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**24/
25**



beowulf: the epic in performance
benjamin bagby, voice and medieval harp

Thursday, February 6, and
Friday, February 7, 2025, 7:30 PM

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beowulf: the epic in performance

benjamin bagby,
voice and medieval harp

*The performance will last approximately
85 minutes with no intermission.*

Presented with modern English subtitles

**These performances are supported in part
by gifts from Ms. Susan M. Hansen and
Dr. Rachel Gabriele and Dr. Matthew Gabriele.
Additional funding is provided by the
Don and Carolyn Rude Fund for Excellence.**

synopsis

Although this performance uses video supertitles, the following summary will give an overview of the story up to the point where the retelling of Beowulf will stop, encompassing roughly the first third of the entire epic (lines 1-852).

Following the formal call of *Hwaet!* (Listen!), the *scop* reminds the listeners of some genealogy: the legendary arrival of the great leader Scyld, found in a boat along the Danish coast, a solitary baby with no possessions. But when he grows up, he becomes a unifier, war-leader, and king of the Danes. On his death he is again set adrift, but now the boat is piled high with treasure and the standard floats in the wind on the mast above him. He leaves a son, Beow, already famous as a king in South Sweden (the northern part of Denmark in the fifth century). Beow carries on the Scylding line as a good and able ruler and is succeeded by his son, Halfdane. Halfdane, in turn, is a worthy king, and has three sons — Heregar, Hrothgar, and Helga — and a daughter, Yrsa, who marries Onela of the royal line of Sweden. Eventually, Hrothgar becomes king and rules long and well.

With the kingdom stable, Hrothgar orders that a great banquet hall be built. Workmen from far and near are brought to build and decorate this royal building. Its fine workmanship and gilded gables are famous in Denmark and abroad. Hrothgar names the hall Heorot (Hart). The drinking and laughter of the warriors and the harping and songs of the *scop* provoke a savage monster named Grendel, a descendant of Cain, who lives in the marshes nearby and cannot bear this human gaiety in his loneliness. Only gradually do we learn details of the creature: that it takes four men to carry his head on a spear, and that his hand has sharp claws like steel spikes. For weeks and months Grendel visits the hall nightly, devouring sleeping warriors and carrying off others to the moor to feed on later. At last, only drunken, boasting fools will linger in the hall after dark, until they, too, are slaughtered.

Twelve years pass, and news of Hrothgar's assailant travels eventually to other lands. Beowulf, sister's son to Higelac, King of the Geats, hears of Hrothgar's distress, and with consent from his uncle, sails with

15 companions from southwestern Sweden on the east coast of the Oslofjörd. When the Danish coastal watchman learns that they have come to Hrothgar's aid, he shows them the path to Heorot. The Geatish warriors march with their spears, swords, helmets, shields, and chainmail to the high-gabled hall. At Heorot, Beowulf and his men enter with challenges and formal speeches, the strict codes of a warrior's behavior in court. King Hrothgar had earlier given protection to Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, during a feud. Learning Beowulf's name, Hrothgar recalls hearing of the extraordinary strength and reputation of the Geatish hero.

The strangers are warmly received, and Beowulf is seated on the bench with Hrothgar's young sons. No Dane has confronted Grendel and lived. But the enthusiastic welcome shown to the Geats irritates the jealous Unferth, a drunken courtier sitting at Hrothgar's feet, who taunts Beowulf for supposedly having been defeated in a legendary swimming contest with Breca. Beowulf sets the record straight by recounting the dangers — attacking sea monsters, storms, and vast distances — and claiming that they had merely dared each other to a boyish hunt for sea beasts. Separated by the winter storm, they swam, carrying swords and wearing chainmail, two different paths: Breca to Norway and Beowulf to the land of Finns. Beowulf ends his retort with a taunt that Unferth has slain his own brother, the ultimate crime, even though by accident. With such "heroes" as this, it's no wonder the Danes can't deal with Grendel themselves! The queen, Wealhtheow, pours ritual mead for the feasting warriors, and Beowulf boasts to her that he will defeat Grendel or die in the attempt.

