



# Scyld & Scef

EXPANDING THE ANALOGUES

ALEXANDER M. BRUCE

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ALEXANDER M. BRUCE

WITH A FOREWORD BY PAUL E. SZARMACH



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*To my very patient wife, Kathryn,  
and our two beautiful daughters, Allison and Carolyn*

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# Foreword

In this collection of texts and documents preceded by an analytical discussion Alexander Bruce presents all the extant medieval notices and references to Scyld and Scef, two shadowy figures of Scandinavian mythology who are linked in that glorious, proleptic opening of *Beowulf* where the poet celebrates Scyld Scefing ['Scyld son of Sheaf'] by exclaiming, with the help of all editors, "þæt wæs god cyning!" ['that was a good king!'], and by continuing with a sketch of Scyld's successful kingship. This brief account in *Beowulf*, as well as the mention in *Widsið*, are the most prominent references to the Scyld and Scef figures. At the head of the Danish royal line, Scyld gives his name to his direct successors in the poem, who are Scyldings ['sons of Scyld']. For the first-time student of *Beowulf* the significance of Scyld is apparent in the initial rhetorical emphasis, somewhat murky as it is, and soon the significance becomes bewildering and off-putting for Scyld does not reappear to swell an anthem or fill a theme. Subsequent readings of the poem allow a reader the opportunity to become comfortable with the poet's allusive, sometimes minimalist method where the mention of a name contains a narrative world implied within, just as three straight lines crowned by daubs of color can become a bouquet through the brush of a modern artist. Scyld Scefing, however, is more than an example of poetic technique, and it is this more that Bruce gives by his trilingual pursuit of Scyld and Scef in the world of Germanic myth. Who are Scyld and Scef? Bruce gives us the information and the framework of understanding for answering the question.

Because this is a book of primary materials and analysis, the cunning reader may choose to review the primary materials first in Part II and then consider Bruce's "take" on the material, thus mitigating to a degree the sin of mediation, which some post-modernists see as the original sin in all scholarship. The cunning reader will have to be trilingual, however, and less like John Gower and his trilingualism and more like Nabokov and his nimbleness in the face of language evidence over time. In previous eras such language

facility might have been close to the norm for those coming to the study of early medieval culture. Accordingly, Bruce presents the original sources as well as translations of them to give the contemporary reader the evidence and a rendering of it. Where possible, Bruce offers authoritative translations of other scholars to help underline and ensure the validity of his presentation. Where such authorities are not present, he necessarily offers his own renderings. The absence of authoritative translations shows that the territory Bruce has entered in his pursuit of *Scyld* and *Scef* is uncharted in many regions. The apparatus of the primary materials also documents the absence of recent editions and the sometime presence of nineteenth-century ones, accessible only in the best research libraries. In many senses the texts and translations are “new” evidence.

Perhaps only a specialist in medieval cultural forms might be able to read the primary evidence with method and understanding, not to mention intellectual appreciation. The literary formalist of the new critical stripe never could read the genealogical list as a recognized genre, though good work in the poetry of Walt Whitman does provide a clue as to how to come to terms with a list of evocative names. For most readers, then, Bruce must offer a framework of understanding. The first chapter, which begins with an echo of Alcuin’s famous rhetorical question regarding Ingeld and Christ, clears away the underbrush to make way for the subject. Without doubt there are the perduring problems that bedevil the medieval field: a paucity of evidence and the discontinuity of the evidence, in this case the forty-three sources written across some nine centuries. The pitfalls are evident, as in any attempt to reconstruct the ur-narrative of *Scyld*, that imagined “saga” from which the various fragments descend in mock Platonic freefall, as early analysis of myth and narrative would always seek to find. Terminology, especially in the postmodern climate, is a vexed matter. Bruce uses “source” to mean that material he uses to construct the world of *Scyld* and *Scef* or the material any other writer uses to construct his record; he uses “analogue” restrictively and conservatively to mean any similar narrative element in another work *that must name Scyld or Scef as such*. The specific restriction on “analogue” makes it possible to limit the field and to preclude the never-ending search for yet another motif that is like one found in *Scyld* and *Scef* narrative elements. Bruce’s review of past scholarship helps clarify his own stance. The reader will find no Wagnerian strains in the analysis, no Romantic nostalgia for Germania, and no attempt to recuperate an ancient Germania through scholarship. The reader will find a functional analysis of *Scyld* and *Scef* varying in the evidence, supported by the best recent scholarship.

