

### ***Beowulf: Prince of the Geats, Nazis, and Odinists***

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*Beowulf*, a poem written in a language identified with the Anglo-Saxons but without mention of England or a single English character, has always been entangled with the complexities of issues of nationalism. The tribes and peoples mentioned in the story are little more than names to us, but the original audience may well have had strong feelings about them. There may be strong ethnic or nationalist themes running through the poem to which we are blind in the dim light of historical distance. These issues of national identity are more than minor details; Anglo-Saxon England had, of course, a complicated relationship with the Scandinavian peoples, and as Dorothy Whitelock pointed out, the matter of how the Danes would be perceived by the audience of *Beowulf* is a central question in the debate over the dating of the poem.<sup>1</sup>

Modern scholarship on the poem is also fraught with issues of nationalism, but in this case we can see the details and distinctions more clearly. The dual catastrophes of the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII and the Ashburnham House fire of 1731 left *Beowulf* without any serious competition for the title of “Old English Epic,” and as such, the poem was a prize for the taking. Claims upon *Beowulf* have often served as proxies for claims on national identity, whether English or otherwise. John D. Niles stated with dry irony that “Thorkelin’s chief motive for transcribing and publishing *Beowulf* was nationalism: Danish nationalism, to be precise.”<sup>2</sup> *Beowulf* is by no means unique in medieval literature in serving the interests of nationalism. In *Inventing the Middle Ages*, Norman E. Cantor traced the deep interest in and profound impact of the Nazis upon medieval studies, particularly in the ways in which they promoted the use of history, linguistics, and folklore as tools for shaping a myth of pan-Germanic identity.<sup>3</sup> Though they used medieval studies for their own purposes, the Nazis were part of a long tradition of underwriting national identity through medieval literature, a tradition that includes less malevolent incarnations such as the work of the Brothers Grimm or, in the case of *Beowulf*, the work of Frederick Klaeber.

Scholars and teachers of *Beowulf* tend either to ignore or downplay this aspect of *Beowulf*’s critical reception, or they may work actively to challenge such readings through more sophisticated analysis of the poem’s origins and history. Unlike many other medieval works, however, *Beowulf* has a life beyond the academic world and a place in popular culture, where the nuances of scholarly caution and restraint have little effect. *Beowulf* has been adapted into fantasy novels, comic books, and video games; a number of recent film adaptations have tried various approaches to the poem, from the 1999 futuristic Christopher Lambert version<sup>4</sup> to the 2007 Robert Zemeckis motion-capture animated version.<sup>5</sup> Most film versions have tended to focus on action sequences (Beowulf fights Grendel with everything from his bare hands to explosive crossbow bolts), on what might generously be called sexual politics (Grendel’s mother is often transformed into a siren figure), or on conflicts between paganism and Christianity. Most are basically monster-hunting stories; they take little interest in questions of national identity. But the producers of one film, *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats*,<sup>6</sup> have inadvertently discovered just how seriously some fans of *Beowulf*

1 Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951).

2 John D. Niles, introduction to *A Beowulf Handbook*, by Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 4.

3 Norman E. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

4 *Beowulf*, directed by Graham Baker (Capitol Films, 1999).

5 *Beowulf*, directed by Robert Zemeckis (Paramount Pictures, 2007).

6 *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats*, directed by Scott Wegener (David Garrison Productions, 2008). The film was shown only briefly in theaters; it is available on dvd from <http://princeofthegeats.com>. 100% of the profits of all sales goes to the American and Norwegian Cancer Societies.

do take such questions. In this film, Beowulf, although raised among the Geats, is the son of an African explorer, a Pushkin-esque figure who looks like an outsider but who is ultimately a product of the culture that raised him. While the film was still in production, neo-Nazi, neo-pagan, and other nationalist groups learned about the black Beowulf and accused the filmmakers of “calumniating, misrepresenting, [and] traducing” the poem.<sup>7</sup>

When Scott Wegener, the executive producer and director of *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats*, originally conceived of the project, he was unaware of the history of nationalistic readings of the poem. Wegener was looking for a project to raise money for the American Cancer Society and decided to create an all-volunteer film version of a classic work of literature. *Beowulf* seemed a good fit, and Wegener particularly looked to Seamus Heaney’s best-selling translation for guidance. He recruited others who were interested in the project and willing to donate their time and talent to raise money to fight cancer. In the process, they created a film that is more properly called “no budget” than “low budget”—*Beowulf: Prince of the Geats* was produced entirely on donated time and services.<sup>8</sup>

