

Heroic Vocabulary and Identity in Old English

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Abstract: *The present article explores several lexical items pertaining to the heroic vocabulary of Old English, and argues that the words hæle and hæleð represent the most appropriate equivalent of the word hero, a loanword from Middle French. There are over twenty-five words related to man in Old English. The legendary Beowulf and the less famous Byrhtnoth are both called eorl. St Andrew and Boethius are both called hæle, Christ and Hrothgar – hæleð. Given the variety of terms and the propensity of Old English literature for the heroic, it is surprisingly difficult to establish a definitive equivalent of hero. Through close readings of such texts as Beowulf, Andreas, Widsith and The Battle of Maldon, this article attempts to show that it is, in fact, the context that makes the hero.*

Keywords: *hero; heroism; Old English; poetry; Beowulf;*

By the time the Greek term ἥρωζ (*hērōs*) concluded its long journey through Latin (*heros*, plural *heroes*), and worked its way into English from Middle French, it was already the late fourteenth century. The lay of the valiant Beowulf, the perilous voyage of *Andreas*, and the hopeless *Battle at Maldon* were forgotten by then, and so was most of the heroic vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon England. Heroism was allegedly one of the main features of early medieval Germanic societies (Earl 30; Klaeber lxxii; Niles 136), yet the Old English term(s) for ‘hero’ gradually lost ground to the loan word from French.

How can such an important native word have such feeble support from the language itself? Perhaps the weakness lay not in the scarcity, but in the wealth of vocabulary for manliness/manhood, and hence heroism in Old English. The greatest hero of Old English poetry, Beowulf, is successively called *beorn*, *ceorl*, *leod*, *eorl*, *wiga*, *mann*, *hyse*, *hæle*, *hæleð*, *wer*. All of these words can mean *man* in Old English.

The list of variants can be extended to contain at least twenty-five words, if all words related to *man* are taken into consideration, including those with a narrower, more specialised meaning, such as words referring to social status (*æðeling* ‘prince’, *cniht* ‘knight’, *maga* ‘a relative’) or to specific warrior-attributes or roles (*ðegn* ‘thane’, *freca* ‘warrior’, *cempa* ‘warrior’).

Contemporary English seems unprepared to cope with such diversity for an apparently simple concept. Nevertheless, while there seems to be no shortage of synonyms for ‘man’ in Old English, it is considerably harder to pin down the suitable word expressing the notion of ‘hero’. This lexical problem

has given scholars ample cause for debate, which resulted in no shortage of exegesis on the matter. The present article focuses on the most relevant terms for ‘hero’ in Old English literature, *hæle*, *hæleð*, and *eorl*, with its abstract variant, *eorlscipe*, and examines if they are appropriate equivalents of the word ‘hero’ and the concept of heroism, and if not, how they can best be translated.

1. *Hæle*

Before going any further, it is important to remark that Old English poetry was highly conventional and formulaic. Leonard J. Peters comments upon its restrictiveness, mainly due to alliteration. This, in turn, has led to a ‘common stock’ of poetic expressions, that tend to occur, under various circumstances, in most Old English heroic works (Peters 851). Andy Orchard remarks that *Beowulf* is based on “two opposing principles, namely repetition and variation” (58). In his study, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, Robinson delves into the style of the poem: “more suggestive than assertive – more oblique than direct” (13). This shows a keen awareness of the meaning of words, both evident and hidden. A closer study of *Beowulf* reveals that, between them, the words *hæle* and *hæleð* occur thirty-two times in the poem. *Hæle* itself, however, appears only twice in direct reference to *Beowulf*, in exactly the same formulaic manner one might find, for example, in *Andreas* (*hæle hildedeor/ hildedior* ‘battle-brave’): once, in line 1646, referencing the Geatish hero, when *Beowulf* and his men return to Heorot with Grendel’s head, and again in line 1816, referring to *Beowulf*, before his departure from Hrothgar’s Hall (Fry 355). Finally, in line 3111, it is used to describe Wiglaf, who asks the Geats to gather wood for *Beowulf*’s funeral pyre after the fight with the dragon. To simply translate *hæle* as ‘man’ in any of these contexts, would slight *Beowulf* and his faithful retainer:

