

The Emendation *Eorle* (Heruli) in *Beowulf*, Line 6a:
Setting the Poem in “The Named Lands of the North”

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To most editors, line 6a of *Beowulf*, “egsode eorl,” has required explanation if not emendation. A straightforward and literal translation, “terrified the warrior,” makes little sense in the context of the celebration of Scyld Scefing’s great deeds in the opening lines of the poem.¹ Most editors and translators therefore follow J. M. Kemble and Eduard Sievers in emending *eorl* to accusative plural *eorlas* and printing square brackets in their editions.² The opening lines would then be translated as:

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1. Grammatically singular *eorl* might be taken as a collective plural in the sense of “terrified warriors,” but “such a use of *egsode* with a singular object in variation with *ofteah* with plural objects (*preatum, mægþum*) raises particular doubts” (R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, eds., *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 4th ed. [University of Toronto Press, 2008], 112). The verse is also metrically suspect, since the two unstressed syllables *-ode* would normally count as a single metrical position when not verse-final according to the “rule of the coda” (now sometimes called “Fulk’s rule”). See Thomas M. Cable, *The English Alliterative Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 19; and R. D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 221, 228. A class II weak verb like *egsode* is normally followed by a trochaic word to form a type A (or A2b) verse, as in *fundode wrecca* (the adventurer yearned) (1137b) or *tryddode ūrfæst* (the glorious one stepped forth) (922a). There are some fourteen examples of such verses in *Beowulf* (see Fulk, *History of Old English Meter*, 205 n. 70, for the full list) but only two sound parallels for taking 6a as a type E verse without an extra final syllable: *drihtlice wīf* (noble woman) (1158a) and *lāðlicu lāc* (awful prizes) (1584a). The metrical argument for emending line 6a by adding an additional final syllable is not decisive on its own, but it does carry a not inconsiderable probabilistic weight.

2. Kemble was the first editor to print “eorl[as].” With the exceptions of Schaubert, who adopted “eorl,” and C. L. Wrenn (discussed below), subsequent editors have followed Kemble. See John Mitchell Kemble, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf, the Traveller’s Song*,

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Listen! We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes in the elder days, how those kings of the people accomplished valorous deeds. Often Scyld Scefing took away the mead benches from hordes of enemies, from many nations, terrified warriors, after he had first been found with few possessions.

(1–7a)³

However, although the sentence produced by emending line 6a to “eorl[as]” is grammatically correct, “Scyld Scefing . . . terrified warriors” fits somewhat uneasily with the rest of the passage. Scyld is said to have taken away the mead benches of surrounding enemies (a synecdoche for politically subjugating them), eventually extracting tribute from each of the peoples across the sea (9–11a). Saying that he “terrified warriors” is anticlimactic without being understated enough to be an obvious litotes. As C. L. Wrenn states, “*eorl[as]* seems weak as an emendation from the point of view of style and context.”⁴

An archetypal form of *eorlas* being miscopied as *eorl* also requires us to accept that scribe A of *Beowulf* made an unmotivated error almost immediately after beginning his copying of the text, and that scribe B did not notice this obvious grammatical mistake when he went back over the poem to correct the work of scribe A.⁵ But the manuscript at this point (fol. 132r) shows no crowding, malformed letters, corrections, or apparent hesitation by the scribe, and indeed the only emendations most editors accept to the text on this page are to insert a few letters (in lines 15b and 20a) that are obscured by the damage in the lower right portion of the folio, and possibly the removal of unmetrical *þāra* in line 9b. With the exception of the name “Beowulf” in line 18a (which we discuss below), all visible text on this folio is taken to be authoritative, and furthermore, as Wrenn notes, if *eorlas* was the reading of the archetype, “the process of scribal error is not clear.”⁶

In 1924 William A. P. Sewell, in a brief note in the *Times Literary Supplement*, accepted “eorl[as],” but translated the line as “terrified the Eruli,” thus referring not to generic warriors, but to a specific Germanic tribe,

and the *Battle at Finnes-burh*, 2nd ed. (London, 1837); and Else von Schaubert, ed., *Beowulf* (1863; Paderborn: Schöningh, 1961).

3. The Anglo-Saxon text of *Beowulf* is taken from Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, with line numbers given parenthetically. Discussions of the manuscript are based on the digital images available from the British Library at https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Vitellius_A_XV. Unless otherwise noted, translations are our own.

4. C. L. Wrenn, *Beowulf with the Finnsburg Fragment*, rev. ed., ed. Whitney F. Bolton (1953; New York: St. Martin's, 1973), 96.

5. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, xxvii–xxxv. See also Tom Shippey, “Names in Beowulf and Anglo-Saxon England,” in *The Dating of “Beowulf”: A Reassessment*, ed. Leonard Neidorf (Cambridge: Brewer, 2014), 58–59.

