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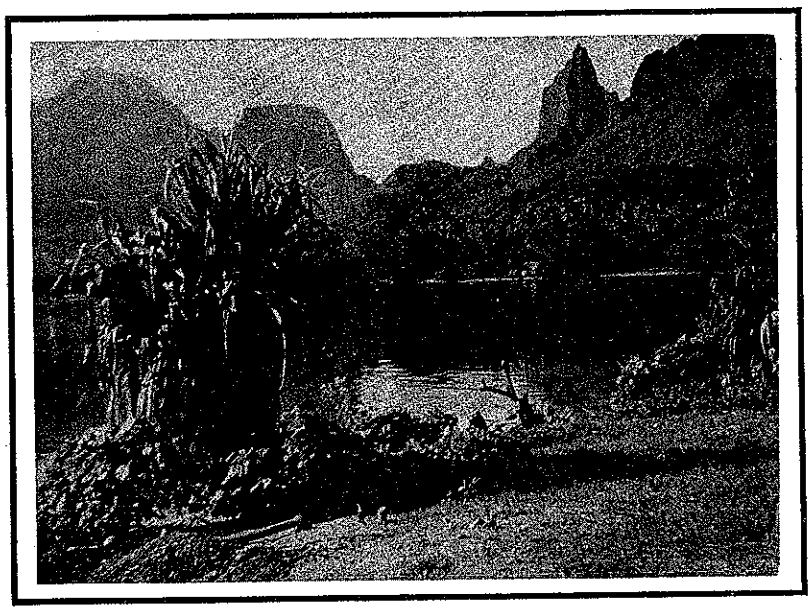
Vol. 24 (1983)

THE MANKIND QUARTERLY



Reprint

OLD ENGLISH HENGEST AS AN INDO-EUROPEAN TWIN HERO

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In both the mythic-historical and folk-literary traditions of Old English, a figure named Hengest is to be found. In the historical (or quasi-historical) account of the coming of the Anglo-Saxons to Britain, e.g. as recorded in King Alfred's 9th century translation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum,* (1) Hengest is described as being one of the two leaders of the Germanic tribes, along with his brother Horsa; both are given a 'divine' genealogy, being traced back ultimately to Woden:

> Waeron ða aerest heora latteowas and heretogan tweġan ġebroðra, Hengest and Horsa. Hi waeron Wihtgylses suna, þaes faeder waes Witta haten, þaes faeder waes Wihta haten, and þaes Wihta faeder waes Woden nemned. (Book I, lines 889-895 (Chapter 15))
>
> 'Then at first their [i.e. the Angles and Saxons and Jutes] leaders and war-chieftains were two brothers, Hengest and Horsa. They were sons of Wihtgyls, whose father was called Witta, whose father was called Wihta, and Wihta's father was named Woden.'

A similar account is to be found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (2) and in general, numerous references to a (quasi-) historical Hengest occur throughout the Old English textual record. (3) A character named Hengest also appears in the Old English

(1) The following quotation from Bede's work is taken from Schipper's edition (1897: 42), following his manuscript B (= #41 of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge), with the substitution of *and* for ⁊ and *g* for ȝ in the manuscripts.

(2) For example, the Laud (Petersborough) Chronicle has the following in the entry for the year 449 (from Thorp 1861):

> Heora heretogan waeron twegen gebroðra. Hengest and Horsa. þa waeron Wihtgilses suna. Wihtgils waes Witting. Witta Wecting. Wecta Wodning.
>
> 'Their leaders were two brothers, Hengest and Horsa. They were the sons of Wihtgils. Wihtgils was the son of Witta, Witta the son of Wecta, Wecta the son of Woden.'

(3) For a review of the historical accounts regarding Hengest, see Aurner (1921).

folk-literature, in the so-called Finn or Finnsburg episode, which is found in lines 1063 to 1159 of *Beowulf,* supplemented by the manuscript fragment generally known as the *Fight at Finnsburg.*

The occurrence of a character with the same name in these two traditions has naturally led to speculation on the part of scholars as to what connection, if any, there was between the two Hengests. The prevailing view until an article by Grein in 1862 held that the two Hengests were the same figure. Grein's negative opinion held sway for some time, though, until Aurner (1921) provided a rebuttal to Grein's stance; the current consensus, bolstered by de Vries (1953) and more recently Ward (1968), seems to favor the earlier view in which the two Hengests were taken to represent the same (quasi-) historical figure. Still, this is a question of a somewhat controversial nature,(4) and so is one for which any additional evidence is welcome. Moreover, even though the *Beowulf* Hengest is embedded in Old English heroic tradition, nonetheless there are certain traits he displays which seem in certain ways to be distinctly unheroic – these are discussed in detail below.

