

Hrothwulf's time with Hrothgar: *sipþan* in *Widsith*, lines 45-49

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In the middle of *Widsith* is a sentence in lines 45-49 in which the Danes Hrothwulf and his uncle Hrothgar are said to keep kinship for the longest time, either after, or before, or even as they repulse a raid by Ingeld, king of the Heathobards. At issue for the temporal relation between clauses is the subordinating conjunction *sipþan* at the head of line 47, on whose interpretation much depends concerning not only *Widsith*, but also and especially the relationship of this poem to *Beowulf* in which Hrothulf and Hrothgar have bigger parts to play. The present essay, revisiting the range of temporal unities in OE *sipþan* clauses in Old English verse, while also discussing a related problem, the semantic influence of the superlative adverb *lengest* near the end of line 45, will attempt to establish the most plausible temporal relation between the principal and subordinate clauses in these lines. My conclusion will address the degree to which this relation aligns the story of Danish royals in *Widsith* with that of their namesakes in *Beowulf*.

It is not a foregone conclusion that the five-line allusion to Hrothwulf and Hrothgar in *Widsith*, a poetic catalogue of heroes and kings preserved in the Exeter Book, refers to the story about Danes and Heathobards which is told in *Beowulf*. *Widsith's* relation to *Beowulf* is unknown. From the fact, however, that no King Beowulf (nor indeed Hygelac) appears near these Danish royals in *Widsith* or anywhere else in that poem, it may be supposed that its poet did not know of *Beowulf*; consequently, that any verbal resemblance between the poems is owed to a common source. Perhaps the outcome of this enquiry with *sipþan* may strengthen or weaken the last supposition. Depending on how one takes this word, which relates the time of one clause to that of another, *Widsith* celebrates the family bond of Hrothwulf and Hrothgar as a long-established fact before, or after, or as they rout an invasion:

Hroþwulf ond Hroðgar heoldon lengest
sibbe ætsomne suhtorfædran,
sipþan hy forwræcon wicinga cynn
ond Ingeldes ord forbigdan,
forheowan æt Heorote Heaðobeardna þrym.
(*Widsith*, lines 45-49)

The text is taken from Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson in an appendix to their edition of *Beowulf* (1998: 198). For their part ten years later, the editors of *Klaeber's Beowulf* (4th edition) quote these lines without translation and discuss them further as an analogue to the peace maintained between uncle and nephew in *Beowulf*, lines 1163-5, on which more later (Fulk, Bjork and Niles, 2008: lv, clxxvii). In that *Klaeber's Beowulf* assumes one story common to *Widsith* and *Beowulf* which 'differs markedly

from what we find in Scandinavian sources', it treats their two Ingeld stories as identical and uses this identity to dissociate Hroth(w)ulf and Hrothgar from their Norse namesakes in *Hrólfs saga*, Hrólf and Hróarr, who are left to one side (Fulk, Bjork and Niles, 2008: clxxxiv). However, the case for identity has yet to be made.

This may happen here with *sipþan*, which, as a conjunction, 'is used indifferently to express the relations *ex quo* and *postquam*' (Adams, 1907: 101). Mitchell and Robinson translate the lines from *Widsith* in this way, putting the time reference in the *sipþan* clause before that of the main clause:

Hrothwulf and Hrothgar kept peace together for a very long time, uncle and nephew, when they had driven away the race of the Vikings and crushed the army of Ingeld, destroyed at Heorot the host of the Heathobards. (1998: 199)

The literary implication of their pluperfect, 'had driven away', is that *Widsith* refers to a Danish narrative in which Hrothwulf and Hrothgar start their long association after Ingeld's attack; not before it, as in *Beowulf*. The poet of *Beowulf* puts this attack some time in the future, after Beowulf's slaying of the Grendels and his return to Geatland. *Beowulf*'s first allusion to the attack consists of a startling *chiaroscuro* image of Heorot's destruction at the end of the sentence which proclaims its creation. Once built, the poet says, the new hall stands glorious while it waits for the flames of battle:

ne wæs hit lenge þa gen
þæt se ecghete aþumsweorum
æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde.
(*Beowulf*, lines 83-5; Mitchell and Robinson, 1998: 51)

[Nor was it then any longer
that the blade-hate between father- and son-in-law
must awake after murderous battle.]

