Chapter 4
Anachronic Entanglements: Archaeological Traces and the Event in *Beowulf*

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4.1   Introduction

Beowulf can boast an abundance of traces. Indeed, one might even argue that the trace constitutes the poem's single most important trope. The text repeatedly draws attention to traces in a literal sense, especially bloody traces: for instance, the bloody trail Grendel leaves behind as he returns to the mere after losing not only the fight against the poem's eponymous hero, but a whole arm with his shoulder attached to it in the process. In the same vein, Grendel's mother leaves bloody traces after her night-time attack on the royal hall of Heorot, where she rips off the Danish councilor Æschere's head and takes it with her, only to abandon it at the edge of the lake.

>   Lastas wæron
> æfter waldswaþum   wide gesyne,
> gang ofer grundas,   [þær] gegnum for
> ofer myrcan mor,   magoþegna bær
> þone selestan   sawolleasne
> þara þe mid Hroðgare   ham eahtode. (*Beowulf* ll. 1402b–1407b)[1]

> The traces were seen wide along the forest paths where she had gone over the ground, gone forward over the dark moor, she bore away the lifeless body of the best of the retainers who watched over the residence with Hrothgar.

It is precisely these traces that later lead Beowulf to her underwater cave. But this is by no means all. Arguably, the trace assumes an importance unparalleled by any of the poem's other symbolic concepts, especially if one is prepared to accept a more

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[1] All quotations from *Beowulf* are taken from Fulk et al. (2008). All translations are the author's, unless stated otherwise.

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metaphorical notion of the trace. Thus, Æschere's head—the highly significant and entirely physical trace of a man now visibly dead—perfectly encapsulates the theme of this paper, i.e. the manifold ways in which material artifacts in medieval literature possess a capacity for shaping meanings and events, the ways in which they actually come to embody these events.

4.2 *Beowulf* and the Traces of Archaeology

There are moments when one feels that *Beowulf*, the Old English epic poem, has a particularly trace-like character itself. Surviving in a single tenth-century manuscript (Cotton MS Vitellius A XV) that nearly perished when the Cotton library went up in flames in 1731, the poem is set in a sixth-century Scandinavian past that would have been almost as archaic and distant to its tenth-century English manuscript audience as it is to its twenty-first century readers. The epic tells the story of its eponymous hero in two parts divided by a gap of 50 years. In what critics have identified as the first part, the protagonist, a Geatish warrior-aristocrat from what is now southern Sweden, travels to Denmark to rid King Hrothgar of an evil monster, Grendel, who is harassing his court. After having successfully dispatched Grendel in the king's great hall, Beowulf must face the monster's mother who has killed a prominent Dane in an act of revenge. He seeks her out in her underwater cave and, with some difficulty, manages to kill her. The second part of the epic takes place in the land of Geats, where the now ancient Beowulf has been king for five decades. When his kingdom is attacked by a dragon, Beowulf confronts the dragon and kills it, but is himself mortally wounded in the process.

To some extent, the remarkable prominence of the trace in *Beowulf* has to do with the supremely archaeological nature of Beowulfian tropes and aesthetics in general. I do not, of course, use the term 'archaeological' to mean the modern scholarly and scientific approach to historical materiality. What I mean is a mode of approach to and conceptualization of the past that relies heavily on the symbolic uses of material remains. In *Beowulf*, ruins, swords, cups, necklaces and all manner of objects from the past are frequently mentioned, and in a few significant instances they are even discussed at length. The objects in question often bear particular physical traces of the past or are themselves presented as traces of the past. As traces, they may trigger acts of reading and interpretation. As traces, they often draw attention to the flimsiness of our knowledge of the past, since they are constantly under threat. They are always in danger of diminishing or else are already in the process of vanishing. This calls to mind the way in which Jacques Derrida has understood the trace, namely, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, as the "mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present" (Spivak 1974/1997, p. xvii). As traces, moreover, these objects encapsulate particular forms of temporal experience, because their very presence gestures not only towards the past, but also towards the future as the 'not yet present.'

