Manuscript Stability and Literary Corruption: Our Failure to Understand the *Beowulf* Manuscript

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### THE CORRUPTION OF THE *BEOWULF* MANUSCRIPT

There can be no doubt that the *Beowulf*-manuscript is corrupted. Even its name is unclear: it now bears the shelfmark 'British Library Manuscript Cotton Vitellius A. xv (Second half)',[1] is more commonly known as 'the *Beowulf*-manuscript' (after its most famous text),[2] and is perhaps most usefully known as the 'Nowell codex' (after its first known owner).[3] None of these names attempt to describe the manuscript as it was first produced. As it now stands, the first text misses its opening: so too does the last.[4] The final text was probably originally before what is now the first;[5] at least one text is missing before it and others may also have been lost.[6] The leaves are disordered, with the third and fourth gatherings swapped around. Many pages were damaged in the 1731 Ashburnham House fire. Before, and possibly after, that date letters, lines, and pages were damaged from

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[1] The first half of the volume is widely known as the Southwick codex; the volumes were bound together *c.* 1620 by Richard James working with the Cotton collection. The most comprehensive account of the production of the manuscript is that in K. Kiernan, *'Beowulf' and the 'Beowulf' Manuscript* (Michigan, 1996), pp. 66–169. For a briefer account see also A. Orchard, *A Critical Companion to 'Beowulf'* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 12–23.

[2] The *Beowulf*-manuscript has also been used for just those gatherings which contain *Beowulf*, most notably by Kevin Kiernan.

[3] Nowell signed 91(93) (BL94)r with the date 1563. Kevin Kiernan discusses Nowell, clarifying the identification as probably the Dean of Lichfield rather than the antiquary of the same name, in 'The Reformed Nowell Codex and the *Beowulf* Manuscript' (unpublished). I am grateful to Prof. Kiernan for sharing an unpublished draft of this piece with me.

[4] At least some of this interference may have taken place in *c.* 1563; see Kiernan, 'Reformed Codex'. Approximately two thirds of *St Christopher* has been lost, judging by broadly similar accounts of the narrative, amounting to about one gathering of five leaves: *The Nowell Codex (British Museum Cotton Vitellius A. xv, Second MS)*, ed. K. Malone, EEMF XII (Copenhagen,1963), p. 12. The extent of loss from *Judith* is unclear, and cases have been made for both very considerable and minimal loss. Mark Griffith gives a full discussion in his edition *Judith*, ed. M. Griffith, Exeter Med. Texts and Stud. (Exeter, 2001), pp. 3–4, following P. Lucas, 'The Place of *Judith* in the *Beowulf* Manuscript', *RES* 41 (1990), 463–78.

[5] See Lucas, 'The Place of *Judith*' for a full discussion. See also Kiernan *'Beowulf' Manuscript* pp. 150–67 for an argument that *Judith* was not a part of the original codex.

[6] As it stands, *Judith* begins towards the end of the ninth fitt. If it was not a long text (on which opinions differ; see n. 4 above), it must have been preceded by at least one other piece now completely lost.

weathering, bookworms, and more intentional human alterations. Protective paper frames have ensured a long life for the manuscript, but have also concealed some marginal readings left visible after fire damage.[7]

This history of damage and reconstruction is perhaps best (though most confusingly) represented by the multiple foliations the manuscript has been subject to. Kevin Kiernan has identified six:[8]

- *c.*1630, under the Cotton librarian, Richard James;
- 1703, by Matthew Hutton during Humphrey Wanley's corrective committee's work;
- 1793–1801, perhaps by Joseph Planta – this is the foliation Kiernan follows, written on the folios themselves;
- before 1845, pencil numbers in the upper right corners of the paper frames, before Henry Gough rebound the MS in that year;
- 1845–1884, on the lower right hand corners of recto frames, perhaps intended to supplement that of 1845;
- 1884, the final attempt, intended to clarify confusion between the fourth and fifth foliations: this is followed by the British Library.

As a result of this sequence of remaking, virtually every recto page bears a baffling set of numbers, many crossed out or written over. Kiernan's proposed foliation system is sometimes cumbersome, but makes sense: it identifies the 'manuscript foliation' number (Planta's work from between 1793 and 1801), with the British Library's 'official' figure (from 1884) in brackets.[9] More significant difficulties come with the third and fourth gatherings, where the current order of pages is certainly incorrect. For these instances, Kiernan's system puts the current location in brackets, with where they 'should' be as their main folio number. So folio 107(115) (BL118) is currently the 115th in Cotton Vitellius A. xv; if the gatherings were reordered according to their content it would be 107th; in the British Library system it is 118th. Yet more confusingly, two folios were misplaced when Planta foliated the manuscript. This means that Kiernan's general rule of following the number written on the pages cannot be absolutely followed: under his

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[7] *Electronic 'Beowulf'*, ed. K. Kiernan, 3rd ed. (London, 2011) identifies letters hidden by the protective frames using UV photography.

[8] I follow Kiernan's detailed account here, *'Beowulf' Manuscript* pp. 91–110.

[9] It remains essential to include the British Library's foliation because the most widely available and high quality facsimile (used for all images in this paper) is *Cotton MS Vitellius A. xv*, Digitised Manuscripts (London: British Library, online from February 2013, last visited 21/5/14) which uses only these numbers. All images are © The British Library Board, Cotton Vitellius A.xv

system these anomalies are folio 147A(131) (BL149) and 189A(197) (BL192) respectively; there is no folio 131 or 197.[10]

So much for the manuscript as it currently stands: neither unreadable nor clear, it could easily be presented as 'corrupt'. However, I want to suggest that despite this evident corruption the manuscript can still tell us a good deal about its texts, their eleventh century meaning, and the kind of readerly engagement its scribes anticipated. The two scribes were careful and sought to communicate with their readers, sometimes in ways that we now struggle to understand and never attempt to represent in our editions of the texts. Ultimately, the corruption of the *Beowulf*-manuscript does not lie in its material fragility but – as evidenced by our failure to find a simple approach to counting its pages – in a kind of intellectual decline: a falling away in scholarly capacity to decode eleventh century signs and what they tell us about the texts we read.