6. Wrenn, *Beowulf with the Finnsburg Fragment*, 96.

the Herulians, who lived in northern Europe in the third through fifth centuries.⁷ According to Jordanes the Heruli, known for their ferocity, had with the Ostragoths defeated the Roman Emperor Romulus Augustus in 476.⁸ Earlier, they featured regularly, if not always clearly, in the histories of the late Roman Empire: along with the Goths, they attacked Athens in the late third century, and in the fourth were first conquered by the powerful Gothic ruler Ermaneric, and were then seemingly brought into the Hunnish confederation.⁹ Jordanes locates them initially in Scandza (southern Scandinavia), and Procopius places a group of later Heruli (who, he says, had returned back from the south) there as neighbors of the Gautoi, whose name corresponds perfectly to the Geats of *Beowulf*.¹⁰ Jordanes reports that they were driven from there by the Danes: “However, the Dani, who trace their origin to the same stock, drove from their homes the Heruli, who lay claim to preeminence among all the nations of Scandza for their tallness.”¹¹

Klaeber’s rejection of Sewell’s idea is surprising for its brevity and certainty: “The mention of an individual tribe would be extremely doubtful in this place.”¹² Fulk, Bjork, and Niles only slightly soften this assertion by stating that although Sewell’s conjecture “provides a plausible explanation for the faulty reading,” it is “doubtful in this context,” and assert that “the special significance accorded to the Heruli in scholarship now seems dubitable.”¹³ To reuse Tolkien’s description of a different critical

7. William A. P. Sewell, “A Reading in *Beowulf*,” *Times Literary Supplement*, September 11, 1924, 556.

8. Jordanes, *De origine actibusque Getarum*, chap. 46. For an English translation, see *The Gothic History of Jordanes: In English with an Introduction and a Commentary*, ed. and trans. Charles C. Mierow (Princeton University Press, 1908), reproduced online at <http://people.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/jordgeti.html>.

9. Jordanes, *De origine*, chaps. 23, 50.

10. Procopius, *History of the Wars, Books V and VI*, trans. H. B. Dewing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), bk. 6, chap. 14.

11. Mierow, *Gothic History of Jordanes*, chap. 3. “Quamvis et Dani, ex ipsorum stirpe progressi, Herulos propriis sedibus expulerunt, qui inter omnes Scandiae nationes nomen sibi ob nimia proceritate affectant praecipuum” (*Jordanis Romanus et Getica*, ed. Theodor Mommsen [Berlin, 1882], 59–60). See R. W. Chambers, *Widsith: A Study in Old English Heroic Legend* (1912; Cambridge University Press, 2010), 216. If Procopius’s account has any accuracy to it, the Danish victory reported by Jordanes could have either been before the initial Herulian departures, apparently in the third century, or over the Heruli in Scandinavia at a later point (whether these Heruli were truly people who had come back after much time in the south, or simply a branch of people bearing that name who had never left).

12. Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1950), 124.

13. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 112. The editors cite E. Ekwall, review of C. Wrenn, ed., *Beowulf*, *English Studies* 35 (1954): 78; and R. Girvan, review of C. Wrenn, ed., *Beowulf*, *Review of English Studies* 5, no. 18 (April 1954): 175–79.

consensus within *Beowulf* studies, “there is something irritatingly odd about all this.”¹⁴ The repetition of forms of the word “doubtful,” and the somewhat sarcastic phrasing of “special significance accorded to the Heruli in scholarship” without citing any of it,¹⁵ are all indicative that either we have strayed into a long-abandoned critical battlefield, or that the emendation would contradict some deep assumption that no one has any great desire to reexamine. Or, as we shall see, both. For in spite of the seeming opposition of the editors of the standard edition, the emendation of line 6a to clarify that it is a reference to the Heruli has much to recommend it, not only providing a philological and paleographical explanation for the form in the text, but also helping resolve problems elsewhere in *Beowulf* and shedding light on the historical and cultural background that the author assumed the poem’s audience would share.

PHILOLOGY

Wrenn accepted Sewell’s arguments and emended line 6a to “Eorle.” In defending this change, Wrenn attempts to head off one potential objection, the fact that **Eorle* has a sequence *-rl-* with no vowel, while *Heruli* has the weak medial vowel *u*:

The stem *erul* of the *Eruli* seems to appear with a different weak vowel in Norse Runic inscriptions in the sing. form *erilaR*; and *erul*, with syncope of the *u*, would give a primitive [Old English] form *erl* which, with the normal breaking [of vowels], would give the historical O.E. *eorl*. The pl[ural] of this, assuming the common *-e* ending found in such names as *Seaxe*, would be *eorle*. Now, a late scribe, seeing the form *eorle* (there being no capitalizing of proper names), might alter it mechanically to *eorl*, as it would look like a dat. sing. (which made no sense) of the familiar noun *eorl* – since the old form *Eorle* for the long-forgotten Eruli would be unknown in the 11th century.¹⁶

14. J. R. R. Tolkien, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 13.

15. Bernard Mees’s 2003 essay, the only scholarship referenced to support this point by Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, argues that the word *erilaz* on runestones indicates generic warriors rather than the specific tribe of the Heruli, a point barely tangential to line 6a of *Beowulf*. See Bernard Mees, “Runic ErilaR,” *North-Western European Language Evolution* 42 (2003): 41–68. In his third edition, Klaeber sends the reader on a reference chase around the book to discover the argument (discussed below) about the Heathobards being Heruli.

16. Wrenn, *Beowulf with the Finnsburg Fragment*, 96. Also available at Benjamin Slade’s *Beowulf on Steorarume* (Beowulf in Cyberspace), “Explanatory Notes,” <https://www.heorot.dk/beowulf-rede-notes.html>. Note that Wrenn passes over one further feature in silence: the fact that the initial *H-* found in Latin sources is most likely silent and purely orthographic. The usual Greek form, Ἑρῶλοι, has a soft breathing mark, reinforcing the point that the *H-* is inauthentic.