This specifically archaeological nature of *Beowulf*'s engagement with the past is part of a larger pattern. As scholars have remarked again and again, the poem itself can be seen as a complex and sophisticated meditation on the nature of the past and the experience of history. Roy Liuzza observes:

> *Beowulf* is a profoundly retrospective poem: when we look back towards it, we find it too looking back to a vanished age, for all we know seeking the same things we are hoping it will provide. (Liuzza, 2005, p. 92)

And in a similar vein, Eileen A. Joy and Mary K. Ramsey have assessed the poem's particular sense of history as follows:

> *Beowulf* does not make sense of the past so much as it calls the supposed coherence of the past […] into question. (Joy & Ramsey, 2006, p. xxxiv)

In the space allotted to me here, I will attempt to provide a reading of traces—and especially of archaeological traces—in *Beowulf* that shows how the epic deals with and makes use of the notion of an always-already absent presence not in the singular, but in the plural. I shall attempt to investigate how, through negotiating the notion of the trace, the epic produces a palimpsestic interplay between various levels and layers of absence-cum-presence—layers that are imagined, however, in very material terms. Jonathan Gil Harris has employed the concept of the palimpsest to denote "a complex, polychronic assemblage of material agents" (Harris, 2009, p. 17). This idea of temporality, I argue, is very similar to the archaeological notion of temporality we encounter in *Beowulf*. In a second step, I wish to trace the various notions of history that this interplay contributes to generating. In particular, this article is interested in the ways in which, within the poem, the network of traces associated with a given object may, in fact, help to constitute a specific concept of the historical event. In *Beowulf*, I contend, a historical event is characterized as such through the particular density and complexity of the entangled traces that mark it in a manner that resembles what Carolyn Dinshaw has called "multiple temporalities" (Dinshaw, 2007, p. 4). The epic, I argue, conceives of an event in terms of a node that binds together a multiplicity of traces, and hence, a multiplicity of entangled temporalities. A multiplicity of historical perspective appears to be woven into the very fabric of the text, since in Gail Owen-Crocker's words, a

> late Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Viking poet is invoking, in flashes, a culture which existed three centuries earlier, in order to tell a fictional story which incorporates real historical material over a century older. (Owen-Crocker, 2009, p. 123)

But let us first briefly remind ourselves of the fundamentally archaeological nature of *Beowulf* as a whole. The poem's landscapes are strewn with debris from ancient pasts, such as the Roman road leading up to the royal hall of Heorot—"stræt wæs stanfah" (l. 320a), "the road was paved with stones"—the tessellated and thus apparently pre-Germanic floor, the *fagne flor* (l. 725), gracing that same building (Lerer, 2005), or the stone arches, the *stanbogan* (l. 2545), that support the Dragon's lair. Emily V. Thornbury has suggested convincingly that the stone arches in the Dragon's lair—twice referred to as *enta geweorc* (ll. 2717 and 2774)—are deliberate allusions to a specifically Roman past, reinforced as they are through another

reference to Roman culture, the *segn eallgylden* (l. 2767), whose Romanness has persuasively been argued on etymological grounds (Thornbury, 2000).[2] On top of all these architectural features, we encounter a considerable range of smaller artifacts, sometimes in decrepit or fragmentary form, but just as frequently in what appears to be a state of perfect preservation. It is these objects in particular—the ones apparently untainted by age and decay—that confirm a sense of the past as a constant, living presence in *Beowulf*'s fictional world. In fact, a detail that is worthy of note in this context is that the poem makes repeated reference to the necessity of polishing precious objects in order to preserve their shine and prevent them from rusting: as the materiality of the past is maintained in all its sensuous luster, history is virtually kept alive. Encapsulated in beautifully shiny and glinting metal artifacts, this past—and the emphasis here is on *this* past—appears not to come in the form of a specter that remains irrecoverable even as it haunts the present. Instead, it presents itself as a phenomenon that is materially anchored in a specific kind of historical experience—a historical experience whose very materiality promises to keep the past present. The reasons why the past should be kept present are shown to be manifold: ancient heirlooms, for instance, lend legitimacy to their owners in the present, and as soon as these heirlooms are exchanged as gifts, they create powerful bonds of loyalty and obligation. In some instances, however, they may also be capable of spelling doom for their owners.

In the poem, the fictional culture's material heritage thus consistently claims a contemporary currency, one that permits the objects involved to establish links to tradition, allowing them to play a role in the present and to participate in propelling the action further into the future. To a certain extent, this is what John M. Hill has in mind when he says that the epic conceives of

> objects and of social relationships as having identity through time, essentially as being what they are only in virtue of their entire history or, if applicable, of their cycle. (Hill, 1995, p. 41)

Whereas Hill sees the poet establishing "seamlessly […] a basic continuity with that past" (Hill, 1995, p. 40), the perspective favored here focuses less on continuity than on the multiplicity and plurality not only of the pasts involved, but of the temporalities constructed by the text. In the purely material existence of the artifacts that matter in *Beowulf*, we witness, therefore, a complex economy of temporalities through which an object must be understood not merely as a thing to be transmitted in time, but as a thing that actually transmits time itself, that makes temporality available for cultural and political appropriation. Hence, the material object from the past is, in fact, located at a nexus of entangled temporalities and possesses something close to historical agency of its own. Due to its 'anachronic' character, the ancient artifact simultaneously cuts through levels of time and binds them together. The term 'anachronic' is used by Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood to describe the ability of a work of art to create temporalities of its own, to "hold

