group who were would have understood this to be linking the politics of the present to the positive values of yore. Indeed, the fact that the Latinity and erudition of the drafters in question is rightly celebrated here as exceptional is in obvious tension with the implicit assumption that there was a broader audience ready for, and responsive to, the overtones of their flights of fancy. This does not mean that such meta-messages may not have been intended; it does, however, make one wonder how often they were understood in the ways here suggested.

Yet such healthy scepticism should not distract from the author’s achievements. Taking advantage of the signal advances in recent years in the editing of Anglo-Saxon charters, Snook has provided a rich, sensitive assessment not just of the literary content of these documents but also of the possible political and ecclesiastical significances of these same literary qualities. Furthermore, he presents his findings with an admirable clarity and a wry humour that are the antithesis of his source material. Anyone concerned with pre-Conquest England and its literary culture will be enriched by his work, which, moreover, demands and deserves to be read in full.

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In 1981 Kevin Kiernan controversially claimed that Beowulf was contemporary with its sole extant manuscript which, he argued, was copied during the reign of King Cnut (1016–35). Prior to Kiernan, scholars had usually assigned the poem’s copying to the reign(s) of Æthelred the Unready (978–1013, 1014–16) and it was widely, though not universally, accepted that the manuscript itself was a late copy of an already ancient poem. Helen Damico’s new monograph locates both the copying of the manuscript and the poem’s composition even later than Kiernan, proposing that the first two-thirds of Beowulf allegorize the struggle over the English royal succession which took place after Cnut’s death in 1035. Given the radical nature of Damico’s thesis and the ongoing, at times heated, arguments concerning the poem’s date, this book will be of interest to all Beowulf scholars.

In four chapters Damico lays out a series of what she contends are striking parallels between certain episodes in the poem and some of the major political events of the first half of the eleventh century. Chapter 1 argues that in describing the beheadings of Æschere (lines 1279–99, 1408–24) and Grendel (lines 1573a–90),
the Beowulf poet ‘imaginatively refashioned’ (p. 50) the deaths of two rivals for the English throne after Cnut’s death, Alfred atheling and Harold Harefoot. Chapter 2 proposes that Grendel’s attacks on Heorot reflect the eleventh-century Danish invasions of England. Chapters 3 and 4 explore links between various accounts of Cnut’s two queens, Ælfgifu of Northampton and Emma of Normandy, and Grendel’s mother and Wealhtheow respectively, as well suggesting that illustrations in the Harley Psalter lie behind the poem’s depiction of royal banquets.

There are three main problems with Damico’s central thesis that Beowulf is an eleventh-century poem: first, there is in fact a considerable body of evidence – linguistic, metrical, paleographical, and cultural – pointing to the poem’s origins before the Viking Age, as demonstrated by the 2014 volume of essays edited by Leonard Neidorf; secondly, many of the texts which Damico posits as sources, such as MS C of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle or the Encomium Emmae Reginae, might just as easily have been influenced by Beowulf or works resembling it; and thirdly, her reading of the poem is highly selective, almost entirely overlooking the final third save for a brief discussion of the dragon-fight in the Conclusion.

Kenneth Sisam’s argument that Beowulf, together with its companion-pieces, was copied into the Nowell Codex primarily because of the compiler’s interest in monsters – rather than for any perceived relevance to contemporary politics – remains one of the more widely accepted theories about the poem’s transmission. While some of the parallels highlighted by Damico are certainly tantalizing, few readers will be persuaded by the argument advanced here that Beowulf (or at least the section corresponding to Scribe A’s stint) was composed in the mid-eleventh century as an elaborate political allegory centred on the power struggle which followed Cnut’s death. But Damico nonetheless provides a fresh and valuable re-examination of the richness of Anglo-Danish literature and court culture in the early to mid-eleventh century, bringing Beowulf into conversation with a wealth of insular and continental Latin and Old Norse texts. As such, this entertaining and lively book raises important questions about how Beowulf might have been read in the decades following its final copying.

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A single glossator and scribe, Aldred, is identified in autograph colophons to two Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, the great Lindisfarne Gospels and the Durham Ritual