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TWO NOTES ON *BEOWULF*

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I. *BEOWULF* 2444-71

The interpretation of *Beowulf* 2444-71¹ has long been a matter of controversy. The chief bone of contention in the past has been whether the 'gomel ceorl' of l 2444 is to be equated with Hreðel, or whether the passage was intended by the *Beowulf* poet as an extended simile.² The main purpose of this article, however, is to bring to the foreground the real difficulty, beside which the question of simile or no simile is incidental.

Most scholars to-day seem to accept the theory that the lines constitute a Homeric simile in which the sorrow of Hreðel at the death of his son Herebeald is compared with that of an old man who sees his son hanging on the gallows.³ This interpretation is favoured by the parallelism of the 'swa' in l 2444 with that in l 2462. On the other hand, as Hoops says,⁴ the choice of this motive for comparison with the sorrow of Hreðel is curious. Since Hoops wrote these words an interesting attempt has been made by Miss Whitelock to show that, although curious to the present-day reader, the comparison would yet be effective in Anglo-Saxon times.⁵ She points out that Hreðel is grieved not only at the loss of his son but also because his son will be neither avenged nor atoned for. Compensation or vengeance is impossible because the homicide is Herebeald's own brother, Hæðcyn. Compensation or

¹ The text used here is that of Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf*, 3rd ed, Boston 1941.

² Cf H. M. Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin* (London 1899), 39: 'It is not quite clear how far the passage is intended as a simile.'

³ Klaeber, op cit 213n; R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf with the Finnsburg Fragment* (Cambridge 1943), 122n; J. Hoops, *Kommentar zum Beowulf* (Heidelberg 1932), 260; J. J. Hall, *Beowulf, an Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem* (Boston 1893), 82: 'The passage beginning "swá bið géomorlic" seems to be an effort to reach a full simile, "as . . . so".'

⁴ Hoops, op cit 260.

⁵ D. M. Whitelock, 'Beowulf 2444-2471', *Medium Ævum* VIII (1938), 198-204. Cf also the same author's *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford 1951), 18.

vengeance is equally impossible, in Anglo-Saxon law, for the relatives of an executed criminal. The real point of the comparison, therefore, is taken to be that the sorrow of Hreðel and that of the old man whose son has been executed both result from the impossibility of taking vengeance. The point is striking and the suggestion an interesting one, though it is by no means conclusive. One would feel happier if it were more explicit in the text. The sorrow of Hreðel is undoubtedly based on his inability to gain redress: the poet is insistent on the point.⁶ But in the lines under discussion there is nothing to suggest that the old man is grieved because he can gain no redress; the tragedy for him is simpler and more universal — he grieves solely because of the loss of his son. One is forced, therefore, to return to Hoops' statement that the choice is a curious one; how curious, it may be worth while to inquire.

Since Professor Tolkien's masterly demonstration of the literary skill of the *Beowulf* poet⁷ and Bonjour's monograph on the digressions in the poem,⁸ it has become necessary to accept fully the literary competence of the author and to assume that the introduction of these, admittedly fine, poetic lines was deliberate. It is up to the reader to consider his interpretation carefully within the context, and to be doubtful of that interpretation unless it is demonstrably appropriate.

The lines occur in the second half of the poem. Beowulf, in his youth, has won fame at the court of Hroðgar by defeating and killing the two monsters who ravaged Heorot. The poet now wishes to picture him in his old age, after a life of fame, glory and goodness. Beowulf is now the perfect king and a symbol of man at his greatest and most noble. He is now ready to give up his life for the sake of his subjects, and the poet is preparing to show him as

wyruldcyning[a]
 manna mildust ond mon(ðw)ærust,
 leodum liðost ond lofgeornost.

⁶ ll 2441-4, 2464-7.

⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf, the Monsters and the Critics', *Proc. Brit. Acad.* xxii (1936).

⁸ A. Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf*, Oxford 1950.

