is found in its lair: in *Ectors saga* it is, somewhat unusually, *undir hans höfðagerð* (“under his headboard”), and in *Beowulf* it is located variously *on searwum* (“among treasures”) and *on wāge... hangian* (“hanging on the wall”).⁵⁰ Other details are less straightforwardly inherited from the “Two-Troll” *oikotype*. Vernacius throws his sword away after dealing the fatal blow to Nocerus: “kastar frá sér sverðinu útar eptir húsinu” (“he threw the sword away across the hall”).⁵¹ This unmotivated act fits awkwardly in the narrative chronology of the episode. It is likely a “blind motif” related to Beowulf's disposal of Hrunting: “wearp ðā wundenmæl wrættum gebunden | yrre öretta, þæt hit on eorðan læg” (1531–1532) (“the wroth warrior cast the patterned sword away, inlaid with ornamentation, so that it lay on the ground”). The hero's discarding the sword, both in *Beowulf* and in some Scandinavian analogues, is a response to the weapon's ineffectiveness against his foe and is frequently followed by the hero resorting to wrestling, as Beowulf himself does.⁵² In *Ectors saga* this important motif is included, but in the wrong place. The curious comment that it was the clatter of the

⁴⁴On this figure see Jorgensen, “Useless Weapon,” esp. 89.

⁴⁵Quotations from *Ectors saga* are normalised from Loth (here 91), and translations are based on Grant, “The Saga of Ector.”

⁴⁶Quotations from *Beowulf* are from *K4* with italics and superscript dots removed. Translations are the author's.

⁴⁷On the semantics of the term *jötunn* in Old Norse, see Grant, “Giant Proportions,” esp. 80–4.

⁴⁸Loth, 95.

⁴⁹Loth, 94.

⁵⁰The presence of a bed and bedclothes in this episode is difficult to account for. These are features of several Scandinavian analogues identified to date and may ultimately derive from the Polyphemus tradition; see Grant, “*Hrólf's saga Gautrekssonar*,” 10.

⁵¹Loth, 96.

sword rather than the terrible wound which woke Nocerus may be an attempt to account for the awkward implementation of this old motif. The wrestling match expected following the disposal of the sword is now impossible and is reconfigured as Nocerus' violent death-throes, in which he writhes around and destroys the hall.⁵³

The sword in question is clearly a prize: when it is handed to Vernacius, the narrator notes “hann tók við ok leizt vel á ok girndi hann mjök til þess” (“he took it, inspected it closely, and greatly desired it”) and, at the conclusion of the episode, “hann tók þat upp, ok þykkist nú vel hafa farit er hann fekk gott sverð” (“he picked it up, and it seemed to him that he had done well to have gained a good sword”).⁵⁴ This is closely paralleled by Beowulf's own exultation in his loot: “sælāca gefeah | mægenbyrþenne, þāra þe hē mid him hæfde” (1624–1625) (“he rejoiced in the great burden of sea-booty which he had with him”).⁵⁵

It was mentioned above that Vernacius' combat with Nocerus is not motivated by the theft of a princess. The episode is instigated instead by Nocerus' desire to avenge his *kærastr riddari* (“dearest knight”), Loricus. Shortly after Loricus is slain away from the castle, Nocerus travels out to avenge him, which prompts the second conflict in his dwelling. The arrival of Grendel's mother is similarly precipitated by the fact that she “wolde hyre mæg wrecan” (1339) (“wished to avenge her kinsman”). There are clear differences in the configuration of these two scenes. Loricus possesses none of the qualities characteristic of the first adversary in *Beowulf* or its saga analogues. His relationship to Nocerus, though close enough to warrant vengeance, is not familial. Vernacius also does not travel to Nocerus' castle as Beowulf seeks the mere but is conveyed there as a captive. The clear differences between these accounts notwithstanding, Loricus' presence and function are an indication of the debt of this episode to the “Two-Troll” pattern.

The Trial of Alanus

The second episode which is of relevance to this discussion constitutes the majority of the adventure of the knight Alanus, which is the fourth of seven trials related in *Ectors saga*. As with the previous episode, a narrative summary is provided to facilitate discussion.

