beowulf
and the problem of translation

I The Manuscript:

A. British Museum, MS Cotton Vitellius A xv (folio 129r):

B. Transcription of Beowulf manuscript (folio 129r, lines 1-11):

HWAET WE GAR DE
na ingear dagum þeod cyninga
þrym ge frunon huða æþelingas elle(n)
fre medon. oft scyld sceing sceæ(na)
þreatum monegu[m] mægum meodo setla
of teah egode eorl[as] syðdan ærest wea(rð)
fea sceæft funden he þæs frofre geba(d)
weox under wolcnum weorð myndum þah
oð þ[æt] him æghwylc þara ymb sittendra
ofer hron rade hyran scolde gomban
gyldan þ[æt] wæs god cyning. ðæm eafera wæs
C. Literal translation of passage from manuscript:

WHAT WE OF THE SPEAR DANES
in days of old of the people-kings
of the glory have heard how the noble princes courage
performed often scyld scefing terrified
enemy troops from many a clan seized mead-benches
terrified earls since first he became
found wretched he for that as a remedy was sent
waxed under the clouds prospered in honors
until to him every one of those living about
over the whale-road had to heed
pay tribute that was a good king to him a son was

D. Poetic edition of *Beowulf* (lines 1-10) by Frederick Klaeber:

Hwaet we gardena in geardagum
þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
    Oft Scyld Scefing sceafena þreatum
monegum mæðum meodo-setla ofteah
egsode eorlas syððan ærest weard
feasceaft funden; he ðæs frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum, weorð-myndum þañ
ðæt him æghwylc þara ymsissentra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde
gomban gyldan. Þæt wæs god cyning.

II. The Translations:

A. From *The Oldest English Epic*, Francis Gummere (1909):

Lo, praise of the prowess of people-kings
of spear-armed Danes, in days long spied,
we have heard, and what honor the athelings won!
Oft Scyld the Scefing from squadroned foes,
from many a tribe, the mead-bench tore,
awing the earls. Since erst he lay
friendless, a foundling, fate repaid him:
for he waxed under welkin, in wealth he throve,
till before him the folk, both far and near,
who house by the whale-path, heard his mandate,
gave him gifts: a good king he!

Lo! we have heard the glory of the kings of the Spear-Danes in days gone by, how the chieftains wrought might deeds. Often Scyld Scefing wrested the mead benches from troops of foes, from many tribes; he made fear fall upon the earls. After he was first found in misery (he received solace for that), he grew up under the heavens, lived in high honour, until each of his neighbours over the whale road must needs obey him and render tribute. That was a good king!

C. From *Beowulf: A New Translation*, David Wright (1957):

HEAR! We know of the bygone glory of the Danish kings, and the heroic exploits of those princes. Scyld Scefing, in the face of hostile armies, used often to bring nations into subjection, and strike terror in the hearts of their leaders. In the beginning he had been picked up as a castaway; but he afterwards found consolation for this misfortune. For his power and fame increased until each of his overseas neighbours was forced to submit and pay him tribute. He was an excellent king.

D. From *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic*, Charles Kennedy (1940):

Lo! we have listened to many a lay
Of the Spear-Danes' fame, their splendor of old,
Their might princes, and martial deeds!
Many a mead-hall Scyld, son of Sceaf,
Snatched from the forces of savage foes.
From a friendless foundling, feeble and wretched,
He grew to a terror as time brought change.
He throve under heaven in power and pride
Till alien peoples beyond the ocean
Paid toll and tribute. A good king he!


Yes, we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes' kings in the old days—how the princes of that people did brave deeds.

Often Scyld Scefing took mead-benches away from enemy bands, from many tribes, terrified their nobles—after the time that he was first found helpless. He lived to find comfort for that, became great under the skies, prospered in honors until every one of those who lived about him, across the whale-road, had to obey him, pay him tribute. That was a good king.

Listen! We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes
in the old days, how noble princes showed great courage!
Often Scyld Scefing seized mead-benches
from enemy troops, from many a clan;
he terrified warriors, even though first he was found
a waif, helpless. For that came a remedy,
he grew under heaven, prospered in honors
until every last one of the bordering nations
beyond the whale-road had to heed him,
pay him tribute. He was a good king!


Listen!

The fame of Danish kings
in days gone by, the daring feats
worked by those heroes are well known to us.
Scyld Scefing often deprived his enemies,
many tribes of men, of their mead-benches.
He terrified his foes; yet he, as a boy,
had been found a waif; fate made amends for that.
He prospered under heaven, won praise and honour,
until the men of every neighbouring tribe,
across the whale’s way, were obliged to obey him
and pay him tribute. He was a noble king!


Indeed, we have heard of the glory of the spear-Danes, kings of the nation in days gone by—how those princes performed deeds of courage.
Often Scyld Scefing dragged away the mead benches from bands of foes, from many tribes—struck terror in the Heruli. From the time when first he was found destitute (he received consolation for that) he flourished beneath the skies, prospered in honours until every one of those who dwelt around about him across the whale’s road had to obey him, pay him tribute. That was a great king!

NOW WE HAVE HEARD STORIES of high valor
in times long past of tribal monarchs,
lords of Denmak, how those leaders strove.

Often Scyld Scefing by the shock of war
kept both troops and tribes from treasured meadbench,
filled foes with dread after first being
discovered uncared for; a cure for that followed:
he grew hale under heaven, high in honor,
until no nation near the borders,
beyond teeming seas but was taught to obey,
giving tribute. He was a good ruler.


Listen!

We have heard of the glory in bygone days
of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes,
how those noble lords did lofty deeds.

Often Scyld Scefing seized the mead-benches
from many tribes, troops of enemies,
struck fear into earls. Though he first was
found a waif, he awaited solace for that—
he grew under heaven and prospered in honor
until every one of the encircling nations
over the whale's-riding had to obey him,
grant him tribute. That was a good king!


So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,
a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on
as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts
beyond the whale-road had to yield to him
and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.