- (1)
- feower scoldon
on þæm wælstenge wærcum geferian
to þæm goldsele Grendles heafod –
oþ ðæt semninga to sele comon
frome fyrdhwate feowertyne
Geata gongan gumdryhten mid
modig on gemonge meodowongas træd.
Ða com in gaan ealdor ðegna
dædcene mon dome gewurþad
hæle hildedeor Hroðgar gretan. (1637-46)

Four had to carry [...]four of them had Four men it took to
Grendel’s head with to bear, with some raise on a war-spear

difficulty on the pole to the golden-hall, strong and brave the fourteen Geats, with their lord proud in the company, marched on the plain near the hall. Then in came marching the lord of thanes, the brave man, basked in glory, the <i>battle-brave hero</i> to greet Hrothgar. ¹	strain, on a battle-pole Grendel's head to the gold-hall, until presently fourteen proud and battle-hardy Geats came to the hall, warriors marching; the lord of those men, mighty in the throng, trod the meadhall-plain. Then the ruler of thanes entered there, daring in actions, honored in fame, <i>battle-brave hero</i> , to greet Hrothgar. (Liuzza, 86)	Grendel's head, laboriously guide it back to the gold-hall. In marching formation they came to the hall-door, the fourteen Geat-men, brave, battle-ready, and the lord of those men marched right among them; proud with retainers he came across fields. That prince of thanes then entered the hall, brave in his deed, honored in fame, <i>a man battle-tested</i> , he greeted Hrothgar. (Chickering, 143)
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Surely, any man from the Geatish hero's host could easily be described as *hildedeor* – otherwise they would not be at his side. Moreover, the three occurrences of the word *hæle* are not randomly chosen; Beowulf's return with Grendel's head is a feat of strength and heroism that could not have been accomplished by anyone else: the translation as 'hero' is obviously warranted in this case. Simply calling Beowulf a 'battle-hardened' or 'battle-experienced man' would hardly seem sufficient; after all, he stands head and shoulders above his host. Even though McNamee suggests Beowulf also exemplifies traits such as humility and charity, here it becomes clear that he embodies Germanic heroic might (Mc Namee 333-34; Orchard 155). As further proof, in the aftermath of the battle, it takes four people merely to carry the head of Grendel on a pole or spear back to Heorot. The poet is also right to call these retainers *hildedeor*. It is highly improbable that Beowulf's retainers had never been through battle or had no warfare experience. However, the poet would arguably be in the wrong to call them *hæle* in this context, while they act under the shadow of Beowulf's achievement. This momentum of understandable awe carries on until Beowulf's departure, roughly two hundred lines later. Indeed, in the poem, this title is at first offered only to Beowulf, and only in the aftermath of his heroic victory against Grendel. Heremod, for example, was too bloodthirsty, while Hrothgar seems to fall short of earning such praise, for

¹ All translations are mine, unless otherwise specified.

he himself admits that, although serving as defender of his people for almost fifty years, he failed to defeat Grendel. Hrothgar gained much wisdom, and is repeatedly called *frod* and *snotor* but his old age and the lack of martial prowess do not allow him to be designated as a hero. After Beowulf's death, it is unsurprisingly Wiglaf who receives the title of *hæle*. He was the only one to aid his lord in his hour of need, and he could also claim some degree of kinship to Beowulf, as the last of their clan. Having survived the battle with the dragon, in which Beowulf lost his life, Wiglaf inherits his Beowulf's title as 'hero'. This particular example is also relevant in discussing *eorl* and *eorlscipe*, as will be seen shortly:

(2)

Het ða gebeodan byre Wihstanes
hæle hildedior hæleða moneg
boldagendra þæt hie bælwudu
feorran feredon folcagende
godum togenes. (3110-4)²

He then commanded, the son of Weohstan, the <i>battle-hardened</i> <i>hero</i> , that many warriors, leaders of folk, fetch from afar wood for the pyre of the good man.	Then the son of Weohstan, brave battle-warrior, let it be made known to many heroes and householders, that they should bring from afar the wood for the pyre to that good one. (Liuzza, 148)	The son of Weohstan, sound in battle, the brave man ordered that they announce to all warriors, owners of dwellings, that men of property from near and far were to bring timber for the king's pyre. (Chickering, 237)
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In the poem *Andreas*, whose formulas and even wording are often inspired by *Beowulf* (Peters; Riedinger), St Andrew heroically rips the prison door and frees Matthew. Andrew's breaking the door is described in words inspired by a passage about Grendel, but the apostle is described with the formula applied to Beowulf, and the ultimate source of this heroism is the action of the Holy Ghost:

² I see no reason to emend *hæle* to *holdra* here. The repetition is most likely intentional and contrasts Wiglaf's new status with the rest of the retinue, see Andrew, §170.