The innovation of casting a black actor in the role of Beowulf came early in the project. Wegener thought the actor Jayshan Jackson would be ideal for the title role, but Jackson was African-American. Rather than opt for the ‘colorblind’ casting sometimes used in stage productions (in which the ethnicity of the actors is irrelevant to the role and, presumably, to the audience), Wegener began re-working the script in order to explain this oddity, and eventually developed an idea that he felt was both thematically appropriate and historically plausible. Given how far some Vikings fared, he reasoned that African explorers might also have been able to journey equally far. In the film, the traditional story of *Beowulf* is bracketed by two scenes in Africa. We learn through this backstory that Beowulf’s father Ecgtheow is from an African fishing tribe, the Ombra. In order to facilitate their fishing, the Ombra have developed the compass, but Ecgtheow prefers exploring to fishing, and sets off to find the end of the world. He travels north until he reaches the land of the Geats, and decides that it is as far as he will go. He settles there, marries a local woman, and produces a son, Beowulf. From that point on, the film’s narrative generally follows the outlines of the poem.



Jayshan Jackson on the set of *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats*

Negative reaction to the casting of a black Beowulf began with e-mail messages in February 2005. Under the subject header, “beowulf is not a nigger!!!”<sup>9</sup> came a death threat: “You sicken me. Why must you steal white culture and replace it with your multi-cultural filth? Why do you fear white culture? You should be killed for what you are doing, and maybe you will, you can never tell.”<sup>10</sup> A second e-mail was sent on the same day, under the subject heading, “beowulf\_a filthy NIGGER???”<sup>11</sup> This one read, “You have got to be kidding me. Do you think you will get away with this?”

7 “An Open Letter to the People Behind Prince of the Geats,” *Prince of the Lies*, posted November 29, 2005, <http://princeofthelies.blogspot.com/2005/11/open-letter-to-people-behind-prince-of.html>

8 Scott Wegener, personal interview, June 23, 2008.

9 Note that the actual subject heading has dozens of exclamation marks.

10 McGinnis1488, e-mail message to David Garrison Productions, February 3, 2005.

11 Note that the actual subject heading has dozens of question marks.

I am insulted.”<sup>12</sup> A third e-mail under the subject heading “beowulf\_webmistress Aryan culture IS FOR WHITES” simply read, “You should be killed for this disgrace.”<sup>13</sup>

All three e-mails were sent from a single account within the space of about an hour, so it might have been possible to dismiss the threats as the bizarre rantings of a single racist crank. Over the next three years, however, various eruptions appeared on the internet, from a variety of individuals and groups, from neo-Nazis to neo-Odinists. In addition to occasional posts and articles, one Australian writer created a blog dedicated to opposition to the film, called “Prince of the Lies,” asking people to “Join the campaign to stop the appropriation of a North Seas cultural icon!”<sup>14</sup>

This characterization of Beowulf as a “North Seas cultural icon” reveals some of the confusion that still surrounds questions of nationalism and *Beowulf*. Elsewhere on the same site, the author refers to the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons as coming from “Scandinavia and Germany,” and in an earlier post he refers to the setting of *Beowulf* as “either northern Denmark or Southern Sweden.” The phrase “North Seas cultural icon,” then, seems chosen to include England, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. The website “Asatru Update” also uses shifting terminology to characterize *Beowulf* and describe their preferred cast for a film version. The poem’s characters are alternately “Northern European,” “whites,” “blondes,” or “European-descended people”; all “Germanic folk” should be offended by the film. For the author of one post, the problem is as much European neglect of identity as it is a problem of “cultural predators.” The author writes,

At the bottom, the problem is that most Eurofolk do not realize we are a people. Men and women of Germanic ancestry form a distinct group, nested inside the larger but still very distinct European group that constitutes our “Greater Family.” We are not just isolated and disconnected individuals. We are bound to each other by networks of ancestry and culture that transcend space and time.<sup>15</sup>

Here, the writer seems to understand that the cultural identity of the “Greater Family” is a complicated issue, though interestingly enough he also refers to “American society,” presuming an audience of Americans of either Germanic or “Eurofolk” descent. This seems a reasonable assumption considering that the “Asatru Folk Assembly,” a neo-pagan group promoting worship of Odin and other northern gods and goddesses, constructs itself around a notion of Germanic identity. The Asatru Folk Assembly website defines Asatru as

[...] an expression of the native, pre-Christian spirituality of Europe. More specifically, it is the Way by which the Germanic peoples have traditionally related to the Divine and to the world around them.