More than twelve years later in the poem, in lines 2020-68, Beowulf comes home from Heorot and predicts to his uncle Hygelac that Ingeld's wedding with Freawaru, Hrothgar's daughter, will erupt into violence and renew an old war between his tribe and the Heathobards (Mitchell and Robinson, 1998: 116-18). As Beowulf sees it, a Heathobard veteran will incite one of his own to attack a Danish guest who carries the sword of the young man's dad, whom his father had killed in battle. Beowulf says that the young Dane will pay for 'Wiðergyld' ('Payback', line 2051) with his own life, a bigger fight will break out, and Ingeld's love for his new wife will cool (lines 2064-6). This prediction, whose accuracy the leading analogue in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* (ca. 1200) tends to confirm (North, 2006: 118-24; Fulk, Bjork and Niles, 2008: 229), appears borne out by the Heathobard attack that we see in *Widsith*. That the attack is imminent in *Beowulf*, moreover, may be seen in the

poet's unusual choice of 'se hrefn blaca' ('the black raven', line 1801) as a bird to sing at the break of day, for the raven is a shiny bird of battle that looks forward to a meal; that this one 'bliðheort bodade' ('announced with joyful heart', line 1802) the sunrise on the morning of Beowulf's departure points to a battle in the near future (North, 2006: 108).

Here is a story which must be foreknown to the audience of *Beowulf*, if these hints are to make sense there. As for the poet's earlier allusion to Ingeld's attack, the likeness between the adverb or adjective 'lenge' above on *Beowulf*, line 83, and the superlative 'lengest' in *Widsith*, line 45, appears to align the two versions of his story even more closely. *Klaeber's Beowulf* notes nonetheless a 'considerable uncertainty' about whether 'lenge' is either an adjective or adverb for 'at hand' or 'soon'. The latter meaning is not attested, in contrast to one such as 'pertaining to', which is. Briefly considering and rejecting a case of *gelenge* ('belonging to'), the editors propose treating 'lenge' as a comparative, a form of *lēng* ('longer'), with the meaning that the enmity between in-laws will arise no later than the burning it will cause: litotes for sooner, as in 'It was sooner yet that the hostility was to arise' (Fulk, Bjork and Niles, 2008: 120). There is an example of a comparative *lēnge* in an Easter Sunday homily of the late tenth century: 'Efne hit bið gelic þe man mid wætere þone weallendan lig ofgeote þæt he lenge ne mot rixian' ('It is as if one might douse the welling flame with water, so that the flame may not hold sway for longer'; Schaefer, 1972: 249-59; Cameron no. B3.2.7). Although this adverbial reading of 'ne wæs hit lenge þa gen' (*Beowulf*, line 83) compares two moments of trouble in the future without reference to the narrative present, it does obviate the immediate semantic difficulty of 'pertaining to' and 'belonging to' for 'lenge' in this case. Taking 'lenge' as a comparative adverb also brings *Beowulf*'s Ingeld-story closer to that in *Widsith*, which features a superlative adverb 'lengest' in line 45. Let us return to this adverb later.

A more pressing question is how we regard the word 'siþþan' on line 47 of *Widsith*. Mitchell defines *siþþan* as either an adverb or a conjunction. 'Frequently', he allows, 'it cannot be determined which we have' (Mitchell, 1985: II, 239, §2418). This is especially so in poetry, in which the order of elements is more ambiguous than it is in prose (1985: II, 291, §2356; II, 351-2, §2669). If *siþþan* were an adverb in this case, the matter would be quickly resolved, in that the meaning (with sufficient temporal flexibility in the preterite) would be 'Then they drove the race of the Vikings away'. That is an order of events which aligns with the situation in *Beowulf*. Even though 'forbigdan' is clause final on line 48, which points to subordination, the early position of the verb in 'siþþan hy forwraecon' on line 47 might speak for *siþþan* as an adverb in a principal clause. Nonetheless, it seems better to follow Mitchell and to read this 'siþþan' as a conjunction.