Bonjour has demonstrated⁹ the poet's skilful use of digressions to account for Beowulf's present position as ruler of the Geats and to contrast his actions with those of other princes, and it is therefore unnecessary to go over that ground again here. The lines under discussion in the present digression are part of a speech made by Beowulf to his followers immediately before he embarks on his last battle, his supreme sacrifice. He reviews the early part of his life, and tells how he was adopted by King Hreðel and treated by him as affectionately as Herebeald, Hæðcyn and Hygelac, the king's own sons. He is accounting for the action he is about to take, the sacrifice he is to make. The reader already knows that Beowulf will die in this last fight.¹⁰ The Geats are about to lose their lord — the greatest of all calamities — just as they had done before when Hæðcyn was the tragic cause of Herebeald's accidental death. But the calamity this time will be greater, for while the tragedy of Herebeald's death is personal the death of Beowulf will bring sorrow on the whole nation. When Herebeald dies it is Hreðel who grieves and suffers most; but when Beowulf dies he is mourned by all the Geats, for his death will lead inevitably to national extinction.

Since, therefore, the tone of the poem here is one of high tragedy, of complete and inexorable disaster, mitigated only by the catharsis of supreme heroism, the reader is bound to feel troubled by the introduction of so trivial a comparison — with a criminal who pays for his crimes on the gallows. It is difficult to believe that the *Beowulf* poet, at this juncture, could compare the sorrow felt at the tragic loss of Herebeald, foreshadowing as it does the national mourning for the death of the hero, with that felt by some old man who sees his son justly pay the penalty exacted by the law. It is, indeed, under the circumstances a curious choice. Surely the Beowulf poet with all the tragic story of Germanic heroic legend at his disposal could have produced something more appropriate.

It is not surprising, then, that other scholars have suggested

⁹ Bonjour, *op cit*; see especially 24-35, 73.

¹⁰ See II 2342, 2419-24.

different interpretations.¹¹ Holthausen¹² and Gering¹³ both suggest that the poet is making use here of heroic legend, and that the reference is to Eormanric's punishment of his son Randwer by hanging. But the similarity between the two instances is slight and 'there is nothing in the Beowulfian allusion to indicate that the father caused the son to be hanged'.¹⁴ Indeed we know that Hreðel visits no such punishment on Hæðcyn, who succeeds him on the throne.

It is of interest, however, to note that this interpretation and others¹⁵ are based on what seems the most natural reading of the text, in that they assume Hreðel and the 'gomel ceorl' to be identical. It might further be instanced in support of this assumption that there is no other example in *Beowulf* of the Homeric simile.¹⁶ Still, the serious objection to the generally accepted interpretation — namely, the inappropriateness of the gallows image — applies equally even if Hreðel is the 'gomel ceorl'. It is this image of the criminal on the gallows which strikes the jarring note and which one would, therefore, like to eliminate.

It is perhaps useful to recall here an undeveloped and neglected suggestion made long ago by the late Professor Chadwick. He proposed that these lines in *Beowulf* may contain a reminiscence of the Óðinn cult¹⁷ and suggested that in heathen times the bodies of the princely dead may have been hung on the gallows,¹⁸ presumably in order to dedicate them to Óðinn and to remove the stigma of their not having died in battle. Supporting evidence for this suggestion can easily be adduced from Scandinavian sources, if such are acceptable.

¹¹ See *Medium Ævum* VIII. 201-2.

¹² *Anglia*, *Beiblatt* IV (1894), 35.

¹³ Note in his translation of *Beowulf*.

¹⁴ Klaeber, *op cit* 213.

¹⁵ See Whitelock, *op cit*.

¹⁶ The similar uses of *swa* in *Beowulf* 1769, 3066, 3079 and *Wanderer* 19, instanced by Klaeber, are not strictly parallel. The comparison is in each case shorter, and in all the *swa* clause is a particular instance of the general rule and not, as here, a direct comparison of one particular case with another.

¹⁷ Chadwick, *op cit* 38-9.

¹⁸ Chadwick, *op cit* 39.

For example, Snorri Sturluson in his *Ynglinga saga* describes the deaths of Óðinn and Njǫrðr as follows:

‘Óðinn died of sickness in Sweden, and just before he died he had himself marked with the point of a javelin and appropriated to him all men who met their death by weapons.’¹⁹

‘Njǫrðr died of sickness; he also had himself marked for Óðinn before he died.’²⁰

The hanging on the gallows may be instanced from stanza 138 of the *Hávamál*:

Veit ek at ek hekk
vindga meiði á
nætr allar níu,
geiri undaðr
ok gefinn Óðni,
sjálfr sjálfum mér.

