

Finnsburh: Fragments of Fact, Fiction, and History

Translation of *The Battle of Finnsburh*

by Kayse Schmucker

Preface



Anglo-Saxon poetry is not only remarkable in that it gives modern readers a glimpse into the transformation of storytelling over the centuries, but also in that the poems—like all great literature—can shed even the smallest amount of light on the people and how they felt, thought, and behaved in ways that legal records and historical documents cannot. In some instances, however—as in the case of *The Battle of Finnsburgh*—the text itself inspires as many questions as it answers, becoming a source of mystery, speculation, and controversy for scholars.

Much of the allusiveness surrounding *Finnsburgh*—commonly called the “*Finnsburgh Fragment*”—swirls from questions surrounding the manuscript itself, the foremost being the currently-unknown location of the folio leaf that contained the original poem; no one has been able to pinpoint the location of the original 48-line text since George Hickes transcribed the passage near 1705 (Bradley 507). The missing leaf and the remaining transcript by Hickes have left scholars with a variety of questions.

In an extensive study examining possible locations of the manuscript, Jane Roberts of the University of London explains that MSS 487 and 489 of the Lambeth Palace Library “houses two manuscripts that contain Old English homilies” and “are therefore regarded as contenders for the book in which Hickes’s fragment was found” (“*The Finnsburgh Fragment*, and its Lambeth Provenance,” 122). Cryptic descriptions left by Hickes have led to this tentative conclusion, but scholars like N.R. Ker continue to speculate alternative theories that the leaf may have been bound into other collections (123), giving the fragment of *Finnsburgh* an added layer of mystery beyond the bounds of the written word.

One of the chief reasons the misplacement of the manuscript is such a cause for concern (beyond the fact that such manuscripts are invaluable) is that the reliability and accuracy of Hickes's 1705 transcription have been consistently called into question by scholars, giving rise to more than a few issues for editors and translators alike. Christina Landis quotes Donald Fry in *Finnsburh Fragment and Episode* in viewing Hickes as a "careless copyist" ("Hwearflacra hrær," 34), while R.D. Fulk's examinations of *Finnsburh*'s opening lines in 'Six Cruces In The Finnsburg Fragment And Episode' wrestles with editorial emendations such as changing "Næfre" in Hickes's transcript to "Hnaef," thus connecting the *Fragment* to the episode in *Beowulf* through one of the essential characters (191). Fulk also defends the integrity of Hickes' transcription in saying that "certainly we need not accord Hickes's transcript the same authority that an Anglo-Saxon manuscript commands, but that is not sufficient explanation for the assumed textual corruption..." (192). The two separate views illustrate the complexity of making even simple decisions of which editorial changes to the transcript, if any, should be acceptable.

For these reasons, translating and searching for meaning within the *Finnsburh Fragment* in isolation would be a difficult and mystifying task, which is why scholars look for answers by putting the poem in the context of the "Finnsburh Episode" of *Beowulf*; lines 1070-1159 of the epic poem contain the story that follows Hildeburh—sister of *Finnsburh* character, Hnæf, and wife of Finn—after the death of her brother and son (Bradley, 507). Piecing together the two stories, scholars like Gwara Scott have developed an outline of the feud between the Frisians and the Jutes or Danes followed by a temporary truce leading to a bloody end at the hands of the vengeful Jutes ("The Foreign Beowulf And The "Fight At Finnsburg," 187).

Some of the most disputed cruces in the *Fragment* display the very reason why the story of Finnsburh is the perfect springboard for a discussion about the art of Anglo-Saxon storytelling. The first of these cruces comes in line 5a of the poem, “Ac her forþ berað,” translating to “But here [they] bear forth.” Speaking to the ambiguity of this half-line, editors have dealt with this issue in a few ways which Helge Kökeritz summarizes; editions of *Finnsburh* by Wyatt-Chambers and W.J. Sedgefield operate on the assumption that Hickes may have omitted two subsequent half-lines, while others, such as Rieger, attempt to add their own to make sense of the line (191-2). Kökeritz also delves into various translations of the passage, including Clark Hall’s “Nor here do the gables burn in this hall of ours, / But hither forth they fare, the birds of battle sing,” (192), a rather straightforward and literal translation. Crossley-Holland, on the other hand, takes more liberties, translating, “the gables of the hall are not burning, / but men are making an attack. Birds of battle screech...” (line 5, Loc 1650¹). Simplifying and making decisions that clear up any ambiguity, Crossley-Holland makes the passage certainly more approachable to a modern reader—perhaps at the expense of the Anglo-Saxon linguistic rhythm—while preserving the alliteration of the Old English. “nor are the gables of this hall burning here. / But here bear forward the foes; the birds sing...”

Though Crossley-Holland has a graceful rendering of the imagery in the lines that follow the crux in 5a, it is Tolkien who paints a clear and defined picture of Anglo-Saxon culture with his translation of the passage in which Sigferth speaks:

"Sigeferþ is min nama," cweþ he, "ic eom Secgena leod,

25 wreccea wide cuð; fæla ic weana gebad,

¹Refers to the location in the Kindle edition of Crossley-Holland’s *Finnsburh*

heardra hilda. ðe is gyt her witod
swæþer ðu sylf to me secean wylle."