THE SCRIBES' SENSITIVITY TO THEIR TEXTS

According to Neil Ker, the *Beowulf* manuscript was copied sometime between 975 and 1025 at an unknown location. This span can be tightened to somewhere between 1000 and 1025.[11] As it now stands, the codex contains five texts, the first three prose and the last two in verse, which are now commonly known as: *The Passion of St Christopher*, *The Wonders of the East*, *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, *Beowulf*, and *Judith*.[12] The codex

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[10] Kiernan discusses the foliation in full in *'Beowulf' Manuscript*, pp. 85–109 with a succinct explanation of this numbering system pp. 103–4; Orchard provides a concordance of sorts to the foliation of *Beowulf* alone, see *Companion*, Appendix 1: pp. 268–73. For an overview of foliations of *Wonders of the East* see A., Mittman and S. Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts: The 'Wonders of the East' in the 'Beowulf' Manuscript*, Med. and Renaissance Texts and Stud. 433 (Tempe, 2013), p. 38. Where editors do not discuss foliation, they generally follow the 1884 system; I follow Kiernan in labeling this 'BL' rather than 'traditional'.

[11] On Ker and the debate over his dates, see F. Leneghan, 'Making Sense of Ker's Dates: The Origins of *Beowulf* and the Palaeographers', *The Proceedings of the Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies Postgraduate Conference* 1 (2005), 2–13. It is not useful here to enter into the intense palaeographical controversy over the precise dating of the codex. It is worth noting that David Dumville has compressed this fifty-year span to a shorter period, from approximately 1000–1016 in 'Beowulf come lately: Some Notes on the Palaeography of the Nowell Codex', in *Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen* 225 (1988), 49–63; Kiernan, recently supported by Elaine Treharne, would date it later in Ker's span.

[12] The standard edition of 'St Christopher' is *The Passion of Saint Christopher* ed. P. Pulsiano, in *Early Medieval English Texts and Interpretations: Studies Present to Donald G. Scragg*, ed. E. Treharne and S. Rosser, Med. and Renassiance Texts and Stud. 252 (Tempe, 2002). *The Wonders of the East* has been most recently edited by Asa Mittman and Susan Kim in *Inconceivable Beasts*. Elaine Treharne is the only other editor to focus on the Nowell codex version; the latter in her Old and Middle English c.890-c.1450: An Anthology (Oxford, 2010), pp. 172-81. For the standard edition of the text, and of *Alexander's Letter*, see A. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the 'Beowulf'-Manuscript* (London, 2003).

was copied by two scribes: Scribe A and Scribe B. The handover between them takes place abruptly and is visually startling, but far from exceptional for the period.[13] Scribe B writes in the older hand: a form of Square Minuscule influenced by some Caroline forms; Scribe A uses a form of English Vernacular minuscule.[14] Scribe A's hand is more aesthetically admired: Ker sees his writing as 'pointed and delicate' compared with Dumville's assessment of Scribe B's 'crude' formations.[15] However, Scribe B has the older hand, and he appears to 'take over' from Scribe A. On that basis, the general assumption is that Scribe B acted in a senior, possibly supervisory capacity. That he also intervenes in Scribe A's work on *Beowulf* on twelve occasions renders this hypothesis more likely.[16]

That these two men both corrected their own work, and that Scribe B corrected his colleague's, suggests that they intended to produce an accurate copy.[17] Modern editors are generally agreed that, however well the scribes reproduced what they saw, their version of *Beowulf* is highly corrupted.[18] It seems likely that at least some of the errors that have been detected resulted from faulty copying into the extant manuscript;[19] on the other hand, where one or other of the scribes has consciously interfered with the text, it seems

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Stanley Rypins edited the prose texts together, mostly as a line by line transcription of the manuscript, in *Three Old English Prose Texts in MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv: 'Letter of Alexander the Great' 'Wonders of the East', 'Life of St Christopher'*, ed. S. Rypins, EETS (London, 1924). The standard edition of *Beowulf* is *Klaeber's 'Beowulf': Fourth Edition*, eds. R. D. Fulk, R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles (Toronto, 2008). Kiernan's edition included in *Electronic 'Beowulf'* has a different line numbering system and is a useful, highly conservative reinterpretation. *Judith* has been most recently edited by Mark Griffith (Exeter, 2001). The poetic texts are edited together as *'Beowulf' and 'Judith'*, ed. E. V. K. Dobbie, ASPR IV (New York, 1953). To my knowledge, the texts of the manuscript have only been edited together once, by Robert Fulk for the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library series in a readers' (rather than scholarly) edition: *The 'Beowulf' Manuscript*, ed. & trans. R. D. Fulk, Dumbarton Oaks Med. Lib. 3 (London, 2010). Like Rypins' and Orchard's, Fulk's edition prefers the version of *Wonders* in London BL MS Tiberius B. v.

[13] Orchard, *Companion*, pp. 21–2.

[14] Dumville, 'Some Notes' remains the prime palaeographical comment on the manuscript, though the rigid certainties of his dating system are being called into question.

[15] N. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957) §216; Dumville, 'Some Notes', p. 50. Compare Malone *Nowell Codex* p. 17.

[16] Fulk *et al*, *Beowulf*, accept eleven of these, not noting 167v.10 (BL170v); I follow Orchard on all twelve; he lists corrections he sees as an appendix to A. Orchard, 'Reading *Beowulf* Now and Then', *Selim* 12 (2003–04), 49–81.

[17] Contrast Orchard who notes that a large number of uncorrected errors remain, *Companion* p.141, n. 120. Kiernan argues that *Beowulf* received special corrective attention, *'Beowulf' Manuscript*, throughout see e.g. pp. 141–2, but the statistics do not fully bear this out.