Alanus emerges from a forest to find a farmstead surrounded by mutilated corpses. The farmer informs him that he is in the land of Nafaria, ruled over by King Fancrancius. Two sorcerers active in the kingdom, Elvidus and his wife Glebula, have bewitched a she-wolf so that it ravages men and livestock, and is invulnerable to weapons. Alanus is also told that this wolf had killed the farmer's son, and that no one dares to face it. Alanus rides on to the king's castle. Outside the castle he bests a knight, Lucius, who becomes his companion. They go to greet the king and agree to stay there. Alanus sleeps uneasily

⁵²Consider Gunnarr's casting away his ineffective axe during a fight with a giantess in chapter 6 of *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*; see Jorgensen, “Useless Weapon,” 87.

⁵³Influence from the first of the two monster fights in the “Two-Troll” pattern may be discernible in the sequence of Nocerus' death: after receiving a grievous wound he stumbles towards the door, destroying the wainscoting in the process, and falls over the threshold. One is reminded here of Grendel who, during his hall-wrecking bout with Beowulf, seeks to exit the building.

⁵⁴Loth, 96, 97.

⁵⁵Weapons possessed by giants and claimed by their slayers are frequently ornate in saga analogues. Perhaps the best-known example is the rich shortsword which Grettir takes from Kárr (see McConchie, “Neglected *Beowulf* Analogue”). Consider also Hálfðan's discovery of a *sax gulli búit* “gold-adorned shortsword” during his fight with Sleggja in chapter 4 of *Hálfðanar saga Brúnufóstra* (see Jorgensen, “Two-Troll Variant,” 38, 40).

and leaves the castle. He spots the she-wolf breaking into some livestock enclosures, and it rushes at him. Alanus thrusts a spear into its jaws but the wolf bites it apart and sinks its claws into his flesh. Alanus clasps the she-wolf and breaks its spine. At that Lucius realises that Alanus is gone and finds him outside the castle, praising his valour. A fearsome knight appears riding a camel who they recognise must be Elvidus. Alanus fights him alone. He hews at Elvidus' leg, chopping it off and leaving the sword sticking in the camel. The two then wrestle. Alanus gets free, grabs his sword, and slices Elvidus in two. He realises that Lucius is nowhere to be seen, and finds him wrestling with a sow. Alanus strikes it with his sword, but only dust flies off. He grabs the sow and wrenches off its leg. Lucius takes hold of the sow's jaws and dislocates the head from the neck. They realise that the sow must have been Glebula. Alanus informs the king of his deed, and takes his daughter's hand in marriage.

As with Vernacius' adventure, this episode exhibits a number of similarities with the "Two-Troll" *oikotype* which are given a chivalric veneer. The account is split into two parts. The first, which is concerned with the depredations and slaying of the she-wolf, contains several of the same motifs familiar from Beowulf's fight with Grendel and the first combat in many saga analogues. The adventure opens with the hero arriving from abroad in a land ravaged by a destructive monster: "mennirnir liggja rifnir í sundr við strætínu. Af sumum váru fætrnir en sumum hendr, ok þó allir dauðir" ("men were lying by the wayside ripped asunder. Some were missing their legs, and others their arms—but all were dead").⁵⁶ In much the same way Beowulf is told of the *drihtsele drēorfāh* "noble hall stained with blood", and he himself hears of Grendel's depredations beforehand: "þæt fram hām gefrægn Higelāces þegn | gōd mid Gēatum, Grendles dāda" (194–5) ("Hygelac's thane, good among the Geatas, heard of Grendel's deeds from home").

The adventure proceeds with Alanus' might being tested by Lucius: "er hann sér ókunnan mann fara, keyrir hann sinn hest sporum ok reið at Alanus" ("when he saw an unrecognised man going there, he spurred his horse and charged towards Alanus").⁵⁷ The occurrence of such a challenge at this point in the narrative chronology echoes Unferð's verbal sparring with the unknown newcomer Beowulf and their subsequent reconciliation.