*Scyld* and *Scef* have a noteworthy presence in Anglo-Saxon England not only through its primary literary monument, *Beowulf*, but also through genealogies and records. Incorporating the scholarship of current and past generations, including, among others, Roberta Frank, Thomas D. Hill,

Nicholas Howe, and Fred C. Robinson, Bruce takes a functional approach to Scandinavian mythology whereby the rivalry between the warrior class and the agricultural class, more cosmically represented by the clash between the Vanir and the Æsir, works itself out to a resolution. In *Widsið* Sceaƿ(a) is a civilizer of a warlike tribe, in *Beowulf* Scyld Scefing is a model king who establishes a strong and ordered society. The extensive presence of Scyld and Scef in the prose genealogies might very well come as a surprise to those who know and study only Anglo-Saxon poetry. Bruce looks at five different sources: the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (in four versions), Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, Æthelweard's *Chronicle*, the *Textus Roffensis*, and *An Eleventh-Century Anglo-Saxon Illustrated Miscellany*. Here Bruce follows the recent trend in seeking to incorporate both prose and poetry into a more comprehensive model of Anglo-Saxon culture beyond the partial record afforded by poetry alone. Within the Christian-pagan framework Scyld and especially Scef helped the Anglo-Saxons define their cultural origins relative to Germanic heroes and Judeo-Christian patriarchs. The Germanic tribes did not receive Christian revelation early enough, and they did need to reverence their past (and not to repudiate their ancestors) when they embraced Christianity. In this respect the Anglo-Saxons maintained their dual origins and the tension these origins may have inspired. By comparison, Charlemagne ruled an empire that seemed to consider itself "God's Chosen People" (or as Donald Bullough has put it, "God acquired another Chosen People") and an empire that subsumed the Germanic past in a different way, letting Latin dominate so triumphantly over the vernacular, for example. In post-Conquest records (see Table 2) Scyld and Scef continue as figures from the Germanic past. As scholars who work on chronicles of this period readily know, the patterns of borrowing and transmission are intricate and difficult, especially when lost records can be assumed or factored into the scholarly equation. Yet Scyld and Scef play their legendary roles as part of the foundation myth and as part of the link to the Germanic past. There are no new elaborations on their narrative, and by contrast with earlier accounts they are figures in reduction. Despite the many political, social, and religious changes in the 400 years of the High and Late Middle Ages in England, especially the growing Christianization, Scyld and Scef live on in legend.

Bruce provides two chapters on Icelandic and Danish sources for stories and legends of Scyld and Scef. Now, more than a generation ago Brigid Brophy pooh-poohed the Englishness of *Beowulf* because of its Scandinavian setting and heroes, but Bruce helps current readers to see the pan-Scandinavianism in which one might situate *Beowulf*. Indeed, Robert Bjork and John Niles document the Scandinavian temper of the poem and its study in their *Beowulf Handbook*. Bruce participates in this Scandinavian resurgence, as he sketches the dominant characteristics of Scyld and Scef in Icelandic and Danish sources. It has always been an axiom in the study of "Northern narra-

tive" that Icelandic sources, though almost all later than Anglo-Saxon sources, can be seen to reflect earlier myth. The Icelandic Scyld, more prominent than Scef by far, is a son of Odin and a warrior figure among the Æsir and the Vanir, and in some accounts he is considered a god. In Danish sources Scyld, although still the stuff of legend and the embodiment of the ideal of kingship, has a historical dimension as the founder of the Danish royal line. The Danish Scyld can overcome a bear in single-handed, unarmed combat, and yet he can serve as a model, Christian king against whom all successive kings can be measured. In fact, the Danish royal house is still called "Scyldings."

