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**Review of Bjork, R.E. (2024) Old English studies and its Scandinavian practitioners: nationalism, aesthetics, and spirituality in the Nordic countries, 1733 to 2023**

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**Citation**

Klare, S. H. (2025). Review of Bjork, R.E. (2024) Old English studies and its Scandinavian practitioners: nationalism, aesthetics, and spirituality in the Nordic countries, 1733 to 2023. *Amsterdamer Beiträge Zur Älteren Germanistik*, 85(1), 133-136.  
doi:10.1163/18756719-12340352

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4260071>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Robert E. Bjork. *Old English Studies and its Scandinavian Practitioners.*

*Nationalism, Aesthetics, and Spirituality in the Nordic Countries, 1733 to 2023* (Anglo-Saxon Studies 50).—D.S. Brewer, Cambridge 2024. Hardcover xv + 336 pp. + 16 black-and-white illustrations (ISBN: 9781843847267). £95.00. Paperback (ISBN: 9781843847274). £24.99. E-book (EISBN: 9781805434252). Open access.

Over the last three decades, historians of Old English Studies have increasingly focused on the roles played by English nationalism and Anglo-American racism in the development of the discipline. As a result, scholarship produced outside the Anglosphere has not always been given due attention. With this book, Robert Bjork aims to remedy this situation by making the work of Scandinavian scholars of OE more accessible. Throughout his monograph, Bjork deftly narrates the course of OE Studies in Scandinavia, illuminating the contributions made by Nordic scholars without losing sight of the motives some of them had for studying the language and literature of early medieval England.

The book's seven chapters are subdivided into three parts, the first of which concerns three chapters on Scandinavian approaches to OE before 1900. The second section of Bjork's work concerns the early twentieth century up until 2023, a period which he labels "The Flourishing" of OE Studies in Scandinavia; despite the title, this section contains only one chapter. Section three comprises three chapters and steps away from the purely chronological approach: one on Scandinavian scholarship on *Beowulf*, one on translations of *Beowulf*, and one on translations of other OE literature (all of which is afforded a single chapter, showing that Scandinavian scholars have not been immune to *Beowulf's* charms). Lastly, the book is supplied with two appendices, which serve as bibliographies of Scandinavian studies and translations of OE, respectively. The book's structure is somewhat unbalanced: some chapters concern a single topic, others give broad overviews of entire centuries of scholarly output. At the same time, the chapters themselves form well-contained units and lend themselves well to being read in isolation.

Chapter one provides an overview of the Scandinavian interest in OE Studies, which grew exponentially during the Nordic Renaissance (ca. 1750–1800) and heightened further in the nineteenth century, with the political turmoil of the Napoleonic era. The subsequent growth of nationalist feeling in Scandinavia inevitably influenced the study of the region's past, a past which was closely related to that of early medieval England. Bjork explains how philologists interpreted history and embraced nationalism in their own ways, some more staunchly than others. Degrees of nationalism may have varied, but it was nevertheless consistently present in nineteenth-century philological thinking; as such, it cannot be overlooked in the study of Scandinavian OE Studies.

Chapters two and three hone in on a single contributor to OE studies: N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), who among other things was one of the most talented philologists of the nineteenth century. Chapter two covers Grundtvig’s approach to interpreting and representing historical material, which was based on his understandings of history and language. In Grundtvig’s Christian interpretation of historical developments, Scripture prefigured and mirrored the development of history: the old naturally takes a new form in the present. Furthermore, scripture should not be confined to the literal words on the page, which are dead; instead, these should be translated or “Danished” into a new form to revive the spirit of the original. Grundtvig “Danished” Old English texts as well, the most famous of which was *Beowulf*. In his view, Old English was a Danish dialect, and the famous poem a manifestation of the Nordic Spirit, which others who wished to claim Anglo-Saxon ancestry (the English and Germans) did not understand. This chapter gives a valuable overview of Grundtvig’s views on poetry and history, laying the groundwork for the analysis of his version of *The Phoenix* in the following chapter.