[18] Orchard gives a useful discussion of editorial emendations *Companion* pp. 42–4.

[19] Michael Lapidge argues that a number of the errors were produced by eleventh century scribes struggling to read an eighth century exemplar, 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', *ASE* 29 (2000), 5–41.

probable that they are reproducing what they saw (or thought they saw) in their exemplar.[20] Nick Doane has argued that scribes are producers in their own right, and that their versions of poetic texts should be respected, if not celebrated.[21] Similarly, Kiernan argues the principle that 'conservatism... enlarges the field of possibilities within a text'.[22] That is, trusting the 'edition' presented by scribes can produce a richer text than flattening out all apparent corruptions.

However, even in Kiernan's 'ultra-conservative' edition, some clear scribal decisions are ignored in favour of traditional emendations. For instance, Scribe B carefully and clearly inserts the word *side* ('broad') on 173v.4 (BL176v), poetic line 1981a, as shown in Figure 1, below. The difficulty is that this gives a rare unalliterating line: geond þæt [side] reced hæreðes dohtor.[23]
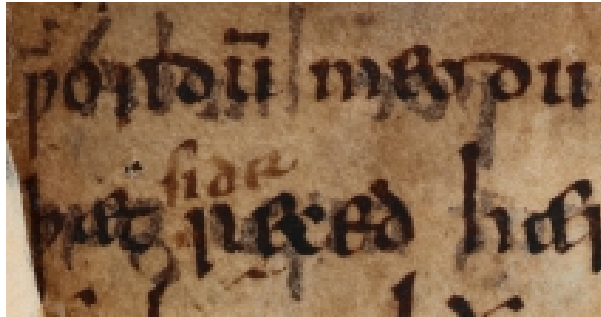


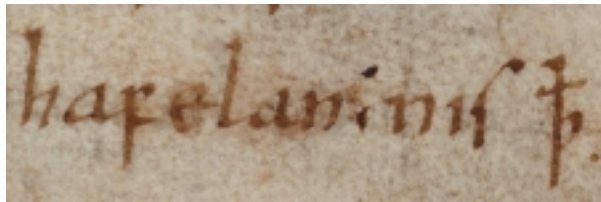*Figure 1: Scribe B's insertion of side, 173v.4*



*Figure 2: Scribe B's insertion mark after*

*hafelan, 160r.17*

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[20] So Kiernan *Beowulf Manuscript* p. 211, but see the discussion below on some difficult instances.

[21] See for instance on this poem A. Doane, '*Beowulf* and Scribal Performance', in *Unlocking the Wordhoard: Studies in Memory of Edward B. Irving Jr*, eds. M. C. Amodio and K. O'Brien O'Keeffe (London, 2003), 62–75.

[22] Kiernan, *Beowulf Manuscript*, p. 185.

[23] Citations from *Beowulf* are my transcription from MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv unless otherwise noted; here 173v.3–4 (BL176v): 'through that broad hall, Hæreth's daughter...'. Translations from Old English are my own.

A number of alliterating words are available and used by editors.[24] So, that Scribe B returned to this point at a later date in order to make a correction makes it clear that he saw this as the correct reading, and suggests that it is unlikely that he felt able to insert an alliterative word of his own choosing. At another point, this time within Scribe A's stint, at manuscript 160r.17 (BL163r), poetic line 1372a, Scribe B makes an insertion mark without writing the necessary word, as shown in Figure 2, above. This suggests that he was not prepared to make insertions on his own authority,[25] showing that he was content to make an unlikely emendation when the exemplar supported it, but not on his own authority. It is extremely likely that the exemplar for *Beowulf* had (or seemed to Scribe B to have) *side* in the first position.[26] Following Kiernan's (and Doane's) argument, the scribal emendation should be retained. This would be a rare use of a non-alliterating line;[27] it is highly unlikely to have been an 'original' reading, and perhaps entered the manuscript version during a copying by someone less aware of how unusual it is than Scribe B seems to have been.

Scribe B's alterations, then, provide information about the exemplar and the scribes' desire to faithfully reproduce it, even if they do not give acceptable readings. Sometimes, however, the flattening effect of modern editions is much clearer. Scribe A uses ᛟ, the *ethel* rune, in place of the word *ethel* on three occasions. Damian Fleming has compared the occasions on which he writes the word in full with those on which he uses the rune. In a convincing argument, he has found that the rune is used in those parts of the narrative concerned with Germanic history; perhaps Fleming's most compelling example is when Hrothgar examines the hilt brought from Grendel's Mother's cave. In an argument conceptually parallel to Kiernan's, Fleming suggests that the rune makes 'the manuscript more alive, more real and exciting for those who would read it.'[28] This implies that Scribe A was aware of those who would be visually reading his production and valued their engagement with it at least as much as those to whom it would be read aloud.

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[24] For instance, *heal* is used by Dobbie, *Beowulf*, and by Fulk et al, *Beowulf*; Kiernan, *Electronic Beowulf* uses *here*.

[25] Running against Kiernan's suggestion that he had some authorial control over the text *Beowulf Manuscript* pp. 243–70.

[26] Doane, 'Scribal Performance' p. 68 argues both that Scribe B was 'attuned to the verse' and that this insertion is not from the exemplar and is wrong; I do not follow his logic.

[27] Non-alliterating lines are possible in Old English poetry but are extremely unusual. I am grateful to Richard Dance and Richard North for discussing this point with me.

[28] D. Fleming, 'Ethel-weard: The First Scribe of the *Beowulf* MS', *NM* 105 (2004), 177–86, p. 181.