Thus, two interesting problems emerge from a consideration of the character of Hengest in *Beowulf*:

1. What is the source of his puzzling behavior in the Finn episode?
2. What is his relationship with the (quasi-) historical Hengest mentioned, for example, in Bede?

These problems turn out to be inter-related, for an understanding of why Hengest acts as he does in the Finn episode helps to provide some further corroboration of the view that the two Hengests are one and the same figure. In addition, the methodology that can be used to arrive at a solution to these problems is of some intrinsic interest, for it is through a consideration of Indo-European comparative mythology as reflected in Germanic folk-heroic tradition that one can gain insights into Hengest's actions in the Finn episode.

In the Finn episode,(5) Hengest appears as one of the re-

(4) For example, Chambers (1959: 443) doubts the connection of the two Hengests and Dobbie (1953) labels it as 'improbable'.

(5) Numerous details concerning the story of the Finn episode itself are unclear; indeed, Fry (1975: 5) says 'the greatest difficulty in Finnsburh scholarship is establishing the plot.' In this study, I am essentially following the interpretation implied by Wrenn (1973: 138-143) in his textual notes to the Finn episode. While it

tainers of Hnaef of the Half-Danes, who are being besieged by the Eotens,(6) joined by Finn, the king of the Frisians, who is married to Hnaef's sister, Hildeburh. The exact cause of the struggle is not made explicit in *Beowulf,* but it may have involved an attempt on the part of the Half-Danes to rescue Hildeburh from mistreatment at Finn's hands.(7) After holding their position for five days, Hnaef and several of his men are killed in the fight. At this point, the command of the Half-Danes is assumed by Hengest, a valiant warrior, to judge from the fact that Finn feels that without a large force he cannot fight against Hengest, shown by *Beowulf* 1080-1085 (text and translation from Wrenn 1973):

> Wīg ealle fornam / Finnes þegnas, nemne fēaum ānum, / þāēt hē ne mehte on þāēm meðel-stede / wīg Hengeste wiht gefeohtan, / nē ȝā wēa-lafe wige forþringan, / pēodnes ðegne.
>
> 'War had carried off all Finn's retainers excepting only a few, so that he could not in that place of strife at all carry to a finish the fight against Hengest, the prince's [Hnaef's] thane, nor by warfare dislodge the survivors of the grievous disaster.'

Thus, despite the death of their leader Hnaef, the Half-Danes seem to have an advantage in the battle.

However, instead of pressing this apparent advantage, Hengest decides to offer to Finn peace terms which seem generous to the Half-Danes.(8) This is the first of Hengest's seemingly

is not possible here to motivate a decision on all the problematic aspects of the episode nor to examine the evidence favoring or disfavoring any one particular interpretation, it is important to note that virtually all interpretations of the episode (see Fry (op. cit.: 5-25) for an excellent summary of previous views) are in accord on those aspects of the story which are most crucial to the point being made here, such as the fact that Hengest agrees to peace terms with Finn (whether or not he himself offered them), or the fact that Hengest waits through a winter at Finn's, or the fact that Hengest is presented with a sword at the end of his winter's stay at Finn's. See also footnotes 8 and 10.

(6) The Eotens may be the Jutes who came to occupy Kent and the Isle of Wright, though this identification is controversial, as Fry (1974: 13ff.) has discussed. Nothing crucial in the analysis given here for Hengest's actions hinges on the correctness of this identification, and in general, as Williams (1924: 25) points out, the *Eoten* question is largely irrelevant to an understanding of the episode.

(7) This suggestion has been made by Ward (op. cit.: 72), though it is based more on parallels between the Finn episode and other apparent euhemerizations of Dioscuric myths within Germanic traditions (for example the Ermanaric legend) than on any textual evidence from *Beowulf.*

(8) The question of who offers peace terms to whom is one of the unresolved problems concerning the Finn episode (see fottnote 5). Fry (op. cit.) and Wrenn (op.

nonheroic actions in this episode, for one might expect, in keeping with standards of heroic conduct in Old English society, that Hengest should try to avenge the death of his lord Hnaef at the hands of Eotens and Finn. Thus the warrior Hengest seems here to be adopting a more peaceful and passive attitude.

After the peace settlement, Hengest stays on in Friesland with Finn through a long and hard winter. His motive for this, despite the peace terms that were agreed on, seems to be a desire for vengeance against the Eotens and possibly Finn also:

> hē tō gyrn-wraece / swīðor þōhte þonne tō sǣe-lāde
> (*Beowulf* 1138-9)
>
> 'He [i.e. Hengest] thought more about vengeance than about a sea-voyage.'

