

Beow in Scandinavia

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a new appraisal of the Scandinavian evidence relating to Beow – a figure who surfaces in a range of Anglo-Saxon sources as a member of the famous Scylding dynasty. The well-known appearances of Beow in Old Norse genealogical material and in the composition known as *Kálfsvísa* are first reviewed, along with their evolving status in the critical history of *Beowulf*. New evidence is then adduced from the text known as *Bjarkarímur*, which attests to a more extensive Scandinavian tradition surrounding Beow than has previously been acknowledged. The expanded dossier of Old Norse evidence pertaining to Beow allows, in turn, for reflections on the development of traditions surrounding this figure in Anglo-Saxon England, and the manner of their transmission to Scandinavia.

It might be said that the figure known as Beow occupies a more prominent position in *Beowulf* studies than is warranted by his fleeting appearances in Anglo-Saxon sources. Most scholars now agree that the mysterious ‘Beowulf’, who makes two early appearances in the sole extant manuscript witness to the Old English epic as the prospering son of Scyld and grandson of Scaef, is to be identified as Beow – a figure who surfaces with one or both of the same ancestors in a range of West Saxon genealogical material.¹ Beow appears as Beaw in the ninth-century *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (entry for 855) and Asser’s *Vita Ælfredi regis Angul Saxonum*; as Beo in Æthelweard’s tenth-century *Chronicon* and as Beowius in William of Malmesbury’s twelfth-century *Gesta regum Anglorum*.² This name also appears, in various forms, in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon charters.³

¹ The emendation of ‘Beowulf’ to ‘Beow’ has been followed almost unanimously since C. G. Child suggested it (*Beowulf* 30, 53, 132, 2957, *Modern Lang. Notes* 21 (1906), 175–7, 198–200, at 198–9); see further *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, ed. R. D. Fulk, R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles, 4th ed. (Toronto, 2008) (hereafter *K4*), p. 117; R. D. Fulk, ‘An Eddic Analogue to the Scyld Scefing Story’, *RES* 40 (1989), 313–22, at 314, n. 4, and L. Neidorf, ‘Scribal Errors of Proper Names in the *Beowulf* Manuscript’, *ASE* 42 (2013), 249–69, at 252–3.

² For these sources, see *K4*, pp. 291–2, and for commentary, see R. D. Fulk, ‘The Etymology and Significance of Beowulf’s Name’, *AS* 1 (2007), 109–36, at 123–4. The classic scholarship on these genealogies is provided in K. Sisam, ‘Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies’, *PBA* 39 (1953), 287–348, at 287.

³ Variants of the name Beow in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon charters are provided in G. Binz, ‘Zeugnisse zur germanischen Sage in England’, *BGDSSL* 20 (1895), 141–223, at 153–6.

Beow was evidently a known figure for some centuries in Anglo-Saxon England, but little information besides his name and ancestry have been preserved – and these in variable forms. His enigmatic career in the prologue of *Beowulf* is overshadowed by the advent and death of his more famous father.⁴ Beow is introduced as the heir of Scyld in lines 12–19:

Ðǣm eafera wæs æfter cenned
geong in geardum, þone God sende
folce tō frōfre; fyrenðearfe ongeat –
þæt hīe ær drugon aldor(l)ēase
lange hwile. Him þæs liffrēa,
wuldres wealdend woroldāre forgeaf:
Bēow wæs brēme – blǣd wide sprang –
Scyldes eafera Scedelandum in.⁵

His accession and fathering of Healfdene, Hroðgar's father, are then related hurriedly between lines 53–7, punctuated by further commentary on Scyld's death:

Ðā wæs on burgum Bēow Scyldinga,
lēof lēodcýning longe þrāge
folcum gefræge – fæder ellor hwearf,
aldor of eard – oþ þæt him eft onwōc
hēah Healfdene.⁶

Despite (or perhaps owing to) the dearth of extant material relating to Beow, there exists a great range of hypotheses concerning the origins, role and significance of this figure. There is neither the space nor the need to outline these in any detail, but a brief summary will serve to orientate the reader. Beow, whose name is identical to OE *bēow* ('barley'), has been identified as a Germanic fertility god sharing links with the Scandinavian deity Byggvir and the Finnish Pekko, whose names are both

⁴ For scholarship on the opening section of *Beowulf*, see F. Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf*, AS Stud. 39 (Cambridge, 2020), p. 39, n. 34.

⁵ 'An heir was born to him, young, in the courts; God sent him to the comfort of the people. He perceived their dire need – that they had formerly suffered lordless for a long time. The Lord of Life, the Ruler of Glory, bestowed upon them worldly honour: Beow was renowned – his fame spread wide – the heir of Scyld in Scandinavia.' Quotations from *Beowulf* are from *K4*, with superscript dots and italics removed. All translations in this paper are the author's.

⁶ 'Then was Beow of the Scyldings among the settlements, long a dear national king celebrated by the people – [his] father departed elsewhere, the lord, from earth – until the high Healfdene was born.'

related to a cognate word for barley in Old Norse, *bygg*.⁷ This role was also likely shared by his grandfather, Scaef ('sheaf'). Beow has been seen as a figure of English provenance and, like Scaef, as an interloper in the Scandinavian Scylding dynasty.⁸ A now unpopular school of thought regarded Beow as a divine hero who, in earlier Germanic tradition, performed all of the feats now ascribed to Beowulf in the Old English epic, including the slaying of Grendel.⁹ The evidence traditionally adduced for this hypothesis is the famous co-occurrence of *beowan hamm* and *grendles mere* in a Wiltshire charter of 931.¹⁰ A related theory, which has seen a recent resurgence in support, suggests that the name Beowulf, or 'Beowulf', is theophoric in character, and contains the name of the god Beow.¹¹

The current scholarly consensus holds that Beow likely began his life as a deity, but in extant sources exists only as a euhemerized human king with an illustrious Scandinavian pedigree. This two-century old debate concerning the development and identity of Beow has been overwhelmingly based upon this figure's appearances in *Beowulf* and in Anglo-Saxon charters and genealogies. A fourth category of