Mitchell's definition of this use of *siþþan* is that the conjunction is primarily temporal, 'but often with some suggestion of a causal relationship' (1985: II, 356-7, §2676), although causality in this word has been discounted in Old English prose (Adams, 1907: 103). *Siþþan* may be used for 'after' (when the action of the principal

clause is thought to be completed), or ‘since’ (where it is thought that the action of the principal clause is still happening). Moreover, in Mitchell’s section on verbs, as in his and Robinson’s translation of *Widsith* above, he determines that ‘the time of reference of a subordinated *sipþan* clause with a past tense is always anterior to that of the principle clause’ (1985: I, 416-17, §995; on prose, see also Adams, 1907: 101). Let us see some examples.

Of the first category, ‘after’, with an anterior tense in the subordinate clause, there may be *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. The cross says in *The Dream of the Rood*, lines 48-9: ‘Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed, / begoten of þæs guman sidan, siððan he hæfde his gast onsended’ (‘I was all steamed with blood, poured on from the man’s side, after he had sent on his spirit’; Mitchell and Robinson, 2001: 260). There is a similar example in *Guthlac A*, lines 722-4): ‘Ða wæs Guðlaces gæst geblissad, / sipþan Bartholomeus aboden hæfde / godes ærendu’ (‘Then the spirit of Guthlac was gladdened, after Bartholomew had announced God’s mission’; Roberts, 1979: 104). When the same poem, however, shows Guthlac to be living in the fens ‘þær he mongum wearð / bysen on Brytene sipþan biorg gestah’ (lines 174-5; *ibid.*: 88), the meaning of ‘sipþan’ hovers between ‘after’ and ‘since’. Insofar as Guthlac, no longer alive in the poet’s present, once inspired people with his example, the meaning might be ‘after’, with ‘wearð’ as a preterite, as in ‘where he became an example to many among the people of Britain, after he climbed up the mound’. However, since people should still follow Guthlac’s example after his death, the tense might be perfect, as in ‘where he has become an example, since he climbed up the mound’.

A *sipþan* conjunction means unambiguously ‘since’ at the start of *The Wife’s Lament*, whose speaker says that she can tell ‘hwæt ic yrmþa gebad, sipþan ic up <a>weox’ (‘what sufferings I have endured, since I grew up’, line 3; Mitchell and Robinson, 2001: 265). These are sufferings which, since they are ‘no ma þonne nu’ (‘never more than now’, line 4), are set to continue. In this category there is often a correlative adverb of time, such as *æþr* ‘before’, as in Hrothgar’s negative claim to Beowulf, on retiring for the night, that:

‘Næfre ic ænegum men ær alyfde,
 siþðan ic hond ond rond hebban mihte,
 ðryþærn Dena buton þe nu ða.’
 (*Beowulf*, lines 655-7; Mitchell and Robinson, 1998: 69)

[‘Never before have I trusted any man,
 since I could lift hand and shield,
 but you now, with the Danes’ mighty building.’]

The period of time to which the ‘since’ use of this *sipþan* conjunction refers may extend back to a point in the manner of *ex quo*. Mitchell illustrates this with Eve in *Genesis B*, as she strains to convince Adam that the apple has genuine powers:

‘Wearð me on hige leohte
utan and innan, siðþan ic þæs ofættes onbat.’
(*Genesis B*, lines 676-7; Krapp, 1931)

[‘My mind has been lit up
outside and in, since I bit this piece of fruit.’]

Since the effects have been immediate, the meaning is *ex quo*, with a shade of causality; and since they are still with her, the action of the principal clause is not complete: a perfect tense is in order for ‘wearð’. There is a similar use of *siðþan* earlier in *Genesis B*, in lines 611-14, when the demon indicates to Eve that her superpowers started with her obedience to his instruction. From the Old English translation of *Augustine’s Soliloquies*, Mitchell also quotes the end of a remark by Augustine, that Reason has explained enough ‘þæt ælces mannes sawl nu si, and a beo, and a wære syððan god ærest þone forman man gescop’ (‘what man’s soul is, will be and always has been, since God first made the foremost man’; Carnicelli, 1969: 91, lines 9-11). Here the subjunctive preterite ‘wære’ serves as a perfect in the principal clause, while its correlative adverb ‘a’ (‘always’) confirms that mankind has not been discontinued since the creation of Adam.