Bruce invites us to look at the past looking at its past and to see how the people who celebrated Scyld and Scef constructed their cultural identity. Recent voices have warned contemporary scholars to be wary of their own search for origins in the records they study, but this self-consciousness about method and its results, which has its salutary gains, cannot come at the expense of the historicity of truth. Who they were and where they came from were questions, formulated sometimes differently perhaps, asked by the medieval past of itself. Bruce not only shows his readers how his sources asked and answered those questions, but he allows the medieval past its own right to be. We shall seek the same understanding and the same right from those who come after us.

Accordingly, I am very pleased to offer a few remarks to open this welcome book. The pleasure is double, really, for Dr. Bruce revised his manuscript while participating in "Anglo-Saxon England," a Summer Institute sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1999 and directed by me at the Richard Rawlinson Center for Anglo-Saxon Studies and Manuscript Research, The Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University. Dr. Bruce's excellent participation during those six weeks stimulated his colleagues and his subsequent successful completion of his book will stimulate our common field.

Paul E. Szarmach  
Western Michigan University

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And finally, I must thank my wife, Kathryn, who, since I first discovered Old English, has put up with countless hours of my reading, writing, proofing, cursing, rewriting . . . and all in some obscure language. Without her, I would be incomplete.

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PART I

# Commentary



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Why Scyld and Scef?

What has Scyld Scefing to do with *Beowulf*?

Or, for that matter, what has Scyld or his ancestor Scef to do with *Widsið*, or with the histories of Asser and of Æthelweard, or with the chronicles of William of Malmesbury and of John of Worcester, or with the legends compiled by Snorri Sturluson and Saxo Grammaticus, or with the thirty-five other works of the medieval Germanic world that mention either of the two figures? Why do Scyld and Scef keep appearing in these poems, genealogies, and histories?

These two figures, who are often presented with Scef either as the father of Scyld (as in the composite hero Scyld Scefing of *Beowulf*) or as a rather immediate ancestor (as in the Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic genealogies), would seem to have some significance: we do find them in forty-three works from a wide range of cultures within the medieval Germanic world.<sup>1</sup> But the nature of that significance is hard to judge, for references to Scyld and Scef, though frequent, lack the expansion and detail we desire; although some writers such as Saxo Grammaticus and Æthelweard develop either a Scyld or Scef figure in some detail, many others, including the writers of the “*Annales Ryenses*” and the “*Reges Danorum*,” mention the two only as names in longer lists of kings. On the one hand, the number and variety of references underscore the significance of Scyld and Scef, for if proportion is a measure of importance, then the fact that the two heroes appear in forty-three often unconnected sources written across nine centuries suggests that this pair was important to those who wrote of them, either individually or together. But on the other hand, the range of scope and the inconsistent development of the Scyld and Scef moments in the forty-three accounts complicate matters; having a clearly defined sense of the heroes’ functions and meanings has proven elusive. Their ephemeral presence ultimately tantalizes scholars who want to understand the nature of these characters and what they meant to the cultures that included them in their histories and legends.

As no one story gives a full, complete, all-encompassing and completely thorough account of Scyld or Scef, we must identify all these various analogues and, through a close and detailed examination of them, achieve a greater appreciation for and understanding of the role the two figures played in the several Germanic cultures that wrote of them. Such exploration and examination do not mean an attempt to identify or create a unified, coherent, “historical” Scyld or Scef nor an effort to construct the single “true” Scyld Scefing narrative and thereby build a better *Beowulf*. Instead, the goal is to gain a fuller appreciation of the various Germanic cultures that recognized Scyld and Scef by understanding more completely how the forms and manifestations of the mythological figures—themselves the coalescence of different legendary and semihistorical elements—have shifted over time and from one culture to another. This sort of collation and analysis of all Scyld and Scef figures is long overdue, for through this analysis of each of these various and sometimes contradictory sources, we will gain a much more complete understanding of the cultural roles Scyld and Scef played for the different societies that incorporated the legendary figures in their textual records—and with that understanding, a fuller appreciation of those societies themselves.