⁷ For scholarship on Beow as a fertility god, see Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, pp. 146–7. The first reference to the connection between Pekko and Beow was by A. Olrik, *Danmarks heltedigtning, en oldtidsstudie, II: Starkad den Gamle og den yngre skjoldungsrække* (Copenhagen, 1910), pp. 254–5. Byggvir has been the subject of discussion for far longer (see the references in G. Dumézil, trans. E. Haugen, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley, 1977), pp. 89–93). For early scholarship on the connection between Beow and Byggvir, see E. Björkman, 'Bēow, Bēaw und Beowulf', *Englische Studien* 52 (1918), 145–93 (at pp. 166–8). More recent treatments of this connection include J. Harris, 'The Dossier on Byggvir, God and Hero: *Cur deus homo?*', *Arv* 55 (1999), 7–23, at 8–11; W. Sayers, 'The Names Bēow, Scēf, Scyld and Bēowulf: Shares into Swords', *ES* 97 (2016), 815–20, at 817, and Fulk, 'Etymology and Significance', pp. 128–34. For a recent counterargument, see P. A. Shaw, *Names and Naming in Beowulf: Studies in Heroic Narrative Tradition* (London, 2020), p. 32.

⁸ See A. Olrik, *Danmarks heltedigtning, en oldtidsstudie, I: Rolf Krake og den ældre skjoldungsrække* (Copenhagen, 1903), pp. 246–7; W. W. Lawrence, 'Some Disputed Questions in *Beowulf*-Criticism', *PMLA* 24 (1909), 220–73, at 249; E. R. Anderson, 'Beow the Boy Wonder (*Beowulf* 12–25)', *ES* 89 (2008), 630–42, at 631, and Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, pp. 141–52. Such a view is also implicit in treatments which locate Scaef and Beow in Germanic myth rather than Scandinavian genealogy.

⁹ The early history of this argument is summarized in Lawrence, 'Disputed Questions', pp. 247–58.

¹⁰ See principally *K4*, p. xlvi for references. This charter evidence is now regarded as an insufficient basis for supposing that Beow(a) was originally associated with Grendel (Lawrence, 'Disputed Questions', p. 251; R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: an Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 42–3; L. D. Benson, 'The Originality of *Beowulf*, *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*, ed. M. W. Bloomfield (Cambridge, MA, 1970), pp. 32–69, at 43–4; Shaw, *Names and Naming*, p. 62).

¹¹ Relevant scholarship is provided in *K4*, p. 465. See esp. Fulk, 'Etymology and Significance'; Stefan Jurasinski, 'Wealthweow and the Problem of Beowulfian Anthroponymy', *Neophilologus* 91 (2007), 701–15, at 707. Recent arguments to the contrary are provided by C. Abram, 'Bee-Wolf and the Hand of Victory: Identifying the Heroes of *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*', *JEGP* 116 (2017), 387–414 and Shaw, *Names and Naming*, pp. 29–32. For an effective rejoinder to the latter, see L. Neidorf and C. Zhu, 'The Germanic Onomasticon and the Etymology of Beowulf's Name', *Neophilologus* (published online, 2021), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11061-021-09703-8>.

evidence which has been less thoroughly considered is Old Norse material, in which Beow makes several brief but, in the author's view, important appearances. This article aims to rectify this by reviewing the extant evidence for the tradition of Beow in Scandinavia, and by contributing to it overlooked material from the Icelandic text *Bjarkarímur*. This effort will add to the corpus of evidence relating to Beow and will allow for useful reflections on the identity and development of this figure in Anglo-Saxon England.

BEOW-BJÁRR

That Beow was known in Scandinavia is plainly evidenced by his appearance in versions of an Icelandic genealogy known as *langfeðgatal* ('long count of ancestors'). The earliest version of this genealogy to contain a reflex of Beow is found in Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar AM 1 e β II fol., a copy of a mid-thirteenth-century vellum manuscript which itself probably had an earlier exemplar.¹² In this manuscript a certain 'Beaf' is given as the son of 'Sceldva', who is himself preceded several stages earlier by 'Sescef'.¹³ The reliance of this part of the genealogy on an Old English text is made plain by the scribe's linguistic and orthographic errors: 'Beaf' derives from 'Beaw', where an OE wynn ('p') was misinterpreted by an Icelandic scribe as an 'f', and 'Sescef' is a corruption of an original *se Scef* (i.e. 'that Scef'). The source is likely to be closely related to a list dating from c. 990–4 contained within the English manuscript London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. v.¹⁴ At a later stage, these figures were equated with characters apparently known from Scandinavian tradition. Perhaps the earliest extant genealogy to contain this additional explanatory material is the so-called *Ættartala Sturlunga* ('genealogy of the Sturlungar'), which is preserved in the Codex Upsaliensis manuscript of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (DG 11 4to).¹⁵ Here one finds 'Skjaldun, en vér kǫllum Skjǫldr, hans son Biaf, þann kǫllum vér Bjár'.¹⁶ Scef reappears as

¹² On this early-eighteenth-century copy, see A. Faulkes, 'The Genealogies and Regnal Lists in a Manuscript in Resen's Library', *Sjóttú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977* (Reykjavík, 1977), pp. 177–90.

¹³ This genealogy is transcribed in A. Faulkes, 'The Earliest Icelandic Genealogies and Regnal Lists', *Saga-Book* 29 (2005), 115–9, at 117.

¹⁴ This manuscript itself is thought to date from the early eleventh century; see Sisam, 'Genealogies', p. 290 and D. Anlezark, 'Scef, Japeth and the Origins of the Anglo-Saxons', *ASE* 31 (2002), 13–46, at 18, n. 17.

¹⁵ According to Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, this genealogy dates from significantly earlier than 1230 ('Helga Sturludóttir og Sölmundur austmann', *Guðrúnarstíkkí keðinn Guðrínu Nordal fimmtugri 27 september, 2010*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson, Halldóra Jónsdóttir and Torfi Tulinius (Reykjavík, 2010), pp. 34–7). For further information on *Ættartala Sturlunga*, see *Snorri Sturluson: The Uppsala Edda*, ed. Heimir Pálsson and trans. A. Faulkes (London, 2012), pp. lxxvii–lxxviii.