An uncompleted action with *ex quo* is confirmed by ‘since’ for *siðþan* in a different way towards the end of *The Battle of Brunanburh* (in 937), in which ‘Ne wearð wæl mare / on þis eiglande æfre gieta / folces gefylled beforan þissum,’ (‘No greater carnage of people on this island has ever yet been completed before this time,’ lines 65-7; Campbell, 1938: 94-5), according to old books, ‘siðþan eastan hider Engle and Seaxe up becoman’ (‘since Angles and Saxons came here up from the east’, lines 69-70). As with ‘wære’ in the *Soliloquies* above, the poet’s backward-looking comparison of the present with the past encourages a perfect tense in ‘wearð’, in line with Mitchell’s observation that in such cases ‘the preterite verb-forms in the principal clauses serve as perfects’ (1985: II, 354, §2671).

By now it should be clear that the conjunction ‘siðþan’ on line 47 of *Widsith* differs from all above types of ‘since’. The triumph against Heathobard invaders in that passage is anterior to an action in the principal clause which is complete. However long Hrothwulf and Hrothgar held their family together, neither is still living – although Hrothwulf might be if we match him with King Hrólfr in a burial mound in a tale in two versions of *Landnámabók* (Jakob, 1986: 212-13). It seems thus that ‘siðþan’ tends more to ‘after’ on line 47 of *Widsith*. This is a meaning to which Mitchell and Robinson, despite giving ‘when’ for *siðþan* here, point with their use of pluperfect tenses for ‘forwraecon’, ‘forbigdan’ and ‘forheowan’ on lines 47-9: ‘kept peace for a very long time, (...) when they had driven away, crushed and cut down the Vikings’. Their reading of the conjunction forces a meaning where the victory is meant to have occurred before Hrothwulf and Hrothgar preserve their unity for ‘a very long time’, or ‘the longest time’.

The literary implication of this temporal relation is that in *Widsith* Hrothgar is not as old as he is in *Beowulf*, whose poet calls the king ‘eald ond anhar’ (‘aged and grizzled’, line 357) and ‘gamolfeax’ (‘grey-haired’, line 608). In *Beowulf* Hrothgar calls himself ‘wintrum frod’ (‘wise in winters’, line 1724) in his sword-hilt speech, nor does his wife Wealhtheow dissent in public earlier when she compares his age with Hrothulf’s, allowing cruelly for ‘gyf þu ær þonne he, / wine Scildinga, worold oflættest’ (‘if you, friend of Scyldings, should leave the world sooner than he’, lines 1182-3). Does *Widsith* derive in this way from a tradition in which uncle and nephew are closer in age? If it does, its relationship with *Beowulf* is probably not so close.

This is so if ‘siþþan’ on line 47 of *Widsith* means ‘after’ in either a general or precise sense. If it means ‘after’ generally, with no reference to the time in which the action in the principal clause began (Mitchell, 1985: II, 355, §2673), a gap is implied between the two actions, whereby the rout of Heathobards precedes Hrothgar’s special family unity by some time. If it means ‘after’ precisely, that gap narrows, so that ‘siþþan’ serves as ‘from the time that’ in the linear sense *ex quo*, whereby the unity between Hrothwulf and Hrothgar begins as soon as they rout the Heathobards (see also Mitchell, *ibid.*). In either case, *Widsith*’s background story would diverge from *Beowulf*’s, in which their namesakes are seen carousing before the predicted attack as if by habit (lines 1013-17) and beholding Wealhtheow as she draws near to

þær þa godan twegen
 sæton suhtergefæderan; þa gyt wæs hiera sib ætgædere,
 æghwylc oðrum trywe. (*Beowulf*, lines 1163-5)

[where the two generous men
 were sitting, uncle and nephew; still at this time was their kindred together,
 each man true to the other.]