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[2] A comprehensive analysis of the various ways in which Anglo-Saxon poetry was capable of deploying the metaphor *enta geweorc* is to be found in Garner (2011, pp. 112–168). For a recent discussion on the way this metaphor works within *Beowulf* see Neidorf (2019).

incompatible models in suspension", to "'fetch' a past, create a past, perhaps even fetch the future" (Nagel & Wood, 2010, p. 18). This is something that appears to be true of the archaeological objects in *Beowulf*, the overwhelming majority of which are described as possessing the status of sophisticated aesthetic artifacts. The epic imagines the artifact's particular power to reside in its capacity to become charged with temporality and also to pass on that charge, linking past, present, and future—often in unexpected ways. In the words of Nagel and Wood:

> No device more effectively generates the effect of a doubling or bending back of time than the work of art, a strange kind of event whose relation to time is plural. The artwork is made or designed by an individual or by a group of individuals at some moment, but it also points away from that moment, backward to a remote ancestral origin, perhaps, or to a prior arte-fact, or to an origin outside of time, in divinity. At the same time, it points forward to all its future recipients who will activate and reactivate it as a future event. The work of art is a message whose sender and destination are constantly shifting. (Nagel & Wood, 2010, p. 9)

While Nagel and Wood developed their ideas in the context of the early modern work of art, archaeological theorists like Yannis Hamilakis have developed similar ideas by adopting the notion of the 'assemblage' with its many different forms of interpenetration between humans and the material world, focusing especially on the multitemporal implications of these diverse interrelationships. In Hamilakis's view, "multitemporality" (Hamilakis, 2017, p. 174) is marked by the

> commingling and the contingent co-presence of diverse temporal moments; this is a multi-plicity of times, of various pasts and various presents, but also a multiplicity of temporal modalities: geological times, archaeological/historical times, human experiential times, non-human animal experiential times. (Hamilakis, 2017, p. 173)

It is this entanglement not only of different temporalities, but also of what Hamilakis calls different 'temporal modalities' that constitutes the generative and transforma-tive dimension of the assemblage, a dimension that produces new futures.

One such object in *Beowulf* that appears to be producing a future—grim and futile though that future may look—is the famous necklace Beowulf receives from the Danish Queen Wealhtheow. Beowulf hands it on to his own king, Hygelac, who will wear it on his ill-fated expedition against the Frisians. In this case, too, we wit-ness a past being kept alive, though we cannot always be sure what kind of past it is—the poem does not spell it out—that remains in the present. At the end of the day, the notion of the specter that haunts the present is never far away, even as it seems to be outshone by the brightness of precious metals, the brilliance of spar-kling jewels and the seductive sheen of glittering gold surfaces.

At the same time, not all of *Beowulf*'s material objects participate fully in the poem's preferred temporal economies. Some of the artifacts mentioned apparently operate in clear defiance of any notion of circulation. These objects refuse to become absorbed into the endless reciprocities of gift-giving and, consequently, they avoid being drawn into the ambivalent dynamics of the treasure-laden future-perfect of inheritance.

4.3 The Sword as Trace

Paradoxically, it is the very object in the epic that possesses the highest and most venerable degree of antiquity that appears also to be the one most aggressively bent on remaining outside the circulation of ancient heirlooms. The artifact in question is the "ealdsweord eotenisc" (l. 1558), the 'ancient giant sword', that Beowulf spots in the nick of time, just as he appears to be losing his fight against Grendel's mother. At the precise moment when she seems to be gaining the upper hand, Beowulf espies the weapon glinting in the semi-darkness of the cave. It is this monstrous sword—monstrous in terms both of its size and weight and of its origin, forged as it was by giants—that saves the hero's life. He pulls it from what seems to be a heap of armor and kills Grendel's mother, moving on, for good measure, to decapitating the dead Grendel lying in the underwater cave. But then something unexpected happens: the sword's blade melts and the weapon becomes unfit for further use. All that is left is the sword's hilt. On his return from the cave, Beowulf presents the hilt to Hrothgar, who merely stares at it. Ultimately, his response remains unreadable, though it is quite possible to assume that the king's extreme verbal economy—he does not comment on the sword at all—represents little more than stupefaction. We, the readers, are informed that the sword hilt bears an inscription telling the story of the giants destroyed by the Flood. Hence, the reason for Hrothgar's bewilderment may, in fact, be very simple: the text inscribed refers to an event, the Flood, that must, to all intents and purposes, be unknown to the pagan Danish king. Adding an intriguing perspective, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has suggested that the Flood in question need not have been the one that necessitated the construction of Noah's Ark. The letting of Ymir's blood by the Old Norse gods, which led to the drowning of all the giants save Bergelmir and his wife, might serve as an alternative explanation. Given the cyclical structure of Old Norse mythical history, in terms of periodization, the effects of this deluge would not have been quite as impressive as those of the biblical Flood (Cohen, 2006, p. 366).[3] But since the epic as a whole insists on a more general biblical frame of reference, it is probably safer to assume that, here, we are dealing with the biblical Flood, after all.