I know that I hung fully nine nights on the wind-swept tree (or gallows), wounded by a javelin and given to Óðinn, myself unto myself.’

An alternative suggestion, if the reminiscence of the Óðinn cult be regarded as possible, is that the expression *on galgan ridan* could be taken as a poetic circumlocution for ‘to die a violent death, a sacrifice to Óðinn’.

Unfortunately very little is known about the cult of Óðinn in Anglo-Saxon England, and it is not easy to form a picture of the cult amongst the continental Germanic tribes. The fullest account, and even this is by no means complete, is to be found in comparatively late Icelandic sources. From these, however, one can demonstrate the steps by which such a poetic circumlocution might have been reached. Óðinn was the god of the dead, and those slain in battle belonged to him. It was therefore customary, when two armies met in the field, to hurl a spear over the opposing host and at the same time to cry out ‘I dedicate you to Óðinn’.²¹ The dedication to

¹⁹ ‘Óðinn varð sótt dauðr í Svíþjóð, ok er hann var at kominn dauða, lét hann marka sik geirsoddi ok eignaðist sér alla vápndauða menn.’ See F. Jónsson, *Heimskringla* (Copenhagen 1911), 9, ll 11-13.

²⁰ ‘Njǫrðr varð sótt dauðr; lét hann ok marka sik Óðni áðr hann dó.’ F. Jónsson, *op cit* 9, ll 27-8.

²¹ Cf Chadwick, *op cit* 17. The reader will note that much of the material for this argument is taken from Chadwick’s monograph.

Óðinn became synonymous with a violent death. As Chadwick concludes, 'to give to Óðinn is to kill', 'to go to Óðinn' is to die. But, as shown above,²² dedication to Óðinn could take place in another way — by sacrificial hanging. For example, Starkaðr in *Gautreks saga* sacrifices King Vikarr in this way,²³ Adam of Bremen tells of the mass hangings at the grove in the temple at Upsala in Sweden,²⁴ and Óðinn is often referred to as the 'lord of the gallows'.²⁵ The two ideas of dedication to Óðinn by death in battle and by sacrificial hanging can also be found combined in the custom of hanging prisoners-of-war on the battlefield immediately after the battle.²⁶ There might even be a reminiscence of this practice in *Beowulf* itself, for in ll 2937-41 Ongenþeow threatens to hang his opponents after capture —

wean oft gehet
 earmre teohhe ondlonge niht,
 cwæð, he on mergenne meces ecgum
 getan wolde, sum[e] on galgtreowu[m]
 [fuglum] to gamene.

Hence it seems possible that the two ideas of violent death and of sacrificial hanging on the gallows may have become equated. This equation can, indeed, be paralleled in two pieces of Icelandic skaldic verse. In the Icelandic *Landnámabók* Helgi Ólafsson resents the addresses paid to his mother by Þorgrímr orrabeinn,²⁷ fights with him and slays him. In the account of the fight, which he gives to his mother, he says:

Ásmóðar gafk Óðni
 arfa þróttar djarfan,
 guldum galga valdi
 Gautstafn, en ná hrafni.

²² Cf notes 19 and 20, and the stanza quoted above from *Hávamál*.

²³ V. Ásmundarson, *Fornsggur Norðrlanda* III (Reykjavík 1889), 24; also A. Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum* (Strassburg 1886), bk VI, 184; Elton's translation, 226-7.

²⁴ Cf Chadwick, op cit 16.

²⁵ Cf Chadwick, op cit 19.

²⁶ Chadwick, op cit 6.

²⁷ F. Jónsson, *Landnámabók* I-III (Copenhagen 1900), 117 f.

'I gave to Óðinn the brave son of Þormóðr, paid the sacrifice of Óðinn to the lord of the gallows and (gave) his body to the raven.'

A similar verse is to be found in *Þórðar saga hreðu*. Þórðr is ambushed by Qzurr but succeeds in slaying him,²⁸ and in his admission of the slaying he says:

Enn hefi ek sex, en svinna,
svellr móðr af því, þella
goldit gálgavaldi,
gullbaugs, jöru drauga.

