BOOKS

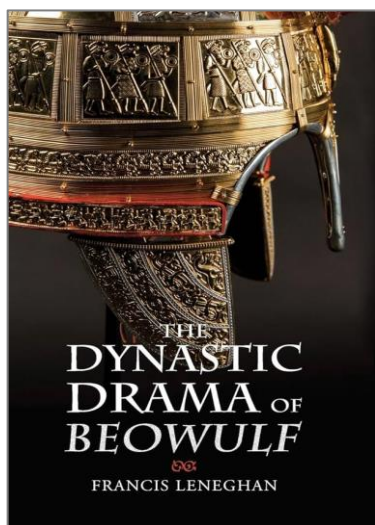## Francis Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf* (Anglo-Saxon Studies 39), Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2022 (paperback edition), pp. vii, 300.

Despite the considerable amount of scholarship dedicated to the most important Old English poem, Francis Leneghan manages to make a major contribution to *Beowulf* exegesis. This book discusses at large the three royal dynasties in the poem (the Scyldings, the Scylfings, and the Hrethlings), and the role their struggles play in the larger landscape of Scandinavian royal legends.

The introduction contextualises the manuscript, and offers information on the text's origin, while also providing a brief overview of earlier critical reception. It then moves on to a succinct discussion of the major themes of the poem, including kingship and dynasties. The reader is given extensive guidance through ample annotations and footnotes. Chapter One distinguishes between three stages in the life cycle of a dynasty: founding, maturity and the inevitable fall. Thus, the poem begins with the story of Scyld Scefing, the destitute child who became the founder of a dynasty. The youthful phase of the dynasty is in place, and Scyld's offspring thrive after his death. *Beowulf* therefore becomes a poem about the life cycle of dynasties, and how and why they differ.

Hrothgar's rule falls into the second stage: maturing and facing crisis. Grendel's attacks have rendered the Danish king unable to rule. Moreover, Hrothgar faces a complicated dynastic succession. Leneghan aptly emphasizes the importance of queens as royal advisors, as seen when Wealhtheow advises Hrothgar against adopting Beowulf and complicating the succession even further. Dynastic tradition, as Leneghan argues, is at the forefront of the poem. Beowulf himself refuses both Hrothgar's offer and the Geatish throne out of respect for the standing succession rules. Furthermore, the complexity of the system of allegiances is discussed in depth. The third phase is tied to the dragon and heralds the end of dynasties: the fall of Beowulf's dynasty, the Hrethlings.

Chapter Two tackles the possible sources of the poem. Leneghan suggests that the poem repurposes a well-known story of a highly proficient swimmer and combines it with the dynastic drama of Hygelac's house. Thus, Hygelac's great size, his seaside burial and the swimmer story are combined to create the fictional Beowulf. The poem becomes at once a rousing tale of the rise of the house of Scyld and a cautionary tale on the fall of the Hrethlings. The fall of Heremod allowed the rise of Scyld. The death of Hygelac became the legend of Beowulf. This proves the ability of the *Beowulf* poet, who skilfully repurposed Scandinavian legends for "a Christian Anglo-Saxon audience" (p. 151).

Chapter Three explains the role of the monsters in the poem: Grendel's onslaught on the Danes is seen as an attempt to usurp the throne. His inability to completely wrestle control from Hrothgar is attributed to the illegitimacy of his royal claim. Leneghan draws a compelling parallel between the poem and the illegitimate royal claims in Anglo-Saxon England. Thus, he argues, Grendel's lack of royal blood and legitimacy prevents him from ever fully taking control of Heorot. Grendel's mother becomes the antagonist of the women in the poem, who are intimately invested in preserving royal lines. Together with the dragon that destroys the throne of the Hrethlings and the last member of this dynasty, the monsters serve "as portents of dynastic and national crises" (p. 193). The dragon is the lesser of the evils that are going to befall the Geats, now that their king is dead.

Chapter Four deals with Old Testament kingship and its similarities with *Beowulf.* Indeed, most kings in *Beowulf* share traits with Saul, David and Solomon. The poem makes a subtle departure from the warlike, purely Germanic kings like Scyld and Heremod, and turns towards characters of combined pagan and Christian values, like Beowulf himself. Leneghan further argues that some characteristics that animated Beowulf, like his eagerness for fame, were appreciated by Bede in pagan Anglo-Saxon kings such as Æthelfrith.

The Conclusion deals with the reception of the poem at the time of its composition, and in two later periods: during the reign of Alfred the Great, and at the time when the Nowell Codex was compiled. Leneghan points out that the poem must have enjoyed some popularity during Alfred's reign, given that during this time the "West Saxon royal house began to declare its descent from various Danish kings mentioned in *Beowulf*" (p. 240). Moreover, Leneghan analyses the influence of *Beowulf* in *Andreas* and suggests that during the same period the poem came to be read "as a critique of pagan kingship" (p. 243). Lastly, the poem could have enjoyed some importance during the reign of Æthelred and Cnut, though most likely the latter. Through astute close readings, suitable translations, and a veritable treasure-hoard of scholarship, Leneghan has managed something quite extraordinary: his book clears some of the mist surrounding *Beowulf*. Instead of dryly dissecting the poem, he brings the reader closer to the context of legends and myths that the Anglo-Saxon audience might have known. That, in and of itself, brings us closer to Beowulf and the struggles in the poem than ever before.

Andrei CRIŞAN
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
ioan.crisan2@ubbcluj.ro