Much of this is sound, but Wrenn's own explanation for connecting *-rl-* and *-rul-* (and further *-ril-*, to bring in the Early Runic form *erilaz/irilaz*, apparently referring to some sort of rank or social status held by the inscribers of a number of runic inscriptions) does not work: the *u* would not be regularly lost in Old English in this position. However, a potential solution has been provided by Bernard Mees in his recent systematic review of this word family. Mees concludes that the three forms are, in fact, originally just variants of the same Proto-Germanic word, meaning "noble, lord." He provides a potential Proto-Germanic paradigm that contains all the relevant variants of the medial syllable as ablaut gradations.¹⁷ By the time we get to Old English, these variations have been simplified so that the *-rl-* sequence, with no intervening vowel, is the only form known in the language, so that the loss of the *u* is nothing more than a routine matter of analogy (paradigm regularization).

The editors of the fourth edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf* cite Mees's article approvingly but nonetheless reject Wrenn's emendation on the grounds that the word "would not be the proper plural of a national name, since such *i*-stem plurals of national names ought to show front mutation."¹⁸ The base noun *eorl* does not show umlaut because it is an *a*-stem noun (with plural *-as*), but when used as a tribal name in the plural, it would take historical *i*-stem endings (like *Dene* [Danes] or *Engle* [Angles]). If line 6a contained an accusative plural *eorle*, the ending would be from Proto-Germanic **-inz*, which became **-ī* in early Old English. This means that, before applying any sound changes, the morphological structure of *eorle* in line 6a would originally have been **erl-ī*.

As the editors of *Klaeber's Beowulf* note, this form would have undergone certain sound changes in the history of Old English, including umlaut. The expected course of development can be usefully illustrated by the development of the word for "herdsman" (Late West Saxon *hyrde*), which is better attested in early texts than the tribal name **Eorle*. There are two more complex early changes we would expect to apply, as well as two straightforward later changes:

17. Mees, "Runic EriLaR," 46–47. The paradigm provided by Mees falls under the type that Indo-Europeanists call hysterokinetic, with the accent and full grade shifting from stem to the ending between case forms; see Benjamin W. Fortson IV, *Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 119–22 (§6.19–28), for an introductory account of Indo-European nominal ablaut. A paradigm of the proterokinetic type, with the accented full grade shifting between the root and the stem, might perhaps be more plausible, with a nominative singular form **erulz* (from **h₁ érl̥s*), an accusative singular **erlu^o* (from **h₁ érl̥m*), and a genitive singular **eril(i)s* (from **h₁ (e)r̥éls* or **h₁ (e)r̥éles*, with initial **e* restored through paradigm regularization). Either reconstruction will produce all the variants needed to account for *Heruli*, *eorl*, and *erilaz*.

18. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 112.

1. Breaking. Many sounds underwent breaking, turning into a diphthong in various contexts, including before an *r + a consonant. The dialectal details of breaking are quite variable, but an early form like *erlī or *herdī would generally undergo breaking to *eorlī, *heordī.¹⁹
2. Umlaut. The details of *i*-umlaut vary from dialect to dialect. In West Saxon, *eo is altered, under the influence of a following *i, to either *ie* (in Early West Saxon) or *y* (in Late West Saxon). Thus we find *heordī typically as *hierde* in Early West Saxon texts such as the *Cura pastoralis*, and *hyrde* in later works such as the writings of Ælfric. When Fulk, Bjork, and Niles object to lack of umlaut effects in line 6a's *eorl[e]*, they presumably have these West Saxon outcomes in mind, and are objecting to the fact that the MS does not read either **ierl[e]* or **yrl[e]*. However, *Beowulf* is not likely to have originally been a West Saxon composition, but rather Anglian (and probably Mercian).²⁰ In these dialects, *eo was umlauted to *io*, as we can see in the early Mercian form *hiordi* from *heordī (found in the eighth-century Corpus Glossary). In a dialect of this sort, *eorlī would become *iorlī.²¹
3. Lowering. Eventually, during the historical period in which Old English is recorded, *io* had a tendency to merge with *eo*. This change probably postdates the first writing of *Beowulf* but predates our extant manuscript. Scribe A of *Beowulf* in particular has a strong tendency to "modernize" examples of *io* to *eo*, as we see again and again in the hero's name (scribe B is rather more conservative, and typically copies out the name in a more archaic and correct fashion as *Biowulf*).²²

19. Karl Brunner, *Altenglische Grammatik nach der angelsächsischen Grammatik von Eduard Sievers*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1965), 55 (§84).

20. Fulk, *History of Old English Meter*, 269–347.

21. Brunner, *Altenglische Grammatik*, 78–79 (§107); Don Ringe and Ann Taylor, *The Development of Old English* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 247. We have presented the development as starting from pre-Old English *e, breaking to *eo, and then umlauting to *io. It is possible, however, that the pre-Old English forms of the words in question were actually *hirdī and *irlī, with a root *i by a much earlier, Proto-Germanic process of umlaut (which should be firmly distinguished from Old English umlaut, which occurred centuries later). Our account assumes, with Alistair Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 59 (§154.3 n. 3), that *hirdī and *irlī were replaced analogically by *herdī and *erlī, under the influence of the base nouns *herdu and *erl. It is also possible, however, that no such replacement took place, and that *hirdī and *irlī were broken directly to *hiordi and *iorlī. These forms would then have become *hierde/hyrde* and **ierle/yrle* in West Saxon but have remained unchanged in other dialects; see Brunner, *Altenglische Grammatik*, 78–79 (§107). The exact details are a matter of discussion (see also Ringe and Taylor, *Development of Old English*, 183), but our argument holds under either approach. The essential philological fact is that the Corpus Glossary shows the development to *hiordi*, and our suggestion is simply that the historical changes that produced this would also produce early Mercian *iorlī.

22. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, cxxxviii–cxl, clv.

4. Unstressed *i*'s. During the course of the eighth century, unstressed *-i* tended to be reduced to *-e* (this happened somewhat later in Northumbrian). Thus an earlier form **iorli* would, left to its own devices, have eventually developed into **eorle* in later (non-northern) Old English. The scribes of *Beowulf* were either copying from an exemplar where the change of *-i* to *-e* had already been carried out, or else themselves routinely equated final *-i* with their own *-e* and modernized the text accordingly.²³

Taken together, these points of historical phonology show that the phonological objections raised by Fulk, Bjork, and Niles do not hold. An original form **erli* (Heruli) would most likely have become **iorli* in the archetype text of *Beowulf* and would have been **iorli* or **eorle* in the exemplar from which scribe A copied the text.²⁴ Even if scribe A encountered the archaic form **iorli* directly, he would have interpreted it as an equivalent of *eorle* in his own dialect. We suggest, then, that the scribe was, or understood himself to be, looking at *eorle*, which he took to be an erroneous dative singular and “corrected” to be an accusative singular *eorl*. If this is the case, then Sewell was correct in his translation of the line as “terrified the Heruli.”

Such a scribal error would be very much in keeping with the scribes' struggles with proper names in *Beowulf* more generally. Leonard Neidorf has documented some sixteen major and fifteen to eighteen minor errors in the two scribes' treatments of names.²⁵ Although a few of these errors may be subject to dispute, most are obvious and unequivocally wrong, including the names of Hrethric, the Heathobards, the Freswæl, and even Cain. Neidorf attributes these and many other errors to the scribes' having copied lexeme by lexeme and thus not having tried particularly hard to make sense of the resulting sentences. When they encountered an unfamiliar word, he argues, they assimilated it to the nearest familiar lexeme.²⁶ So *Eomer* becomes “geomor” and Heardred becomes “hea rede” even though the latter makes very little sense in context and the former makes no sense at all. The miscopying of *iorli* or *eorle* as *eorl* would be

23. Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, 153–57.

24. Or perhaps a mixed stage such as **iorle* or **eorli*, depending the precise dialect and chronology. The textual history assumed here accepts the arguments that the written history of *Beowulf* goes back to an archetype sometime before the year 750. See Michael Lapidge, “The Archetype of *Beowulf*,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 29 (2000): 5–41; and Leonard Neidorf, “The Archetype of *Beowulf*,” *English Studies* 99, no. 3 (May 2018): 229–42.

25. Leonard Neidorf, “Scribal Errors of Proper Names in the *Beowulf* Manuscript,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 42 (2013): 249–69.

26. Leonard Neidorf, *The Transmission of “Beowulf”: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 103–32.

consistent with Neidorf's theory, since the scribes would have perceived either form as an error and corrected to the putatively correct lexeme, *eorl*.

Scribe A seems to deviate more from his exemplar early in his copying, suggesting that at first he thought that he was working with a corrupt text, only realizing, as he went on, that he did not fully understand what he was copying. Not only is there something wrong with *eorl* in line 6a, but in line 9b *para* is grammatically unnecessary and metrically suspect. The likely expansion of an archetypal *beo* into *beowulf* in lines 18 and 53²⁷ is also consistent with the idea that the scribe did not respect the exemplar, assuming that unfamiliar words were errors or abbreviations when they were not. These changes are, however, not simply the work of a "bad" scribe, but of a copyist with specific aims wrestling with difficult material. There is no particular reason why an original reading *eorlas* should have been corrupted to *eorl* except for laziness or carelessness; there is every reason why original *eorle* (or *iorli*) should have been "corrected" to *eorl*, given the usual working methods of our scribes.

THE HERULI IN HISTORY AND LITERATURE

Sewell's original case for the Heruli rested upon their mention by Jordanes as having been driven out by the Danes from parts of the southern coast of Scandinavia and some of the adjacent islands before occupying a different portion of southern Scandinavia, where they were neighbors of the Jutes. Because there is no mention of this expulsion in Saxo Grammaticus, Sewell concludes that it must have occurred in "the early days of Danish history, in the time of Scyld."²⁸

This argument is plausible. The Heruli appear to have been a Germanic tribe, famous for their ferocity and cruelty, who perhaps reached the height of their power in the late third century, sacking Athens and various Greek cities around 297.²⁹ Jordanes refers to the Heruli as being effective fast-moving, light-armed troops.³⁰ Procopius, who dislikes them, claims that

27. Or perhaps better *bio* or *biowi*. The argument for interpreting "beowulf" as resulting from a scribe taking *beo* (or *biowi*) in an exemplar as an abbreviation for *beowulf* is discussed in Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, xlvi–xlix, 113. For a long discussion of the complex historical possibilities, see R. D. Fulk, "The Etymology and Significance of Beowulf's Name," *Anglo-Saxon* 1 (2007): 109–36; and James Earl, *Thinking about "Beowulf"* (Stanford University Press, 1994), 23–26.