'I have given to the lord of the gallows, O wise woman, another six fighting-men. My heart swells at the thought.'²⁹

It will be noticed that the correspondence of these two pieces of skaldic verse is all the closer to *Beowulf* in that the men do not fall in a pitched battle. Þorgrímr, for example, is killed in a duel between man and man. One further point of interest is the mention both here and in *Beowulf* of the giving of the corpse to the raven, a bird very closely associated with Óðinn.

It is true that the evidence for this equation is derived mainly from foreign sources, and often late ones; but, as Professor Chadwick's monograph shows,³⁰ there are indications that the heathen Anglo-Saxons had similar customs to those of their relatives on the continent. For example, the dedication to Óðinn by the throwing of the spear over the host may be reflected in the action of Coifi, Edwin's chief priest, who, after voting for the acceptance of Christianity, hurls a spear into his own heathen temple.³¹

It only remains to give a full translation of this passage, using the suggested interpretation of the gallows image:

'So it is painful for the old man (Hreðel) to experience that his son should die a death of violence in his youth; then may he utter a dirge, a song of sorrow, when his son hangs (lies) as a joy for the raven, and he, old and stricken in years, can

²⁸ G. Jónsson, *Íslendinga Sögur* VI (Reykjavík 1946), 450.

²⁹ For the use in skaldic verse of the idea of 'riding on the gallows as on a horse', cf *Ynglingatal* 10 and Sighvatr's *Erfidrápa Olafs helga* 1.

³⁰ See especially ch II.

³¹ Bede, *Hist. Eccl.* II, ch 13; Plummer's edition, 113.

afford him no help. Always, every morning, he is reminded of his son's passing; he does not care to wait for another son and heir within the strongholds, now that this one (so well beloved) has had his fill of deeds in the shape of violent death. Full of sorrow, he sees in his son's dwelling the festive hall abandoned, the wind-swept resting-place bereft of joy; the riders sleep, the warriors in the grave. No music of the harp is there, nor entertainment in the courts, as formerly there were. Then he returns to his couch and sings a lay of sorrow, alone, in memory of his dear one; all too spacious seemed to him the deserted court-yards and the homestead. So the protector of the Geats bore a surging sorrow in his heart for Herebeald; in no way could he exact compensation for that feud from the slayer, and none the more for that could he pursue that warrior with hostile acts, though he was not dear to him. Then with that sorrow in his heart, which fell too sorely upon him, he gave up the joys of men and chose God's light. As a wealthy man does, he left his lands and strongholds to his sons, when he departed this life.'

Notes: ll 2444-7. It will be seen that the difficulty, mentioned by Nader,³² of the change of tense from 'linnan sceolde' to 'bið' is overcome if this interpretation is accepted.

ll 2451b-3a. The difficulty of 'a second son and heir', if these lines refer to Hreðel, need not be serious. The reader will be familiar with the *Beowulf* poet's willingness to sacrifice accuracy of detail for the sake of a good impressionistic picture. Schücking suggests that the whole passage, ll 2450-9, is conventional, 'ein typisches Totenklagelied'.³³ This may well be correct, for there can be no doubt that it is true of ll 2455-9. The literary echo here is only too evident and, it may be added, is exceptionally effective in its context. In these lines, if anywhere, there is an implied simile.

l 2453. If Schücking's suggestion, given in the last note, is accepted there is, of course, no need to translate *se an* as

³² *Anglia* x (1888), 545, § 6.

³³ L. L. Schücking, 'Das angelsächsische Totenklagelied', *Englische Studien* xxxix (1908), 8 f.

' this one, so well beloved', The same is true of the translation given for *an æfter anum* in l 2461.

It is admitted that no strong claim can be put forward for this interpretation. The weak links in the argument, which can perhaps never be strengthened, will be obvious to all. The heathen circumlocution for ' death ' at the beginning of the extract would, however, form an interesting contrast to the corresponding Christian circumlocution at the end, *Godes leoht geceas*. All that can be claimed for it is that it does provide a way of escape from the repugnant gallows image.