Seeing Scribe A as sensitive to the visual impact of his work does not necessitate an oblivious Scribe B.[29] A simple instance is the range of macrons used by the latter. As has been widely noted, Scribe B uses more abbreviations than his colleague.[30] With some exceptions, Scribe A uses abbreviations for only *ond* (*7*), *þæt* (*þ*), and terminal *m*, mostly after *u* (as *ū*). Scribe B uses a wider range, including a macron above the preceding letter to show both *m* and *e*, usually when the latter follows *g*. What matters here is that he tends to use a tilde shaped macron to show *e* and a straight bar with half-serif-like flicks at either end to show *m*. That is, like Scribe A, he expected that the audience of his work would, at least to some extent, respond to the visual subtleties of his work and be capable of decoding his signs.

## MEANING CONVEYED BY CAPITAL FORMS

Where the scribes seem to collaborate in delivering meaning through visual presentation is their use of major or marginal capitals, as shown in Table 1 below. Minor capitals are used by each scribe in very different patterns, suggesting that they may have had some control over when and how to use them.[31] Scribe A uses minor capital G in *Wonders of the East*, *Alexander's Letter*, and *Beowulf*. In each text, he uses the same rounded shape. His marginal capitals, however, vary from text to text. What is left of his marginal capital *G* in *St Christopher* suggests a rounded back with a pointed upper terminal and his *G* in *Beowulf* is angular and uncial. Given the significant differences between other aspects of their hands, it is interesting that Scribe B uses precisely the same shape for marginal *G* in *Beowulf*. Similarly, the scribes seem to have an identical model for marginal *H* when copying *Beowulf*, but Scribe B uses a more decorative version of the same template in *Judith*.

Scribe A copies capital *O* in all four of his texts, although those in *Alexander's Letter* are minor rather than marginal capitals. Following the pattern suggested by his *G*'s, he uses a different form in each text. That used twice in *St Christopher* is a fundamentally

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[29] Arguments about the skill or engagement of the scribes has generally focused on deciding which one is more competent in different areas; different scholars have come to different conclusions: Rypins and Klegraf find Scribe A more faithful to his exemplar; Klaeber, Hulbert (in 'The Accuracy of the B-Scribe of *Beowulf*', *PMLA* 43 (1928), 1196 –99), and Kiernan find Scribe B a more reliable witness. See also Orchard, *Companion*, pp. 23–8.

[30] See for instance Malone, *Nowell Codex* pp. 25–6.

[31] By my count, Scribe A uses 55 minor capitals in 1,939 lines of *Beowulf*, where Scribe B uses 11 in 1,243 lines.

symmetrical calligraphic shape, narrow at the top and wider down each side, with decorative points coming into the centre from each side. That in *Wonders* is similar in basic form, but with a more pointed internal shape and with no decoration. In *Alexander's Letter*, the narrow parts of the letter are off-centre at top and bottom; in *Beowulf*, thin lines are at top and bottom again, but the left side is significantly thicker than the right. Scribe B's only marginal *O* is mostly lost. It clearly narrows towards the base. It looks closer to the *Wonders* shape used by Scribe A, with the right side certainly thicker than that used by Scribe A in *Beowulf*; without a full letter shape, it is not possible to tell which model Scribe B is following.

The point of all of this is to observe that Scribe A changes his capital form based on the text he copies. Within *Beowulf*, he is certainly free to add basic internal decoration, as he does to *Đ* at 145r.8 (BL147r), 148 r.10 (BL151r), and 152r.18 (BL155r) and to *H* at 135 v.7 (BL137v), 141r.15 (BL143r), and 150r.8 (BL153r). In the only clear comparisons (of *G* and *H*), Scribe B seems to match his capital shape in *Beowulf*. Less certainly, it also seems to be the case that Scribe B adjusts his *H* form when copying different texts. That is, where minor capitals seem to have been deployed at scribal discretion and thus conform to shapes preferred by scribes, 'compulsory' capitals at the start of fitts have an identical appearance.[32] That this is the case even when both Scribe A and Scribe B can be seen to use different shapes for capitals elsewhere demonstrates that both placement and formation of some letters was not purely a matter of scribal preference. This cannot have been absolutely the case: *O* provides the clearest instance of Scribe A shifting shape with each text, but Scribe B does not match A's form in his stretch of *Beowulf*. But the variant use of capital forms in their work suggests that both scribes to some extent, and perhaps Scribe A more so, saw the visual shape of their work as relevant to its meaning.

This is less unlikely than it might at first appear. Julia Crick has demonstrated that scribes working on charters in the eleventh century were aware that 'graphic choices...signal a position within the wider literate world'.[33] She regards scribes imitating earlier hands as involved in deliberate 'archaising' and a kind of facsimile making.[34] In literary texts, Elaine Treharne has recently argued that archaising is a less useful term than

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[32] I have argued elsewhere that the use of minor capitals throughout the codex is indicative of scribal interpretation: S. Thomson, 'Capital Indications: How Scribe A thought readers should engage with the Nowell codex', in *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Language, Culture and Society in Russian / English Studies, 5th-6th August 2014*, eds. J. Roberts and R. Hawtree (forthcoming).

[33] J. Crick, 'Script and the Sense of the Past in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Anglo-Saxon Traces*, ed. J. Roberts and L. Webster, Med. and Renaissance Texts and Stud. 405 (Tempe, 2011), pp. 1–30. See especially p. 6.

[34] Crick, 'Sense of the Past' pp. 8 and 3 respectively.