At nightfall, Hrothgar and all the Danes depart from Heorot to sleep elsewhere, leaving Beowulf and his men to occupy the hall benches. Beowulf removes his helmet, chainmail, and weapons and boasts again: that he will use no weapon in this fight, since Grendel uses none. As darkness descends, Grendel comes gliding up from the misty marshes and pushes open the great door, his eyes gleaming with evil. Immediately he grabs and eats a sleeping warrior. Next, the monster reaches for Beowulf, but the hero grasps his arm and rises to his feet. Beowulf's men cannot help him, since Grendel has put a spell on all weapons so that none can harm him. During the ferocious struggle that follows, the hero

synopsis, cont.

wrenches off Grendel's arm. The sounds of the combat terrify the Danes outside: Grendel howling with pain, benches torn up and overturned, the hall shaken to its foundations. Grendel, leaving a trail of blood, escapes without his arm and limps back to the fens, where he dies. Beowulf fixes the arm high above the hall as a symbol of victory. Heorot is cleansed of the evil monster, and in the morning people come from far and near to inspect the sight, following Grendel's trail to a boiling pool of bloody, dark water in the marshes.

program notes

The Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* survives in a single manuscript source dating from the early 11th century (British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. XV). Although scholars do not agree on the dating of the poem, as theories range between the sixth century and the date of the manuscript, it is clear that the story has its roots in the art of the *scop* (creator), the “singer of tales” — oral poet, singer, storyteller, and reciter in one person — at formal and informal gatherings, whose services were essential to the fabric of tribal society in early medieval England. The *scop* would retell the story of *Beowulf*, in song and speech, perhaps accompanying himself on a six-stringed harp (this we know from contemporary accounts and surviving instruments). His pre-literate audience was attuned to the finest details of sound and meaning, meter and rhyme, timing and mood. The performance — which, for the entire epic, might last between four and six hours — would never be exactly the same twice, as the *scop* subtly varied the use of poetic formulæ to shape his unique version of the story.

The central dilemma of any attempt to revocalize a medieval text as living art is based on the fact that a written source can only represent one (and possibly not the best) version of a text from an oral tradition in which musical notation was unknown. The impetus to make this attempt has come from many directions: the power of those oral storytelling traditions, mostly non-European, which still survive intact; the work of instrument-makers who have made careful reconstructions of seventh-century Germanic harps; and those scholars who have shown an active interest in the problems of turning written words back into an oral poetry meant to be absorbed through the ear/spirit, rather than eye/brain. But the principal impetus comes from the language of the poem itself, which has a chilling, direct, and magical power that modern translations can only approximate.

the instrument

The six-string harp used in this performance was built by Rainer Thureau (Wiesbaden, Germany), based on the remains of an instrument excavated from a seventh-century Alemannic nobleman's grave in Oberflacht (near Stuttgart). The study of this instrument also informed the reconstruction of the Sutton Hoo instrument now on display at the British Museum. The remarkably intact pieces of oak clearly show a thin, hollow corpus with no soundholes. There are strong indications, supported by contemporary iconography, that such an instrument had six gut strings, a tailpiece, and a free-standing bridge. This *scop's* instrument serves as a key piece of evidence in reconstructing the performance, for it provides the "singer of tales" with a series of six tones. Although several possible tunings present themselves, the six tones used in this performance were arrived upon through a careful study of early medieval modal theory, yielding a gapped octave that contains three perfect fifths and two perfect fourths. The resulting series of tones serves as a musical matrix, upon which the singer can weave both his own rhetorical shapes and the sophisticated metrics of the text (in my reconstruction work, I never made musical notations or consciously created any "melodies," preferring to work with simple modal gestures). The Anglo-Saxon ear was finely tuned to this web of sounds and syllable lengths, which was always experienced as an aural event, inextricably bound up with the story being told. The harp is a relatively quiet instrument, but in the ear of the performer it rings with an endless variation of gestures, melodic cells, and repetitive figurations, which give inspiration to the shape of the vocalization. In the course of the story, the vocalist may move imperceptibly or radically between true speech, heightened speech, speech-like song, and true song. The instrument acts as a constant point of reference, a friend and fellow performer, a symbol of the *scop* and his almost magical role in the community of listeners.