28. Sewell, "Reading in *Beowulf*," 556.

29. The evidence of the various sources is usefully synthesized by Roland Steinacher, "The Herules: Fragments of a History," in *Neglected Barbarians*, ed. Florin Curta (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 322–26.

30. Jordanes, *De origine*, chap. 3.

the Heruli killed their aged and sick and forced widows to commit suicide at the funerals of their husbands.³¹ In 299 they were defeated by the emperor Claudius II Gothicus in a battle near Naissus (present-day Niš in Serbia). Before occupying a kingdom on the middle Danube in the fifth century, they appear to have come from southern Scandinavia. First subjugated by the Goths of Ermanric and then by the Huns, after the death of Attila, many Heruli served with Odoacer and helped defeat the last Western emperor, Romulus Augustus, in 476. Cassiodorus's *Variae epistolae* includes a letter from Theodoric the Ostrogoth proposing an alliance with their king.³² The Heruli were destroyed as a political entity by the Lombards in the sixth century.³³

Lines 86b–88 of *Widsith* read:

Mid East-Þyringum ic wæs
 ond mid Eolum ond mid Istum ond Idumingum.
 Ond ic wæs mid Eormanrice ealle þrage.³⁴

[I was with the East-Thuringians, and with the ?Heruli? and with the Iste and the Idumingas. And I was with Eormanric all the time.]

In his edition of this poem R. W. Chambers accepts Jakob Grimm's emendation of "Eolum" to "Eorlum" (Heruli),³⁵ noting that without emending, the name is not identifiable and that the change Grimm proposes is "linguistically . . . satisfactory."³⁶ If "Eolum" does refer to the Heruli, then for the author of *Widsith* they appear to have been a Germanic tribe in proximity to the Iste on the southern Baltic coast (and further south) and the Idumingas on the eastern Baltic shore.³⁷ Chambers argues that some Heruli, Wærnas, and the Angles were neighbors somewhere near the northern border of Thuringia,³⁸ but it is difficult to draw any secure geographical conclusions from *Widsith*, especially given the chronological flatness of the poem's catalogue and the apparently mobile nature of the Heruli.

If the notion of the Heruli being driven from Scandinavia by the Danes was not merely invented by Jordanes, then they are in the right place at approximately the right time to be referred to in *Beowulf*. Their defeat

31. Procopius, *History of the Wars*, bk. 6, chap. 15.

32. Chambers, *Widsith*, 245; Steinacher, "Herules: Fragments," 328.

33. Chambers, *Widsith*, 216 n. 87; Steinacher, "Herules: Fragments," 345–49.

34. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 149–53.

35. Grimm later, following Müllenhoff, proposed "Eotum" (Jutes), but never reconciled the differing interpretations; see Chambers, *Widsith*, 216.

36. Chambers, *Widsith*, 216 n. 87.

37. *Ibid.*, 248–52.

38. *Ibid.*, 245.

by the Danes would have been at least three generations before Hygelac's disastrous raid into Frisia in approximately 524.³⁹ If we allot approximately twenty years for a generation and note that Hrothgar is very old well before Hygelac's death, the Heruli would be migrating away from southern Scandinavia to the middle Danube no later than the first third to the middle of the fifth century. Describing the accomplishments of Scyld's son, lines 18–19 of *Beowulf* read:

Bēo⁴⁰ wæs brēme —blæd wīde sprang—
 Syldes eafera Scedelandum in

[Beo was renowned—his glory spread wide—Scyld's offspring in Scedeland]

That "Scedeland" is in the southern part of Scandinavia is generally agreed upon, as is the connection of the word with *Skåne*.⁴¹ But whether *Scedeland* indicates specifically what is now Skåne in southern Sweden, or if the word is a more generic term encompassing southern Sweden, the Danish islands and the Jutland peninsula, has been the subject of some debate. In lines 1685b–86, Hrothgar is said to be the best of the rulers who dealt out treasure "be sǣm tweonum / ðara þe on Scedenigge" (between the two seas, of those in Sceden-isle). Fulk, Bjork, and Niles appear to take *Scedenig* as equivalent to *Scedeland* and gloss both as "the southernmost part of the Scandinavian peninsula, applied to the Danish realm."⁴² But it may be that the two terms should be seen as marking a distinction between the realm that is attached to the rest of the Scandinavian peninsula (*-land*) and that separated from it by water (*-ig*). If the poet and *Beowulf*'s audience imagined Heorot to be located near present-day Lejre, on the island of Zealand,⁴³ then this distinction would be descriptive: Hrothgar's

39. Scyld himself is likely simply a back formation from the ethnonym *Scyldingas*; see Carl Anderson, "Scyld Scyldinga: Intercultural Innovation at the Interface of West and North Germanic," *Neophilologus* 100, no. 3 (July 2016): 461–76. That the defeat of the Heruli is assigned to him rather than to one of his descendants suggests that it was an event associated with an early phase of the Danish rise to regional power, rather than with the reigns of Healfdene or Hrothgar depicted rather more immediately in the poem. Even a considerably earlier date for the historical events—Chambers's proposed chronology puts Jordanes's account of the Danish victory over the Heruli in the third century (see below, and compare n. 11 above)—would hardly be ruled out, though in that case the poet would have compressed the chronology somewhat by placing the vaguely dated early Danish victory just a few generations before the Hrothgar's reign.