(3)

Duru sona onarn
þurh handhrine haliges gastes,
ond þær in eode, elnes gemyndig,
hæle hildedeor. (999-1003)

The door loudly sprung open through the grip of the Holy Ghost, and there went in, mindful of strength, the *battle-hardened hero*.

Obviously, in accordance with the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition, St Andrew appears warrior-like, surrounded by his *comitatus* (the sailors). His might is not that of an ordinary man, and, like Beowulf, he has the blessing of God. He therefore transcends the simple status of *man*, becoming, like Wiglaf and Beowulf before him a *hæle hildedeor*, a ‘hero’. Arguably, the relevance of the *Andreas* example is debatable. Numerous scholars, most notably Klaeber in his translation of *Beowulf*, and Krapp in his edition of *Andreas*, seem to have silently agreed upon the fact that *Andreas* “exhibits abundant and unmistakable signs of having been written with *Beowulf* as a model” (Klaeber, cxi). However, I would argue that the use of *hæle* in *Andreas* has intrinsic value, and is not a mere echo of *Beowulf*. Technically, Krapp is right that St Andrew’s mission to the Mermedonians is similar to Beowulf’s arrival at the Danish court. However, as Leonard Peters correctly points out, such a parallel does not turn *Andreas* into vulgar plagiarism of *Beowulf* (846). Numerous heroes arrive from many places to slay evil foes in many stories. Peters argues that the *Andreas* poet drew information from a Latin translation of the apocryphal Greek account of St Andrew and St Matthew, rather than from the Old English *Beowulf*. In *Beowulf*, the voyages to and from Hrothgar’s lands are described in roughly thirty lines, fourteen for the initial voyage, and sixteen for the return home respectively. This is clearly not the case with *Andreas*, where the voyage lasts for almost five hundred lines, 469 lines, to be precise. Here, at the very least, Peters is probably right to claim that ‘the *Andreas* poet seems indebted only to his Greek source’ (846). Also, the cannibal Mermedonians need not be echoes of Grendel, for one might as well conclude that any man-eating monster in other mythologies are reminiscent of Beowulf’s foe.

On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the visible influence *Beowulf* had on the *Andreas* poet. Indeed, given the numerous verbal parallels between lines not found elsewhere in the Old English corpus, it is likely the *Andreas* poet had access to a manuscript of *Beowulf* (Riedinger 287, Papahagi, *Wyrð* 328). If he did not blatantly plagiarise the epic, he proudly references it through the repetition of various pairs of lines (Woolf 51). In any case, the usage of *hæle* in *Andreas* is relevant: if the poet plagiarised *Beowulf*, he did so in order to paint the apostle as a Germanic hero, and worked with what the epic

provided him. If he only drew inspiration from *Beowulf* in pursuit of his own work, he recognised and acknowledged the word *hæle* as hero and attributed it to St Andrew.

Hæle, in its weaker meaning of *man(n)*, for example, is present in the *Metres of Boethius*:

(4)

He wæs for weorulde wis, weorðmynða georn
beorn boca gleaw; Boitius
se *hæle* hatte se þone hlisah geþah.

He was wise in the ways of the world, eager for fame, the learned man. Boethius was the name of *the man* who achieved such reputation. (tr. Godden and Irvine 1.49-51)

Hæle may indeed be translated as ‘man’ here. This is not a Germanic heroic context, there are no feats of strength comparable to Beowulf’s monster-slaying. Indeed, Boethius initially sees himself as a victim (Astell 42). Moreover, as opposed to Beowulf, whose “private thoughts or personal hopes or misgivings” are never exposed to the reader, Boethius’ worldview changes from a literal to a figurative one, and only therein does he find his Christian heroism.