On the same night as his reception by the king, Alanus sleeps *óvært mjök*, "very restlessly", next to his companion. This rare motif finds a clear parallel in *Beowulf*, which has the protagonist lay awake in wait for Grendel: "Scēotend swæfon, | þā þæt hornreced healdan scoldon, | ealle būton ānum" (703–5) ("the warriors slept, those who had to guard the gabled hall, all except one"). In *Ectors saga* the motivation for the hero's wakefulness has fallen away—Ananus does not consciously await the arrival of his foe in the night—but it is nevertheless correctly followed by the appearance of the she-wolf.⁵⁸

Like Beowulf Alanus faces the plundering monster alone as it breaks in, but unusually this conflict is located neither at the farmstead where the destruction is first witnessed, nor at the king's residence, but at some cattle folds outside the city: "hann sér hvar dýr var á grindunum ok hafði brotit grindurnar" ("he saw where the beast was at the

⁵⁶Loth, 116–7.

⁵⁷Loth, 118.

⁵⁸That this motif was available in Scandinavia is indicated by chapter 35 of *Grettis saga*, where the protagonist lays awake in expectation of an attack from the undead Glámr. This same motif also occurs in Ketill's combat with Kaldrani in chapter 2 of *Ketils saga hængs*.

cattle folds, and had broken into them”).⁵⁹ This departure is difficult to account for. However, the possibility that Alanus’ foe broke through the castle gates in an earlier version of the narrative is suggested by the equivocality of the word *grind*, which can mean either “barred gate” or “fold”. The possible development from the former to the latter may have been encouraged by the animalistic representation of the hero’s enemy.⁶⁰

Alanus’ fight with the she-wolf is related in *Ectors saga* only briefly, but nevertheless contains motifs familiar from *Beowulf* and other versions of the “Two-Troll” pattern. It is said earlier that this monstrous enemy is impervious to weapons: “hana bíta engi járn” (“no iron harms her”).⁶¹ In much the same way, it is said of Grendel: “þone synscaðan | ænig ofer eorþan irenna cyst, | gūðbilla nān, grētan nolde” (801–3) (“no war-blade, not the best iron on earth, would strike the evildoer”). Accordingly Alanus’ spear fails and is destroyed—a common alternative in “Two-Troll” tales to the hero casting his weapon away or presciently resorting to wrestling.⁶² Like *Beowulf* Alanus destroys his foe by brute force. He achieves this by clasping the she-wolf’s spine, which is a common means of dispatching monstrous enemies in saga analogues.⁶³

After the ravaging wolf is defeated in the night, Lucius reunites with Alanus at the site of the battle. He looks upon the slain wolf, and takes it a sign of the hero’s prowess: “[hann] sér ýlgina dauða liggja ... ok mælti ‘mikils máttar ertu, ok inn mesti afreksmaðr’” (“he saw the dead she-wolf lying there ... and said, ‘you are very mighty, and a man of the highest valour’”).⁶⁴ A possible parallel to this scene is the exhibition of Grendel’s arm after *Beowulf*’s victory over the monster: “Þæt was tæcen sweotol | syþðan hildedēor hond ālegde, | earm ond eaxle” (833–5) (“that was a clear sign, once the battle-bold one lay out the hand, arm and shoulder”).

The defeat of the she-wolf initiates the next part of the trial, where parallels are to be found with the second combat in the “Two-Troll” pattern. Elvidus is essentially a copy of the knight Nocerius met in Vernacius’ adventure. He emerges shortly after the death of the previous adversary riding a camel. He is not expressly described as a *þotunn*, but appears inhuman: on his approach it is said “maðr ríðr, ef mann skal kalla” (“a man came riding, if he must be called a man”).⁶⁵ Elvidus’ desire to avenge the slaying of the she-wolf is not announced, but this seems to be implied by his timely arrival and engagement of Alanus in battle.

The details of Alanus’ fight with Elvidus differ substantially from *Beowulf*’s bout with Grendel’s mother, but there are structural similarities between the two episodes. Both heroes initiate the fight proper by striking their foe with a sword. Hrunting proves ineffective and is thrown away, while Alanus’ sword becomes lodged in Elvidus’ mount. Now unarmed, the warriors both fall to the floor and wrestle their enemy. Unlike their first fight, this combat proves especially challenging and both heroes’ lives

⁵⁹Loth, 119.

⁶⁰This development is not unique: ravaging beasts with a preference for livestock are a known variant of the humanoid raider figure in Scandinavian analogues. The creature which attacks the Scylding hall in chapter 35 of *Hrólfs saga kraka* is perhaps the best-known example.

⁶¹Loth, 117.

⁶²See Jorgensen, “Useless Weapon.”