In this poem’s version of Danish history, the bond between Hrothulf and Hrothgar is long established. And yet here we see another formulaic resemblance with *Widsith*: the word ‘suhtergefæderan’ in *Beowulf*, in combination with a ‘sib’ which has long held together and is now about to split, seems drawn from the same source or stock as the line ‘sibbe ætsomne suhtorfædran’ with which the poet of *Widsith* (line 46) encapsulates the longer poem he knows. Is his source so divergent from that of the poet of *Beowulf*? This seems unlikely, for even besides the four names (Hroth(w)ulf, Hrothgar, Ingeld, Heathobards), their poems have three words in common (‘lenge(st)’, ‘sib(be)’, ‘suhtor(ge)fæd(e)ran’). For this reason too we cannot read ‘siþþan’ in *Widsith*, line 47, as ‘after’ in the two senses above.

Nonetheless, ‘siþþan’ here in *Widsith* may serve as ‘after’ with lighter reference to the time of action in the principal clause. There is an example of this again in *Guthlac A* (Roberts, 1979: 104), in which the saint takes heart, ‘siþþan Bartholomeus aboden hæfde / godes ærendu’ (‘after Bartholomew had announced God’s mission,’ lines 723-4). The meaning ‘after’ for *siþþan* shades into

'when', both here and also in *Widsith*, line 47 in the translation of Mitchell and Robinson. A similar overlapping between 'since', 'after' and 'when' may be found with three cases of *sipþan* in as many adjacent lines in *Daniel*, where the three youths enjoy fame as a consequence of experiencing, braving and surviving Nebuchadnezzar's fire:

Wæs heora blæd in Babilone, siððan hie þone bryne fandedon;
dom wearð æfter duguðe gecyðed, siððan hie drihtne gehyrdon.
Wæron hyra rædas rice, siððan hie rodera waldend,
halig heofonrices weard, wið þone hearm gescylde.
(*Daniel*, lines 454-7; Farrell, 1974: 75)

[Fame was theirs in Babylon, from the time they tried the burning;
the glory was proclaimed to retinues, since they had obeyed the Lord.
Their rewards were mighty, when the Commander of the Skies,
holy Guardian of heaven's kingdom, shielded them from that harm.]

Admittedly, the meanings of the conjunction in this sequence seem to hover between *ex quo*, causality, and immediate anteriority, in a way which is impossible to translate, in past tenses as well as in the choice of conjunctions. If the repetition has an effect, this might consist of an ever closer focus on the Almighty, insofar as the gap between relations of time is meant to narrow from distance to immediacy.

For the rare case of 'after' as 'when' in *sipþan*, as in the third above line, Mitchell gives two examples from *Beowulf*, each of which concerns Hygelac (1985: II, 355-6, §2764). The first, to be found a little after Wealhtheow approaches Hrothgar and Hrothulf in the place of honour, concerns the necklace which, so the poet tells us with a leap into the future (lines 1202-14), will end up on Hygelac's body:

Þone hring hæfde Higelac Geata
nefa Swertinges nyhstan siðe
siðþan he under segne sinc ealgode,
wælreaf werede.
(*Beowulf*, lines 1202-5; Mitchell and Robinson, 1998: 88)

[Hygelac of the Geats had that ring,
Swerting's nephew, on his last expedition,
when he guarded his treasure beneath a banner,
defended spoil of the dead.]

Hygelac is unlikely to don the necklace after the battle has begun, nor can he when it has concluded, when he is dead, so here 'siðþan' appears to mean 'when'. Despite Dennis Cronan's attempt to keep an 'after' for this conjunction, where the poet's irony is that Hygelac's greatest moment with (Hygd's) necklace comes when he is no

longer alive to enjoy it (1997: 60-2), *Klaeber's Beowulf* concurs with Mitchell in reading 'when' here in the sense of 'at the same time as' (Fulk, Bjork and Niles, 2008: 194, n. to line 1204).

