

The Ibn Fadlan Influence

Ibn Fadlan outlined Buliwyf's adventure with the journey to King Rothgar's country as the first part; the battle with the mist monsters as the second; the thirteen's infiltration of the monsters' lair to assassinate the matriarch, the third; and fourth, their clash with the "glowworm," or the full force of a furious Wendol army.

The Ibn Fadlan report was accomplished around 926 A.D. after a three-year adventure with Buliwyf and his Northmen warriors. The Arab ambassador never accomplished fulfilled his mission to the Bulgars, as far as Eaters of the Dead is concerned, and whatever happened to his report—how the Caliph received it—is never known, though it went on to become the earliest known eyewitness account of Viking life and society (6).

Through time the manuscript had fallen into the hands of some careful owners that treated it as treasure. Among these was a thirteenth-century Arab named Yakut ibn-Abdallah who used the facts in the report to complete a geographical lexicon he was putting together. This indicates that the manuscript did survive upheavals through time.

But not intact. Physically, portions have either been gutted by the elements of time and much of its content corrupted by the activities of those whom the story had later inspired. Not all later owners afforded the manuscript with the same regard as ibn-Abdallah did. The centuries saw translations and commentaries attempted by authors who saw value of the Ibn Fadlan report. There were also versions which were too inaccurate to be called translations, but were never intended to replace the original. This is not uncommon. A reader may want to reach out to other readers with his own version of a story he found inspiring. So instead of referring them the original text, he takes a creative step and present an edition in which his own revisions have already been applied. Crichton makes a brief and sweeping summary of these fabrications; in so doing, he hints on the extent of the popularity Ibn Fadlan's tale had gone.

According to Crichton's summary of the manuscript, fragments of it and of other versions, even of those "of dubious origin" (7) have been discovered all over Europe with the earliest dating back to 1047 A.D. One notable composition goes back to the sixteenth century, written in Latin, and contains the material about the Oguz Turks and passages relating the battle with the Wendol. It has been claimed that the translation was derived directly from an Arabic text (7). Another text which allegedly contains Ibn Fadlan's relationship with the Caliph was found in a monastery situated northeast of Thessalonica, Greece. The date of writing remains uncertain but was penned in Medieval Latin (7).

Crichton seemed to have lamented on the lack of scholarly concern of past experts to consider what treasure they had in the Ibn Fadlan report which eventually led to its partial disintegration. On the other hand, we should also not readily devalue the documents that came after the original, wielding their inaccuracies. In a way we can understand that these were acclamation for the inspiration delivered by the original as it passed from owner to owner, from one place to another. These are undoubtedly a manifestation of the influence of the Ibn Fadlan manuscript,

its account copied into a mold that altered the complexion and merged with a new author's creative opinion of what should have been.

While Yakut ibn-Abdallah looked to the Ibn Fadlan report as a source of information for his geographical lexicon, one Anglo-Saxon manuscript seemed to have taken great interest in the prowess of Buliwyf. This particular piece of writing contained most of the names, places, and events, that appeared in the original, yet rearranged into what later became one of greatest heroic epics ever written.

Beowulf

The Anglo-Saxon manuscript does not make mention of any author from the deserts of the Middle East but experts trace its style from a sophisticated man of letters writing for a courtly audience. It does not speak of a foreign thirteenth warrior or any spiritual group of warriors but a passage mentions the hero sailing to Rothgar's kingdom in a company of fifteen. It does not speak any tribe of monsters that attack in the mist, but affirms one rampaging brute and its mother that had slaughtered Rothgar's bravest. And though the names Rothgar, Hygelac, Wulfgar, Ecgtheow, and the Hurot Hall all appear in this scripture, "Buliwyf" does not.

The name of the hero of this story is Beowulf and he had been summoned by his uncle, King Rothgar, to contain a menace called by many titles in the scriptures—the Fiend of Hell, that grim Hobgoblin, the greedy one, the fierce one, that skulking Shade of Death, this Foe of mankind, Stalker lone by night, the hugest of night horrors—but ultimately goes by the name Grendel. As in the Ibn Fadlan story, this monster was lured by the revelry in the Hurot Hall massacring thirty of Rothgar's mightiest Danes. The great mead hall was shut down after that night, boarded up tight as with all the other houses in the kingdom by nightfall. But this was about to end with the arrival of Beowulf.