⁶³See Peters, “Wrestling,” esp. 239, where it is also suggested that this traditional *hryggspenna* style may also have been used by *Beowulf* to slay *Dæghrefn*.

⁶⁴Loth, 120.

⁶⁵Loth, 120. A variation of this same phrase is also used of Nocerius; Loth, 94.

are in danger. In *Ectors saga*, Elvidus “grípr Alanus ok tekr at sér svá fast at Alanus þykkir við því búit at hann muni brenna ok brotna í sér hvert bein” (“grabbed hold of Alanus and squeezed him so hard that he thought every bone in his body would bruise and break”).⁶⁶ In *Beowulf* only the hero’s armour protects him from death: “Hæfde ðā forsīðod sunu Ecgþeowes ... nemne him heaðþbyrne helpe gefremede” (1550, 1552) (“the son of Ecgþeow would then have perished, had the corslet not afforded help”). After this mortal danger both heroes manage to stand up and grab a sword to make a second stroke. In *Ectors saga* this is the sword which was earlier lodged in the camel—an unusual realisation of the traditional motif—and in *Beowulf*, it is a different blade lying in the vicinity. Both Beowulf and Alanus thereupon succeed in delivering the death-blow to their opponent.

This episode is atypical for including a third, separate conflict with a monstrous adversary. This struggle appears to be a duplication of the prior fight with Elvidus, perhaps added under the influence of the “Two-Troll” pattern.⁶⁷ However, it presents a slightly different configuration of motifs. That Alanus’ sword fails to inflict harm on Glebula and is subsequently flung to the ground parallels the treatment of Hrunting in *Beowulf* exactly, and represents the traditional implementation of the same motif met earlier in Vernacius’ combat with Nocerus. Alanus also resembles Beowulf in resorting to wrestle his foe after discovering the uselessness of his sword. In the absence of a preferable weapon the strength of Alanus and Lucius proves sufficient, and Glebula’s head is pulled out of joint. This is a possible parallel to Beowulf’s second fight concluding with his striking the neck of Grendel’s mother.

Conclusion

Taken together, these episodes furnish four separate combats, each of which draws on the “Two-Troll” tradition identified in a wide range of Old Norse sagas. This amounts to more separate analogical episodes than in any text identified to date excluding *Grettis saga*.⁶⁸ The evidence adduced here permits a number of conclusions relating to the nature and use of the folktale material common to *Beowulf* and its Scandinavian analogues in Iceland.

It is clear that motifs from the “Two-Troll” pattern could be implemented with conscious flexibility in Icelandic sagas. The conflict between Vernacius and Nocerus provides an effective example. In this episode, recognisable motifs such as the hero’s receiving a sword; the hero’s use of an ornate sword to deal a deathblow to the otherwise invincible second adversary; and the central importance of the motif of vengeance are retained in a typical fashion. Other motifs have been subject to clear adaptation: the casting of the sword has been taken out of its familiar context, and the wrestling has become a

⁶⁶Loth, 120.

⁶⁷Doubling and tripling is so common in Old Norse *Beowulf* analogues that Jorgensen considered it “almost the rule, rather than the exception”; see “Useless Weapon,” 83, n. 8 for examples. The “Two-Troll” pattern is already fulfilled by the fight with the she-wolf and subsequent conflict with Elvidus. However, this complex often features, as in *Beowulf*, an animalistic female avenging her male relative. This irregular third fight with Glebula could have been included to satisfy this convention.

⁶⁸*Grettis saga* contains five separate analogues identified to date: Grettir’s fight with Kárr *inn gamli*; with a bear in Hálogaland; with Glámr and with the trolls at Sandhaugar, and Grettir’s defence of Drangey; see Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies* 140–68 and the references there.

violent death. That these motifs appear correctly elsewhere in the saga—such as in Alanus’ wrestling with the she-wolf and his discarding the sword in the fight with Glebula—suggests that the author was aware of the traditional implementation of at least some of these elements, and deliberately altered them to account for narrative inconsistencies and produce a varied story.