40. The manuscript reading here and in line 53b is "beowulf." See Neidorf, *Transmission of "Beowulf,"* 103–32.

41. See Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 471.

42. *Ibid.*

43. John D. Niles, "*Beowulf*" and *Lejre* (Tempe: Arizona Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 2007), 178–82, 214–22.

realm is surrounded by water (the Kattegat and the Baltic separate it from the mainland), while Beo's kingdom was not, indicating that the Danes had migrated to their present location from Scania.⁴⁴

Using the information from the Latin writers in concert with these readings of *Beowulf*, we can synthesize a sketch of what the author or audience seemed to believe about early Danish history. After some kind of crisis or interregnum, Scyld becomes king of the Danes. He leads his people in defeating the Heruli, expelling them from their lands in Scedeland. The Danes subjugate the surrounding peoples, taking away their political autonomy and forcing them to pay tribute. After Scyld's death and glorious funeral, his son Beo rules well in Scedeland, further increasing the power of the Danes. He is succeeded by his son Halfdan (whose name may indicate that his mother was from some other people). Either Halfdan or his son Hrothgar expands Danish rule into the Danish islands. Seizing the site of Heorot, Hrothgar builds there a mead hall larger than people had ever previously seen (67b–70).

SCHOLARLY POLITICS AND THE CRITICAL REJECTION OF THE HERULI

A good general principle is that when we see in the criticism either a disproportionately impassioned response or an unexplained silence, scholarly politics were once involved. Line 6a proves to be no exception. That such a simple and philologically straightforward emendation as *eorle* for *eorl* has not been widely discussed, the odd way in which first Sewell's and then Wrenn's identification of the Heruli was rejected with such little engagement, and Chambers's uncharacteristic special pleading about line 6a all combine to suggest that there are other factors influencing the scholarship beyond philology or interpretation.

In his *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem*, Chambers provides a long and detailed discussion of the possibility of the Heruli appearing in *Beowulf*.⁴⁵ Surprisingly (at least in light of what we have discussed to this point), he barely mentions line 6a, instead focusing considerable energy on refuting the arguments of R. C. Boer and Elias Wessén and, behind

44. If the two different words do not refer to two different places, then Hrothgar is being praised as the best king in the entire southern Scandinavia region; the "two seas" are, presumably, the North Sea and the Baltic, rather than the Kattegat and the southern Baltic.

45. R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*, 3rd ed., with a supplement by C. L. Wrenn (Cambridge University Press, 1963), 430–50.

them, those of the man whom Tom Shippey has called “the Grendel of *Beowulf* scholarship,” Karl Müllenhoff.⁴⁶

It is possible to interpret Jordanes’s assertion that the Danes drove the Heruli out of their homeland as referring to events in the third century. In this view, the expulsion by the Danes was the reason the Heruli were acting as mercenaries throughout Europe. “In this case,” says Chambers, “this first act in the recorded history of the Danes must have taken place around 250, and can have no connection with Hrothgar’s struggles or with the Heathobards mentioned in *Beowulf*.”⁴⁷ But no historical source provides a definite date for the expulsion of the Heruli by the Danes (see n. 11 above): the link to Herulian mercenaries on the borders of the Roman Empire is conjecture. If Jordanes is instead referring to events around the year 500 (which would be consistent with a line from Sidonius), then the Danes would be fighting the Heruli about the same time that *Beowulf* says they are fighting the Heathobards. From this, Müllenhoff concluded that the Heruli and the Heathobards were the same people.⁴⁸

Wessén built upon this idea, arguing that the Scyldings of the poem (who are called Danes) were in fact indigenous Heruli, that the Heathobards of the poem are the actual Danes, and that the Heruli were expelled from Danish lands around 550, after Hrothgar had ruled the Danes. “*Beowulf* has simply turned things into the reverse of what they really were.” Stating that his summary “does no justice to the ingenuity, plausibility and persuasiveness of Prof. Wessén’s arguments, or the learning with which he marshals his material,” Chambers proceeds to eviscerate the argument.⁴⁹ What most exercises him is the chain of reasoning that begins with the assertion that the Danes were originally a small band of rovers from the Mälär district of Sweden. This conclusion is based upon a misreading of the word *stirps* in Jordanes as indicating ancestral homeland rather than genetic stock (as Axel Olrik puts it, the term is ethnographic rather than geographical).⁵⁰ From this starting point, Wessén concludes that the Danes must have been few in number and so they must

46. Richard C. Boer, *Die altenglische Heldendichtung*, vol. 1, *Beowulf* (Halle: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Walsenhauses, 1912); Elias Wessén, “De nordiska folkstammarna i *Beowulf*,” *Kungl. Vitterhets-, Historie- och Antikvitets-Akademiens Handlingar: Filol.-filos., Serien* 36, no. 2 (1927): 1–85. T. A. Shippey and Andreas Haarder, *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 38.

47. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction*, 431.

48. Karl Müllenhoff, *Beowulf: Untersuchungen über das angelsächsische Epos und die älteste Geschichte der germanischen Seewölker* (Berlin, 1889), 26, 40.

49. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction*, 435.

50. Axel Olrik, *Danmarks Heltedigtning: En Oldtidsstudie*, vol. 1, *Rolf Krake og den ældre skjoldungrække* (Copenhagen: Gad, 1903), 21–22, translated and revised in collaboration with the author by Lee M. Hollander as *The Heroic Legends of Denmark* (1919; New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1971), 34.

have absorbed the Heruli, who thus made up the majority of the population that was thereafter calling themselves Danes. The evidence that we have from Procopius, however, completely contradicts this idea and instead is consistent with the Heruli having been driven out of the north by the Danes before settling on the Danube until that kingdom was destroyed by the Lombards. A small remnant, Procopius says, traveled north through the lands of the Slavonic tribes and then sailed to Thule (the Scandinavian peninsula), where they settled as neighbors to the tribe of the Gautoi (the Geats of *Beowulf*).⁵¹ As Chambers notes, Procopius and *Beowulf* both present the same ethnogeography: Danes on one side, Geats on the other, with the sea in between.⁵²

Chambers calls the claims about the equation of the Heruli with the Heathobards an example of “philological legend” that is based upon “just nothing,” but which nevertheless has “become a fixed dogma.”⁵³ His vehemence likely arises from the profound difference in methodology between his work and that of Wessén and Boer, which represented the last gasp of the speculative philology that had reached its high point with Müllenhoff’s scholarship.⁵⁴ Chambers, Fr. Klaeber, W. W. Lawrence, and some of their contemporaries were at the heart of a successful scholarly movement (begun, in many ways, by Axel Olrik, whom Chambers cites approvingly)⁵⁵ to prune away the tangle of speculation that had grown up around the historical or pseudo-historical material in *Beowulf*. The triumph of the resulting “twentieth-century consensus” (to use Shippey and Haarder’s terminology) was so complete that almost no contemporary scholars realize that there was once argument about the Heathobards being Heruli, the Heruli being the real Danes, and the Danes being a raiding band from Sweden.⁵⁶ But at the time of Chambers’s *Introduction*, the “almost undivided trinity” of Lawrence, Klaeber, and Chambers was not yet completely victorious,⁵⁷ thus perhaps explaining the disproportionate effort devoted to demolishing the case for the Heruli as Heathobards:

51. Procopius, *History of the Wars*, bk. 6, chap. 14.

52. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction*, 438.

53. *Ibid.*, 435.

54. See Shippey and Haarder, *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage*, 47–54.

55. “Olrik was able to see things which Müllenhoff had not been able to see, because Olrik did not allow theories and ‘higher criticism’ of *Beowulf* to stand in the way of his observation of facts” (Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction*, 423).

56. Shippey and Haarder, *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage*, 497. In his third edition of *Beowulf*, Klaeber draws his discussion of the possibility that the Heathobards being the Heruli entirely from what he characterizes as Chambers’s “refutation” (129–30, notes to lines 82–85).

57. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf and the Critics*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael D. C. Drout (Tempe: Arizona Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 2011), 137.

more than the individual claim, it was the return of the speculative methodology that was being attacked.

As noted above, in his edition of *Widsith*, Chambers does discuss the Heruli, seeming to be quite happy with the idea that the name is linguistically the same as *eorl*. But he does not mention line 6a and even states that the Heruli “disappear from history in the sixth century: the absence of any mention of them in *Beowulf*, the scene of whose actions is laid near what had been their territory, is notable.”⁵⁸ This failure to consider seriously the possibility that line 6a refers to the Heruli would thus seem to be a casualty of the underlying methodological dispute: not wanting to encourage belief in the theories of Wessén and Boer, Chambers and Klaeber avoid introducing the Heruli elsewhere in the poem. By the time Sewell’s suggestion appeared, then, Chambers was likely too ensconced in his position to really reconsider it, and Klaeber followed Chambers in his revisions of his edition.

A different forgotten controversy may also contribute to the critical resistance to seeing the Heruli in line 6a. The idea that the opening lines of *Beowulf*—either lines 1–52 or lines 1–193—were not integral to the rest of the poem has a critical tradition that began with Ludwig Ettmüller in 1840 and continued until the early part of the twentieth century.⁵⁹ Müllenhoff’s statement is representative: “It seems beyond doubt to me that the introduction [lines 1–193] was composed neither by the poet of the first old lay nor by one of the continuators or interpolators.”⁶⁰ In part this interpretation was based on the name “Beowulf” in lines 18 and 53, which to these early scholars indicated not a mistaken expansion of *Beo* but instead a clumsy welding together of two (or more) distinct poems simply because the name “Beowulf” was present in each. The presence of explicitly Christian statements (the “creation hymn” in lines 92–100a and the hortatory passage in lines 178–88) was also seen as indicating that the material was not organically connected with the rest of *Beowulf*.

In their arguments against the older, primarily German, proponents of *Liedertheorie*, whom they labeled “dissectors,” Lawrence, Klaeber, and Chambers, and later Tolkien, argued for the unity of the poem and thus for the integration of the history of the Danes in the first 52 (or 193) lines

58. Chambers, *Widsith*, 216.

59. Ludwig Ettmüller, *Beowulf: Heldengedicht des achten Jahrhunderts, zum ersten Male aus dem Angelsächsischen in das Neuhochdeutsche stabreimend übersetzt und mit Einleitung und Anmerkungen versehen* (Zurich, 1840), 4. A translation may be found in Shippey and Haarder, *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage*, 231–32.