As a passage that is both difficult to translate and difficult to understand in its content, Tolkien uses the Anglo-Saxon idea of fate to add weight to the words, translating Sigferth's words as, "and here there is appointed for you whatever fate you wish to seek from me," (147). Though fate is not directly written into the Old English, the adjective "witod," with meanings of "appointed, ordained, assured, or certain" does provide connotations that would not make that logical leap unreasonable, as the one doing the appointing remains ambiguous. Crossley-Holland's translation of the same passage falls short, in this instance: "...Even now it is decreed / for you what you can expect of me here," (Loc. 1650-60). The translation is adequate in some ways, but it lacks the clarity and the impact that Tolkien's holds. Bearing these two interpretations in mind, my own translation attempts to take the premise of Tolkien's take on the passage while modernizing it a touch more: "That fate which you yourself / wish to seek from me here is already certain to you."

A place where both Tolkien's and Crossley-Holland's translations capture the Anglo-Saxon description well begins at line 18 of the poem:

ða gyt Garulf Guðere styrde
ðæt he swa freolic feorh forman siþe
20 to ðære healle durum hyrsta ne bære
nu hyt niþa heard anyman wolde

Tolkien's interpretation reads, "Still Guthere was exhorting Garulf that in his armor he should not risk so precious a life in the first attack on the hall-door, now that a hardy warrior was ready

to take it away" (*Finn and Hengest*, 147). Crossley-Holland's, in comparison, reads, "When he saw this, Guthere said to Garulf / that he would be unwise to go to the hall doors / in the first rush, risking his noble life, for fearless Sigferth was set upon his death" (Loc 1650). While Tolkien's final line drives home practicality that Guthere embodies in this passage, pleading to Garulf with the logic of the situation, while Crossley-Holland delivers a simple and clear version. Both translations make the last line their own in some way, and my translation attempts draw on these examples to create the same resonance: "Yet still Garulf guided Guthere / that he might not offer up his life so noble / in the first death at those hall doors of wood, / now that the ill-will of men wished to take it away."

Taking into consideration the many controversial words and passages of *The Battle of Finnsburgh*, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of both Tolkien's and Crossley Holland's interpretations, my goal for the translation is that it adequately captures the Anglo-Saxon language as a storytelling device, wrestling with significant cruces that lie within the text while exploring the many opportunities in the linguistic oddities. Through this translation, I hope to connect modern readers—specifically high school and college aged readers—with the Anglo-Saxon culture, creating a translation that clarifies the story in order to draw the reader in. In doing so, readers will hopefully feel as if they have participated in and gain a curiosity towards the passing down of history and come in contact with humanity as a whole through storytelling.

Therefore, my translation should clarify the story at hand while communicating Anglo Saxon cultural ideologies—like bravery, practicality, and the ceremony of battle—that play an important role in understanding the development of the story and the point of view of the people. In an attempt to do so, I will attempt preserve as much of the alliterating and as many of the ken-

nings of Anglo-Saxon as possible, doing away with original syntax or grammar of the original text where it does not serve the story. While I will also try to retain some sense of poetic rhythm in the text (though not the exact meter), my focus will remain on clarifying the action and emotion of the story itself, making it exciting and readable in order to reach modern readers and share in the storytelling.

The Battle of Finnsburgh

...do the gables burn?"

Hnaef spoke then, the battle-young king:

"Neither is this dawn from the east, nor here the dragon flies,
nor are the gables of this hall burning here.

But here the foes bear forward; the birds sing,
grey-coated one howls, war-wood clamors,
the shield answers the shaft. Now the moon shines,
full and wandering beneath the clouds.

With it arise the evil deeds which this army's spite conspires to commit.

But awaken now, my warriors,
arming your bodies with shields and minds with strength,
fighting the front line of battle bravely!"

Then arose many a gold-adorned thane and buckled his sword,
then to the door went the warriors Sigferth and Eaha
in a noble manner, drew their swords,
and at the other door Ordlaf and Guthlaf,
and Hengest turned to follow in their footsteps.

Yet still Garulf guided Guthere
that he might not offer up his life so noble
in the first death at those hall doors of wood,
now that the ill-will of men wished to take it away,
but he asked openly over all,
courageous hero, who held the door.

"My name is Sigeferth," said he, "I am a prince of the Secg,
a widely-known adventurer; I many of woes endured,

many of bitter battles. That fate which you yourself
wish to seek from me here is already certain to you."

Then the din of many slaughter-strokes
sang through the hall. The hollow shield shattered in bold a hand,
the bone-protector broken; the timbers of the floor sounded,
until in the fight fell Garulf,
the first of all that land's dwellers,
son of Guthlaf, around him many of the good men,
corpses of the valiant faThe raven hovered,
dark and dusky. The splendor of the sword gleamed,
as if all of Finnsburgh were on fire.