— Benjamin Bagby

guest essay

This essay is part of a series of writings by Virginia Tech faculty, staff, and community members that contextualize Moss Arts Center visiting artist performances.

It is easy to forget that *Beowulf* is beautiful. For us, it is more often an object of study than a thing of joy, separated from us by a thousand years of shifts in language and culture and worldview. The one manuscript in which it survives (the Nowell Codex) is not one of the gorgeous illuminated manuscripts, and it has been damaged by fire. For years, it was something of an embarrassment to English literary scholars, who wanted it to be more like the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, or *Aeneid*. The historians combed it for clues about the Germanic past, but they were hoping to find pure ancient paganism, not obscured by the more modern Christianity of the poem, so they too were discontent. J. R. R. Tolkien turned the tide in 1936 with his famous *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (and he stole the scene in *The Hobbit* of one scared thief stealing a cup from a dragon's hoard). The renewed literary interest meant generations of English students have encountered the poem, painstakingly learning Old English, reading *Beowulf* line by line with dictionary in hand, or reading translations, which — even the verse translation by the Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney, who sneaked Irish expressions into his version — can for better or worse never be the same as the original.

But it is beautiful. Benjamin Bagby, who founded the medieval musical ensemble Sequentia almost 50 years ago, has contributed greatly to medieval music, including the music of Hildegard von Bingen and Icelandic Eddas, and he has brought back to *Beowulf* the pleasures of performance, of hearing with others instead of reading alone. *Beowulf* would have been musical. The poem itself speaks of the *scops* (bards) singing poems. When *scops* weren't singing, the guests themselves might sing, playing a few bars and improvising a few lines. (According to Bede, an illiterate cowherd named Caedmon snuck out of the hall when his turn was coming, because he wasn't confident he could sing or compose; but then an angel commanded him to compose a poem in praise of God, and it was so good he was accepted as a monk.) So we should imagine *Beowulf* in a meadhall, where men and women would feast together,

guest essay, cont.

drink together, sing together, and hear bards recite tales of the heroic past.

The alliterative meter, three alliterating stressed syllables and one non-alliterating stress with a slight pause in the middle, provides a compelling rhythm and ways for subtle connections and echoes. The language is full of little riddles, kennings — compound words that get us to see the world in new ways, such as calling oceans “whale-roads” or stags “heath-steppers.” These kennings often let us pause and see a character in a new light.

The mead halls in which *Beowulf* would have been performed — and in which a lot of the poem’s actions occur — were home to tight communities, but the people in them were not insular. A warrior whose grave at Sutton Hoo yielded treasures now in the British Museum may have fought as far away as Syria. Hadrian, an abbot in Canterbury who brought learning and manuscripts new to the English, was North African. *Beowulf* is bound with other works, including the *Wonders of the East*, the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, and *Judith*, a heroic poem with an Old Testament woman as the hero. *Beowulf*, with its stories of the monstrous Grendel and the shining, deadly dragon, thus takes its place with the marvels of a wide world.

The poem rejoices in the violent victories of its hero, but it is clear-eyed about the consequences of violence, especially the blood feuds that could and did bring down families and even kingdoms, the way *Beowulf*’s Geats eventually fall victim to the Swedes. Grendel’s mother, monstrous as she is, is driven by very human grief for the death of her son. Even the fire-breathing dragon, implacable enemy to humans, is mourned. The poem is clear: everything that begins must end. Heroes, dynasties, peoples, all must die. Their glory is not in becoming immortal and everlasting, but in living greatly in the brief window life affords them. And so the poem has many moods, from excitement to triumph to grief.

Even if Old English is now foreign to us, Bagby lets us hear the poetry again, the rhythms of the verse, the shifts in tone, the cadences of a scop singing of the heroes of the past, the dimensions of a poem so crucial to its brilliance, yet so easy to forget.