Some ambivalence on Hengest's part, though, is evident, for he first makes peace, admittedly with Finn but indirectly therefore with the Eotens as well, and only then decides on vengeance.

Furthermore, two aspects of Hengest's taking of vengeance may be significant here.(9) First, Hengest does not actually take vengeance against the Eotens until someone else, namely Hunlafing, spurs him on to it by presenting him with a sword, an act which in the Old English heroic code indicated a retainer's duty to avenge his lord. Second, revenge against Finn is taken not by Hengest himself, but rather by two Danes, Guthlaf and Oslaf; they are presumably in Hengest's command and therefore may be carrying out Hengest's orders, but Hengest is not directly responsible for Finn's death.

Throughout the Finn episode, therefore, Hengest displays a certain ambivalence toward folly persuing his heroic role. He does not immediately avenge Hnaef's death, but rather first makes peace with Finn. He stays on with Finn, apparently to exact vengeance against him and the Eotens, but does not take the initiative – rather, he must be spurred on to action by Honlafing. Finally, he does not personally oversee Finn's death, the last act of vengeance for the death of Hnaef.

Thus, despite his heroic stature and warrior role, Hengest has

cit) feel that it is Hengest who offers the terms, and this is the view I have adopted here; Brodeur (1943: 18), on the other hand, is of the opinion that Finn instigates the peace terms. In any case, as noted in footnote 5, Hengest agrees to peace with Finn, and that fact alone can be taken as counter to his otherwise warrior-like nature.

(9) I am indebted to Prof. Lawrence McKill of the Department of English of the University of Alberta for certain aspects of the following interpretation, presented in class lectures and through handouts. I assume full responsibility, though, for any misinterpretations here.

a passive and even docile streak in his character.(10) Hengest therefore seems to embody both a warrior function and a nonwarrior, i.e. peaceful, function as well. This duality of function is at the heart of the problems of interpretation caused by Hengest's actions in the Finn episode; however, it is this duality of function which becomes understandable in terms of Indo-European comparative mythology, if the *Beowulf* Hengest is the same figure as the (quasi-) historical Hengest.

Throughout Indo-European mythology, one finds references to divine twin-heroes, the most famous of which, perhaps, are those of the Greek tradition, the Dioskouri, Castor and Polydeukes. Divine twin-heroes, though, are found in Indo-Iranian, Italic, and Baltic folk-traditions, as well as in other Indo-European sub-groups. Despite the fact that twin-heroes are to be found outside Indo-European traditions – compare the Hebraic Jacob and Esau, for example – Ward (1968) has managed to isolate several specifically Indo-European thematic traits associated with twin-heroes.

Among those features Ward lists are the following: a connection with horses (e.g. Castor is called ἱππόδαμος 'a breaker of horses' in Iliad 3.237,(11) and one Indic twin-pair is known in the Rig Veda as the Aśvināu 'the two horsemen'); an association with swans (e.g. Zeus approached Leda in the form of a swan when he begot Castor and Plydeukes, and the Aśvināu are said to be pulled by *haṃsa*'s i.e. geese or, possibly, swans, in one verse of the Rig Veda, RV 4.45.4);(12) a dichotomy of

(10) There is a large body of literature on the question of Hengest's motives (see Fry (op. cit.) for discussion) for his apparently ambivalent actions, and some scholars, such as Ayres (1917), have even seen a Hamlet-like tragic dilemma enveloping Hengest. Again, though, as with the issues discussed in footnotes 5 and 8, all that is relevant here is that both types of traits emerge in the Hengest figure, for that is the fact for which my account is attempting to provide an explanation. See also footnote 18.

(11) All quotations of forms and lines from the *Iliad* are taken from the edition of Monro and Allen (1920).

(12) The actual verse in this hymn, addressed to the Aśvināu, runs as follows:

haṃśáso yé vāṃ mádhumanto asrídho hiraṇyaparṇā uhúva uṣarbúdhaḥ / udaprúto mándino mandinispṛśo mádhvo ná mákṣaḥ sávanāni gacchathaḥ

which, following Geldner (1951: 1.478) can be translated:

'Your *swans*, who bring honey and suffer no harm, who have golden feathers and awake at dawn shouting (?), they who swim in water and rejoice, who are Soma-lovers (with them), do you two (i.e. the Aśvināu) go to the pressed-offering of honey, like bees.'