¹⁶ *Uppsala Edda*, ed. Heimir Pálsson and trans. Faulkes, p. 118. 'Skjaldun, but we call him Skjǫldr, [and] his son Biaf, we call him Bjár'.

‘Sesef’ here with the troublesome ‘c’ removed, and apparently lacks a known Scandinavian parallel. This same genealogy is also repeated, with minor variations, in the *Prologue* to Snorri’s *Edda*, and in the text known as *Hversu Noregr byggðist* (‘how Norway was settled’), which appears in the Flateyjarbók manuscript.¹⁷

The genealogist is of course right to connect the ‘Skjaldun’ of his English source with Skjöldr, who is well-known in Scandinavian tradition as the progenitor of the Skjöldungar or Scyldings. The equation between ‘Beaf/Bíaf’ and a figure apparently known as ‘Bjarr’ is more controversial. As Richard C. Boer suggested over a century ago, it seems likely that a figure known as Bjarr was in existence prior to the insertion of Beaf into the Icelandic *langfeðgatal*, as the Old Norse form is substantially different from the Old English one provided.¹⁸ Icelandic genealogists were no strangers to devising fictional ancestors, but one might expect a form such as *Bjáf(r) if based purely on the erroneous reading ‘Beaf/Bíaf’. Bjarr in all likelihood represents an earlier loan from ‘Bēaw’, where OE *ēa* is rendered as ON *já*.¹⁹

Confirmation that Bjarr existed outside of genealogical contexts is furnished by a group of verses preserved in Snorri Sturluson’s *Skáldskaparmál*. These stanzas constitute a *þula* or versified list of horses and their riders which is variously entitled *Kálfsvísa* (‘Kálfr’s poem’), *Alsvinnsmál* (‘The Speech of Alsvinnr’) and *Frá bestum* (‘concerning horses’).²⁰ Assuming that this material was not composed by Snorri himself, it must predate his work. This dates this poetry realistically to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, though it could conceivably have been composed earlier. The verses run as follows:

Dagr reið Dröfli en Dvalinn Móðni,
Höð Hjálmþér en Haki Fáki.
Reið bani Belja Blóðughófa
en Skævaði skati Haddingja. (st. 1)

¹⁷ For a table containing these and other iterations of the Icelandic *langfeðgatal*, see A. M. Bruce, *Scyld and Seof: Expanding the Analogues* (London, 2015), p. 56.

¹⁸ ‘Die Béowulfage’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 19 (1903), 19–88, at 27. His conclusion that the form ‘Bjarr’ is therefore ‘zwar bedeutend älter’ (‘significantly older’) is impossible to substantiate, however.

¹⁹ Consider the rendering of OE *Ēadmund* as ON *Játmundr*. Icelandic scribes presumably did not recognize that the etymologically correct cognate of this name is Auðmundr, and used *já* to approximate the sound of the Old English diphthong. Boer’s argument that ‘Bjarr’ is cognate with ‘Bēaw’ and that both derive from an earlier *Bewar’ fails to convince (‘Die Béowulfage’, pp. 23–8). Aside from his dubious derivation of ‘Bēaw’ from Proto-Norse which was roundly rejected in the early twentieth century (Lawrence, ‘Some Disputed Questions’, p. 246; Björkman, ‘Bēow, Bēaw und Beowulf’, p. 153), Boer fails to account for the presence of Verschärfung in the related Old Norse forms *bygg* and ‘Byggvir’.

²⁰ The various titles of this composition are treated in *Kálfsvísa*, ed. K. E. Gade, *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, ed. K. E. Gade and E. Marold, 2 vols., *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* 3 (Turnhout, 2017) II, 663.

Vésteinn Vali en Vifill Stúfi,
Meinþjófr Mói en Morginn Vakri. (st. 2)

Áli Hrafni, — til íss riðu —
en annarr austr und Aðils
grár hvarfaði geiri undaðr (st. 3)

Björn reið Blakki en Bíarr²¹ Kerti,
Atli Glaumi en Aðils Slungni,
Hogni Hólkvi en Haraldr Fólkvi,
Gunnarr Gota en Grana Sigurðr. (st. 4)²²

How much, or how little, these inconspicuous verses can tell us about the status of Beow in Scandinavia has long been the subject of debate. The form Bjárr which appears towards the end of this *pula* was once thought to bear a connection with 'Bjarki'. This is a sobriquet borne by Bǫðvarr, a protagonist of *Hrólfs saga kraka* ('the saga of Hrólfr *krakr*').²³ As the slayer of a monster pillaging the hall of the Scylding king in Denmark, Bǫðvarr has long been regarded as one of the closest Scandinavian analogues to Beowulf.²⁴ The possibility of a connection between this figure and Bjárr was most famously promoted by Barend Symons in 1900. Symons, apparently taking a cue from Sophus Bugge, suggested that Bjárr formed a bridge between Beow and Bjarki.²⁵ This suggestion was rejected soon after by

²¹ Editors have typically rendered this name as Bjár, Bjárr or Biarr. The variation between *-r* and *-rr* reflects the fact that Icelandic scribes did not distinguish between these characters in final positions. Since Bjárr is only attested in the nominative case, it has been impossible to determine whether the root is 'Bjá-' or 'Bjár-'; see Harris, 'Dossier', p. 17. The form 'Biarr' presumably represents an attempt to render the name as a dithematic, with the last element being *-arr* < **barjaz* ('warrior'). For reasons that will be made clear below, the author prefers the nominative form Bjárr.

²² *Kálfsvísa*, ed. Gade, pp. 664–8. '(1) Dagr rode Drǫsull and Dvalinn Móðnir, Hjálmbér [rode] Hǫðr and Haki Fáki. The killer of Beli <giant> [=Freyr] rode Blóðughófi and the champion of the Haddingjar Skævaðr. (2) Vésteinn on Vali and Vifill on Stúfi, Meinþjófr on Mór and Morginn on Vakr, (3) Áli on Hrafni—they rode to the ice—and another, grey and spear-wounded, wandered east under Aðils. (4) Björn rode Blakki and Bjárr Kǫtrr, Atli [rode] Glaumr and Aðils Slungnir, Hogni [rode] Hólkvi and Haraldr Fólkvi, Gunnarr [rode] Goti and Sigurðr Grani.' Solutions to kennings in this article follow the conventions established in the *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* series.