Kenneth Hodges, professor of English at Virginia Tech, specializes in medieval and areas of early modern English literature, especially about King Arthur. Hodges is author of Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's Le Morte Darthur (New York: Palgrave, 2005) and co-author with Dorsey Armstrong of Mapping Malory: Regional Identities and National Geographies (New York: Palgrave, 2014), as well as numerous papers on Malory, Spenser, and other subjects. Hodges teaches two courses this semester — Literature of King Arthur and British Literary History.

biography

benjamin bagby

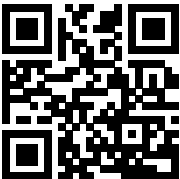
Benjamin Bagby is descended from a Germanic clan that emigrated from Jutland to northern England in ca. 630, where they remained until his branch of the family emigrated to the colony of Virginia almost a millennium later. Following 321 years of subsequent family wanderings, he was born on the shores of Lake Michigan and, 12 years later, was captivated by *Beowulf*. Several years after returning to his European homeland in 1974, he founded — together with the late Barbara Thornton — the Sequentia ensemble for medieval music, which was based in Cologne, Germany, for 25 years; both Bagby and Sequentia are now based in Paris. Find more information at sequentia.org.

In addition to his work with *Beowulf*, Bagby and Sequentia have produced several CDs of musical reconstructions from the early Middle Ages, all part of the *Lost Songs Project*: two CDs based on the medieval Icelandic Edda, *The Rheingold Curse* (2002), which retells the story of Sigurd, Brynhild, the dragon Fafnir, and the cursed Rheingold; *Lost Songs of a Rheinland Harper* (2004), which explores Latin and German song in the period around the year 1000, using as its source the famed *Cambridge Songs* manuscript; and *Fragments for the End of Time – 9-11th Centuries* (2008), featuring some of the earliest apocalyptic texts in Old German, Latin, and Old Saxon. Sequentia's newest programs in the series include *Frankish Phantoms* (2011), presenting songs from the Carolingians and Ottonians; *Monks Singing Pagans*, an exploration of the Christian fascination with antiquity, myths, and pagan stories (2016); and *Boethius: Songs of Consolation*, featuring the sung poetry from the *Consolation of Philosophy* (2017). The most recent program is called *Word of Power: Charms, Riddles, and Elegies from the Medieval Northlands*. A DVD production of Bagby's *Beowulf* performance, filmed by Stellan Olsson in Sweden, was released in 2007 and includes interviews with noted Anglo-Saxonists and with the performer.

In addition to his activities as researcher, singer, harper, and director of *Sequentia*, Bagby is much in demand worldwide as author, teacher, and coach. He taught from 2005 to 2018 in the medieval music masters program at the University of Paris–Sorbonne. Since 2018 he teaches medieval music performance at the Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen, Germany. He also teaches courses in Italy, Spain, Canada, Switzerland, and the U.S. He received the 2016 Early Music Artist Award by REMA, the European Early Music Network, and received the Howard Mayer Brown Lifetime Achievement Award from Early Music America. Bagby has lived in Paris since 2001.

These are Bagby's first performances with the Moss Arts Center.

tell us what you think!



We'd love your feedback on this performance. If you complete the short survey, you can enter for a chance to win two tickets to *A.I.M* by Kyle Abraham on Saturday, March 22, 2025.

bit.ly/beowulf-feedback

Please note, survey responses are anonymous. If you would like a response to your feedback, please email mossartscenter@vt.edu.

engagement events

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 4

UNIVERSITY CLASS VISIT: INTRO TO EUROPEAN HISTORY

Benjamin Bagby provided students with context and insight into the medieval period through the cultural lens of *Beowulf*.

UNIVERSITY CLASS VISIT: BAROQUE ENSEMBLE

School of Performing Arts students compared the artistic styles and influences of the medieval and Baroque periods with Bagby.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 5

UNIVERSITY CLASS VISIT: BRITISH LITERARY HISTORY

English students examined the role of *scops* as poets and entertainers, how these bards preserved oral traditions and history through public performance, and the importance of the epic poem *Beowulf* to the Anglo-Saxon literary canon.