'reliving': she finds scribes to be interested in bringing in 'the aura of the past' rather than attempting to deceive the reader. In her analysis, letter forms in the twelfth century Southwick codex show the scribe 'drawing in features
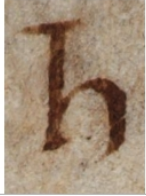
| Allograph | St Christopher | Wonders of the East | Alexander's Letter | Scribe A Beowulf | Scribe B Beowulf | Judith |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Minor G | |  |  |  | | |
| Marginal G |  | | |  |  | |
| H (minor and marginal) |  |  | |  |  |  |
| O (minor and marginal) |  |  |  |  |  | |

*Table 1: Some majuscule letterforms in the Nowell codex*[35]

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[35] Due to a lack of comparable forms, the letterform *H* from the prose texts is minor rather than marginal, as is *O* from *Alexander's Letter*.

from the original as witness' as part of a 'visual appeal to the past'.[36] The Nowell codex scribes were certainly not attempting to fool readers into thinking that the manuscript was an old document, but they may well have been adapting major capital forms as a response to their exemplars; in *Beowulf*, this naturally means that they use roughly the same allographs as one another. This subtlety is, of course, lost in modern editions that mostly have to simply decide between upper and lower case, with a degree of flexibility in size and formatting for some editions.[37] Given that non-facsimile editions of the codex's texts do not present them together, the relationship between texts and their differing statuses or meanings implied by variant capital forms is also lost.[38] Some of the complexities of meaning clearly present to the scribes, and probably present for at least some of their audience, have been lost to us through both our flattened presentation and our diminished capacity to read. This finding is of some significance when considering how the Nowell codex was read, and how the scribes engaged with their exemplars: it makes it more likely (though of course not certain) that the codex was compiled from variant exemplars rather than being a direct copy of an existing collection.

INDICATIONS OF LITERARY ENGAGEMENT

There are some other, less clear, indications of encoding processes at play in the manuscript which our 'corrupted' sensibilities are no longer able to access. One example occurs at manuscript line 164 v.18 (BL167v), poetic line 1587. After killing Grendel's Mother, Beowulf sees his earlier foe lying in her cave and beheads him. The manuscript lines read:

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[36] E. Treharne, 'Invisible Things in London, British Library Cotton Vitellius A.xv', presented at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, 2014. Treharne's paper was delivered after the 2013 Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at which this paper was first presented. The Southwick codex (as noted above) is bound together with the Nowell codex, but connections between the two have been generally assumed to have not existed prior to the seventeenth century ordering of Robert Cotton's library, and to be relatively random; Treharne also suggests that reading the two together may be productive.

[37] This bears close similarities to an argument made by Derek Updegraff in his paper 'Medieval Layout, Old English Poems, and Visual Lineation: Reassessing the Uses of Aural Verse and Visual Lines in Modern Translation', presented at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, 2014.

[38] As noted above, pp. 56–7, n. 12, the exception to this rule is Fulk, *Beowulf Manuscript*, although that still includes a different version of *The Wonders of the East* and *The Finnsburg Fragment*, which has no manuscript relation to the Nowell codex.

he him þæs lean for geald reþe cempa
toðæs. þe he onræste geseah guð ƿerigne
grendel licgan aldor leasne ⁺ sƿa him ær        +
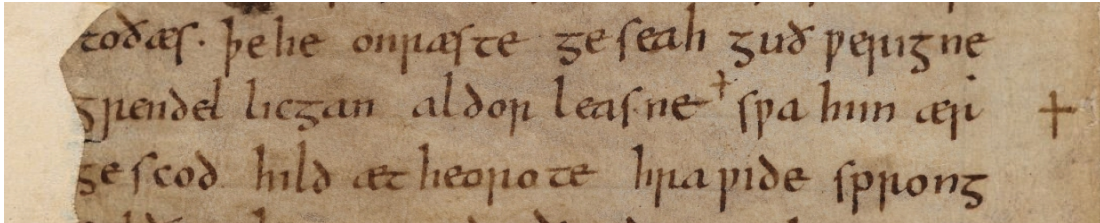gescod hild ætheorote...[39]



*Figure 3: Marginal cross at 164v.18*

The cross after *aldorleasne* and that highlighting the position in the margin, shown in Figure 3 above, are in a different colour to that of the main text at this point, though elsewhere Scribe A uses ink similar to this shade and it is not impossible that the marks are his; the general lack of this kind of marginal interaction in his texts makes it more likely to be someone else.[40] The use of two crosses is relatively frequent in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts to mark a site of omission: in such instances, the larger marginal cross is accompanied by the missing text. However, there does not seem to be any text missing here and no editors have suggested an emendation or addition. There is no indication of additional text written around the marginal cross, although there is a relatively large amount of marginal space still visible here. Zupitza's explanation for the crosses, followed by Kiernan, relates it to the same word (*aldorleasne*) on the first manuscript

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[39] Both transcript and translation attempt to follow the manuscript lineation:
        'He [Beowulf] repaid him [Grendel], fierce warrior,
        for that when he saw him at rest: weary of war,
        Grendel lay deprived of life ⁺ because of what had earlier        +
        taken place in battle at Heorot...'
The lines as normally rendered by editors are:
                he him þæs lean forgeald,
    reþe cempa,     to ðæs þe he onræste geseah
    guðwerigne    grendel licgan
    aldorleasne    swa him ær gescod
    hild æt Heorote.

[40] Though Scribe A does appear to show some interest in Grendel's narrative, as I have argued in 'Capital Indications:'.

page of *Beowulf*.[41] The theory is that a reader in the Renaissance found the first occurrence of the word impossible to make out and, having read 71 pages of manuscript, realised that here was the same word again and marked it with crosses without returning to the first *aldorleasne* to clarify it for himself or future readers; this ink shade is also completely unlike that used elsewhere by more probable Renaissance readers such as Laurence Nowell.[42] It is more likely that a reader (possibly the scribe), engaged with the narrative, marked the moment at which Grendel finally dies, and highlighted it in the margin for future reference. This is another moment in the manuscript where some 'richness', to borrow Kiernan's term, is lost by editing simply the text; in terms of considering Anglo-Saxon readership it is also a reminder that 'what happens to a text is just as interesting, ultimately, as where it came from'.[43]
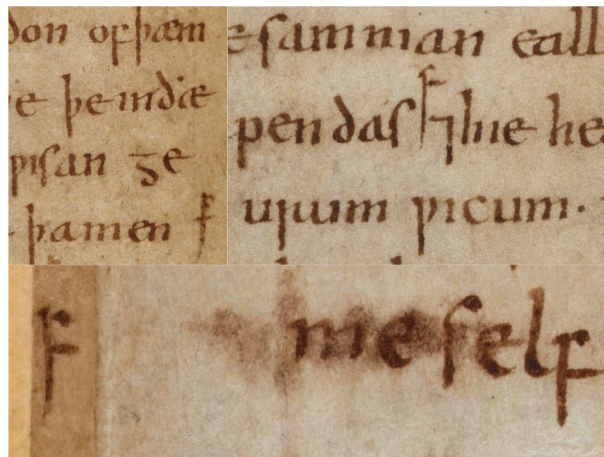