²³ Bjarki may be the original name of this figure, with Bǫðvarr deriving from an appellative *bǫðvar* ('of battle'). See *K4*, p. 1, n. 4 and R. North, *The Origins of Beowulf: From Vergil to Wiglaf* (Oxford, 2007), p. 49.

²⁴ For a recent review of *Hrólfs saga kraka* as an analogue, see T. Grant, 'Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar and the Originality of *Beowulf*', *RES* (published online, 2021), 1–19, at 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgab051>.

²⁵ B. Symons, 'Heldensage', *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie III*, ed. Hermann Paul (Strasbourg, 1900), pp. 606–734, at p. 649. Sophus Bugge, whom Symons cites, mentions Bjarki next to Bjárr in his work of 1887. However, he clearly did not wish to connect the two, as he says of Bjárr

Axel Olrik.²⁶ In the same year Boer also dismissed Symons' idea, but nevertheless maintained that Bjarki and Bjárr were identical.²⁷ Andreas Heusler, followed by Alois Brandl, noted the phonetic similarity between the two names, but both were otherwise unconvinced of any etymological or functional link.²⁸ It seems that putative connections between Bjárr and Bjarki were thoroughly unfashionable by the time that William W. Lawrence published his influential contribution to *Beowulf* criticism in 1909.²⁹ By 1918, Erik Björkman could suggest 'auch der mehrfach angenommene Zusammenhang zwischen Biárr und Biarki ('barchen') ist endgültig aufzugeben'.³⁰

Since the conclusion of this debate, *Kálfsvísa* has only been stretched so far as to suggest that Bjárr, a reflex of Beaw, was known in Scandinavia – a view which has a long pedigree.³¹ Henrik Schück treated the verse as evidence that 'denna Beaw eller Beo har äfven varit känd i Norden', and Chambers suggested that *Kálfsvísa* serves as proof that 'something was known in the north of this Bjar'.³² Jan de Vries also regards Bjárr as a 'name aus der heldensage'.³³ This has not been accepted universally, however. Lawrence suggested 'Bēowa has no place in any northern version of the saga of the Scyldings, nor is there any evidence of his early presence there as a mythico-heroic figure'.³⁴ Joseph Harris in a recent treatment voiced more reserved doubt: 'one is certainly entitled to be skeptical about whether *thula* information really reflects lost stories'.³⁵

'dieser nordische sagenheld ist sonst unbekannt' ('this northern hero is elsewhere unknown'); 'Studien über das Beowulfepos', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 12 (1887), 1–112, at 57). Symons seems to have been unaware of Jón Jónsson's exposition of the apparent similarity between Bjárr and Bjarki which was published in the previous year ('Liserus.—Beow.', *Arkiv för nordiske filologi* 15 (1899), 255–61, at 258–61).

²⁶ Olrik, *Danmarks helteedigtning I*, p. 137, n.

²⁷ Boer, 'Die Beowulfssage', p. 65.

²⁸ A. Brandl, *Geschichte der altenglischen Literatur I: Angelsächsische Periode bis zur Mitte des 12. Jahrhunderts* (Strassburg, 1908), p. 993; A. Heusler, 'Review of Axel Olrik, *Danmarks helteedigtning, en oldtidsstudie, I: Rolf Krake og den ældre skjoldungsrække*', *Anzeiger für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 30 (1906), 26–36, at 32.

²⁹ See his 'Some Disputed Questions', pp. 245–7, for a useful review of some of the older scholarship on this question.

³⁰ Björkman, 'Bēow, Bēaw and Beowulf', p. 173; 'The repeatedly assumed connection between Bjárr and Bjarki ('little bear') must also be abandoned for good'.

³¹ The description of Bjárr as a Norse hero dates at least back to Bugge, 'Studien', p. 57.

³² H. Schück, *Studier i Beowulfssagan* (Uppsala, 1909), 'this Beaw or Beo was also known in the north'; Chambers, *Beowulf*, 45.

³³ *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 4th ed. (Leiden, 2000), 'Bjár', 'a name from the legendary sagas'.

³⁴ 'Some Disputed Questions', p. 246.

³⁵ 'Dossier', p. 17.

With only two instances of Bjárr available to the debate – one present in a genealogy clearly derived from Anglo-Saxon material, the other in a versified list of uncertain date and provenance – it is unsurprising that Beowulf's existence or otherwise in Scandinavia, and his significance there, have come down to a question of belief. The Old Norse work known as *Bjarkarímur* ('Bjarki's *rímur*') furnishes additional evidence which contributes to this well-worn debate. This text is a cycle of eight *rímur* or poetic sub-sections (sg. *ríma*) dating from around 1400.³⁶ It centres around Þoðvarr *bjarki* and is set against the wider dynastic history of the Skjöldungar. *Bjarkarímur* has long been of interest to scholars of *Beowulf*, as it independently preserves much of the same material as *Hrólfs saga kraka* – one of the most well-known witnesses to the heroic tradition drawn on in the Old English epic.³⁷ Both texts are based to a great extent on a lost early-thirteenth-century text known as *Skjöldunga saga* ('the saga of the Skjöldungar'). However, *Bjarkarímur* is extant significantly earlier than *Hrólfs saga* and may represent its source more closely.³⁸

The material relevant to this discussion is found in the first two *rímur* where the poet relates events surrounding a chieftain named Bjórr. The plot of this section of *Bjarkarímur* will be summarized to facilitate discussion. The poet begins his narrative in the court of Hrólfur *kraki*, *Beowulf*'s Hroðulf, and then introduces Bjórr in stanza 20:

Bjór var nefndur burðugr jall
bygði Álands síðu,

³⁶ *Hrólfs saga kraka og Bjarkarímur*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1904), p. xxx (hereafter *Bjarkarímur*).