Exactly as with Buliwyf, Beowulf orders the reopening of the Hurot Hall and the revival of festivities to taunt Grendel into facing him in the same place where many worthy warriors faced their unholy death. It was not a foreign trek for Grendel and the monster thought it would be like before when lesser flesh faced his psychotic rampage and were slain. But it was not like before for defying him this night was the strongest of the strong, a man who was blessed by the gods themselves. In Ibn Fadlan's report, the gory encounter left behind an arm of one of the Wendol raiders; it was no different in the story of Beowulf where Grendel retreats severely beaten and his left arm, torn from the shoulder, in the possession of Beowulf. The monster staggers back to his lair where he shortly dies of his injuries.

Rothgar and his Danes found this a matter to celebrate. For Buliwyf, it was a situation more ominous than before. The Wendols they faced were but an experimental force which for the first time was sent back reeling after a bloody clash. The Vikings were sure of a second bigger Wendol attack that would shortly come after and of which would surely destroy them all (8). Buliwyf and his men knew that their only recourse to save the kingdom would be a preemptive attack on the lair of the Wendol. So notwithstanding fatigue and weakness resulting from the

recent skirmish, Buliwyf and his commandos immediately set out on horseback to take the battle to the enemy.

This was not how Beowulf saw the situation. A great triumphal banquet was set for him with songs sung of his prowess and great treasure lavished for his reward. But when the festive thunder had ended and all had retired, a terrible reprisal yet greater than before stormed into the Hurot Hall and butchered the valiant Danes of Rothgar and Beowulf's Geats. None, not even Beowulf, had foreseen the vengeful fury of Grendel's mother, and not this soon. Now it was vengeance for vengeance, and Beowulf set his courage towards the snake-infested lair of the monster.

To augment his god-given strength and ensure the death of the monster, Beowulf was handed a magical sword which bore the name Runding. In Ibn Fadlan's account, Runding was known as "the power of the ancients, the power of the giants" (9), a power he was entitled to wield being a chieftain. But it was also represented as a sword and with it he took with him and used it till his final battle with the Wendol (10).

Beowulf soon descends into the den of the monster and successfully slays the menace. Buliwyf likewise, considerably debilitating the enemy force but emerges from the lair mortally wounded from his battle with the mother. He did finish her off in a duel, but not without a price: "A silver pin, such as a pin for hair, was buried in his stomach: the same pin trembled with each heartbeat. Buliwyf plucked it forth, and there was a gush of blood. Yet he did not sink to his knees mortally wounded, but rather he stood and gave the order to leave the cave" (11). By the time the Viking commandos reached the safety of their exit, Buliwyf crumpled to the ground. His lieutenant Ecthgow took charge of him till they made it home to Rothgar's kingdom (12).

The adventure of Buliwyf and his brave Viking fighters took place in a span of a few months. There were three battles with the Wendols each spaced a few hours. The imminence of the final battle came "an hour before dawn" (13), when the full force of the Wendol army came in a trail of torch fire that looked like a "glowworm dragon" (14), as Herger, Ibn Fadlan's interpreter, described it. In the Beowulf story, it took fifty years after Beowulf had become king of the Geats when the threat of a glowworm descends on his kingdom.

Unlike the glowworm dragon faced by Buliwyf, Beowulf faced a real dragon. The shadow of this dragon emerges after a thief steals a precious jeweled goblet from its treasure cache. The loss enrages the firebreather and takes it out on the hapless homes and properties of Beowulf's kingdom. Beowulf, daring and bold as ever but now weighed down with many years, raises his sword against the dragon and bring his defiance straight to its lair. Accompanied by his army of Geats and his right-hand man Wiglaf, he storms the dragon's lair and slays it at the cost, however, of his own life. It proved to be Beowulf's final battle. To Wiglaf's embarrassment, he witnessed how what were supposed to be fearless Geat warriors scamper and flee from the dragon. Only Wiglaf came to the aid of the single-minded Beowulf when he rushed and was mortally wounded by the mighty beast. After the terrific battle, only Wiglaf and a wounded dying Beowulf stood victorious. Beowulf confides to Wiglaf of his final requests: that a tower be built in

his name at the edge of the sea and the dragon's treasure be buried beside it. Wiglaf lights Beowulf's funeral pyre, collects his ashes in the end and stores it in the tower that bears his name.