60. Karl Müllenhoff, quoted and translated in Shippey and Haarder, *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage*, 348; for the original, see “Die Innere Geschichte des Beowulfs,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 14 (1869): 193–244, reprinted in *Deutsche Altertumskunde*, 5 vols. (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1870–1900).

with the rest of the plot. Evaluating *Beowulf* in light of classical aesthetics, these scholars saw the opening lines of the poem as an awkward digression because they were not explicitly linked to the story of the hero. Today, when most critics see the opening lines, particularly 1–52, as “a deliberate part of the poem’s design” (finding, for example, an intentional parallel between the funerals of Scyld and Beowulf),⁶¹ it is difficult to appreciate how much of an aesthetic failure Etmüller, Müllenhoff, and others saw in *Beowulf* beginning with the lineage of the Danes but ending with the death of a Geatish hero. But this was the view of the poem—epitomized, for Tolkien, by the work of W. P. Ker—that the twentieth-century consensus was working against.⁶² The more abstract and general the opening of *Beowulf* is, the simpler it is to link it to either an overarching theme or the specific plot of the ending.⁶³ Arguments for coherence, therefore, are easier to make if the opening lines are a putative proem or exordium about kings and kingship in general than if they are a recounting of the specific history of the early Scylding dynasty. A reference to the Heruli, then, which sets the poem in a specific time and place, would thus seem to be an unwelcome intrusion (even though the appearance of ethnonyms in what Paul Battles identifies as the “traditional opening” passages of most Old English epics is not unusual).⁶⁴

THE BENEFITS OF READING LINE 6A AS “TERRIFIED THE HERULI”

Reading line 6a as “terrified the Heruli” rather than “terrified the warriors” places the opening of *Beowulf* in the fifth century near the shores of the Baltic. Scyld, the legendary founder of the Skjoldung dynasty, leads the Danes against the Heruli, who were living in southern continental Scandinavia. “Egsode” (terrified) could be a litotes for “utterly destroyed,” or it could be a way of differentiating the Heruli, who fled their lands, from the other peoples who paid tribute to Scyld after he took away their mead

61. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, lxxxiv–lxxxvi, 110–11.

62. Tolkien, *Beowulf and the Critics*, 6–7.

63. Some contemporary scholars have followed Arthur Brodeur in inferring an operatic structure to the poem, calling the Unferth episode an “intermezzo,” and seeing lines 1–52 or 1–193 as an “overture.” See, e.g., Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 148–49, 152; and Arthur G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959).

64. Paul Battles, “Toward a Theory of Old English Poetic Genres: Epic, Elegy, Wisdom Poetry, and the ‘Traditional Opening,’” *Studies in Philology* 111, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 7–11. *Elene*, for example, mentions the Franks, Hugas, Goths, and Huns in its opening (we are grateful to the anonymous referee for *Modern Philology* for pointing out this correspondence). Cynwulf cannot have taken these historically incoherent references to specific Germanic peoples from the written tradition he drew upon for the poem.

benches (i.e., politically subjugated them). As a result of Scyld's conquest, the Danes occupy the former lands of the Heruli in Scedeland—southern Scandinavia—where Scyld's son Beo rules after his father's glorious ship funeral. Beo is succeeded by mighty Halfdan, and either he or his son Hrothgar continues his people's expansion into the Danish islands and the Jutland peninsula. To celebrate this achievement, Hrothgar builds a mead hall greater than any that the children of men have ever seen: Heorot. All of this occurs some time before the king of the Geats, Hygelac, is killed while leading a raid into Frisia.⁶⁵ This semihistorical and political background is presented quickly and without detailed explication, indicating that the author of *Beowulf* expected the poem's audience to know it. The setting of the poem is in this view "a tradition concerning moving *historical* events, the arising of Denmark and the wars in the islands."⁶⁶ Whether or not the poet and the audience knew precisely when the events were supposed to have happened, the relative chronology and the cultural geography are understood.

The explicit difference between Scyld Scefing "terrified the eorls" and Scyld Scefing "terrified the Heruli" is slight, a single word out of 17,165. But recognizing the Heruli in any putative proem or overture of the poem brings about a subtle but important change of emphasis in our reading: that despite the centrality of "the marvellous" Grendelkin, sea monsters, and dragon, *Beowulf* is, to use Tolkien's words, more from "The Book of Kings" than "Tales of Wonder."⁶⁷ The poem is set not once upon a time in a far away land, but in the migration era in "the named lands of the North,"⁶⁸ and this time and place were part of the cultural history—and quite possibly the physical reality—of its author and audience.

65. T. A. Shippey, *Laughing Shall I Die: Lives and Deaths of the Great Vikings* (London: Reaktion, 2018), 40–45.

66. Tolkien, *Beowulf and the Critics*, 90. See also Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 16.

67. Fred C. Robinson, "Elements of the Marvellous in the Characterization of Beowulf: A Reconsideration of the Textual Evidence," in *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, ed. R. R. Burlin and Edward Irving (University of Toronto Press, 1974), 119–37; J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 208. Ironically, there is more warrant in historical texts for flying, fiery dragons than there is for any king of the Geats named Beowulf.

68. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 17.