In all probability, the language in which that text on the sword hilt is written is equally strange to Hrothgar.[4] And we are possibly even meant to assume that the very medium this message is conveyed in—that is, script—is just as unfamiliar to Hrothgar, or at least, that he does not recognize that the engravings on the hilt do,

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[3] Originally published in Cohen (1999, pp. 1–28).

[4] The language and lettering on the sword have sparked some controversy. While H. R. E. Davidson considered the inscription to be runic—an opinion shared by a large majority of subsequent scholarship (Davidson, 1962, pp. 137–138), Christine Fell has suggested that the letters on the sword ought to be understood as Latin script (Fell, 1995). Fred C. Robinson has rejected this view, arguing that runes are the one and only possible interpretation (Robinson, 1999, p. 18). In his graphic novel *Beowulf*, the artist Gareth Hinds has highlighted the problems surrounding the inscription by depicting it as cuneiform (Hinds, 1999, no pagination).

indeed, constitute some form of lettering.[5] Consequently, Hrothgar remains silent about the object that has been placed in his hands.[6]

It seems only appropriate that, as a weapon, the sword should become useless immediately after having served in the killing of Grendel's mother and in the decapitation of her son. As an object from biblical history, it fulfils an entirely fitting purpose in ridding the earth of God's monstrous enemies, the kin of Cain, "Caines cynne" (l. 107): Grendel (and his mother) (Fig. 4.1). But having wreaked the execution required, the sword refuses to become involved in the never-ending cycles of gift-giving that constitute the economic system of the poem's fictional Germanic society. Those cycles of gift-giving encapsulate the ethics of reciprocity that dominates *Beowulf*'s system of morality, and they encapsulate, moreover, the manner in which a predominantly violent past is not only appropriated by the present, but also continues to haunt that present. By switching to a 'self-destruct mode', the giant sword essentially defies the circularity of pagan history and opts instead for a notion of temporality one might choose to associate with Christian teleology.[7]

What has just been referred to as the giant sword's 'self-destruct mode', directs our attention to this paper's central topic, that is, to the special role that traces play within *Beowulf*'s performative negotiations of complex notions of history. After all, it is through the melting of its blade, that the giant sword moves from one object category to another; in other words, it changes from the category of ancient, but

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[5] Even the exact nature of the representation is in doubt. Michael Near assumes that the description of the sword consists of two parts, the first of which contains a visual representation of the Flood while only the second is constituted by runic lettering (Near, 1993, pp. 320–332). Near's reasoning is based on syntactic evidence; evidence disputed by Seth Lerer who interprets the 'swa' linking the two passages as one that establishes a relation of sameness between them and not, as Near posits, one of difference (Lerer, 1991, p. 171). The German scholar Haiko Wandhoff has read the description of the script in the context of the tradition of ekphrasis and thus assumes that what we encounter is a deliberate depiction of script that transforms into a visual impression (Wandhoff, 2003, p. 18). Annina Seiler has recently developed an interesting argument which suggests that our understanding of Hrothgar's response to the inscription is colored by too narrow and too modern an approach to reading as a cultural practice. She argues that for the purpose of interpreting medieval acts of reading the visual and magical qualities of script need to be taken into account. Fascinating as this argument is, it does not actually explain the huge gulf that exists between Hrothgar's words and the biblical story inscribed on the sword hilt, nor does Seiler tell us exactly which visual and magical properties of the sword hilt prompt Hrothgar's speech (Seiler, 2016).

[6] James Paz offers an intriguing comment on this scene—one which he admits to be entirely speculative: Paz argues that Æschere's being singled out for revenge by Grendel's mother could be of special significance here, since the counsellor is described in terms that seem to emphasize his capacities as a reader of texts and an interpreter of mysteries. Hrothgar calls him "min runwita ond min rædbora" (l. 1325), "my rune-knower and advice-bearer." Without his hermeneutic expert, Hrothgar must remain ignorant of the sword's message (Paz, 2017, pp. 37–39).