II. TWO NEGLECTED *BEOWULF* PARALLELS IN *GRETTIS SAGA*

In addition to the two well-known parallels to the Grendel story in *Grettis saga*³⁴, there are two others in the saga to which little attention has been paid.³⁵ They are, it is true, of less importance than either the Sandhaugar or the Glámr episode, but they deserve further notice if only because they illustrate the interest taken by the saga-writer in the legend common to his saga and *Beowulf*.

The first of these episodes tells of Grettir's encounter with the ghost of Kárr the Old.³⁶ Grettir, outlawed from Iceland for manslaughter, sails for Norway and is shipwrecked on a small island called Háramarsey. He accepts an invitation to stay with Þorfinnr, the local chieftain. One evening he notices flames rising up from a headland and is told by Auðunn, a farmer with whom he has become friendly, that they mark the site of the burial mound of Kárr the Old, Þorfinnr's father. Grettir decides to break open the mound for the treasure it contains. The next day, accompanied by Auðunn, he opens the mound, lets down a rope and descends into the chamber. Auðunn is left above ground to keep watch. Grettir finds a great store of treasure, but as he turns to go he is attacked from

³⁴ Cf R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf, An Introduction* (Cambridge 1932), 48-53 and *passim*; Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf* (Boston 1941), xiv-xvii.

³⁵ Klaeber, *op cit* xiv, note 3; xvi, note 1.

³⁶ R. C. Boer, *Grettis saga*, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek VIII (Halle 1900), ch XIII; G. A. Hight's translation, 42.

behind by the mound-dweller. A desperate struggle follows until finally his attacker falls to the ground with a terrible crash. Auðunn, thinking Grettir has been killed, leaves the rope and runs away. But Grettir draws his sword, cuts off his opponent's head and, in the approved fashion, lays it down beside the thigh of the corpse. As he prepares to leave the mound he realises that Auðunn has deserted him. However, he manages to climb up the rope and to draw up the treasure after him. The most valuable item in the treasure is a short-sword (*sax*), which Grettir, very properly, hands over to Þorfinnr. Later, however, after Grettir has saved his farm from an attack by berserks, Þorfinnr makes him a present of the *sax*.

The connexion between the above episode and the attack on the monsters' lair in *Beowulf* is slight, and consists mainly of the desertion of the hero by his companion and the removal of the sword from the chamber. But the parallel provided by the second episode,³⁷ which follows soon after the one just related, is a little closer.

Grettir accepts an invitation to stay with a rich farmer in Halgoland, called Þorkell. Also staying with Þorkell is a kinsman of his named Björn, a quarrelsome man who, by his gibes, often drives Þorkell's guests away. He and Grettir do not get on well together. That same winter both men and cattle are attacked by a bear which haunts a cave in a cliff overlooking the sea. The cave can only be reached by a single narrow track. The bear stays in the cave all day, and goes out marauding only at night. Björn boasts that he will deal with his namesake (the bear), but his attempt fails and brings him nothing but scorn. At Christmas a concerted attack is made on the bear's den by eight men, including Björn and Grettir. Björn does little himself except urge on the others. They are unable to enter the cave and have to turn back, but before they do so Björn throws into the cave a fur-cloak belonging to Grettir. As they walk back Grettir's gartering breaks and he stops to tie

³⁷ *Grettis saga*, ch. XXI; Hight's translation, 55 f.

it up. Björn cannot resist a gibe and dares Grettir to attack the bear. Grettir turns back along the narrow track leading to the cave. He prepares himself by drawing his own sword, Jökulsnaut and also by attaching his newly acquired short-sword to his wrist by means of a loop. The bear, seeing that Grettir is alone, attacks at once and strikes at him with his paw. Grettir cuts off the paw above the claws with his sword. A wrestling-match follows, in the course of which Grettir and the bear, locked in each other's embrace, tumble down the precipice onto the rocks below. Grettir is uppermost and, grasping his short-sword, he slays the monster. Climbing back to the cave and retrieving his cloak he returns to Þorkell's farm, and he takes with him the paw he has cut off. The jealous altercation between Grettir and Björn is continued.

The night-attacks of the bear, the cutting-off of the paw and the use of it as evidence, and finally the wrestling-match make it clear that the same basic legend is present in this story as in the other parallels to *Beowulf*.