Grundtvig’s *The Phoenix* “Danishes” the OE poem, following the main plot but translating freely to breathe life into a, in Grundtvig’s view, dead text. His Christian interpretation of the mythological figure of the Phoenix expresses itself in part in his expansion of the imagery of the poem. Bjork notes that Grundtvig extends passages when he wants to “emphasize a thought in the OE”, and that these thoughts tend to be in praise of God (88). Bjork elegantly illustrates the beauty of Grundtvig’s translation and how its form mirrors the imagined bird itself: “[t]he poetic form gives the translation its modern Danish plumage, the outward manifestation of the risen Phoenix” (88). The translation’s structure is nebulous and governed by free association, much as a bird need not fly in a straight path. Grundtvig’s translation of *The Phoenix* has long been overlooked, both by his contemporaries and later scholars; Bjork convincingly argues that it should not have been.

The fourth chapter concerns the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of Scandinavian OE Studies. During this time, “[w]ell over 80 percent of the work touching on Old English (OE) subjects and published in the Scandinavian languages” (101) appeared. To avoid losing the forest for the trees, Bjork structures his discussion of Scandinavian writings on Old English by using the same categories as those used by Stanley B. Greenfield and Fred C. Robinson’s in *A Bibliography of Publications on Old English Literature to the End of 1972*. This structure has the advantage of helping readers easily navigate through a wide-ranging overview of Scandinavian writings on Old English. Appendix A, which also follows Greenfield and Robinson’s bibliographical

practices, is helpful in finding the texts discussed in chapter four. Bjork's overview is thorough and demonstrates the Scandinavian interest in Old English texts by reviewing publications on, among others, *The Dream of the Rood*, *Widsith*, and in particular *The Voyages of Wulfstan and Ohthere*.

Chapter five considers the work of Scandinavian philologists in the dissection and interpretation of *Beowulf*, addressing the nationalist under- and overtones that marked much of this scholarship. For instance, Gísli Brynjúlfsson (1827–1888) argued that English and thus *Beowulf* had their roots in Scandinavia rather than Germany, while Frederik Rønning (1851–1929) specifically argued that *Beowulf* originated in Sweden. Bjork also points to the indispensable contributions Scandinavians made to *Beowulf* scholarship: they disproved Karl Müllenhof's *Liedertheorie* in regard to *Beowulf* (Rønning), allowed the dating of the events of the poem (Grundtvig's identification of Hygelac with the Chochilaicus of Gregory of Tours), and provided insights by diving deeper into the poem's digressions.

Chapter six lists the translations of *Beowulf* that have come out of Scandinavia, most of which appeared in the twentieth century. Grundtvig's 1820 translation carries a particular weight, since his translation was given to Danish children to sing in folk high schools; millions of Danish children engaged with *Beowulf* through these songs. But there are many more translations of the poem that came out of Scandinavia. Most of these (unsurprisingly) came out of Denmark and Sweden, but Norwegian, Finnish, Icelandic and Saami versions also exist. The approaches to translation are as varied as one may expect: some foreignized the poem, like Henrik Rytter (1877–1950), while others domesticated it with the aim of making it understandable for a contemporary audience, like Sune Lindqvist (1887–1976). This chapter is especially helpful in the analysis it provides of these little-discussed translations.

The final chapter lists Scandinavian translations of OE poetry other than the well-known heroic poem. Through Bjork's discussion, it becomes clear that many of these translations were created with *Beowulf* in mind. For instance, the first four Scandinavian translators of *Beowulf* also included translations of *The Finnsburh Fragment*. Karl F. Sundén (1868–1945) published his translation of *Widsith* in the same volume as his translation of *Beowulf*, and in 2004 *Widsith* was translated into Finnish to appeal to readers of *Beowulf*. At the same time, non-*Beowulf* related interest in OE also abounded, mainly in the sphere of Christian poetry such as *Judith* and the *Genesis* poems. Lastly, aesthetic appreciation of OE literature was also an important motivation for Scandinavian poets to want to engage with OE poetry. Bjork highlights Suzanne Brøgger, who points to the universality of themes like transience and existential misery

in OE literature. *Beowulf* certainly left its mark, but this chapter shows that Scandinavian interest in early medieval English also went beyond the famous poem.

On the whole, Bjork's work is a valuable overview of Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Icelandic and Saami engagements with Old English. Some chapters dive deeply into particular people and texts, others give broader overviews of scholarship that will prove useful for the academic community at large. European contributions to the study of Old English have been receiving more attention only very recently; may this book encourage others to create equally thorough analyses of non-Anglophone Old English scholarship.

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