[7] Allen J. Frantzen has proposed a different way in which the Giant sword contributes to complicating the poem's temporalities. Rather than casting Beowulf in the role of a hero who wreaks God's vengeance on Cain's descendants and thereby effectively brings the biblical narrative to its ultimate conclusion, Frantzen argues that the presence of the sword might, in fact, suggest that the Flood never achieved its purpose. According to this reading, Beowulf's killing of Grendel and his mother would not show us a teleological history drawing to its logical close, but rather the initial stages of a new cycle of violence pointing into the future (Frantzen, 1990, p. 188).
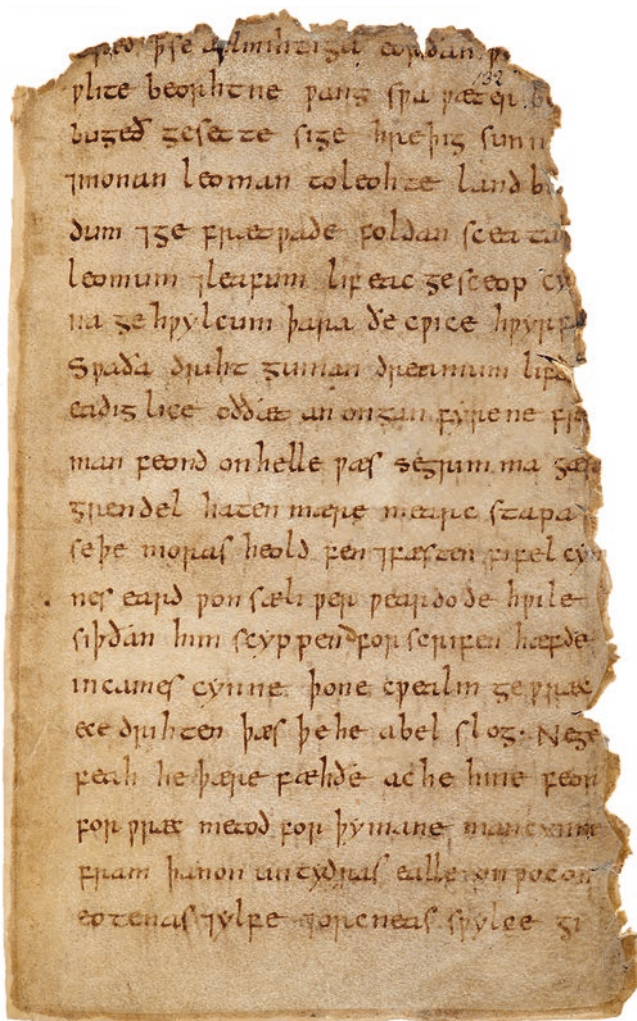
Fig. 4.1 *Beowulf* refers to Grendel as Cain's descendant ("in Caines cynne", line 6 from below) (Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, f. 134r, The British Library, UK)

perfectly preserved historical artifact to that of a mere archaeological fragment. As it does so, the sword considerably increases its trace-like character. As its blade vanishes before our very eyes, the sword as object acquires that sense of an absent presence so characteristic of the trace. In purely material terms, more than three quarters of the sword are gone once the blade has melted away. Indeed, what has disappeared is that part of the weapon which most obviously embodies the essence of what one might, for lack of a better term, refer to as its 'swordness'.

As far as actual archaeological evidence is concerned, swords without blades are quite a common feature in Anglo-Saxon treasure hoards. The Staffordshire Hoard

Fig. 4.2 Twelve items from the Staffordshire Hoard: gold strip with Latin inscription; helmet cheek piece; folded gold mount of two eagles grasping a fish; gold hilt plate with zoomorphic decoration; gold and garnet object with interlace animal panels (probably from a headdress); gold sword hilt fitting with inlay of cloisonné garnet (see also right); gold and garnet sword pyramid; gold and garnet sword button; gold, garnet, and glass sword pyramid; gold horse head terminal; Millefiori glass stud (probably part of the same headdress); folded panel from gold great cross (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, UK; photos: D. Rowan and D. Buxton, Creative Commons license CC BY 2.0)

(Fern et al., 2019) (Fig. 4.2), for instance, as James Paz reminds us, "turned up an extraordinary quantity of pommel caps and hilt plates—but no blades" (Paz, 2017, p. 50). Both early Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian graves frequently contained magnificent sword hilts richly decorated with patterns of interwoven serpents and often bearing runic inscriptions revealing the owners' names, but without the blades themselves which may have been kept "for another generation" (Webster, 1998, p. 192). In a more recent discussion of the Staffordshire Hoard, Leslie Webster explains that as opposed to some typical Scandinavian hoards containing bladeless swords, there is no indication of a ritual context for the Staffordshire Hoard. It seems to have been buried in a hurry for purely pragmatic reasons and the absence of objects associated with women points to a specifically military context (Webster, 2016, pp. 26–30).