Before proceeding with a study of Scyld and Scef, the two terms *sources* and *analogues* should be defined. Within the context of this study, I use the term *source* in two ways. First, *source* is used to refer to any written work of the medieval Germanic world containing a reference to a Scyld and/or a Scef figure; that is, these genealogies, histories, and poems are sources for our understanding of the two figures.<sup>2</sup> Second, as will become more evident in the following discussions of the development of the various genealogical lists and historical chronicles, *source* may be used in the sense that one writer used another writer’s work as the source for his own record.<sup>3</sup> What defines an analogue remains a subjective matter<sup>4</sup>; for this study, I have chosen to limit the definition of *analogues* to include only those works that contain a Scyld or Scef figure named as such. I am not including the works that refer to “Scyldings” without naming Scyld or Scef explicitly, nor am I including works without a Scyld or Scef figure even if they contain episodes that parallel those found in works with Scyld or Scef figures. For example, I am not considering the many Scandinavian works that praise the Scylding line yet never mention Scyld; I am not considering moments like the funeral of King Hake from the *Ynglinga Saga*, even though such a tale offers a clear situational analogue to the funeral of Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf*.<sup>5</sup> Even so, as the ensuing discussion of Scyld and Scef will show, we still have analogues that show clear “genetic” relationship (that is, one writer of one work clearly used that of another, even to the point of being copied nearly verbatim) and ones that are similar—but not *simply* or *merely* similar, for the repetition not only of the names of the heroes (with slight and expected variations in spelling) but also of the *functions* of the heroes supports the argument for a strong con-

nection between the various works. Although this latter connection might not always be described as “genetic,” it can certainly be deemed “cultural,” as the analogues stem from common and closely related Germanic traditions.<sup>6</sup>

Although there are many sources (both Anglo-Saxon and otherwise) that refer to Scyld and Scef, certainly the best known text that makes mention of Scyld and Scef is *Beowulf*, and for many individuals the research presented in this book may be most relevant to their study of the Anglo-Saxon poem. In *Beowulf*, the role of Scyld Scefing, brief as it is, stands out noticeably. He appears as a child among the leaderless Danes, sent across the water by seemingly divine powers for seemingly divine reasons. He leads the Danes to glory, conquering neighboring tribes, bringing them under his authority, and exacting tribute from them. He has a son, thereby establishing a ruling dynasty and thus preventing the Danes from ever being lordless again. Then he dies, and his burial ship, loaded with treasures by his appreciative people, takes him back over the waves into the unknown whence he came. This entire narrative of Scyld Scefing, often referred to as the “Scyld Episode,” stands as an arguably separate fifty-two-line introduction to the much longer poem of *Beowulf*. Yet Scyld Scefing’s story clearly serves a purpose in that work; as J. R. R. Tolkien explained in his “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” “[*Beowulf*] is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death.”<sup>7</sup> By this definition of the poem, it is clear that the Scyld Episode is a fitting prologue, a microcosm of the greater structure of *Beowulf*, for in it we are told of Scyld Scefing’s “rising and setting.” His tale adds much to our understanding of the poem; it provides a balanced point of comparison, creating what Fred Robinson called a “significant but unexpressed relationship” between the life of Scyld Scefing and the life of the central hero.<sup>8</sup> With such interpretations of the Scyld Episode, we might be encouraged to feel satisfied in our efforts to understand the role of Scyld Scefing; we know what Scyld Scefing has to do with *Beowulf*.

Except that we don’t. We may have answered the question at one level, but there is an underlying issue: Why Scyld Scefing? Why invoke his name? Even as we read *Beowulf* and learn something about the nature of Scyld and, indirectly, something of Scef, we realize that there must have been more elaborate legends surrounding Scyld and his progenitor. We know this precisely because the poem does not tell the audience the full story; it merely alludes to a tale outside the main narrative, a tale the audience presumably would be expected to know. But because we reading the poem centuries later do not have a complete understanding of who Scyld and Scef were, of how the audience understood the heroes, we are at a loss to explain the full impact of the Scyld Episode on *Beowulf* as a whole. Perhaps we cannot even say we

appreciate *Beowulf* completely if we do not specifically understand the presence of Scyld, son of Scef. Similarly, because no single work telling the entire story of either Scyld or Scef has been found and scholars have thus been frustrated in their attempts to understand the full nature and function of Scyld and Scef, we cannot even be sure we completely appreciate the other forty-two individual works that mention either of the two heroes.

