

NOTES ON THE RECORDINGS OF THREE ANGLO-SAXON ELEGIES

BENJAMIN BAGBY

IN 2003 JOHN Miles Foley and I began discussing the possibility of recording some of the Anglo-Saxon elegies which he hoped to discuss in a book he was planning. Unfortunately, that project was never realized. My own work with these texts has continued over the years, and for this collection I have recorded three of the pieces which have meant the most to me as a performer, remembering that friendly pact sealed long ago with John:¹

1. *Beowulf* lines 26–52,² Scyld Scefing's funeral (4:27)
2. *Deor* (6:25)
3. *The Wanderer* (13:56)

Scyld Scefing's funeral is excerpted from *Beowulf*, which I have been performing since 1990 and for which John served as an important mentor and guiding spirit. *Deor* is a text which any professional "singer of tales" can relate to, expressing the nature of our craft and how insecure we performers can be in the real world. And finally, the *Wanderer* beckons as a summit of the art of elegy, in which the singer with his harp explores multiple shades of vulnerability, regret, and loneliness embodied by the image of an unidentified, uprooted soul. It is a masterpiece which cries out for performance.

These recordings were made in late January, 2016, in Cologne, Germany. The producer was Norbert Rodenkirchen and the sound engineer Reinhard Kobialka (Audio Studio Topaz). The making of the recordings was supported by a grant from the Vassar College Research Committee, and the recordings are housed in The Frederick Ferris Thompson Memorial Library at Vassar College. They are freely available in the folder Bagby at the url cited in n. 1.

The two harps used in my performances were made by Rainer Thureau (Wiesbaden, Germany) in 1991 and 1997. They are precise reconstructions based on the fragments of instruments dating from the seventh century, found in a burial site near Oberflacht, near Stuttgart (Germany). One of these fragmentary harps is exhibited in the Baden-Württembergisches Landesmuseum Stuttgart. The remains of the second harp were destroyed in Berlin in 1945. The tunings of these instruments remain a mystery to us, although one documented tuning does survive from an early tenth-century monastic source.³ I have used this tuning for *Deor*, as well as two other tunings which I discuss in

1 These recordings can be found at https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B_DdIKm_nVgTkpzZUVsbWV6a1U.

2 I cite *Beowulf* from Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*.

3 Bagby, "Beowulf, the Edda, and the Performance of Medieval Epic."

my conversation with Mark Amodio in this volume. Additional information can be found on my website: www.BagbyBeowulf.com.

My work on the Anglo-Saxon elegies will certainly continue, with the addition of other musicians, to eventually produce an entire program. I am indebted to John Foley for that initial push from thought into deed, and to Mark Amodio for making it possible.

Author Biography Vocalist, harper, and medievalist Benjamin Bagby has been an important figure in the field of medieval musical performance for over 35 years. Since 1977, when he and the late Barbara Thornton co-founded the medieval music ensemble Sequentia, his time has been almost entirely devoted to the research, performance, and recording work of the ensemble. Apart from this, he is deeply involved with the solo performance of Anglo-Saxon and Germanic oral poetry: his acclaimed performance of *Beowulf* has been heard worldwide and was released as a DVD in 2007. He has received the Howard Mayer Brown Lifetime Achievement Award from Early Music America, as well as the Artist of the Year Award by REMA, the European Early Music Network. In addition to researching and creating over seventy-five programs for Sequentia, he has published widely, writing about medieval performance practice. As a guest lecturer and professor, he has taught courses and workshops all over Europe and North America. Between 2005 and 2018 he taught medieval music performance practice at the Sorbonne, University of Paris. He currently teaches medieval music performance at the Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen, Germany.