Thus, without its blade, the sword effectively ceases to be a sword and becomes a mere trace of a sword. The sword hilt still testifies to the sword's former purpose, it bears and conveys the memory of the blade now vanished and, hence, of the events this sword may have been involved in. But the blade has become an undeniably absent presence. This sense of the absent presence is further reinforced by the narrative written on the hilt, the story of the giants and their destruction. They, too, have vanished, but the splendid artifact wrought by their hands has not—or rather: not entirely. What we witness is a complex, palimpsestic layering of history on the sword hilt. This layering begins with the odd anachronism of the hilt's depiction of a narrative of the Flood, of that very event in history that supposedly eradicated the sword's actual makers, an anachronism that, by extension, may in fact turn both Grendel and his mother into anachronisms, too. If they belong to the race of giants then they, too, should have been dead long ago. Their survival would thus be flying in the face of history, or, at the very least: in the face of Christian teleology.

So, while the destruction of the giants *as a race* is inscribed on the sword in written form, the destruction of the two individual monsters, Grendel and his mother, is inscribed into the sword as the material trace of a historical event. After all, it is the act of the killing of mother and son itself that destroys the sword by causing the blade to melt. The hilt is, therefore, a material trace not simply of the sword itself, but of the historical event of the destruction of the giants. Beowulf's slaying of the two monstrous creatures inscribes itself into the sword physically just as the story of the giant-kin as a whole was originally inscribed into the hilt in merely symbolic and linguistic form. Thus, doubly inscribed, the sword bears traces and is itself a trace of two different yet related historical events. The weapon proves to be loaded with a double charge of history as it both physically participates in, and materially signifies, an event. The archaeological object possesses a form of material continuity with the events it represents through written language.

4.4   The Dragon's Treasure

Such a sense of a historical overload is by no means confined to the giant sword. There is, at the very least, one other scene, or sequence of scenes, in *Beowulf*, which contains a similar phenomenon. This scene occurs roughly 50 years later, when Beowulf, now king of the Geats, must face the greatest challenge of his reign, the challenge that will seal not only his own fate but that of his kingdom as well: the Dragon.

The Dragon, we must remember, is roused by a Slave stealing a cup from his hoard. Responding to the theft, the Dragon, who had been sleeping on his vast treasure for 300 years, awakens and seeks revenge for the damage done to his treasure. Dragons live in barrows and tend to be fascinated by treasure, as *Maxims II* suggests:

> Draca sceal on hlæwe,
> frod, frætwum wlanc. (*Maxims II*, pp. 55–57, ll. 26–27)

> The dragon shall dwell in a barrow, / Old and treasure-proud.[8]

But how do they acquire their monstrous wealth in the first place? In *Beowulf*'s case, the Dragon had simply happened upon it by chance. A lucky find led him to an unguarded treasure, the wealth of a former civilization long gone. The treasure had been hidden by a nameless character referred to in *Beowulf*-criticism as the "Last Survivor", the last representative of a vanished nation. The degree to which that nation has in fact been obliterated is emphasized by their lack of a name. The narrator makes no mention of who they might have been or what they might have done. What matters is merely that they may have been pagan—though this is something we are not actually told—that they became extinct due to warfare and that they left behind a hidden treasure, apparently waiting for a Dragon to claim and guard it.

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[8] Translation Williamson (2017).

When the Dragon strikes against the Geatish kingdom, Beowulf seems to feel a personal responsibility for the Slave's actions—a responsibility hard to understand—and assumes that he might have offended God through the breaking of an "ealde riht" (l. 2330), an ancient law. If Beowulf has, indeed, broken an ancient law, then it may well have been an ancient pagan law, but we cannot, ultimately, be sure. Once again the poem seems enigmatically to fuse the pagan and the Christian in a manner that makes it difficult for us to disentangle the two strands. What does become clear, however, is that the *ealde riht* has something to do with the treasure and, in all probability, with its original owners now perished. The words spoken by the Last Survivor as he buries the treasure do not, however, suggest an actual curse, but rather the supreme melancholy of the demise of an entire nation:

> Heald þu nu, hruse, nu hæleð ne m(*o*)stan,
> eorla æhte. (*Beowulf* ll. 2247–2248a)

> Hold now, you earth, now that men may not, / the possession of warriors.