Our best recourse, then, is to gather all the analogues and examine them not individually but collectively, looking for patterns, identifications, and even contradictions in presentation. Doing so is the only way to gain a fuller knowledge of the place these two figures occupied in the genealogies, histories, and poems that included them; we will also gain a fuller understanding of the beliefs and traditions of the people who made the references to Scyld and Scef.

Such analysis of the Scyld Scefing analogues has been attempted. In his 1959 revision of *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem*, R. W. Chambers quotes several analogues for the Scyld Scefing legend, including the *Skjoldunga Saga*, Saxo Grammaticus' *The History of the Danes*, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *Widsið*, Æthelweard's *Chronicle*, and William of Malmesbury's *De Gestis Regum Anglorum Libri Quinque*.<sup>9</sup> Harmonizing the sources despite their frequently conflicting details, Chambers develops an explanation of the nature of Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf*. He identifies the underlying essence of the two legendary or semimythical figures who contributed to the composite character of Scyld Scefing; Chambers concludes that "Scyld" was "probably a mere eponym of the power of the Scylding kings of Denmark," and that the Scef figure was "regarded as an ancient king" associated with a fertility myth.<sup>10</sup> Such conclusions have etymological support: the Anglo-Saxon *Scyld*, related to the Old Norse *Skiold*, has clearly martial overtones, for it means *shield*; *Scef* in turn is the Anglo-Saxon word for *sheaf*.<sup>11</sup> Additionally supporting Chambers' separation of Scyld Scefing into his composite elements is the fact that many of the forty-three works refer to just one of the two and that others, although preserving their familial relationship, make the two heroes very distinct. It is fair, then, to consider the two mythical figures as individual creations. Yet as we identify and examine the individual traits of Scyld (also spelled *Sceldwea* and *Skiold*) and Scef (variously identified as *Seskef*, *Sescef*, and *Sceafa*), we must also consider that they do appear in conjunction; though each has his distinct characteristics, there are points of relationship between them.

The more than forty years since Chambers' publication have seen little scholarly exploration of these issues, and more recent scholars have continued to accept Chambers' conclusions. Betty Cox, writing in 1971, depends upon Chambers' findings in her discussion of the Scyld Episode in her *Cruces of "Beowulf"*.<sup>12</sup> In his notes to the Scyld Episode in his 1977 dual-language edition of *Beowulf*, Howell D. Chickering draws upon Chambers'

study yet blurs the distinction between Scyld and Scef in his comments that Scyld Scefing is “faintly reminiscent of an earlier vegetation deity.”<sup>13</sup> In an article published in 1989, R. D. Fulk does the same, providing an analogue to Scyld Scefing’s arrival that emphasizes his role as a fertility god.<sup>14</sup> Craig R. Davis also relies upon the conclusions of Chambers in his 1996 *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England*, and in his 1996 “*Beowulf’s* Scyld Scefing Episode: Some Norse and Finnish Analogues,” Clive Tolley cites Chambers as he discusses the fertility aspect of Scef. However, although Chambers’ work does offer a useful starting point to a study of the two heroes, it should not necessarily be considered the final point for scholars seeking to understand completely the nature of the legendary figures. Chambers sought to identify only the background of the specific composite figure Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf*, and he provided much useful information to that end; this study, though, hopes to explore the wider issue of understanding the multiple roles of both Scyld and Scef within all those Germanic communities that wrote of them. That search must entail an examination of all works featuring Scyld or Scef figures, not just those reviewed by Chambers, and the discussion ought to be relevant to all works that mention the heroes, not just *Beowulf*. Chambers’ thoughts on the nature of Scyld Scefing—that he was at once a warrior figure and a fertility figure—may indeed prove to be well grounded, but we should also look at all the evidence, add the research of the past decades to Chambers’ work, and broaden scholarly perspective beyond studies of *Beowulf* in order to have the most satisfactory understanding of the function (or rather *functions*) of Scyld and Scef.