2. *Hæleð*

Establishing the closest equivalent of the loan word ‘hero’ in Old English becomes more complicated when it comes to *hæleð/hælep*. Leo Carruthers asserts that there is not enough evidence to justify “giving this word preference as the equivalent of the Greek ‘hero’” (29). Despite going through a weakening of meaning from ‘hero’ to ‘man’, the initial strong sense is very much alive in heroic poetry. If that were not the case, one might be inclined to translate *Widsith*’s line, *ic wæs [...] mid hæðenum ond mid hælepum* (80-81), as “I was [...] among heathens and among men”. Adrian Papahagi is right to remark that such a translation would be a poor choice. The heathens, devoid of God as they may be, still qualify as human beings (Papahagi, “The Anglo-Saxon Hero” 76). A more striking and compelling comparison could be made between Alcuin’s *pagani et perdit* and paragons of Christianity, saints. Given that Germanic traditions permeated the Anglo-Saxon society, it would seem only natural that warrior-saints like St George or even the Germanic representations of Christ in the Saxon *Heliand* or the *Dream of the Rood* would be prime examples (Klinck 109; Cherniss 242; Wolf 203). Christ is depicted as young and heroic leader in the *Dream of the Rood: Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð/ þæt wæs God*

ælmhtig, strang ond stiðmod (“The young hero stripped himself of his gear/— That was God almighty, strong and sturdy”, 39-40; Fulk 429-30). ‘Young man’ is not a fitting translation, especially since Christ is immediately qualified by adjectives ‘almighty’, ‘strong and sturdy’, which evoke heroic traits. With such figures in mind, Widsith’s line begins to take new shape. *Hælepum* here refers not to Christian men in a broad sense, but specifically to saintly heroes, the antagonists of heathens.

In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar is called *snottor hæleð* (*wise man/hero*, 190). The translation ‘man’ would diminish the king’s heroic status. Although he is old and impotent, Hrothgar descended from the mythical hero Scyld Scefing, evoked in the first lines of the poem. Hrothgar’s own achievements and past glories are evoked a few lines before:

(5)

Þa wæs Hroðgare heresped gyfen
wiges weorðmynd þæt him his winemagas
georne hyrdon oðð þæt seo geogoð geweox
magodriht micel. Him on mod bearn
þæt healreced hatan wolde
medoærn micel men gewyrcean
þone ylde bearn æfre gefrunon
ond þær on innan eall gedælan
geongum ond ealdum swylc him god sealde
buton folcscare ond feorum gumena. (64-73)

Then Hrothgar was given success in warfare, glory in battle, so that his followers eagerly followed him, until the young retinue grew into a mighty host. It then came to his mind that he would have his men build a palace, a great mead-hall, which their descendants would remember forever, and there	Then success in war was given to Hrothgar, honor in battle, so that his beloved kinsmen eagerly served him, until the young soldiers grew into a mighty troop of men. It came to his mind that he should order a hall-building, have men make a great mead-house which the sons of men should	Then Hrothgar was given victory in battle, such honor in war that the men of his house eagerly served him, while younger kinsmen grew into strength. It came to his mind that he would command a royal building, a gabled mead-hall fashioned by craftsmen, which the sons of men should hear of forever, and
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deal to both young remember forever, there within he would
and old all that God and there inside he share out among
have him, except would share young and old all
shares of land and the everything with God had given him,
lives of people. young and old that except common land
God had given him, and the lives of men.
except for the (Chickering, 53)
common land and
the lives of men.
(Liuzza, 55)

The poem takes great care to emphasize that Beowulf arrives before no mere man. This serves to elevate both Hrothgar and the threat Grendel poses. Despite enduring *heardra hynða* ('hard humiliations', 166), Hrothgar is not alone to blame for the helplessness of the Danes. Grendel's overwhelming terror is as much a factor as Hrothgar's decrepitude. The king's juvenile heroism is replaced by his *sapientia*, so that he may assist Beowulf (Hansen 61). But Hrothgar is undeniably a hero. He even shares heroic kennings with Beowulf: *mære peoden* ('great lord') is used seven times for Beowulf and five for Hrothgar (Whallon 97).

When Beowulf's Geatish troop, with their plated shields, glimmering mail-shirts and closed mask-helmets, land on Hrothgar's shores, they are a sight to behold, and make a strong impression on the scout. Superiority, both physical and mental, is vital to heroes since it separates them from the rest:

(6)

æfter hæleþum frægn:
Hwanon ferigeað ge fætte scyldas
græge syrcan ond grimhelmas
heresceafta heap? (332-5)

[...] asked about the heroes: Whence are you coming with plated shields, iron shirts and grim helmets, such a band of warriors?