³⁷ The most thorough work to date on *Bjarkarímur* is O. L. Olson, *The Relation of the Hrolfs Saga Kraka and the Bjarkarímur to Beowulf: a Contribution to the History of Saga Development in England and the Scandinavian Countries* (Chicago, 1916). Scholarship on *Bjarkarímur* and related matters is provided at pp. 7–12.

³⁸ *Hrólfs saga kraka* survives in paper manuscripts from the seventeenth century but these are clearly based on earlier exempla (*The Manuscripts of Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. D. Slay (Copenhagen, 1960), p. 4). *Skjöldunga saga* now only survives in a Latin excerpt by Arngrímur Jónsson from 1596. Early scholars generally regarded *Bjarkarímur* as a more reliable (or less defective) witness to Scylding tradition than *Hrólfs saga* (see, e.g., Lawrence, 'Disputed Questions', pp. 228–31; Olrik, '*Danmarks heltedigtning I*', pp. 135–6; F. Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagen Geschichte, Vol. I: Beowulf* (Munich, 1910), pp. 366–7), but subjective judgements about literary merit were the driving force behind such a conclusion. It is difficult to establish how closely *Bjarkarímur* and *Hrólfs saga* approximate *Skjöldunga saga* considering that very little of this text is now extant, and what remains may not have been faithfully translated. It is significant, however, that *Bjarkarímur* agrees with the Latin excerpt against *Hrólfs saga* in certain important instances, such as the narration of the battle on Vænir (see P. Acker's commentary on *Skjöldunga saga*, 'Part I: Fragments of Danish History', *ANQ* 20 (2007), 3–9, at p. 9, n. 13, and the notes to the corresponding translation, Bjarni Guðnason and Sif Rikharðsdóttir, 'Notes', *ANQ* 20 (2007), 22–33; esp. nn. 36–7).

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sá var sagður kaskur kall
í kylfings éli stríðu. (I, st. 20)³⁹

Bjórr is said to be the father of three sons, Bøðvarr, Fróði and Þórir, in the following two stanzas:

Blíða átti bauga Ná
sá brodda þing réð stefna,
og við henni arfa þrjá,
allvel má eg þá nefna. (I, st. 21)

Buðlungs arfi Bøðvar hét,
býsna eru þeir stórir,
frækna drengi falla lét,
Fróði og svó Þórir. (I, st. 22)⁴⁰

The death of Bjórr's wife is narrated in stanza 23, and his counsellor, Bjørn, advises him to remarry in the following verse:

Ræðismaðrinn Bjórs hét Bjørn,
biðr þá jallinn gíptast,
þá mun harmr í hrygðartjorn
helzt í sundur skiptast.' (I, st. 24)⁴¹

Bjørn proposes that Bjórr marry Ása *hin fríða* ('the beautiful'), daughter of a certain Þrándr. Bjórr approves this plan:

'Farðu Bjørn og bið þú nú
brúðar mér til handa,
ef hún er fōgr og einka trú,
en eg mun geyma landa.' (I, st. 27)⁴²

He stipulates that his counsellor may also choose an alternative should Ása refuse. The first *ríma* proceeds with Bjørn setting out on a lengthy bridal quest on Bjórr's

³⁹ *Bjarkarímur*, p. 113. 'There was a *jarl* of high birth named Bjórr; he settled on the shore of Áland. He was said to be a bold man in the harsh storm of the club-bearer [WARRIOR > BATTLE].'

⁴⁰ *Bjarkarímur*, p. 114. '(1) He married a joyful Ná <goddess> of rings [WOMAN] – that man brought about an assembly of points [BATTLE] – with her he had three heirs; I can name them well. (2) The prince's heir was called Bøðvarr – they are menacingly huge – he killed a valiant warrior – and [there were] also Fróði and Þórir.'

⁴¹ *Bjarkarímur*, p. 114. 'Bjórr's advisor was named Bjørn. He asked that the *jarl* get married, "then can the sorrow in the lake of grief best dissolve."

⁴² *Bjarkarímur*, p. 114. 'Go now, Bjørn, and ask for the bride's hand on my behalf, if she is beautiful and most faithful. I will watch over the lands.'

behalf. He is blown off course and comes across a man, Surtr, and his daughter, Hvít. She agrees to marry Bjórr, and they are wed. At the end of the first *ríma* the poet mentions Hvít's wretched nature and her negative influence on Bjórr. The second *ríma* begins with Hvít's ill relations with Bjórr's sons. They accept bewitched cloaks from her, which turn Fróði into an elk, Þórir into a dog and Bøðvarr into a bear. Fróði and Þórir tear each other apart, and Bøðvarr escapes. He encounters a woman called Hildir and they produce three heirs who are, like Bjórr's sons, called Fróði, Þórir and Bøðvarr. This younger Bøðvarr, who is protagonist of the *rímur*, later accrues the epithet *bjarki* ('little bear'). The elder Bøðvarr is captured and slain in bear form by men loyal to Hvít. He is then cooked. His sons unwittingly eat morsels of his flesh and take on animalistic features. Shortly after this Bjórr dies of sickness:

Þanninn endast yssu møk,
ekki varð þar fleira um sök,
þó fekk jallinn þunglig tøk,
þetta urðu hans endarök. (II, st. 42)⁴³

The younger Fróði holds a funeral for his grandfather Bjórr. The following six *rímur* concern the exploits of Fróði, Þórir and Bøðvarr, the last of whom assumes his famous role as Hrólfr *kraki's* champion.

The mysterious figure known as Bjórr has gone almost unmentioned in the history of *Beowulf* criticism despite the clear resonance between his unusual name and that of Bjárr.⁴⁴ As a proper noun Bjórr is unique in the Old Norse corpus, appearing only in *Bjarkarímur*. It might be reasonably traced to the common noun *bjórr* ('beaver'), especially considering the frequency of theriophoric names in Old Norse. However, no such name or name element is attested.⁴⁵ It seems likely that Bjórr is instead a loan from OE 'Bēo(w)', where *jó* represents an approximation of *ēo*.⁴⁶ This makes it a

⁴³ *Bjarkarímur*, p. 124. 'Thus ended the monstrous woman's deeds. Nothing more happened then, save that the *jarl* suffered severe illnesses: that became his doom.'