From Iceland to Russia, from the frozen north of Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, the Germanic peoples wandered and settled over a span of thousands of years. Today, their descendants are spread around the world. We may refer to ourselves as Americans or English, Germans or Canadians, but behind these labels lurks an older, more essential identity. Our forefathers were Angles

12 Mcginnis1488, e-mail message to Pro Tech Computer Services (web host for *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats*), February 3, 2005.

13 Mcginnis1488, e-mail message to Pro Tech Computer Services, February 3, 2005.

14 Prince of the Lies, <http://princeofthelies.blogspot.com>.

15 “Beowulf Was Black? (Are We Angry Yet?),” Asatru Update, March 24, 2007, <http://asatruupdate.blogspot.com/2007/03/beowulf-was-black-are-we-angry-yet.html>

and Saxons, Lombards and Heruli, Goths and Vikings—and, as sons and daughters of these peoples, we are united by ties of blood and culture undimmed by the centuries.

Asatru is our native Way. Just as there is Native American religion and native African religion, so there is native European religion. Asatru is one of its expressions. It gave our ancestors comfort in millennia past, and it can give us strength and inspiration today.<sup>16</sup>

Asatru is defined here as a sort of ethnic or national religion and is clearly at odds with Christianity. But where one might expect issues of paganism and Christianity in *Beowulf* to capture the interest of such readers—as they have certainly fascinated scholars for almost two centuries—the uproar surrounding *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats* focuses entirely on ethnicity. In the posts complaining about Wegener's film, Beowulf is portrayed as a champion of the Germanic peoples, not a champion of paganism.

Odinists who took umbrage with *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats* often depicted their faith as closely intertwined with their national identity, describing it as a “tribal heritage” and Beowulf, therefore, as a “tribal hero.”<sup>17</sup> One email to David Garrison Productions, from a poster who identified himself as “Baz,” claims kinship with the Geats, and even goes so far as to claim that “Beowulf is a sacred text to us.”<sup>18</sup> Another writer explains:

Beowulf is a sacred texts to Odinists. This is not to say that we necessarily take every single line literally. Probably most Odinists regard the Beowulf epic in much the same way as Christians and Jews regard the heroic Biblical stories about King David.<sup>19</sup>

These readers take the poem as an accurate depiction of fifth-century Scandinavian culture; they are generally oblivious to or silent on the poem's English provenance, Christian authorship, and late-tenth-century manuscript context. The writer goes on to explain that this reverence extends beyond the *Beowulf* poem to the personage of Beowulf himself: “Odinists also hold our ancestors to be sacred, as is well-attested in the surviving medieval literature.... If the hero Beowulf really existed, he or his relatives would have contributed to the gene-pool of modern Odinists.”<sup>20</sup>

Objections to the film's casting that seem to rest on quasi-religious grounds, then, are inextricably tied to questions of national or ethnic identity arising from the slippery and romantic notion of “ties of blood and culture undimmed by the centuries.” Religious identity and national identity are of course often closely intertwined; in some cases, however, anger at the film's casting was more explicitly a matter of identity politics. The National Socialist Movement, an unabashedly pro-Nazi political group, was also harshly critical of *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats*. Regarding the original poem, the writers state: “Most scholars have agreed that the epic of Beowulf is a study in Germanic heathen morality. Beowulf, in short, is generally perceived as the ideal Germanic aristocratic warrior, and therefore a moral model for his society.”<sup>21</sup> Critical interpretations aside, it is clear from the post and its context that the main objection to the film is not that Beowulf is depicted as being heathen or Christian, model or moral, but that he is portrayed by a black actor.

16 Asatru Folk Assembly, <http://runestone.org/> (accessed July 16, 2008).

17 Mikel Crees, e-mail message to *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats* webmaster, June 14, 2005.

18 Baz, e-mail message to David Garrison Productions, October 29, 2005.

19 Alain James, e-mail message to David Garrison Productions, November 1, 2005.

20 Alain James, e-mail message to David Garrison Productions, November 1, 2005.

21 “A Black Beowulf,” National Socialist Movement, May 14, 2006, [http://www.nsm88.org/articles/color\\_confusion.html](http://www.nsm88.org/articles/color_confusion.html)

What might otherwise have been barely noted as simply one more in a series of recent film versions of *Beowulf*—undistinguished, perhaps, but interesting, and certainly well-intentioned—found itself the target of a toxic spew of racism, rage, and religious confusion from various dark corners of the lunatic fringe. Yet it was not the first version of *Beowulf* to receive this dubious distinction. Viewers of the Robert Zemeckis *Beowulf* film might have objected to many aspects of its reworking of the poem, but a site called the Vanguard News Network (with the slogan “No Jews. Just Right.”) takes umbrage specifically with its depiction of Germanic culture, describing the film as “a bastard product of Jewish cultural perversions” and complaining about its “Calumny against Christianity: The ex-king’s adviser wore a big cross on his chest and man-handled his crippled slave.... how Jewish!”<sup>22</sup> The site has, thankfully, little to say about *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats*, but its response to the Zemeckis film might suggest a hierarchy of sins against the identity of Beowulf: a non-Christian Beowulf is bad, but a non-European Beowulf is worse.