function(13) between a warrior twin and a twin with more of a peaceful disposition, concerned with more domestic tasks (e.g. the twin-sons of the Aśvināu, Nakula and Sahadeva, who figure in the Indic epic the *Mahābhārata*, are a warrior and a peaceful sort, respectively, as shown by Wikander (1957)); an episode in which there is a sea-voyage and/or the rescue of an abducted maiden (generally the betrothed of one or both of the twins), and other characteristics as well.(14)

The Indo-European twin-hero characters appear in Germanic heroic and historical tradition also, in folk-hero pairs such as Sörli and Hamðir, the Norse rescuers of Svanhild,(15) and in king-pairs such as Ibor and Aio, mentioned by the Lombard historian Paulus Diaconus, and Hengest and Horsa, the leaders of the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain. Among the evidence connecting Hengest and Horsa with Indo-European divine twin-figures are the following considerations: they are said to have a divine genealogy, descending ultimately from Woden (see above); their names link them with horses, for *Hengest* means 'stallion' and *Horsa* means 'horse' in Old English;(16) they are connected in some accounts, e.g. the history of Suffridus Petrus, with swans, in that they are said to have had a sister named *Swana*; and finally, they are associated with different functions, for Ward (op. cit.: 55) suggests that in later Anglo-

(13) It is clear that in Indo-European twin mythology, a warlike twin can be distinguished from a more peaceful brother. However, the way in which this dichotomy reflects the Dumézilian threefold function (religio-political, warrior, and economic) for the Indo-European gods is somewhat controversial (Douglas Fame and Gregory Nagy, per litteras).

(14) The reader is referred to Ward (op. cit.) for a fuller account. See also the brief discussion in Polomé (1980: 160-161).

(15) In view of the association, noted above, of the Indo-European twin-heroes with swans, the (real or folk-) etymological connection of the first part of the name *Svan-hild-* with the Germanic word for 'swan' is noteworthy.

(16) Though neither name has an exact parallel outside of Germanic in the meaning 'horse', both have good cognates within Germanic and may have some Indo-European connections as well. *Hengest* is cognate with Old High German *hengist* (Modern German *Hengst*), and Old Norse *hestr* (from **hanhistaR*), among other Germanic forms, and may be cognate with Greek κηκάω 'gush forth' – it thus may be a transferred epithet, 'the jumper (?)' becoming 'stallion.' Similarly, *Horsa* technically is a derivative in **-an-* from the simplex form Old English *hors,* cognate with Old Norse *hross,* Old High German *hros* (Modern German *Ross*) and other Germanic forms, itself perhaps also a transferred epithet ('the runner') if connected with the root **hers-* of Latin *curr-ere* 'to run'. It should also be noted, regarding these names, that it is not uncommon for such hero-pairs to have names with essentially the same meaning or which are connected closely in some way; compare *Romus* (earlier form of *Romulus*) and *Remus* in the Latin tradition.

Saxon legends, 'Hengest...was revered by the warrior classes [while] Horsa...was revered chiefly by farmers and herdsmen.'

One additional feature of Hengest and Horsa connects them with Indo-European twin-heroes, namely the fact that 'Horsa gradually fades from the scene, leaving Hengest as the sole leader of the Anglo-Saxon invaders' (Ward loc. cit.). Bede, for example, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* mentions specifically that Horsa was later killed: (17)

> ...duo fratres Hengist et Horsa; e quibus Horsa postea occisus in bello a Brettonibus, hactenus in orientalibus Cantiae partibus monumentum habet suo nomine insigne. (Book I, chapter 15.)
>
> '...The two brothers Hengest and Horsa; of whom Horsa afterwards was killed in battle by the Britons; even now in eastern parts of Kent a monument has a sign with his name.'

Among Indo-European twin-heroes, it is often the case that one member of the pair disappears — it is generally the passive, docile one that does so. For example, Ward (loc. cit.) points out that 'the Avesta speaks of only one of the pair (Nąŋhaithya) [and] in Roman heroic tradition, Castor alone [and not Pollux] is patron of the soldiers in the cavalry'.

It may well be the case, then, that Hengest's appearing alone in *Beowulf* is a reflection of the part of the Indo-European twin-hero myth in which one of the twins is lost. Ward (op. cit.: 72) feels this to be the case, saying 'there can be little doubt that the Hengest of the Finnsburg legend is identical to the famed Hengest who led the conquest of Briton', and further suggests that the role of the missing brother Horsa is taken over by Hnaef in the Finnsburg episode.