Never have I heard tell of more honorable men in combat,
nor sixty triumphant heroes to bear themselves better,
nor never to reward better for sweet mead
than his young warriors repaid Hnaef.

They fought so well for five days not one of that company fell,
moreover they held the door.

When one hero new himself to be wounded, departing on the waves,
said that his corslet of mail was broken,
war-dress weak, and also was his helmet pierced,
then soon the leader of the people soon asked him,
how then their wounded warriors were being saved,
or which of the young men...

Works Cited

“The Battle of Finnsburgh (The Finnsburgh Fragment).” *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. Trans. Ed. Bradley, S.A.J. London: Dent, 1995. 507-509. Print.

Bradley’s quick background on the fragment, preceding the translation, summarizes the mystery of the manuscript, including that George Hickes transcribed the poem from the original around 1705, after which time it went missing. Bradley also discusses some of the thematic discrepancies between the fragment and the episode, mainly focusing on the Pagan imagery in the *Fragment* versus the Christian imagery in the *Episode*.

Crossley-Holland, Kevin. Trans. Heather O’Donoghue. Ed. *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburgh*. Kindle Edition. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

Fulk, R. D. "Six Cruces In The Finnsburg Fragment And Episode." *Medium Ævum* 74.2 (2005): 191-204. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 10 Nov. 2014. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2005400432&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Fulk discusses the many editorial and translation controversies surrounding Finnsburgh, moving through the cruces in the poem and discussing the integrity of the transcription and the possible meanings of those problematic words and phrases. Fulk argues that translators and editors cannot assume that Hicke’s was wrong since he is the closest anyone has come to original manuscript in centuries.

Kökeritz, Helge. "Finnsburg Fragment, 5 A." *Modern Language Notes* 58.3 (1943): 191-194. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 11 Nov. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2910272>

Landis, Christina. "Hwearflacra Hrær: Line 34A Of The Finnsburgh Fragment." *Comitatus: A Journal Of Medieval & Renaissance Studies* 43.(2012): 29-40. Humanities International Complete. Web. 12 Nov. 2014. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=84318689&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Focusing on line 34 of Finnsburgh and the controversial phrase, “hwearflacra hrær,” Landis summarizes conflicting critical opinions and studies of the phrase as a mistake by Hickes or a purposeful transcription choice reflecting the original text.

Roberts, Jane. "The Finnsburgh Fragment, And Its Lambeth Provenance." *Notes And Queries* 55 (253).2 (2008): 122-124. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 12 Nov. 2014. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2008580898&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Roberts makes cases for the manuscript from which Finnsburh comes having been located at MS 487 or 489. Those two specific manuscripts, Roberts explains makes a case that those two MS contain Old English homilies, so it is likely Finnsburh was among the other Old English works. Roberts also summarizes opposing arguments, including N.R. Ker's belief that the leaf may have accidentally been bound into another collection.

Tolkien, J. R. R., and Alan Bliss. Finn and Hengest: *The Fragment and the Episode*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983. Print.

Gwara, Scott. "The Foreign Beowulf And The "Fight At Finnsburg." *Traditio: Studies In Ancient & Medieval History Thought & Religion*. 63.(2008): 185-233. Humanities International Complete. Web. 12 Nov. 2014. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=48003821&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Works Consulted

Beaty, John O. "The Echo-Word In Beowulf With A Note On The Finnsburg Fragment." *PMLA: Publications Of The Modern Language Association Of America* 49.2 (1934): 365-373. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 12 Nov. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/458165>

Schilling, Hugo. "The Finnsburg-Fragment And The Finn-Episode." *Modern Language Notes* 2.6 (1887): 146-150. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 13 Nov. 2014. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=0000202700&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Kökeritz, Helge. "Finnsburg Fragment, 5 A." *Modern Language Notes* 58.3 (1943): 191-194. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 11 Nov. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2910272>

Moore, Bruce. "The Relevance Of The Finnsburgh Episode." *Journal Of English And Germanic Philology* 75.(1976): 317-329. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 9 Nov. 2014.

Fry, Donald K. "The Hero On The Beach In Finnsburgh." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen: Bulletin De La Societe Neophilologique/Bulletin Of The Modern Language Society* 67.(1966): 27-31. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 9 Nov. 2014.

Greenfield, Stanley B. "Folces Hyrde, Finnsburgh 46B." *Studies Presented to Tauno F. Mustanoja on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*. 97-102. n.p.: NM 73,i-ii, 1972. *MLA International Bibliography*. Print.

Watson, Jonathan. "The Finnsburh Skald: Kennings And Cruces In The Anglo-Saxon Fragment." *Journal Of English And Germanic Philology* 101.4 (2002): 497-519. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 2 Dec. 2014.

Wolf, Keri. "Enacting Ties That Bind: Oath-Making Vs. Oath-Taking In The Finnsburg 'Episode'." *Comitatus: A Journal Of Medieval And Renaissance Studies* 40.(2009): 1-24.MLA International Bibliography. Web. 11 Nov. 2014.