While some simply vented their rage against *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats*, other websites try to justify their objections on the grounds of historical accuracy. In a few cases, the argument is simply that there could not have been any Africans in Scandinavia at the time. One commenter on the website Majority Rights.com expresses this view [spelling, grammar, typography, and coherence all *sic* throughout]:

Once more[ala Wegner’s Beowulf],the blind Liberal establishment,is attempting to enhance “self-esteem”, by portraying Negroes as intelligent,brave,intelluctual beings,who built the pyramids ,created the “great city of Zimbawe”, gave rise to Euclidian thought, invented most of the White man’s devices, AND PEANUT BUTTER!!! One question-just how the hell did a nigger wind up in 1000 AD Europe, unless as an oddity akin to a monkey? And to think that a Scandinavian woman would indulge in bestiality in those days is absurd-she and her offspring would have immediately put to death. Romantisizing a Stone age race thats greatest achievement is the harnessment of fire, and how [hopefully] to keep dry when it rains is an insult modern mankind.<sup>23</sup>

Others who objected to Wegener’s film tried to present a more coherent argument for the film’s historical inaccuracy, while at the same time suggesting that this historical inaccuracy was an insult to whites. The website “Prince of the Lies,” for example, lays out the case:

Mr Wegener’s [the producer] fantasy is, of course, at odds with the original Beowulf poem, and with the heroic ethos that it expresses. There is also absolutely no literary, historical, archaeological, ethnological or other evidence to give the slightest credence to Mr Wegener’s attempt to distort the facts about the ancestors of the majority of the population in most English-speaking nations. Therefore to give any support to Mr Wegener’s film proposal is, at best, culturally insensitive.<sup>24</sup>

Others drew specific parallels between Beowulf as an icon of “white” culture and the icons of other cultures. One writer on Asatru Update asks rhetorically, “What would be the reaction if Bruce Willis was chosen to play Martin Luther King? Or Brad Pitt cast as Pancho Villa? If this is ‘no big deal,’ why do African Americans get so upset about whites in blackface?”<sup>25</sup> Such sentiments were repeated elsewhere.

22 “I just watched ‘Beowulf,’” <http://www.vanguardnewsnetwork.com/?p=2727> (March 14, 2008).

23 Nick Tamiroff, comment on “A modern Beowulf,” MajorityRights.com, comment posted February 24, 2006, [http://majorityrights.com/index.php/weblog/comments/http\\_majorityrightscom\\_indexphp\\_mark\\_richardsons\\_a\\_modern\\_beowulf/#c22916](http://majorityrights.com/index.php/weblog/comments/http_majorityrightscom_indexphp_mark_richardsons_a_modern_beowulf/#c22916) (accessed July 16, 2008).

24 “An Open Letter to the People Behind Prince of the Geats,” Prince of the Lies, posted November 29, 2005, <http://princeofthelies.blogspot.com/2005/11/open-letter-to-people-behind-prince-of.html>.

25 “Beowulf Was Black? (Are We Angry Yet?),” Asatru Update, March 24, 2007, <http://asatruupdate.blogspot.com/2007/03/beowulf-was-black-are-we-angry-yet.html>.



*Damon Lynch III portrays the aged Beowulf.*

Though the filmmakers knew that their black Beowulf would raise some eyebrows, they did not seem aware of the complex interlaced history of nationalism and criticism of *Beowulf* from the antiquaries through the Second World War. Nor does the angry reaction of groups from the political fringes exemplify the typical reaction; according to Eric “Greer” Scott, a producer and stunt coordinator on the film, most people are much more reasonable, yet still find the casting curious and in need of justification: “People inevitably ask, ‘How does that work?’” when they learn that Beowulf is black in the film.<sup>26</sup> Jayshan Jackson, who plays the young Beowulf, thinks that the reaction is to be expected: “You say ‘Beowulf’ and people immediately think ‘Viking.’”<sup>27</sup>