At the end of the day, it does not even seem to be relevant whether the treasure is cursed or not.[9] When Beowulf refers to his having potentially broken an *ealde riht*, he is not providing objective information on the treasure—which he would have been very unlikely to possess in any case. He is speculating on the reasons for his own nation's misfortunes. Yet precisely because his words do not provide a reliable commentary on what has actually happened, but give us insight merely into his own frame of mind, do they tell us something important. Beowulf assumes that he himself has broken an ancient law. From Beowulf's point of view, the treasure is thus revealed as something from the past that has power over the present and potentially even over the future. While the treasure may be a thing of the past, it is clear that that past has not yet departed. In this sense, the treasure displays a particular form of agency, since it exerts influence on the present and the future. But that is by no means all. We must remember that the treasure changes hands, and part of it, the fateful cup, changes hands more than once. The Dragon takes possession of the hoard after literally finding the door to the hiding place open:

>   Hordwynne fond
> eald uhtsceaða   opene standan,
> se ðe byrnende   biorgas seceð,
> nacod niðdraca,   nihtes fleogeð
> fyre befangen; (*Beowulf* ll. 2270b–2274a)

> The ancient nocturnal predator found the delightful treasure standing open, he who burning seeks barrows, the smooth malicious dragon, who flies at night enveloped in fire;

This turn of events is truly remarkable because at this point in the narrative we have already been told twice that the entrances to the barrow had originally been skillfully concealed: "[…] þanchycgende þær gehydde" (l. 2235), "[someone of

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[9] For a recent suggestion that it is Beowulf's men who curse the hoard after the killing of the Dragon see Cooke (2007).

mankind] taking careful thought hid there," and "nearocræftum fæst" (l. 2243), "firmly fixed through the arts of rendering difficult of access."

Like the giant sword that switches into self-destruct mode, the treasure seems to have a desire to be found, since supposedly perfectly hidden doors appear to display a paradoxical propensity for remaining invitingly open. And this appears to represent something close to a pattern: first, it is the Dragon who finds the entrance to the treasure, and then, 300 years later, the unnamed Slave, too, discovers the secret door. Thus, the Last Survivor's purposes are defeated twice. Despite his attempts to bury the treasure without a trace, that treasure resurfaces by attracting finders. And the second finder sets in motion a sequence of events that will come to an end only with Beowulf's death and funeral—and with what is presented as the final burial of the pagan treasure.

What is so remarkable about this narrative is that the treasure's destructive power remains a latent force to be activated centuries later: the treasure reaches out into the future by attracting the Dragon, who will, after 300 years have passed, become an instrument of destruction. Just as the treasure's first owners have vanished from the face of the earth, so will the Geats vanish when their king is killed by the Dragon. After all, we are informed that the neighboring nations will now invade and destroy the Geatish kingdom. Given the repetitive nature of these events we are reminded once again of the circularity of history that seems to be embodied in the circulation of treasure. And since the Geats, too, bury the treasure, one cannot help but wonder who the next finder will be.

4.5   The Event in History: An Entanglement of Traces

At this point in the discussion it may appear that this interpretation is getting dangerously close to the conceptual binary of linear vs. circular narratives of history, a binary this article has been very much intent on avoiding. Without wishing to deny entirely the circular structure implied in the story of the Last Survivor's treasure, I would argue that the concept of the trace might help us to reveal other temporal dimensions to this narrative. These dimensions do not necessarily stand in stark opposition to the binary of linear vs. circular, but they do open up perspectives easily obscured by that all-too-simple set of opposites.

One key to these other perspectives, I would like to suggest, appears to lie in an, admittedly metaphorical, notion of the trace. Like the giant sword, the Last Survivor's treasure is marked by a complex network of traces. In the case of the sword, these traces are actually quite literal and fully visible as well as deliberately foregrounded in the narrative: first, through the melting of the blade that becomes so obvious an absent presence, and second, through the ekphrastic description of the hilt. In the case of the Dragon's hoard, the network of traces already begins with the architecture of the Dragon's lair itself, since, as Howard Williams has demonstrated, the building's structure combines features inspired by a whole variety of different historical and architectural traditions. Some of these evoke decidedly prehistoric

associations—via a megalithic funerary monument from the Stone Age—while others obviously resemble advanced Roman engineering or early medieval ecclesiastical construction work. All being present simultaneously, these different associations clearly suggest a palimpsestic use of the space (Williams, 2015). That an Old English poem should be capable of imagining the multiple repurposing of a historical site in such an almost obsessive fashion does not really come as a surprise, as it fits well with the archaeologist Sarah Semple's comments on the intensity and creativity with which Anglo-Saxon wielders of social, cultural and political power were active in adapting the archaeological remains of previous cultures to their own ideological requirements. Semple emphasizes

> the sheer scale, in temporal and selective terms, at which the ancient past was recognized and harnessed to the purposes of tradition-making by communities and elite families and individuals in Anglo-Saxon England. (Semple, 2013, p. 224)

Within this specifically archaeological context, we witness once again the Anglo-Saxons' creative ability to develop and explore complex notions of history. As Nicholas Howe points out,

