

The Chronology of Geatish History in Part II (See also the Royal Genealogies on p. 244.)

(Passage B)

2122



2102

Hæthcyn the Geat accidentally kills his elder brother Herebeald. Their father, King Hrethel, dies of grief.

Ongentheow's sons attack the Geats at Sorrow Hill (Geatland).

(Passage C)

2422

In retaliation, Hæthcyn attacks Ongentheow in Sweden, but is killed by him at Ravenswood. There Hygelac's men Wulf and Eofor kill Ongentheow. Hygelac's forces sweep the field.

(Passage A)

2364

Hygelac is killed on his expedition to Frisia. Beowulf escapes.

2301

After young Heardred, the son of Hygelac, becomes king, he harbors two of Ongentheow's grandsons, Eanmund and Eadgils, the sons of Ohthere.

2284

Their uncle Onela, the Swedish king, attacks his two nephews in Geatland and kills their protector Heardred. It is probably at this point that Weohstan, Wiglaf's father, kills Eanmund on behalf of Onela. (See lines 2609-19.) Onela allows Beowulf to rule the Geats.

2291

Later Eadgils returns to Sweden, with arms and men supplied by Beowulf, and kills his uncle Onela.

Beowulf now rules the Geats in peace for a long time. The death of Eanmund the Swede remains unavenged.

Later, after Beowulf's death, Eanmund's brother Eadgils will probably seek revenge against Wiglaf, the son of Eanmund's killer.

While the poet's account of Geatish and Swedish history is presented in anything but sequential fashion, the following summary can be inferred. Hrēðel, like his contemporary Healfdene, has three sons and one daughter. The eldest son, Herebeald, is accidentally killed by Hæðcyn, who, when shooting an arrow, misses his aim and strikes his brother instead (2435 ff.). The grief caused by this tragic fate eats away the king's life. Upon his death and the succession of Hæðcyn, war breaks out between the Gēatas and Swedes (2472 ff., 2922 ff.). It is started by the Swedes, who attack their southern neighbors and, after inflicting severe damage, return home. An expedition of revenge into the land of the Swedes undertaken by Hæðcyn and Hygelāc, though at first successful (even Ongenþeo's queen is taken prisoner), seems destined to utter failure; the 'old, terrible' king of the Swedes falls upon Hæðcyn's army, rescues the queen, kills the Geatish king and forces his troops to seek refuge in the woods (*Hrefnes Hlōt* 2935), threatening them all night long with death in the morning by the sword. But at dawn, the valorous Hygelāc appears with his division and inspires such terror that the Swedes flee, pursued by the Gēatas. Ongenþeo in a brave fight against two brothers, Eofor and Wulf, loses his life. Hygelāc, now king of the Gēatas, after his homecoming richly repays the brothers and gives his only daughter as wife to Eofor.

¹ In Wulfstan's account of his voyage (*Or* 1, 1.16.21 ff.), the form *Scōnæg*, plainly borrowed rather than inherited, is used: *Weonodland him was on stōrbord 7 on bæcbord him was Langaland 7 Lāland 7 Falster 7 Scōnæg, 7 þās land eall hƿrað to Denemearcan*. Cf. *Scani*, Appx. A §1.3. See also Glossary of Proper Names; Lang, §27.

² Ll. 1202-14; 2201-9; 2354-96; (2425-89); 2425-43; 2462-80; 2501-8; 2611-19; 2910-98; also 1830 ff., 1923 ff., 2169 ff., 2190 ff. — For discussion, see esp. Bugge 1899; Nerman 1925; Farrell 1972; M. Stenberger *Den forntida Sverige*, 3rd ed. (Lund, 1979; 1st ed. tr. Binns 1962); Gahrn 1986; Krag 1991; Andersson *R.-L.*² 12.278-83; Sawyer *ibid.* 30.165-70; and refs. *infra*, pp. lxiv ff.

³ There is no direct indication as to which of the two, Ōnthere or Onela, was the elder brother. Malone *PQ* 8 (1929) 406-7 argues for Ōnthere.