⁴⁴ To the author's knowledge only Andreas Heusler devoted more than a sentence to Bjórr's significance. He notes it as a curiosity – and probably not a coincidence – that a figure bearing this name should be present in a work concerning Bøðvarr *bjarki* ('Review of Friedrich Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagen Geschichte, Vol. I: Beowulf* (Munich, 1910)', *Englische Studien* 42 (1910), 289–98, at 295). Erik Björkman later quoted Heusler but provided no additional comments ('Bēow, Bēaw und Beowulf', p. 174). Klæber also summarily dismissed the name in a note concerning Bøðvarr *bjarki's* own: 'no importance need be attached to the fact that the grandfather of Bøðvarr Bjarki is called Bjór in *Bjarkarímur*' (*KA*, p. 1, n. 4). Finnur Jónsson mentions Bjórr in two places in his introduction to *Bjarkarímur* but does not connect this figure to Bjárr (*Bjarkarímur*, pp. xvi, xvii).

⁴⁵ G. Müller, *Studien zu den theriophoren Personennamen der Germanen* (Cologne, 1970), pp. 86–7.

⁴⁶ Cf. the rendering of the Old English epithet 'strēona' ('striver') as 'strjóna' in ch. 24 of Snorri's *Óláfs saga helga*; see De Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 'strjóna'.

variant form of Bjárr, which derives from OE ‘Bēaw’. That Bjórr consists of a root, *Bjór*, with a later nominative *-r*, is suggested by stanza 24 in the first *ríma*, where the genitive form ‘Bjórs’ is given.⁴⁷ The existence of this form may settle the question of whether or not the related form ‘Bjárr’ also features a nominative *-r*.⁴⁸

Readers familiar with *Hrólfs saga* will notice several marked departures between the narrative related there and the one preserved in *Bjarkarímur*. Two are of relevance to this discussion. The first difference concerns the identity of Bøðvarr *bjarkæi*’s forebear. In *Hrólfs saga*, the grandfather of Bøðvarr is named Hringr and is the chieftain of Uppdalir (modern-day Oppdal) in Norway.⁴⁹ Outside of *Hrólfs saga* no king of this name is connected to Scylding tradition, and Hringr is often used as a stock name for rulers in the Old Norse *fornaldarsögur* (‘legendary sagas’).⁵⁰ Bjórr, the only other appearance of Bøðvarr’s grandfather in the Old Norse corpus, instead lives on the coast of Áland (modern-day Åland), located east of Sweden. In terms of narrative stemmatics, the name Bjórr certainly represents a *lectio difficilior* and may more reliably preserve the earlier name borne by Bøðvarr’s grandfather. In situating Bøðvarr’s family in eastern Scandinavia *Bjarkarímur* also departs from the Latin excerpt of *Skjöldunga saga*, which, like *Hrólfs saga*, identifies Bodvarus (Bøðvarr *bjarkæi*) as Norwegian. In this *Bjarkarímur* more closely approximates the Scylding tradition preserved in *Beowulf*, where the action is restricted almost exclusively to south-eastern Scandinavia.

The second departure is that Bjórr is attended by a counsellor named Bjørn. His bridal quest on behalf of the *jarl* occupies the majority of the first *ríma*, running from stanza 24 to stanza 50, and he therefore constitutes a significant character in the cycle as a whole. His conversation with Bjórr also represents the *jarl*’s only direct speech in *Bjarkarímur*. While Bjørn’s quest to find a wife for Bjórr in *Bjarkarímur* is a cast as a lengthy adventure, the corresponding marriage between Hringr and Hvít in *Hrólfs saga* is instead arranged by an unnamed delegation of Hringr’s men in chapter 17 of the saga. Bjørn is absent in this text, and the *jarl*’s marriage is only treated briefly. The relevance of this will be considered shortly.

It is of clear importance to the debate surrounding Beow that a figure bearing a form of this name appears in one of the chief Scandinavian witnesses to Scylding tradition. It seems apparent that the forms ‘Bēaw’ and ‘Bēo(w)’ both entered the Old Norse corpus from Old English and circulated there as variants. The evidence adduced from *Bjarkarímur* would contradict Lawrence’s comment that ‘Bēowa has

⁴⁷ The form ‘Bjór’ is actually present at this place in the manuscript, with a superscript *ɹ* provided at the end of the line by the scribe. This produces the grammatically required genitive form ‘Bjórs’.

⁴⁸ See n. 21 above.

⁴⁹ This distinction was noted by Finnur Jónsson, *Bjarkarímur*, p. xvi.

⁵⁰ This name is used of eighteen separate figures in the *fornaldarsögur*, many of whom are kings and chieftains. See *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, vol. 4 (Reykjavík, 1950), 383.

no place in any northern version of the saga of the Scyldings'.⁵¹ One author, at least, considered Bjórr, or Beow, to be the forebear of the most renowned champion of the Skjöldungr king Hrólftr *kraki*.