Mitchell's second example is from another digression on Hygelac's death, this one before Beowulf's reconnaissance near the Dragon's mound:

No þæt læsest wæs
hondgemota þær mon Hygelac sloh
syððan Geata cyning guðe ræsum
freawine folca Freslondum on
Hreðles eafora hiorodryncum swealt
bille gebeaten.
(*Beowulf*, lines 2354-9; Mitchell and Robinson, 1998: 131)

[By no means was that the least
of hand to hand encounters where they struck Hygelac,
when the king of Geats, in battle assaults,
lord dear to his army on Frisian shores,
heir of Hrethel, died by sword-drinks,
beaten in with axes.]

The great rolling expansion of this *sipþan* clause tells us, if we haven't seen it by now, something other than either the temporal relation between actions or the potential causality in the subordinate clause which leads to a result in the principal clause. Here and in the previous example, the conjunction *sipþan* appears to work as a descriptive 'when'.

To these examples may be added two more, both to do with the Grendels. In the first, we have the arrival of Grendel's Mother to avenge her son:

Þa ðær sona wearð
edhwyrft eorlum, sipðan inne fealh
Grendles modor.
(*Beowulf*, lines 1280-2; Mitchell and Robinson, 1998: 90-1)

[There happened then an immediate
reversal for noblemen, when inside penetrated
Grendel's Mother.]

Mitchell makes no comment on these lines either in his and Robinson's edition (1998: 90-1) or in his *Old English Syntax*, while there is no reference to them either in the commentary of *Klaeber's Beowulf* (Fulk, Bjork and Niles, 2008: 197). However, this is an unusual meaning for *sipþan*. The conjunction on line 1281 correlates with the adverbs 'þa' ('then') and 'sona' (strictly 'at once') on line 1280 to tell us that the

Danish reversal coincides with the arrival of Grendel's Mother. These correlatives seem supplied to help their 'siþðan' mean 'when', even though the situation would have told us that by itself. Two moments of time are here elided with such speed that the cause of the commotion in the principal clause is left for an audience to deduce in retrospect, when it picks up the pieces. The second additional example pushes simultaneity even further, in Grendel's last dive into the Mere:

Deaðfæge deog, siððan dreama leas
 in fenfreoðo feorh alegde,
 hæþene sawle; þær him hel onfeng.
 (*Beowulf*, lines 850-2; Mitchell and Robinson, 1998: 76)

[Death-doomed he vanished, when, freed of joys,
 in the fen-sanctuary he laid down his life,
 his heathen soul; hell received him there.]

Here the temporal relation is made without a correlative adverb. The terminal meaning of *feorh ālecgan* ('to lay down one's life'), a phrase which occurs only here, is confirmed by the noun *feorhlegu*, literally 'laying down of life' (Fulk, Bjork and Niles, 2008: 375, s.v.), which occurs only in *Beowulf*, line 2800, and *Elene*, line 458. In *Klaeber's Beowulf*, the once attested preterite *dēog* is taken to mean perhaps 'hid himself' here, on analogy with *dēagol* ('concealed'); not 'died' as has been claimed (*ibid.*: 164); hence my meaning 'vanished' here. The principal clause in this passage allows for Grendel to be alive at the moment he disappears from view.

The main issue, however, is again with 'siððan', as *Klaeber's Beowulf* acknowledges (*ibid.*: 165). Whatever the meaning of 'deog', Grendel's status as not dead in the principal clause puts the *siþþan* clause, in which he dies, slightly ahead in time, inverting the rule of Adams and Mitchell by which temporal *siþþan* refers to a time anterior to that in the main clause (Adams, 1907: 101; Mitchell, 1985: I, 416-17, §995). Moreover, if the preterite in the principal clause serves as pluperfect, we have 'death-doomed he had (already) vanished, when he laid down his life'. Unless the principal clause announces Grendel's death, with 'deog' as 'died' and with 'deaðfæge' alluding to his living state at that moment, the above inverted use of *siþþan* must be accepted. Nonetheless, as there is no correlative adverb to help this inversion of the rule, it is probably better to read level tenses in the verbs in both clauses. This gives a better temporal relation and brings the above passage into line with the three before it. Taking *siþþan* in this way makes the subordinate clause neither anterior nor causal, but descriptive or even explanatory of the principal clause.