Arguably, most translation problems regarding 'hero' are a matter of contextualization. In *The Battle of Maldon*, Byrhtnoth's title of *hæleða hleo* would make sense if translated as 'protector of men', which he undoubtedly is. However, when his righteousness is confronted with the savagery and godlessness of the Danes, the Anglo-Saxon ealdorman is ennobled, his status elevated: his resolve in the face of adversity cements his heroic stature. Scott Gwara opens his book, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf*, with the statement "that apart from *hæle* or *hæleð* and perhaps the loanword *cempa*, Old

English has no equivalent word for ‘hero’, a loan from Greek *heros*, first attested in 1387 but popularized in its present-day meaning only in the sixteenth century” (13). *Cempa* can also be omitted, the word meaning ‘champion’ or ‘fighter’, a member of a host (*fif hund cempna* ‘...’) and therefore conferring no exclusive or special status, as can be seen in *The Battle of Finnsburg*, where the *drihtlice cempa* (*lordly retinue*) remain nameless and faceless, with few exceptions. Garulf is the only one who is named a ‘hero’, although it is hard to tell why the poet chose to call him so. This is probably due to this heroic holding of the doors, although this is nothing more than speculation. In any case, Gwara’s cautious assessment is preferable to Rolf Bremmer’s categorical statement that “Old English does not have a separate word for ‘hero’” (75). Bremmer further suggests that *eorl*, and its abstract derivative, *eorlscipe*, are working substitutes for *heroism* or *deeds of heroism* – a claim which is addressed next.

3. *Eorl* and *eorlscipe*

Eorlscipe (bravery, dominion) can be only found six times in *Beowulf*, and only a few other times outside the poem in other Old English texts, such as *Widisth*. Of these six, on two important occasions it is paired with the word *efnde efnan* (‘to achieve’, ‘to perform’), which makes it tempting to translate the phrase ‘achieved heroic deeds’, as in Klaeber’s *Beowulf* (324).

Nevertheless, as Raymond Sutherland argues in ‘The Meaning of *Eorlscipe* in *Beowulf*’, *eorlscipe* steers towards duty and dignity rather than blunt heroism (1133). The first occurrence of the word, in line 1727, seems to support this theory:

(7)

Wundor is to secganne
 hu mihtig god manna cynne
 þurh sidne sefan snyttru bryttað
 eard ond *eorlscipe*. (1725-7)

It is a wonder to say how God Almighty, through His profound understanding, bestows upon mankind land and lordship.	It is a wonder to say how mighty God in His great spirit allots wisdom, land and lordship to mankind. (Liuzza, 105)	It is always a wonder how God the Almighty in His full understanding deals out to men their wisdom of mind, their lands, <i>nobility</i> . (Chickering, 149)
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Indeed, it would be wrong to translate *eorlscipe* as ‘heroic deeds’ here. God confers qualities and goods, but the deeds are accomplished by men. It is more sensible to associate the land offered to the implied responsibility of dominion, caretaking, rule. With the offering of *earđ* (earth, land) someone must stand ready to take control of it. Furthermore, in line 2620, there is an obvious rite of succession, where the son is ready to take over the social role of the father, i.e. that of a warrior, and he is also granted various instruments to legitimize this transition of power:

(8)

He frætwe geheold fela missera
bill ond byrnan ođ ðæt his byre mihte
eorlscipe efnan. Swa his ærfæder
geaf him ða mid Geatum guðgewæda... (2620-3)