*Figure 4: f-like signs in Alexander's Letter*

Similarly, at three points in *Alexander's Letter*, shapes like an *f* appear, shown in Figure 4 above. One is placed at the end of a page of text, just to the right of the final

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[41] *'Beowulf' Reproduced in Facsimile from the Unique Manuscript British Museum MS. Cotton Vitellius A. xv*, ed. J. Zupitza, EETS 77 (London, 1882; 2nd ed. 1959), p. 73; Kiernan notes Zupitza's suggestion in *Electronic Beowulf* and confirmed that he agrees with it in personal correspondence 22/1/14.

[42] Such as Nowell's signature at 91(93)r (BL94r); perhaps his or a contemporary's hand above *egsode* on the first page of *Beowulf*; an Early Modern gloss for most of the text on 99(95) (BL102)v; the last few lines of *Judith* recorded in an Early Modern hand at the foot of 206 (BL209)v; the underlined names which appear regularly throughout the manuscript. Kiernan discusses many of these 'Reformed Codex'.

[43] D. Scragg, 'Ælfric's Scribes' in *Essays for Joyce Hill on her Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Mary Swan (Leeds, 2006): 179–89, 186.

word at 111v.20 (BL122v). Another is on the following verso, in the middle of a line and almost superscript between a word and the succeeding *7 hie* on 112v.12 (BL123v). The final instance occurs a gathering later, in the far left margin of a manuscript page at 117r.17 (BL112r). It is worth noting that this last sign is barely apparent in Kiernan's facsimile, where it is absolutely clear in the British Library's Digitised Manuscripts edition, because the manuscript was disbound for the latter, so the gutter is fully visible. This difficulty of access makes it more probable that the marks are scribal, although as the most recent binding was not undertaken until 1845 such a conclusion cannot be definitive. This last sign is similar to Scribe A's *f*-shape; the second is much closer to Scribe B's usual allograph; the first is less easy to place but comes closer to Scribe A's form. Each sign might, of course, be scribal or readerly and could date from almost any moment in the manuscript's history. Kiernan sees them as scribal practice letters, showing improvement in form if read in reverse order. But they bear no similarity to the placement or form of certain pen trials elsewhere in the manuscript and two are not particularly close to an occurrence of *f*.[44] That coming mid-line surely cannot be a rehearsal. Jim Hall suggested to me that they could be 'scriptorium directions' of some manner;[45] given the variable placement, and confinement to these three sites in *Alexander's Letter* this seems unlikely. As he agrees with me that they are probably not all the work of the same hand, this reading becomes less probable.

I do not yet have a convincing explanation for these signs and there is not space here for a full discussion: briefly, given their infrequency and inconsistent placement I find them extremely unlikely to be mechanically related to, for instance, the length of a scribal stint; given their clarity and that all three seem to show the same letter, they are not likely to be random. When written, they were written with a purpose; it may be that this purpose is now utterly irrecoverable. It is, though, at the very least interesting that they all occur in parts of *Alexander's Letter* that can be connected with passages in *Beowulf*. Orchard makes a convincing argument that this Old English translation of the *Epistola Alexandri* was made with close reference to the phrasing employed in *Beowulf*.[46] The first two *f* shapes occur in §16 of the text.[47] §16 is mostly concerned with the discovery of a

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[44] Pen trials can be found at, for instance, the foot of 183r (BL186r). Kiernan suggested this possibility to me per. corr. 22/1/14.

[45] Per. corr. 12/1/14.

[46] In Orchard *Companion*, pp. 25–39.

[47] Sectional divisions used here are those in Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*. Fulk, *Beowulf Manuscript* prints the text without sectional divisions, with sentences numbered; by his system, the first *f*-shape is at 91 p. 50 and the second at 100 p. 52.

freshwater lake where the desperate thirst of Alexander and his army could be slaked; Orchard notes the 'general resemblance' of this scene to the monster-mere in *Beowulf*.[48] It is also one of several passages adjusted from the Latin source in order, Orchard argues, to depict Alexander 'in more selfish terms'.[49] The strongest reading, then, is that the scribe or a reader was interested in these correspondences and marked them out: the only argument against this is that other passages have much stronger correspondences with *Beowulf* and receive no marking. The first occurs mid-sentence but at the end of a line and the end of a manuscript page, suggesting that whoever wrote it (probably Scribe A) may have seen it as marking the conclusion of a section, with *þa men* perhaps starting a new section, Orchard's §16. The second takes place shortly afterwards and is more disruptive: it comes mid-sentence, mid-manuscript-line, and mid-manuscript-page. It may not be coincidental that this is the least likely to be written by Scribe A: perhaps Scribe B or another reader wished to follow up on the scribe's note with an insertion of his own.

The third apparent annotation comes during Alexander's entrance into a rival king's camp, in §24 of the text.[50] Alexander disguises himself as a deserter and manages to see King Porus on the pretext of having information to disclose about the enemy on the eve of battle. Thinking the whole event a great joke, Alexander claims himself to be:

> forealdod...þæs eald...þæt he ne mihte elcor gewearmigan buton æt fyr
> ond æt gledum.