Where a correlative adverb does appear, on the other hand, a descriptive *siþþan* might encourage a pluperfect in the preterite verb of the principal clause, even if this contravenes the rule of anteriority in the subordinate clause (1985: I, 416-17, §995). This is what we seem to have with 'lengest' in *Widsith*, line 45. Probably this

form is for the superlative of the adverb *longe* ('for a long time'), rather than for that of the adjective *lenge* ('pertaining to') or perhaps *gelenge* ('belonging to'). In *Beowulf*, as we have seen, there is the word 'lenge' on line 83, which refers to the same story as 'lengest' in *Widsith*, line 47, and which *Klaeber's Beowulf* takes for the comparative of *longe*. In favour of the meaning 'longest' for 'lengest' in *Widsith*, line 45, is another claim of heroic longevity, on line 28, that 'Sigehere lengest Sædenum weold'. Although Mitchell and Robinson translate this line as 'Sigehere ruled the Sea-Danes for a very long time' (1998: 196), the superlative may be read literally as 'for the longest time'.

A time adaptation parallel to 'longest' in these uses of *lengest* in *Widsith*, lines 28 and 45, might be found in the opening to the (misplaced) story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard in the West Saxon annal for 755. Here it is said that the tyrant Sigebryht, having been cut out of most of Wessex by his usurper Cynewulf, held Hampshire 'oð he ofsloh ðone aldormon þe him lengs<t> wunode' (Irvine, 1994: 37). Michael Swanton translates this line as 'until he killed the ealdorman who stayed with him longest' (1996: 47), but a pluperfect is there, as in 'who had stayed with him for the longest time', because the action of *wunian* is complete. To put it another way, an imperfect use of the preterite 'wunode' is ruled out by the adverbial superlative, which appeals to a length of completed time and so calls for a pluperfect in its neighbouring verb, albeit both verbs sit in subordinate clauses.

The tense of 'heoldon lengest' in *Widsith*, line 45, must be similarly altered in the main clause, because this verbal phrase anticipates a *sibþan* clause two lines later. The alteration accords with the superlative length of time in this phrase. The word *lengest* appears in a gloss, 'lencgest' for 'diutissime', in the eleventh-century Durham Proverbs (Arngart, 1981: 294, no. 33), 'Tiligera hus lencgest standap' ('Workers' houses stand longest', for Latin '[I]nstanter laborantium diutissime stat domus'). The implication of this line is that the superlative claims an extent of time competitively ('longest') more than it claims longevity as an isolated idea ('very long'). Just as a comparison with the houses of other occupations is invoked by 'diutissime' in the proverb, so one is invoked with other royal houses by 'lengest' in *Widsith*, line 45, whose accompanying verb 'heoldon' must be read thus as pluperfect:

Hrothwulf and Hrothgar had kept for longest
 their kindred united, uncle and nephew,
 when they drove off the tribe from Viken
 and crushed Ingeld's front line,
 cut down at Heorot the Heathobards' glory. (lines 45-49)

If we compare this passage with the others in which *sibþan* 'after' elides with *sibþan* 'when', we see its use as more descriptive than temporal or causal. Hereby the principal clause offers an idea whose validity is then illustrated by a causal action in the subordinate clause. To have a pluperfect in this *sibþan* clause, as Mitchell and Robinson recommend apparently in keeping with the rule of anteriority, is to miss

the effect of 'lengest' on 'heoldon', the verb of the principal clause. As Michiko Ogura has concluded in her definitive contribution on *þā*, *þonne* and other OE temporal conjunctions denoting 'when' and 'while', 'the semantic sphere of the OE temporal conjunctions seems to depend on the context rather than each conjunction has a specific meaning' (1984: 290). Thus it seems that the superlative adverb in the principal clause on this line of *Widsith* encourages an anterior tense for the action in its clause which is then validated by the action in the *sipþan* clause. The corollary for interpreting *Widsith* is that its narrative encapsulation of Ingeld's raid in lines 45-49 almost certainly has a source in common with *Beowulf*.¹

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¹ For what that might be, see North, *Origins of Beowulf*, 132-9.

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