This victory at Ravenswood ensures for the Gēatas an apparent degree of peace with their old enemies the Swedes, who appear (or so the text would seem to imply) to dread the power of the warlike Hygelāc. (The Geatish king's position is notably strengthened by the support of his loyal nephew, Bēowulf, who, after his triumphant return from Denmark, where he had overcome the Grendel kin, is portrayed in terms that characterize him as less a subordinate than an associate of Hygelāc: see 2190 n.) Not content with his success in the North, Hygelāc even undertakes a ravaging expedition, cryptically alluded to in ll. 1202-14, 2354-72, 2501-8^a, south into (West) Frisian lands. There (*Frēslandum on* 2357) he and his followers are killed. The poem dwells on the heroic deeds of Bēowulf in the unequal encounter between the allied forces (*ofermægen* 2917) of the continental nations and Hygelāc's warband or army.

The wars that loom ominously over the Gēatas will be waged against the Franks (1210) or Hūgas (2914, 2502), the Hetware (2363, 2916), and (with all probability) the Frisians (2357, 2503). Of the four names mentioned, *Hūgas* may be only an epic appellation of the Franks; and the Hetware, with an equally obscure name, seem to have belonged to the Frankish sphere of influence.¹ The two main peoples involved are thus the Franks and the Frisians (see 2912).² At the same time, the rising power of the Franks is reflected in the allusion to the threatening unfriendliness of the Merovingian dynasty (2921). It is possible, however, that the poet did not consistently differentiate among the three or four terms (see especially 2502 f.). His use of the name *Dæghrefn*, it may be added, suggests that this incident may have a historical basis (see note on 2501 ff.).

The young Heardrēd now succeeds his father Hygelāc. Bēowulf (who by a marvelous swimming feat [see note to 2361 f.] has escaped from the enemies) generously declines Hygd's offer of the throne, but he acts as Heardrēd's guardian during the prince's youth (2367 ff.). When the latter has come into his rights, another series of warlike disputes with the Swedes arises. After the fall of Ongenþeo in the battle of Ravenswood, his son Ōnthere seems to have become king, but upon Ōnthere's death, Onela seizes the throne, compelling his nephews Ēanmund and Ēadgils to flee the country. They find refuge at the court of Heardrēd. Soon after, Onela enters the land of the Gēatas with an army. Heardrēd as well as Ēanmund is slain, whereupon the Swedish king returns, allowing Bēowulf to take over rule of the Gēatas unmolested (2379 ff., 2611 ff., 2202 ff.). A few years later, Ēadgils,³ aided by a Geatish force,⁴ reopens the war (2391 ff.), and this attack results in his uncle Onela's death and Ēadgils's accession to the throne.

Trouble from their northern foes, however, is likely to come upon the Gēatas again, in spite of their temporary alliance with a branch of the Scyfling dynasty; indeed it seems as if the annihilation of their kingdom is virtually foreshadowed in the messenger's speech announcing the death of Bēowulf (2999 ff., 3018 ff.). Whether that annihilation occurred in history, and at what date, are matters of conjecture,⁵ although it is not to be doubted that the people of Götaland were eventually absorbed into the Swedish realm.

¹ The argument that the Hūgas are identical to the Chauci of Caesar and Pliny is dubitable: see *Cha. Wid.* 68 n. 2; *Wenskus R.-L.*² 4.394-8. But it is nearly universally agreed that the Hetware are the Chat(tuarii) of Tacitus and others; see *R.-L.*² 4.392-3. Yet Goffart (in Chase 1981: 83-100) argues that the name *Hetware* has its origins in the later 8th century and *Hūgas* in the earlier 9th.

² The prominence given to the Frisians and their seemingly unhistorical alliance with the Franks is attributed by Sarrazin 1913: 90-1 to the Frisian source of this story.

³ Had Ēadgils made his escape (when Onela attacked the Gēatas) and afterwards returned to the land of the Gēatas, is planning revenge and rehabilitation?

⁴ No mention is made of Bēowulf's having taken part personally in this war; cf. note on 2395 f.

⁵ See note on 3018 ff.