As a result, Porus exults in his inevitable victory, saying:

> Hu mæg he la ænige gewinne wið me spowan swa forealdod mon,
> forþon ic eom me self geong ond hwæt?[51]

The marginal *f*-shape occurs in the middle of this exchange, to the left of *me self*. Orchard does not discuss this passage, but the discourse of young and old rulers is broadly parallel to that sustained throughout *Beowulf*, from its opening consideration of Scyld Scefing and his son Beow (called Beowulf in the manuscript) to the implicit contrast of Hrothgar and

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[48] Orchard, *Companion* p. 34.
[49] The Old English version stresses Alexander slaking his own thirst before that of his men and beasts. See Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies* pp. 137–8.
[50] Fulk, *'Beowulf' Manuscript* 161 p.60.
[51] Text and translation from Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies* §24 pp. 240–1: 'aged...so old...that he cannot keep himself warm except at the fire and coals.'; 'How can he have any success in battle against me when he is such an extremely old man and I myself am young and fit?'

Beowulf, and on to the final contrasts between Beowulf and Wiglaf, and indeed between Beowulf's own youth and age.[52] This scene of intrusion into an opponent's camp also corresponds with the same idea in other texts of the codex: *St Christopher*, *Wonders*, *Beowulf*, and *Judith* all offer instances of a heroic (or at least sympathetic in the case of 'Wonders') figure entering another's home with hostile intent.

<div align="center">OBSCURE VISUAL DETAILS</div>

Two final indications, both again from Scribe A's stint, are suggestive of an awareness of the purely visual properties of his work, engaging just with the reader rather than the literary qualities of the text. The first occurs at manuscript line 149v.1 (BL152v), poetic line 896a, shown in Figure 5 below. As noted above, Scribe A uses few abbreviations. Where he uses a macron, it is always above a vowel, usually *u*, to indicate terminal -*m*; it is usually (but not exclusively) used towards the end of manuscript lines where he may have felt some pressure of space. Utterly exceptional is the abbreviation here, with: bær on beār scipes.[53]
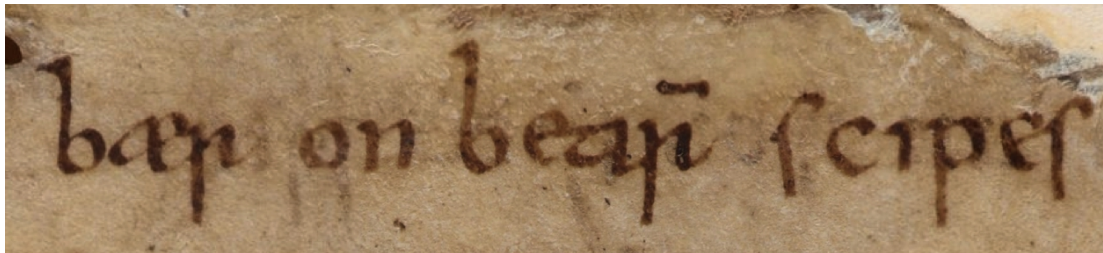


*Figure 5: Possible visual pun at 149v.1*

There is no apparent reason for this anomalous use at this point: it is interesting that it results in a form of visual pun. It is perhaps possible that the *n* was missed off, and the macron added at a proof-reading stage,[54] but there are numerous instances of correction by insertion (even at the end of the word), and no others of this use of punctuation. No reader has identified him as using corrective macrons or other abbreviations elsewhere, even

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[52] Youth and age are explicitly used as a contrastive (or all-encompassing) pair in, for instance, *Beowulf* lines 72 and 853–4a. It is also used (along with other doublets) in *Judith* at line 166.

[53] 'carried into the bosom of the ship'.

[54] As suggested to me by Jim Hall, pers corr 12/1/14.

when they might be appropriate.[55] He would be making an unusual, almost risky, choice here if he expected a reader to be able to read this mark with no difficulty. It is most likely – but, again, unproveable – that the scribe, visually sensitive as he seems to have been, was briefly engaged by the similarity of the two words, and used the abbreviating bar to leave a visual pun of sorts for his reader(s).
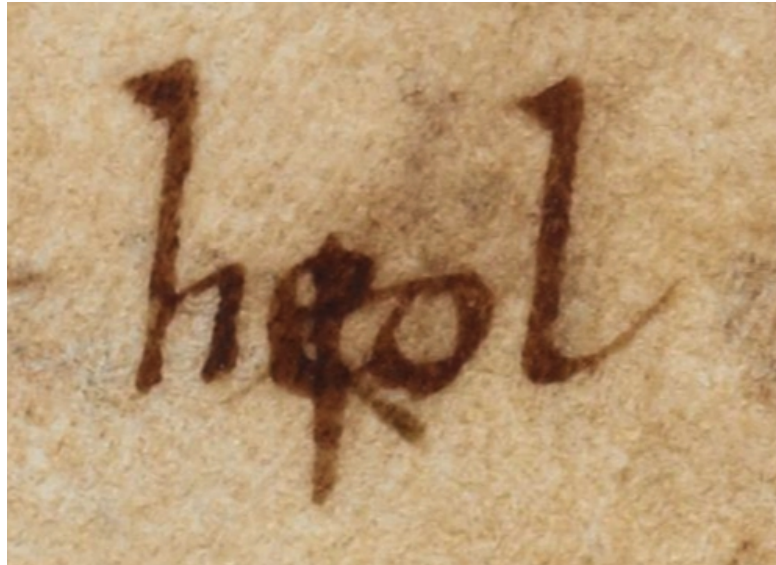