Although these two passages are of minor importance as *Beowulf* parallels, they do add a little to our knowledge of the prototype legend from which all these stories are descended. The new points of interest are two: first the sword with which the monster is slain and secondly the character of Björn, who acts so discourteously towards his kinsman's guests.

In the first of the two episodes referred to above Grettir retrieves a short-sword from the grave of Kárr the Old. With this weapon he later despatches the bear, cuts off Glámr's head and the right arm of the troll-wife, and kills the giant under the waterfall. Now it is interesting that in both the *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga* versions of the early legend a bewildering number of weapons seems to be used. Those used in *Beowulf* can usually be paralleled in *Grettis saga*, though they are rarely employed for the same purpose. For example, Grettir's short-sword, of which he makes such excellent use, is not the same weapon as the *heptisax* which, nominally, corresponds to the *hæftmece* (Hrunting) lent to Beowulf by Unferð. Beowulf slays his foe with the *ealdsweord eotenisc* (l 1558)

which he finds on the wall of the cave. *Grettis saga*, too, mentions a sword hanging on the wall,³⁸ but it plays very little part in the story. In *Beowulf* it is the sword on the wall which is marked with runes on the hilt; in *Grettis saga* it is the grip of the *heptisax*. Professor Chambers has tried to show that *Grettis saga* is clearer in its account of the weapons used.³⁹ But it would seem more probable that the real purpose behind the *heptisax-hæftmece* has been obscured by both authors; possibly in the original story it was the sword which the hero found in the cave and used to slay his opponent.⁴⁰ It is, however, certain that the weapons used to slay the monsters in both *Grettis saga* and *Beowulf* have one thing in common: they are both remarkable for their hilt. This common characteristic is almost certainly a reminiscence of the original legend. In *Beowulf* the sword-blade melts away in Grendel's blood, and the hero can bring only the hilt to Hroðgar. The hilt is noteworthy, and the poet makes this clear by spending twenty-two lines on it.⁴¹ Grettir's short-sword is unique in Old Norse literature.⁴² It is the only *sax* with a regular sword-hilt. Normally, the name given to the handle or grip of a *sax* is *hepti* or *mundriði*, but the handle of Grettir's *sax* is twice called a *meðalkafti*,⁴³ a name usually reserved for the grip of a sword. It may perhaps be argued that the thirteenth-century Icelandic author of the *Grettis saga* made a slip when he gives this name to the hilt of Grettir's short-sword, but the uniqueness of the nomenclature argues rather that tradition had preserved this remarkable feature of the weapon.

Finally, it will be noticed that the character and actions of Björn in the second episode summarised above recall those of Unferð, the mysterious *þyle* of *Beowulf*, who also casts gibes

³⁸ Boer's edition, 239, l 19.

³⁹ Chambers, op cit 472-5.

⁴⁰ Cf the Gull-Þórir version of the legend, where the swords with which the dragons are slain are found in the cave. See Chambers, op cit 498-502, for text and translation.

⁴¹ *Beowulf* 1677-98.

⁴² H. Falk, 'Altnordische Waffenkunde', *Videnskapsselskapets Skrifter*, II *Hist.-Filos. Klasse*, No. 6 (Kristiania 1914), 10.

⁴³ Boer, op cit 85, l 20 and l 18.

at the hero before he wrestles with the monster. Unferð has long troubled the *Beowulf* critics, and many suggestions have been put forward to explain his origin.⁴⁴ Some commentators have been surprised by the apparently inappropriate discourtesy shown Beowulf by Unferð.⁴⁵ But it is probable that this discourtesy towards guests and strangers, so strongly stressed in the saga-writer's portrait of Björn, was a characteristic of the prototype of the two men. The possibility that the motif was a survival from earlier legends has already been noted elsewhere,⁴⁶ and the present analogue adds more positive evidence.

⁴⁴ For references see Klaeber, *op cit* 148 f.

⁴⁵ Klaeber, *op cit* 149, note 3: 'But Unferð's disrespectful treatment of Beowulf contrasts strangely with the dignified courtesy reigning at Hroðgar's court.'

⁴⁶ Cf A. Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf* (Oxford 1950), 18: 'in spite of the probability that the episode [of Unferð] comes right down from former legends or lays'.