Buliwyf met his end in his battle with the glowworm but not without dispelling its danger forever. His body suffered many blows, Ibn Fadlan describes: "His body was hacked by blades of a dozen adversaries, his visage and form was soaked in his own still-warm blood" (15). His men stayed brave and loyal to him till the end. Out of a party of thirteen valiant men, only four remained. Among those who bolted and scurried like a coward in the sight of all was Rothgar's son, Wiglif (15). King Rothgar himself was abashed at the craven action of his son. This Ibn Fadlan noted including the shame that overwhelmed Rothgar when he himself had not joined the battle, a choice unbecoming of a Viking king though "he was a very old man" (15). When Buliwyf's body was carried into his presence, Rothgar was faced with his own shame. War was what the Viking was made for, and it was the death in battle that glorified his name forever (16). For Buliwyf, Ibn Fadlan had this to say:

"Buliwyf, pale as the mist itself, garbed in white and bound in his wounds, stood erect upon the land of the kingdom of Rothgar. And on his shoulders sat two black ravens, one to each side; and at this sight the Northmen screamed of his coming, and they raised their weapons into the air and howled for the battle. Now Buliwyf never spoke, nor did he look to one side or another; nor did he give sign of recognition to any man but he walked with measured pace forward, beyond the line of the fortification, and there he awaited the onslaught of the Wendol. The ravens flew off, and he gripped his sword Runding, and met the attack" (17).

Ibn Fadlan described Buliwyf in the way any Northman could conceive their chief Viking god Odin.

Despite the variations shared by the Beowulf story and the Ibn Fadlan report, it is easy to award the Beowulf story as one of the several offspring of Ibn Fadlan's work. However, such an appraisal will not go unchallenged. It is basically understood that before the version of the Beowulf story we know today was penned in the tenth century A.D. , an earlier composition of it was made two hundred years before, around the eighth century A.D. (18). The writer was believed to be an Anglo-Saxon poet and a Christian, and may have even been a monk. As far as the records go, this was the first time the Beowulf saga saw paper and ink. As far as the Beowulf tradition goes, however, experts believe that the epic had already been heavily circulating in Scandinavia as part of oral tradition over a hundred years before it hit Anglo-Saxon paper and ink! Estimates today favor the Beowulf story to have been composed in the sixth century A.D. after the death of the actual Hygelac, king of the Geats in 523 A.D., known in the legend to be Beowulf's lord and uncle (19). Hrothgar, the story's king of the Danes, is another character based on historical fact dated back to the sixth century A.D. and so is the inspiration for his famous mead hall, Hurot, discovered on recent 2013 excavations in Denmark (20).

Evidences, therefore, go as far as the sixth century. Around this period, Scandinavian denizens, mainly the Danes, were migrating over to Great Britain. It was a new land for Beowulf to conquer. But two hundred years later, a Christian monk in this new land turned the tables on Beowulf and infused the tale with Christian associations for its new Christianized audience, among whom were the very people who brought the epic into British shores. Another two hundred years later, around the time of Ibn Fadlan, a second edition of Beowulf was accomplished in the same Christian tradition as the first one. If the Ibn Fadlan report is not the second edition of the famous legend, would it have been possible that Ibn Fadlan was instead influenced by the Beowulf tale?

What we can be sure of is that Michael Crichton's novel *Eaters of the Dead* is an off-shoot of the Beowulf tale. In December 1992, Crichton wrote this statement in closing to the book's afterword: "When *Eaters of the Dead* was first published, this playful version of Beowulf received a rather irritable reception from reviewers, as if I had desecrated a monument. But Beowulf scholars all seem to enjoy it, and many have written to say so" (21).

In the said portion of the book, Crichton explained that he derived his inspiration for the book out of a "dare" (22) when a friend classified Beowulf as one of today's "great bores" (22), an important literary accomplishment of Western civilization but has now fallen from its ancient appeal to be willingly read by the present generation. He even believed that it was possible that elements of the famous Anglo-Saxon legend were based on facts as were those of the Trojan War, the Minoan Age of Crete, and the route of Odysseus. So in the manner of how the mentioned tales turned out to be in real life, Crichton decided to peel away the fantastic in Beowulf and translate it into credible images of what he believed ancient eyes would have perceived as a Grendel monster, its mother, and a dragon.

As part of his recreation, Crichton had also designed his tale to be a first-hand account of an outsider since part of his objective was to reveal the factual core of the Beowulf legend. A narrative arranged in the form of a traveler's journal therefore conveyed the perfect mood for his details. And he knew just the guy to carry out this task: one factual Arab diplomat who lived in the tenth century A.D. and traveled into the mists of the North to live with the Russian Volgan Vikings known as the Rus. Crichton and Ibn Fadlan were old college buddies, if you know what I mean, and after many years, the first one got in contact with the latter by gathering the English-translated fragments of the Arab's report Crichton could find. From these, he formed the launch pad from where Ibn Fadlan would be hauled into a fantastic mission involving mist monsters and mighty masters of the deep uncharted eighth-century North.