[Weohstan] held the treasures for many winters, the mail-shirt and sword, until his son was ready to perform his duty. So, his ancestor gave him war equipment together with [the lordship of] the Geats.	He kept that war-gear for a great many years, the blade and byrnie, until his boy could perform brave deeds like his father before him; he gave him among the Geats that battle-gear, every piece of it. (Liuzza, 133)	Weohstan held them for many winters, the mail-shirt and sword, till his son was ready to show as much courage as his graying father. He gave him then — they lived among the Geats— a great deal of armor [...] (Chickering, 207)
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Only after receiving these symbolic gifts and blessings from his father is Wiglaf ready to perform *eorlscipe* (Van Mater, 177). *Eorlscipe efnan* needs not be translated as ‘deeds of heroism’, since the phrase refers to a social function rather than to any type of action. Moreover, as Sutherland claims, the same rite can be seen later in the poem, when mortally wounded Beowulf gives Wiglaf his neck-ring, as well as his armor and weapons, and instructs him to use them well. Once again, the theme of succession becomes apparent (1135). Beowulf is not simply giving Wiglaf his possessions – he bestows them upon his thane in an official and ritual manner. As sole survivor of the Waegmundings and of the mighty battle with the dragon, Wiglaf becomes worthy of his king’s gear. He succeeds the fallen hero not only in legacy, but presumably in station as well, earning his kingly rewards through trial by fire

and combat. This is especially relevant when considering the role fine weaponry and armor played in Anglo-Saxon society. R. H. Kaske pertinently remarks that a weapon is “a device [...] serving primarily to amplify and further illustrate the important Germanic ideal of good retainership” (466). Van Meter quotes Gregory of Tours, who records that the Frankish king Guntram gives his nephew his spear, and thus expresses the transfer of power: *Hoc est indicium, quod tibi omne regnum meum tradidi* (‘This is the sign that I transferred all my power to you’, I.1.353). The similarity is not surprising, since Guntram lived in the same century as Hrothgar, if the information provided in the *Gesta Danorum* is believed.

Moving on, when mourners gather around the now dead king, the poet seems to make a clear distinction between two equally important parts of Beowulf’s life. He states in lines 3172–4 that both his kingship and his heroic life are indeed worthy of praise. Beowulf’s ideal conduct as a hero is placed next to his long reign (Brodeur 1185):

(9)

 ond ymb wer sprecan:
eahtodan *eorlscipe* ond his ellenweorc
duguðum demdon. (3172-4)

... and speak about the man: they praised his <i>kingship</i> and his works of courage, valued his military power.	... and speak of that man; they praised his lordship and his proud deeds judged well his prowess. (Liuzza, 150)	... and speak about the man: they honored his nobility and deeds of courage, their friend’s great prowess. (Chickering, 243)
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Eorlscipe and *ellenweorc* are not redundantly synonymous: *eorlscipe* refers to Beowulf’s kingship or duty, and *ellenweorc* designates his works of valour (Sutherland, 1134).

Other occurrences of *eorlscipe* can be found in the poem *Widsith*. The first one, in line 37, is related to King Offa of the *Ongles* (Angles), also mentioned in *Beowulf* (ll. 1958-1963). More important than Offa’s description is the statement that Alewih of the Danes never had *eorlscipe* over Offa:

(10)

Offa weold Ongle, Alewih Denum;
se wæs þara manna modgast ealra,
no hwæpre he ofer Offan *eorlscipe* fremede. (35-7)

Offa ruled the Angles, Alewih the Danes; he was the proudest of all men, yet he never had *dominion* over Offa.

Despite Alewih's spirited nature, he could never force Offa (and his people) into submission. Offa's own accomplishments are described by the same word:

(11)

Nænig efeneald him *eorlscipe* maran
on orette. Ane sweorde
merce gemærde wið Myrgingum
bi Fifeldore; heoldon forð siþþan
Engle ond Swæfe, swa hit Offa geslog. (40-5)

No contemporary earned more *lordship* than Offa. With his sword he drew a border against the Myrgingas at Fifeldor. Afterwards, the Angles and the Swabians held it as Offa had drawn it.

These deeds have the same degree of gravity and arguably heavier consequences than in *Beowulf*. While Offa is bound by his kingship and his duty to his people, young Beowulf is not. The important aspect to consider here is the difference in status rather than strength or stature. We have no heroic epics sung about Offa, even though he was victorious in single combat against two warriors. Conversely, young Beowulf was not a king, and had no immediate concerns other than his own life and his reputation. Offa's actions carry considerably more weight, not only because they affect him, but also his failure may doom his entire people. The Danes would have continued to suffer at the hands of Grendel had it not been for Beowulf, yet Beowulf's own people were never truly in danger. Offa's *eorlscipe* can be contrasted to Beowulf's *ellenweorc*: the first combines heroic and kingly duties, the other is a paragon of pure heroism.