*Figure 6: Possible runic mark behind heol 157r.10*

Similarly unprovable but suggestive is an angular shape behind the *e* of *heol* at manuscript line 157r.10 (BL160r), poetic line 1229b, shown in Figure 6 above. It has been suggested that this was one of two instances of metathesis committed by Scribe A, and that he intended to write *hleo*.[56] Having placed the *l* at the end, he drew a line through the *e* to indicate the correct reading. This does not seem likely. The one known instance of metathesis is that of *wlonc* at manuscript line 137r.14 (BL139r), poetic line 331b. The original letters were erased and the correct form written; it is not even certain that he

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[55] The most comprehensive published survey of scribal corrections is as an appendix to Orchard, 'Reading *Beowulf*', though I would add eighteen instances to his list for *Bewoulf* and he does not consider those in *Judith* or in the prose texts. Corrections to the prose texts are discussed by Rypins *Prose Texts* and Malone, *Nowell Codex*; I would add twenty-two instances to those identified by Rypins. Kiernan discusses corrections in the manuscript *Beowulf Manuscript* pp. 191–218 and provides important images of many that he identifies in *Electronic Beowulf*. I shared a full list of the corrections I see in the codex at 'Mistakes made, unmade, and remade: a millennium of making the Nowell codex' in 'Un/making mistakes in medieval media' at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo 2014.

[56] Zupitza, *Facsimile* p. 58; Kiernan, *Electronic Beowulf*.

originally wrote *woncl*.[57] This is far closer to his usual approach to corrections and, indeed, is much clearer. Most editors, at any rate, do not accept *hleo* as the correct reading and use *hold*. More simply, it has also been suggested that he intended to strike out the *e*, leaving *hol*.[58] This would at least be partially analogous to the use of a horizontal straight line to cancel the dittographic second writing of *hlaford* at manuscript line 135v.15 (BL137v). However, as discussed above, if Scribe A did elect at this moment to use a coding system unlike that deployed elsewhere then he was either very open to risk or not very good at his job. The extreme close-ups enabled by the latest digital edition of the manuscript are not absolutely conclusive, but seem to show that the *e* is written above the line rather than the other way around.[59] It is also absolutely clear that the scribe has not simply drawn a straight line. The line behind *e* has a strong secondary line coming out just below its centre, and projecting down to the right at about 115 degrees from vertical. Less certainly, there may be a line to the other side, at the same angle to the left of the main stroke. It seems likely that the scribe started to write something, then changed his mind and (incorrectly) wrote *heol*.

Such a shape would not be parallel to any of Scribe A's letter forms, even at a half-written stage. It has elsewhere been suggested that the scribes struggled to read their exemplar at points,[60] and, further, that where they did not understand it they sought to represent it as faithfully as possible.[61] Given that *heol* is not accepted by editors, it is possible that Scribe A was simply struggling to copy what he saw, and resolved the shape he had begun to transcribe into an *e*. However, given the angles used, and his use of the ethel rune, noted above, it is also feasible that he began to write a rune here, but changed his mind and wrote a word instead. An incomplete runic shape behind an incorrect word is impossible to decipher. If it is runic, it is obscure: it may perhaps have been intended as ᚱ (*rad*), ᛣ (*kalc*), ᚾ (*nyd*), ᛚ (*lagu*), or ᚳ (*cen*), or possibly another incomplete ᛟ (*ethel*).[62] Following Fleming's reading of the uses of ᛟ (*ethel*) discussed above, this could be an

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[57] Based on his use of UV photography, Kiernan, *Electronic Beowulf*, suggests that the erased word was *oleð*; Cf. Orchard, 'Reading *Beowulf*', p. 70.

[58] Orchard, 'Reading *Beowulf*', p. 70.

[59] Jim Hall is not convinced that the line passes behind *e* and thinks it may be above it, per corr 12/1/14.

[60] Lapidge, 'Archetype'.

[61] See for example Neidorf, 'Scribal Errors', p. 255, pp. 265–6 and notes.

[62] Kiernan has identified what could be read as another rune above the first line of *Beowulf* on 129r (BL132r). It looks like ᛗ (*eoh*), but I am inclined to agree with Dr Hall that it is more likely to be relatively random cuts in the manuscript that happen to form a runic shape; Kiernan does not note this in *Electronic Manuscripts* and presumably also sees it as a coincidence. I am grateful to Dr Hall and Professor Roberts for discussing this mark with me.

appropriate site for a rune as it concludes Wealhtheow's celebration of the unity of Heorot.[63]

## Conclusion

It would, of course, be excessive to claim that these loci of visual interest in the manuscript demand a complete revision of our understanding of *Beowulf*, its manuscript, or its scribes. But collectively they do point to the relative visual complexity of the manuscript, generally ignored in modern editions and critical readings of its texts. In turn, this sophistication matters because it is indicative of an environment of production and reception where this visual complexity was relatively widely recognised: the variation in majuscule shapes, for instance, is useful evidence that the codex was based on more than one exemplar; more significantly, the apparent attempt to preserve this variation indicates that the scribes and their anticipated readers could 'read' this variation. Further, it perhaps makes it more likely that the relationship between the Nowell codex and its exemplars was of contemporary interest. Similarly, that there are several different forms of visual expectation from Scribe A in the codex bolsters arguments made by Crick and others that the readers of vernacular manuscripts in the late Anglo-Saxon period were engaging with texts in a complex way: finding themselves connected with both a historical matrix of textual production; extra-linguistic meanings through signs such as runes; the narrative of figures such as Grendel; and interested in the intertextual relationships presented by a codex. This in turn has implications for the meaning of *Beowulf* for the community who copied it into the codex.

Eleventh century scribes increasingly appear to have been sophisticated re-presenters of their texts, capable of considering both source and reader. More work on literary and non-literary manuscripts may further develop our understanding in this regard. The *Beowulf* manuscript is damaged: corrupted by the ravages of time and some poorly thought through interactions. But however much has been lost to such damage, more may well have been lost by the corruption of our capacity to engage with the subtleties and sophistication of manuscript presentation.

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[63] At poetic lines 1226b–31b; the rune occurs in line 1229b.