UNIVERSITY CLASS VISIT: THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Bagby shared how he approaches the performance of medieval works through careful research and thoughtful creativity.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6

PRE-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION: FAMILY FEUDS, THE POEM BEOWULF IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Featuring Matthew Gabriele, professor of medieval studies in the Department of Religion and Culture, this talk explored how *Beowulf*, one of the most impactful epic poems of the medieval period, would have been understood in its time.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 7

POST PERFORMANCE Q&A

Hear from Benjamin Bagby in an open post-performance discussion.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 12:30-1 PM

READING: BEOWULF IN OLD ENGLISH

380 Shanks Hall, Virginia Tech

Featuring Charlene Eska, professor in the Department of English

Try reading Old English yourself and learn about the historical changes in language that occurred in *Beowulf's* time.

*Special thanks to the Blacksburg Presbyterian Church,
Department of English, Department of Religion and Culture,
Charlene Eska, Kenneth Hodges, Matthew Gabriele, Aline de Souza,
Brian Thorsett, and Jo Wolf*

go deeper

The role of scops (bards) in the preservation of Anglo-Saxon oral traditions and history is widely recognized today. What role has oral history played in American history, and what examples of oral tradition can we find in current theatre-making and culture?



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Virginia Tech Giving Day is from noon on Feb. 19 through noon on Feb. 20.



This is the perfect time to show your support for the Moss Arts Center.

Regardless of age, background, ability, and circumstance, the arts are impactful. Everyone can find their place in the arts and that is especially true at the Moss Arts Center. Here, everyone is welcome to explore, discover, and find what stirs their soul and brings them joy.

There are endless reasons to support the arts. What's yours?

All Giving Day donations to the Moss Arts Center will be recognized in the 2025-2026 season Moss Arts Center performance programs.



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PK-12 PROGRAMS AT THE MOSS ARTS CENTER

Each year, wildly enthusiastic students — from PK through 12th grade — fill our theatre for free matinee performances by artists from all over the world. They explore our visual arts galleries during school tours and create and learn during hands-on workshops with artists. For many students, visiting the Moss Arts Center is the first time they've ever been to a performing arts facility or gallery. Why do kids need access to the arts? Engaging in artistic activities offers a wide range of skills that they will use throughout their lives.

Learn more at bit.ly/moss-k12.

MOSS ARTS CENTER

Through Sun.,
March 30, 2025



Shaunté Gates *This Is Not a Test*

Ruth C. Horton Gallery

Washington, D.C.-based artist Shaunté Gates' solo exhibition features a survey of mixed-media paintings and densely layered works that combine photography, painting, collage, and found materials, resulting in surreal, dreamlike compositions that merge portraiture, landscape, and architecture.

Charisse Pearlina Weston *I saw the room but darkly dreamed it ...*

*Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery and
Sherwood Payne Quillen '71 Reception Gallery*

New York-based artist Charisse Pearlina Weston's solo exhibition engages with themes of surveillance and tactics of Black refusal by transforming materials associated with observation and control through repetition and reuse.

Free Related Event ***Beyond the Frame Gallery Tours***

Thurs., Feb. 13 and March 13, 12 PM
Moss Arts Center Grand Lobby


Charisse Pearlina Weston; pyrolytic envelop I (into the bright and distributed subject side), 2024; text etched on slumped and folded Mirropane surveillance glass and concrete; 51 1/2 x 22 x 14 1/2 inches; © Charisse Pearlina Weston; courtesy of the artist and Dr. Charles Boyd

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Virginia Tech acknowledges that we live and work on the Tutelo/Monacan People's homeland, and we recognize their continued relationships with their lands and waterways. We further acknowledge that the Morrill Land-Grant College Act (1862) enabled the commonwealth of Virginia to finance and found Virginia Tech through the forced removal of Native Nations from their lands in California and other areas in the West.

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Virginia Tech acknowledges that its Blacksburg campus sits partly on land that was previously the site of the Smithfield and Solitude Plantations, owned by members of the Preston family. Between the 1770s and the 1860s, the Prestons and other local White families that owned parcels of what became Virginia Tech also owned hundreds of enslaved people. Enslaved Black people generated resources that financed Virginia Tech's predecessor institution, the Preston and Olin Institute, and they also worked on the construction of its building.





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Among the many volumes of books that will be available in our annual Book Fair there will be a collection of books of local origin, authors and interest. We'll have literally thousands of books, comics, graphic novels, vinyl



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