Finally, at the end of *Widsith*, a final occurrence of *eorlscipe* can be found:

(12)

Swa scriþende gesceapum hweorfað
gleomen gumena geond grunda fela,
þearfe secgað, þoncword sprecap,
simle suð oþþe norð sumne gemetað
gydda gleawne, geofum unhneawne,

se þe fore duguþe wile dom aræran,
eorlscipe æfnan, oppæt eal scæceð,
leoht ond lif somod; lof se gewyrceð,
hafað under heofonum heahfæstne dom. (135-143)

Thus wandering, they who sing songs for men pass over many lands, and tell their story, and give thanks, and ever, south or north, meet someone skilled in songs and free in gifts, who would be raised among his friends to legend, and *hold dominion* till light and life are gone; he who has thus forged himself worthy of praise shall have glory under heaven.

Eorlscipe æfnan should be taken to mean the act of ruling (Sutherland 1137), since the context does not imply heroic deeds. Even so, the earlier passage confirms that the ruler must be above all one to whom “God gives the government of the people”. Any deeds he commits must be motivated by kingship (which involves prudence), not heroism (which is often excessive).

As for the term *eorl*, there is not much to discuss; Bremmer exaggerates by claiming that it can substitute the Greek *hero*. The word means above all a person of higher rank, a nobleman, immediately following the king in authority, like its Old Norse cognate *jarl* (Proto-Germanic *erlaz*, Proto-Norse *erilaz*). The weakening of sense to ‘man’ does not justify its usage as an equivalent of ‘hero’, not to mention that Middle English *erle* and Modern English *earl* have retained the meaning of high-ranking nobleman. In *The Battle of Maldon*, Byrhtnoth is called an *eorl* at the very beginning of the fragment. Also, there is nothing to indicate that events of great importance took place in the missing parts, the scholarly consensus being that the lost fragments narrate how the earl rallies the troops and offer a brief conclusion to the poem. It is highly improbable the poet presented him as a hero before the battle even began. In any case, Byrhtnoth’s heroism stems from his actions, rather than from his title; the earl’s defiance in the face of death grants him heroic status (Cavill 113).

To conclude, it is safe to consider *hæleð* and *hæle* as the closest equivalents of the loan word ‘hero’, and to relegate terms like *eorl* and *eorlscipe* to their different specialized meanings. There is a stark contrast in meaning between *hæleð*, *hæle*, and the generic *man(n)*, a “relatively colourless word with lower alliterative frequency” (Terasawa 22). Heroism is central to Anglo-Saxon poetry, and it seems strange that of all concepts it should be so lexically vexed.

Glossary³

<i>æðeling</i>	man generally, in pl. men, people, used in a good and noble sense, as derivative of <i>æðele</i> (noble); the son of a king, a nobleman, a prince;
<i>beorn</i>	a man, prince, nobleman, chief, general, warrior, soldier;
<i>cempa</i>	a soldier, warrior, champion;
<i>ceorl</i>	a man, husband; a freeman of the lowest class (churl);
<i>cniht</i>	a boy, youth, attendant, servant, knight;
<i>ðegn</i>	a thane, one engaged in a king's service; a soldier, a retainer; where the service is of a public or official character, an officer, minister; a servant, one who does service for another;
<i>drihtlic</i>	lordly, noble, distinguished;
<i>eorl</i>	a man of rank or gentle birth; used of Scandinavians, = Icel. <i>jarl</i> ; as a title in England, taking the place of ealdorman; a hero;
<i>eorlscipe</i>	manliness, bravery, courage, supremacy, nobility, dominion;
<i>freca</i>	a bold man, warrior, hero;
<i>frod</i>	wise, prudent, sage, skillful;
<i>hæle</i>	a man, brave man, hero;
<i>hæleð</i>	a man, warrior, hero;
<i>hilde-deor</i>	stoat in war, brave, battle-brave;
<i>hyse</i>	a young man, warrior;
<i>leod</i>	a man, poet, a prince; in pl. men, people, people of a country;
<i>maga</i>	a relative, a son, a man;
<i>mann</i>	man, a human being of either sex;
<i>snotor</i>	prudent, wise;
<i>wer</i>	a man, a male person;
<i>wiga</i>	one who fights, a man, a warrior;

³ For further reading on the definition and origin of the words, see Bosworth, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 2014.

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