BEOW AND SCANDINAVIAN HEROIC TRADITION

The full significance of the evidence adduced from *Bjarkarímur* to the aged debate surrounding Beow is only revealed by returning to *Kálfsvísa*. While often considered a simple list of horses and their riders, there appears to be an organizing principle at work in these verses which is relevant to the present investigation: namely, the riders are grouped primarily according to the cycle to which they belong. The first eight half-lines, which contain the most miscellaneous mix of heroes, appears to have an affinity with the tradition of the hero Helgi Hundingsbani. Dagr, mentioned in the first half-line, is the name of Helgi's slayer, as related in the eddic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* ('the second poem of Helgi Hundingsbani'). The figure allusively referred to in the eighth half-line as *skati Haddingja* ('champion of the Haddingjar') is known from the epilogue of this same poem as Helgi Haddingjaskaði ('slayer of the Haddingjar'), who is said to be the reincarnation of Helgi Hundingsbani. These two figures envelop a range of other names. Dvalinn in the third half-line is not a known hero, but is a name commonly employed in *þulur*. Haki is mentioned in *Ynglinga saga* ('the saga of the Ynglingar') and Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* as the brother of Hagbarðr and an enemy of Huggleikr, *Beowulf's* Hygelac. Hjálmpér may be identical to one of the eponymous protagonists of the *fornaldarsaga Hjálmpés saga ok Qlvis* ('the saga of Hjálmpér and Qlvir'), and *bani Belja* ('the slayer of Beli') is the god Freyr.⁵²

The final four half-lines in *Kálfsvísa* concern figures connected to the Völsungar – a dynasty also referred to in *Beowulf*.⁵³ Högni, Gunnarr and Sigurðr are mentioned in turn, interspersed by a Haraldr, who may be identical with the legendary Danish king Haraldr *hilditönn* ('war-tooth'). The Hun prince Atli is also mentioned in the third half-line of stanza 4 in proximity to his victims Högni and Gunnarr.

The largest division of *Kálfsvísa* is situated between these two groups, and concerns figures which chiefly appear in sources relating to the Scyldings. At the core of this section is the only narrative material to be found in the collection of

⁵¹ See above, p. 112.

⁵² *Hjálmpés saga* survives in manuscripts from the seventeenth century onwards (R. L. Harris, '*Hjálmpés saga: A Scientific Edition*' (unpubl. PhD dissertation, Iowa Univ., 1970), pp. xxv–xxxii). The corresponding *Hjálmpés rímur* is also late. Considering that *Kálfsvísa* is extant centuries before these texts, it is possible that the Hjálmpér mentioned there is not the same figure as in the *saga* and *rímur*.

⁵³ The poet mentions Sigemund, the *Walsing*, and his nephew, Fitela, between lines 874–97 following Beowulf's victory over Grendel. These figures correspond to the Völsungar Sigmundr and Sinfjötli of Old Norse tradition. On this parallel see *K4*, pp. 166–8 and the scholarship there.

verses. It describes Áli, *Beowulf's* Onela, riding a horse known as Hrafn on the ice. Aðils, or Eadgils, rides another horse to the east which has been wounded by a spear. This pertains allusively to a famous battle between the two kings which is narrated between lines 2391–6 and 2611–22 of *Beowulf* and in a range of Scandinavian sources including *Bjarkarímur*, *Snorra Edda*, *Ynglinga saga*, *Gesta Danorum* and Arngrímur's abstract of *Skjoldunga saga*. In the Old English epic, Beowulf assists Eadgils in slaying Onela. The Scandinavian sources have Hrólfr's champion Bøðvarr similarly assist Aðils in slaying Áli, but the northern versions locate this battle on a frozen lake in Sweden named Vænir (modern-day Vänern).

Judging by the plural verb *riðu* in the second half-line of the third stanza, the names mentioned prior to this allusive reference also rode to the battle. Meinþjófr and Morginn are otherwise unknown, but Vésteinn and Vífill survive in other material relating to the Scyldings. Vésteinn only otherwise exists in *Beowulf* as Weohstan, father of Wiglaf and slayer of Onela's son Eanmund.⁵⁴ Vífill is known from *Hrólfs saga*, where he protects the sons of Hálfðan, *Beowulf's* Healfdene. Neither Vésteinn nor Vífill are mentioned elsewhere in Scandinavian sources as participants in the battle on Vænir. Both are nevertheless firmly entrenched in related legendary material, and the poet of *Kálfsvísa* may have been drawing on traditions regarding the battle which have not survived in other Scandinavian sources. The mention of Vésteinn, who is only otherwise connected to the earliest layer of Scylding tradition, would support such a hypothesis.

The portion of *Kálfsvísa* associated with Scylding legendary tradition ends with the mention of Aðils and his horse, Slungnir, in the fourth half-line of stanza 4. Towards the end of this section, directly after the reference to the battle on Vænir, Bjárr and Björn are mentioned in tandem. These figures are seemingly identical to Bjórr and his companion, Björn, who appear together in *Bjarkarímur*.

Considering the material discussed in *Bjarkarímur*, the grouping of Bjárr and Björn together in a section of the late-twelfth or early-thirteenth-century *Kálfsvísa* with concrete links to Scylding legend has clear implications for this discussion. It suggests that Bjárr was not simply a name fished from genealogical material and used to fill out a versified list of heroes. That the pairing of Bjárr/Bjórr and Björn spans from *Kálfsvísa* until the early fifteenth-century *Bjarkarímur* suggests that a consistent tradition surrounding Beow developed and remained current in Scandinavia for centuries after it faded in England. With this being the case, it now seems untenable to claim, as Lawrence did, that Bjárr can be understood as merely a 'bookish explanation of material derived from Anglo-Saxon sources'.⁵⁵ Nor was Beow simply *known of* in the north, as has been suggested on the basis of his

⁵⁴ North, *The Origins of Beowulf*, pp. 58–60; F. M. Biggs, 'Beowulf and some Fictions of the Geatish succession', *ASE* 32 (2003), 55–77, at 71, n. 76.

⁵⁵ 'Disputed Questions', p. 246.

appearance in *Kálfsvísa* and the Icelandic *langfjöðgatal*.⁵⁶ He seems instead to have accrued a distinctive identity and character. In *Bjarkarímur* his Scandinavian reflex has an important narrative function and emotional life beyond his role as a Scandinavian patriarch.

CONCLUSION

How much the character and function of Bjárr/Bjórr reflects English traditions surrounding Beow is impossible to ascertain. Bjórr's position in *Bjarkarímur* as a famous progenitor is perhaps connected to Beow's own role in *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon genealogical material as an ancestor of kings. Bjárr/Bjórr's Scylding connections across *Kálfsvísa* and *Bjarkarímur* also seem unlikely to be a coincidence, and conceivably reflect Beow's important position in the Scylding dynasty as preserved in Anglo-Saxon sources.