Such a detailed exploration of the Scyld and Scef figures involves finding and examining brief references in a variety of works written across the centuries in a number of different languages, and G. N. Garmonsway, Jacqueline Simpson, and Hilda Ellis Davidson have provided an excellent resource in this endeavor with their “*Beowulf*” and *Its Analogues*. In this work, Garmonsway, Simpson, and Davidson list analogues for every character mentioned in *Beowulf*, including Scyld Scefing, noting a total of fifteen works (including *Beowulf*) in which Scyld or Scef figures appear and providing English translations for almost all of them.<sup>15</sup> To some, this survey has been deemed thorough and complete; the editors of the two-volume collection *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry* omit any examination of *Beowulf* because, as they state in their preface, “good modern translations of [its] sources and analogues already exist.”<sup>16</sup> But Garmonsway, Simpson, and Davidson’s work is dissatisfying in four ways. First, “*Beowulf*” and *Its Analogues* does not provide a full account for every source; several sources are recounted very briefly, and only a paraphrase is provided for the passage in the “*Annales Ryenses*.” Second, the catalogue in “*Beowulf*” and *Its Analogues* is not complete, containing just over a third of the sources. I have found twenty-eight accounts containing references to Scyld or Scef that Gar-

monsway, Simpson, and Davidson did not supply, including the “*Annales Slesuicenses*”; Peter Olaf’s *Chronica Regum Danorum*; a summary of Saxo Grammaticus’ history; the English histories of Roger of Hoveden, Roger of Wendover, Richard of Cirencester, and John of Worcester; several Anglo-Norman genealogies; the Scandinavian “*Ættartölur*” and “*Viðbætur við Olafs Sögu hins Helga*”; an ancient Icelandic fragment; and numerous genealogies of Danish kings. Third, “*Beowulf*” and *Its Analogues* does not provide the text in the original language for any of the accounts; scholars may not readily compare the translation against its source. Finally, there is no discussion of the nature of Scyld and Scef as depicted in the various sources. Granted, providing such discussion was not the objective of Garmonsway, Simpson, and Davidson’s collection of analogues; but it is precisely that commentary we need if we are to grasp the functions of Scyld and Scef. The Scyld figure in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum* is different from the Scyld figure in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*; such differences invite examination and discussion.

Having analyzed the problems associated with studying this figure, we turn now to an exploration of strategies for finding some solutions. This book thus has two objectives. First, it will expand the catalogue of Garmonsway, Simpson, and Davidson, providing scholars with a focused, detailed, and thorough look at all the works of the medieval period that include a Scyld or Scef figure; Part II will include the relevant passages from all the texts in both the original language and translation. Second, this book will broaden the efforts of Chambers by attempting to understand the role of the Scyld or Scef figures in these works and subsequently speculating upon reasons why the two legendary heroes were important to the various English and Scandinavian people who wrote of them.

To begin the exploration, Chapter 2 of this study will turn first to the presence of Scyld and Scef in the Old English poems *Beowulf* and *Widsið*. The reference to a Scef figure in *Widsið* is certainly very brief, but his inclusion among the list of great Germanic kings is significant, for the poem is not only one of the earliest Old English poems but more importantly (at least for this study) provides the earliest reference to either figure. *Beowulf*, the only other Anglo-Saxon poem that tells of either Scyld or Scef, offers much fuller insight into Scyld Scefing’s nature. As noted, critics such as Tolkien, Robinson, and Leyerle contend that the tale of the character Scyld Scefing serves as a microcosm of the entire poem, placing the rise and fall of Beowulf himself in a clearer perspective through a comparison to the rise and fall of Scyld Scefing.<sup>17</sup> His presence, though, exceeds the bounds of the prologue, for the poet reminds the audience throughout the poem of Scyld’s importance as a dynastic leader, referring to the Danes as “Scyldings” on several occasions. These two poems suggest a longer, fuller legend surrounding the composite figure of Scyld Scefing, a legend that scholars must piece together from other works.