However, in view of Hengest's actions in that episode, another interpretation suggests itself. It has already been shown that Hengest reveals both a docile and a war-like side to his character. In terms of the functions of the Indo-European twins, Hengest actually displays traits of *both* twins, being both a warrior and a more passive type embodied in one figure. Thus, if Hengest in *Beowulf* is taken to be the reflection in one character of a set of Indo-European twin-heroes, then the

(17) Interestingly, this part of Bede's account is not to be found in Alfred's Old English version; compare the quotation given at the beginning of this paper from the Anglo-Saxon version of Bede's *Historia.*

ambivalence he displays in the Finnsburg episode becomes understandable, for he continues both the war-like Hengest and the passive Horsa. In that case, the Hengest of the Finnsburg legend would have to be the same figure as the quasi-historical Hengest who led the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain, for otherwise there would be no reason why this Hengest should display traits of both Hengest and Horsa – it is only (18) through an association in legend of the Finnsburg and *Beowulf* Hengest with the Hengest of Hengest and Horsa that a blending of contradictory characteristics observable in him can be understood and perhaps can even be said to be expected, in view of the common disappearance of one member of a twin pair in Indo-European mythology.

Therefore a consideration of Hengest's characteristics in the Finnsburg legend in the light of Indo-European comparative mythology leads to answers to both problems mentioned above that are associated with this interpretation of his actions and his place in history. Hengest's ambivalence, and consequent unheroic attitude, can be taken to be a reflection of his origin in Indo-European twin-hero mythology, with the corollary that he must therefore be identified with the quasi-historical Hengest, who appears together with an apparent 'twin', Horsa. Ward, of course, paved the way for this interpretation and actually answered the question of the relationship of the two Hengests himself; however, an extensions of his work is possible, for one can draw on Ward's conclusions in order to address the question of Hengest's behavior in the Finnsburg episode, and this extension, in turn, provides a further confirmation of the identity of the two Hengests. This example, then, provides a good illustration of the utility of Indo-European comparative mythology and the ways it can be exploited in dealing with specific problems in particular Indo-European folk-literary traditions.

By way of conclusion, it is instructive to look at the treatment suggested in the literature for another figure in the mythology of an Indo-European sub-group, namely Nestor of the Greek tradition. Nestor is the epitome of wisdom and rational-

(18) Although one might propose that the *Beowulf*-poet has merely 'designed in' ambivalence in Hengest for dramatic effect, such an account provides no explanation for why Hengest is an appropriate character to display such traits; by contrast, the account given here explains the occurrence of these traits in Hengest by linking him to a folk-literary tradition in which such opposite traits might well be expected in a single figure.

ity, famous in Homeric epic as a wise old counselor – he is the person who, for instance, de-emphasizes strength (such as a warrior might have) and stresses intelligence in his advice to his son Antilokhos in Iliad 23.315:

μήτι τοι δρυτόμος μέγ' ἀμείνων ἠὲ βίηφι

'(For it is) through intelligence [μήτι] rather than force [βίηφι] (that) a woodcutter becomes much better'.

In this regard, Nestor seems to be somewhat passive in that he does not take action himself but rather advises others – this is not unlike the docile traits displayed by one member of the Indo-European twin-heroes. On the other hand, though, Nestor, in his youth, displayed fierce warrior skills, for example in the cattleraid he led against the Epeians and a subsequent battle with the Elians related in Iliad 11.670ff.(19) Thus, Nestor appears to embody aspects of both members of an Indo-European twin pair.

Such an analysis, on different grounds, has been proposed by Frame (1978). Frame notes (p. 152, fn. 72) that Nestor's regular epithet in Homer is ἱππότα 'horseman', linking him to the horse-association of the Indo-European twins, and that there are formal parallels in the root of Nestor's name (*nes-*) and that of the name of a set of Vedic Sanskrit twin-heroes, the *Nās-atyā* (another name for the twin-figures, the *Aśvināu* or 'horsemen', mentioned above). He further suggests that 'the question of... Nestor's origins [may] have to do with Indo-European twin mythology' and asks whether 'the Greek Nestor, like the Avestan *Nāŋhaiθya*, [has] become separated from a twin brother.' The answer to this particular question awaits further work,(20) but the parallels between this possible analysis of Nestor and the one proposed here for Hengest are striking indeed.

The interpretation given here for Hengest and for his motives for acting as he does comes to light only through a consideration of Indo-European comparative mythology. This result is significant for the Indo-European studies in general and for the analysis of the Medieval English folk-literary tradition, for it shows the continuation of very old Indo-European motifs until well into the Old English period.

(19) Nestor himself, in his story of Ereuthalion (Iliad 7.132ff.), claims to have been a mighty warrior; see especially Iliad 7.133 and 7.157. I am indebed to Gregory Nagy for drawing my attention to this passage.

(20) Frame, at the end of his book, in fact promises such a study on Nestor.

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