That these functions travelled to Scandinavia with Beow is relatively secure. At some point before Beow's insertion into *Kálfsvísa* in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, this figure had also accrued other associations which are of interest. In *Kálfsvísa* he appears not in his usual guise as a distant forebear, but as a mounted warrior associated with Scylding legend. He is given alongside figures long established in this heroic cycle, such as Aðils, Áli and Vésteinn. One glimpses here the euhemerized fertility deity named in lofty genealogies now fully absorbed in Germanic legendary tradition, grouped with Swedish warriors and named following a battle in which Beowulf himself took part. By the time that *Bjarkarímur* was composed, Bjórr had become a battle-hardened ruler in eastern Scandinavia who was associated with the Scyldings.

It is entirely possible that the apparent fleshing out of Beow's heroic identity and his pairing with figures of Beowulfian fame in *Kálfsvísa* and *Bjarkarímur* are Scandinavian innovations. It is also a possibility, I would argue, that this process had its roots in Anglo-Saxon England, where complex traditions surrounding Beow had already been evolving for some centuries. It is by no means necessary to lend any credence to the old theory that Beow was originally a divine monster-slayer standing behind the protagonist of the Old English epic. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that behind the portrait of Bjárr/Bjórr as a warrior-ruler associated with Scylding legend lies a kernel of Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition that developed around Beow and entered Scandinavia with him. Beow's role in traditions surrounding the Scyldings could have grown in Anglo-Saxon England by slow degrees, in much the same way as the career of Beowulf is thought to have developed.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See above, p. 112.

⁵⁷ Beowulf is thought by many scholars to have originally been a minor Anglo-Saxon hero. Leonard Neidorf convincingly shows that the name was established in Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition from

Assuming with good reason that Bjárr and Bjórr are identical, the above evidence also demonstrates that the idea of a connection between this figure and Bǫðvarr *bjarkei* is not as outlandish as Lawrence and Björkman supposed a century ago.⁵⁸ Such a connection is plainly evidenced in *Bjarkarímur* and may also be implicit in Bjárr's connection with the battle on Vænir, where Bǫðvarr is a participant. Precisely how Beow moved from being one of the chief ancestors of the Scylding kings to becoming the grandfather of Bǫðvarr *bjarkei* remains a mystery. This change may have been encouraged by the clear similarities between the careers of Beowulf and Bǫðvarr, and by the links between the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian versions of Scylding legend. Bjárr/Bjórr's links with Bǫðvarr *bjarkei* may in any case provide a clue as to the means by which Beow entered Scandinavian tradition in the first place. A twelfth-century entry in the Durham *Liber Vitae* preserves the name 'Boduwar Berki', which represents clear evidence that this figure was known in England.⁵⁹ It is conceivable that in such contexts of transmission Beow, as an illustrious Scylding ancestor possibly with his own heroic reputation, became associated with Bǫðvarr and was borrowed into Scandinavian tradition, surfacing in time in the Old Norse literary corpus.

Taking into account the findings regarding Bjárr/Bjórr in Scandinavia, a rough chronology for the development of the figure of Beow is proposed below. It should be stressed that this model aims only to rationalize the evidence adduced in this article. Since so little concrete information is known about Beow, both in England and Scandinavia, the chronology provided here must remain hypothetical.

1. Beow, originally a fertility deity, is grafted onto the line of Scylding kings along with Sceaf. This occurred at some point prior to the appearance of this figure in Anglo-Saxon genealogical material.
2. Now regarded as a famous ancestor of the Scyldings, Beow appears in *Beowulf* and in different iterations of the West Saxon genealogical regnal list. The *terminus ante quem* of this development is the mention of Beow in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which dates to the late ninth century.
3. As Beow continues appearing in genealogical material until the twelfth century, he becomes more thoroughly embedded in Scylding tradition. Beow accrues a heroic identity of his own.

an early date ('Beowulf Before *Beowulf*: Anglo-Saxon Anthroponymy and Heroic Legend', *RES* 64, 553–73). Following Benson ('Originality', pp. 48–50), he supposes that this Beowulf, who eventually became the subject of the Old English epic, may have originally been a hero renowned for his feats of swimming ('Beowulf Before *Beowulf*', pp. 565–6; see also A. Liberman, 'Beowulf-Grettir', *Germanic Dialects: Linguistic and Philological Investigations*, ed. B. Brogyanyi and T. Krömmelbein (Amsterdam, 1986), pp. 353–401, at 365, and Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, p. 120).

⁵⁸ See pp. 111–12 above.

⁵⁹ Olrik, *Danmarks beltedigtning I*, pp. 140–1; Lawrence, 'Disputed Questions', p. 254; *K4*, p. xlii, n. 3; M. Fox, *Following the Formula in Beowulf, Örnar-Odds saga and Tolkien* (London, 2020), p. 186, n. 51.

4. In the twelfth century or earlier, traditions surrounding Bǫðvarr *bjarki* arrive in England, at which point they may have come into contact with local stories about Beow. Beow is borrowed into Scandinavian Scylding legend as Bjárr/Bjórr.
5. Bjárr/Bjórr continues to develop in Scandinavian tradition and is linked with a figure known as Björn. They appear together in *Kálfsvísa* around the turn of the twelfth century in association with the participants of the battle on Vænir.
6. Traditions surrounding Bjárr/Bjórr and Björn resurface in the fifteenth century *Bjarkarímur*, where the former is also closely associated with Bǫðvarr *bjarki*.

The foregoing discussion has cautiously raised three possibilities: first, that Beow continued to occupy a place in Scandinavian legend centuries after popular knowledge of this figure faded in England; second, that Beow may have enjoyed a heroic reputation in England beyond that which survives in *Beowulf*, genealogical material, and charters; and third that, contrary to the scholarly consensus, Beow did eventually make the leap from Beowulf to Bǫðvarr *bjarki*. The approach taken here demonstrates the value, and perhaps also the need, of consulting Scandinavian evidence for the elucidation of issues in Anglo-Saxon studies. This is especially the case in *Beowulf* criticism, which has benefited much – and stands to benefit further – from comparative studies in Old Norse material.