Saga authors could also possess a knowledge of multiple variants of a single motif. It is usual for saga analogues adduced to date to contain a single relevant episode which naturally provides one instance of a particular motif. In such episodes the hero might discard his ineffective weapon, as in *Beowulf* and chapter 6 of *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, or the weapon might break, as in chapter 18 of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*.⁶⁹ The four analogous episodes contained within *Ectors saga* indicate that the author had multiple variant motifs at his disposal. He was aware, for instance, that ineffective weapons could either break or be discarded in the “Two-Troll” tradition, and that enemies could be slain with their own weapons or through wrestling.

In a related vein, a text such as *Ectors saga* which contains multiple versions of the same narrative pattern demonstrates that individual saga authors could possess a knowledge of a wide array of different motifs. Taken together, the distinct motifs which appear across Vernacius and Alanus’ various conflicts show that the author of *Ectors saga* must have had a detailed knowledge of the folktale, from common motifs such as the foe being vulnerable to its own weapon, to rarer motifs such as the hero lying awake before his conflict with his adversary. The saga author’s impressively broad inventory of motifs indicates that the Scandinavian *oikotype* of the “Bear’s Son” folktale retained much in common with the folktale ancestor of *Beowulf* until at least the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century.

Lastly, the underlying unity and value of a Scandinavian analogue can be obscured by later narrative and contextual innovations which are frequently attributable to the conventions of genre. The natural accretion of romance clichés and type-scenes to *riddarasaga* analogues can easily skew more fundamental affinities between these texts and *Beowulf*. A closer look reveals that such links nevertheless exist, as the century-long discussion of the romance *Samsons saga* attests. To take a clear example from the present discussion, Alanus’ conflict with the she-wolf exhibits a structural coherency which is matched by few saga analogues adduced to date. Alanus’ arrival from abroad to witness the destruction of a marauding monster; being tested at the king’s residence; lying sleepless; battling the aforementioned monster who makes a night-time attack; and the inspection of the monster’s body occur in a tight chronological order which parallels *Beowulf*’s fight with Grendel. Texts such as *Grettis saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* have more easily recommended themselves as analogues to *Beowulf* because they are stylistically austere and draw on a landscape and heroic ethic familiar from the epic poem. However, episodes such as Alanus’ combat with the wolf, though cast in a romance mould, have just as much potential to inform us about the shape and durability of the “Two-Troll” pattern in Iceland.

Behind *Ectors saga*, then, one finds an author who looked to the “Two-Troll” folktale as an inspiration for two of his knights’ adventures. He created these episodes by carefully

⁶⁹See note 52 above. A similar scene involving the casting away of a weapon also occurs in *Bjarkarímur* IV.10. The relevant episode in *Bárðar saga* is treated in Stitt, *Bear’s Son*, 147.

layering and adapting motifs sourced from this tradition, of which he had an apparently detailed knowledge. His flexible and creative treatment of “Two-Troll” material produced a set of monster-slayings characterised by rich variety and, at times, inconsistency. One may wonder whether there are dim resemblances here with the *Beowulf* poet’s own use and adaptation of his folktale source to shape the first two combats of his epic hero. That some of the inconsistencies in the *Beowulf* narrative similarly result from an imperfect implementation of the underlying folktale is relatively clear, but the poet may also have selectively drawn on a broader tradition than is now evident in the Old English epic.⁷⁰

What can be said with confidence is that the expansion of the anthology of “Two-Troll” analogues argued for above adds further confirmation to the time-honoured argument that *Beowulf*’s monster-fights and those of many heroes of Icelandic literature sprang from a common Scandinavian original. The *Beowulfian* echoes in the deeds of Ector’s knights indicate that narratives structurally comparable to *Beowulf* were circulating orally in Scandinavia antecedent to the composition of the Old English epic. These resonances squarely attest to the fact that the narrative pattern underlying *Beowulf* survived in the same basic form and across a broad geographical range for the best part of a millennium, and did not know the kind of generic distinctions that are now taken for granted.

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⁷⁰Inconsistencies resulting from the *Beowulf* poet’s treatment of the underlying folktale have received wide attention; see, for example, Schück, *Studier*, 22; Panzer, *Studien*, 282; Chambers, *Introduction*, 53, 63–5; “*Beowulf*’s Fight with Grendel,” 85; Lawrence, “*Haunted Mere*”; *Epic*, 175–7, 241; Brodeur, “*Design for Terror*,” 503; Barakat, “*John of the Bear*,” 1.

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