The filmmakers, too, apparently had that expectation, because they uniformly expressed surprise that no one had ever heard of Beowulf when they filmed in Norway. They assumed that the Norwegians would feel some kind of cultural affinity toward Beowulf, perhaps as a legendary Viking hero, but “in Norway, people were, like, ‘Beo-who?’” That very reaction convinces the filmmakers that their choice of a black actor to play Beowulf is not culturally insensitive. While the filmmakers expected some racist reaction, they did not expect it from the Anglophone world but rather from Scandinavia. As Scott says about the negative response from nationalist groups outside Scandinavia, “If nobody in the area he was from knows who he is, why do you care so much?”<sup>28</sup>

For their part, the response of the filmmakers to this reaction against the casting of a black Beowulf reflects in its own way a complex and inconsistent application of history; they argue on one hand that an African Beowulf is historically plausible, and on the other that since the character is fictional, historical

26 Eric “Greer” Scott, personal interview, June 18, 2008.

27 Jayshan Jackson, personal interview, June 23, 2008.

28 Eric “Greer” Scott, personal interview, June 18, 2008.

probabilities are irrelevant. The filmmakers expressed pride in the efforts they put into accurately depicting “Viking” culture—notwithstanding the fact that the period in which the poem is set predates the beginning of Viking culture by several centuries—and defended the black Beowulf as historically plausible. In his conversation with me, Scott Wegener argued that since the Vikings traveled as far as Turkey, it is conceivable that other contemporaneous people traveled equally far.<sup>29</sup> Jayshan Jackson also pointed to the wide-faring Vikings, and added that there were African explorers as well.<sup>30</sup>

None of those involved with the production suggested that the character Beowulf was black, merely that the presence of a black warrior in Viking Scandinavia was not beyond the realm of historical possibility. Indeed, the question of whether or not Beowulf was black was largely subsumed under the argument that he is a fictional character. Many of the e-mails of protest drew parallels between depicting Beowulf as black and depicting historically black figures such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Shaka Zulu, or Malcolm X as white. In response to these arguments, the filmmakers responded that Beowulf is a work of fiction, not history. Jayshan Jackson, for example, specifically responded to the comparison with casting a white man as Martin Luther King, Jr. with the argument that King was an historical figure, while Beowulf was not. When pressed on this issue, however, he felt that even if Beowulf were a historical figure, it would still be appropriate to cast a black man in that role, saying, “Why not? It’s something different, something new.” Jackson argued that there was a double standard even in the area of depicting historical figures, and pointed to Elizabeth Taylor’s depiction of Cleopatra in the 1963 film. “The minute you flip that perspective, it’s not the same rules anymore,” he said.<sup>31</sup>

*Beowulf: Prince of the Geats*, intended simply as a fundraiser for cancer research, found itself instead at the center of controversies over ethnicity, religion, and national identity. Those of us who deal with *Beowulf* in the relatively sanitized conditions of academia might do well to remember that the poem has an ardent readership among those who find in it support for ideologies most scholars would find ridiculous or repugnant. Their response to the poem must be acknowledged as part of the “cultural heritage” of *Beowulf*; their arguments, however offensive, can reveal some of the ways that popular audiences read medieval texts. Likewise the creators of popular versions of *Beowulf* might work from assumptions that might not survive scholarly cross-examination, but their logic can tell us a great deal about how a thousand-year-old poem finds and keeps its ambiguous place in modern culture.

In an early draft of the script, one of the Danes encountering Beowulf thinks his face is dirty and covered in mud, and Beowulf has to explain that it is his normal color. Eventually, the scene was removed, because it came across as cliché and perhaps racist, so that in its final form, there is very little acknowledgement that Beowulf looks unusual, beyond Hrothgar remarking that there is “no doubt” Beowulf is the son of Ecgtheow, and Nils (an invented character) telling Beowulf, “you never belonged here.” Scott Wegener argues that the less race is acknowledged, the better, as it is the best way to get rid of racism.<sup>32</sup> Jayshan Jackson, on the other hand, hopes that the difference “will inspire people to read between the lines of poems,” and that people will see in Beowulf and his band “how this group of men who are different all join together and work together.”<sup>33</sup> Both hope that while this *Beowulf* might look different from others, it might be judged more thematically faithful to the poem than previous films.

29 Scott Wegener, personal interview, June 23, 2008.

30 Jayshan Jackson, personal interview, June 23, 2008.

31 Jayshan Jackson, personal interview, June 23, 2008. [Jackson presumably alludes here to the popular belief that Cleopatra was of African origin. – Ed.]

32 Scott Wegener, personal interview, June 23, 2008.

33 Jayshan Jackson, personal interview, June 23, 2008.