> there is no inherent reason to assume that those who lived during the period were somehow less alert to the complications of their own history than we are some twelve hundred years later. (Howe, 2005, p. 40)

The Last Survivor's treasure, too, is, of course, itself a trace of its erstwhile owners. But it also bears traces itself. Admittedly, as far as we can tell on the basis of the information imparted by the poem, none of the treasure's three known owners leaves any *visible* imprints or markings on the hoard and the objects it contains, but all the different owners do, nevertheless, add to and further specify the treasure's historical significance and thereby propel the action forward. First, the treasure bears the traces of its original owners who were trying to hide it and whose historical catastrophe is relived in the demise of the Geatish kingdom. Indeed, the treasure itself constitutes a trace of its erstwhile owners. Then the treasure bears the traces of the Dragon, whose very presence both ensures and testifies to the treasure's completeness. And, finally, the Slave, too, adds his traces to the treasure, by diminishing it by that single cup and taking the cup into the kingdom of the Geats, thereby triggering that kingdom's destruction. The Last Survivor, the Dragon and the unnamed Slave all constitute links in a chain of events that ultimately leads to historical catastrophe. They all leave their traces on the treasure, if only in terms of the memories that are invoked at discrete stages in the narrative.

When the Slave hands over the stolen cup, that vessel invokes the memory of a nation long perished and thus foreshadows the end of the Geats, but the cup also invokes the memory of the Dragon who will commit the first act of destruction within the final sequence of catastrophes. The relation between these events is causal and symbolic at the same time, and the traces the treasure bears come in the form of memory but also in the form of something close to the supernatural—at least this is what seems to be involved if a fire-breathing reptile awakens after three centuries of sleep because a single cup has been extracted from the vast mound of wealth it has been reclining on.

But there are events and there are events. In the second half of *Beowulf*, the real, the true event that all the other events lead up to is the destruction of Beowulf, the heroic king, and the destruction of his people, a nation doomed.

All the other elements of this part of the narrative—that is, the demise of the nameless Last Survivor's equally nameless people, the finding of the hoard by the Dragon, the stealing of the cup by the Slave—acquire their significance exclusively because they contribute to the one great event that the epic's second part is all about: the downfall of Beowulf and the Geats. As a consequence of these individual, but ultimately subordinate events, Beowulf's end, that is the Big Event, bears the traces of these previous events. The destruction of Beowulf and his kingdom is not merely the culmination of a sequence of events, but is rather the node at which all the other narrative strands become entangled. It is the result of the inactive or hidden charges of history being activated in their interaction.

In *Beowulf*, or more precisely: in the second half of *Beowulf*, the truly historical event—the Big Event, the one event that all the minor ones lead up to—is the result of an overlapping of variously entangled historical traces that gain their true significance within the narrative only through the way they make the final tragedy possible. Significant events in *Beowulf* are thus marked as bearing multiple traces of history. The greater the number of these traces, the more complex their interweaving, the more meaning will the Event they contribute to ultimately possess. Thus, an event in *Beowulf* is defined by its ability to participate in a variety of overlapping layers of history whose interaction both makes that event happen in the first place and at the same time confirms its status as an event. Such a view would fit well with Roberta Frank's observation that tenth-century Anglo-Saxons were fascinated by pagan culture both Roman and Germanic and that the *Beowulf*-poet, in particular, appears to be intent on portraying a historical panorama that is multi-facetted and, above all, multi-layered (Frank, 1982).

In *Beowulf*, the historical event is literally defined as representing a fullness of time, a fullness consisting in the overlapping of different temporalities. Since each and every trace comes with its own temporality, since each and every trace establishes a relation to time of its very own, the truly historical event in the epic is conceived of as being charged with the greatest number of different temporal relations. The event in *Beowulf* thus is the moment in time when temporalities most significantly overlap and intersect. And these overlapping and entangled temporalities are each embodied in a trace. In this interaction between the various entangled temporalities linked to their different traces, we witness an intriguing paradox: as they all contribute to the sense of a truly historical event, indeed, as their multiplicity constitutes that event in the sense of a node bearing multiple charges of history, these traces simultaneously contribute to unravelling the very event that they constitute.

Precisely because the historical event in *Beowulf* derives its significance from the way it combines multiple temporalities, the meaning of that Big Event can never fully be reduced to any single one of the traces and their temporalities that it is made up of, just as none of these temporalities can be completely neutralized, cancelled out or superseded by any of the others present in the Big Event. At its core then, the Big Event in *Beowulf* must always remain unstable, since it ultimately owes its

existence to a tension-ridden multiplicity of temporalities. So, it seems as though it were high time to trace the events in *Beowulf*.

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