

SIR BEVIS OF HAMPTON IN POPULAR TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

Around the figure of the eponymous hero of the Middle English romance of *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, there grew up, from the Middle Ages onwards, a considerable body of speculation as to his historicity, and of popular tradition, largely independent of the romance, about him. It is my aim in this paper to bring together for the first time all the available material relating to the 'extra-literary' Bevis.

The story of Sir Bevis of Hampton enjoyed an enormously wide popularity both during and after the medieval period: versions of the romance are to be found not only in Anglo-Norman, Middle English, Welsh and Irish, but also in Old Icelandic, Italian, continental French, Dutch, Yiddish, Rumanian and Russian (Severs 1967, 26). The relations of these versions to one another, and their comparative authority with respect to the earliest form of the story, have been the subject of much scholarly discussion, which has been usefully summarized by Laura A Hibbard (Hibbard 1924, 115-26; see also Severs 1967, 25-7); but our concern here is only with the English versions of the romance, which appear to derive directly from the Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Haumtone* (Kölbing 1885-94, xxxv; Baugh 1959, 418-54; Martin 1968, 107-14).

Stimming, the editor of *Boeve*, dated it to the beginning of the thirteenth century (Stimming 1899, lviii); and the lost Middle English original of *Bevis* was probably translated from the Anglo-Norman during the thirteenth century (Fellows 1979, I, 52; Köbling 1885-94, xxxviii; Martin 1968, I, 186). The story contains many elements typical of folk-tale and popular romance. Bevis's mother, the Countess of Southampton, arranges the murder of her elderly husband by her lover, whom she subsequently marries. Bevis is sold into slavery, but his fortunes take a turn for the better when the merchants who have bought

him present him to the King of Armenia. After many adventures - which include battles with two lions, with a dragon and with assorted giants and Saracens, and in the course of which he acquires a giant page called Ascopart - Bevis returns to England, defeats and kills his step-father, reclaims his patrimony and marries the pagan princess Josian, who has agreed to accept Christian baptism for his sake. He also builds Arundel Castle, which he names after his horse. However, his happiness is short-lived, for the King of England's son attempts to steal the horse Arundel and is killed by a blow from the animal's hoof; Bevis is again driven into exile. Eventually, after many further exploits, he once more returns to England - this time to help his foster-father, Saber, in the protection of his rights. The King, Edgar, is willing to make peace with Bevis, but his wicked steward stirs up the citizenry of London against our hero. In a night-long battle in the streets of London, Bevis slays some 30,000 men single-handed. Peace is now made between Bevis and Edgar and sealed by the marriage of Bevis's son, Miles, to the King's daughter. Bevis and Josian return to the kingdom of 'Mombraunt', which the former has earlier won in battle from King Yvor, and there they and Arundel die, all on the same day.

The English romance of Bevis enjoyed an extraordinarily long-lived popularity, exceeding that of any other Middle English romance to survive beyond the end of the Middle Ages. In its metrical form, it continued to be reprinted steadily until 1667; and an isolated representative of this version appeared as late as 1711. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, moreover, a variety of prose renderings and numerous chapbook versions of the romance appeared (Fellows 1979, I, 25-35). Alongside this literary tradition flourished the popular legends which are among our prime concerns

here. It is of course, in the nature of the material, impossible to assign a date to the genesis of such legends, but attempts to 'historicize' Bevis can be traced at least as far back as the fourteenth century.

Robert Mannyng's anachronistic reference to 'Beofs of Hamptone' as one of King Arthur's knights, in his *Story of England* (1338) (Furnivall 1887, line 12,356) is probably attributable to confusion with one 'Beofs of Oxford', who is mentioned frequently throughout Mannyng's work. An early-fourteenth-century translation of the *Short Metrical Chronicle*, however, places the existence of Bevis within the tenth century by identifying the King Edgar of the romance with the historical Edgar, who reigned from 944 until 975. Where all other manuscripts of this chronicle give an account of Edgar's translation, one version (Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg.1.1, fols 484^v-9^v) has the following passage (fol 488^v):

En le tens de celui Edgard. Boefs de Hamptoun auoit vn destrere mult fort e ignel le quel destrer o[ci]t le fiz Edgard. par quei Boefs fut exile hors de ceste tere dunt le rei si repenti apres quant il out defaut de teu chiualer cum Boefs fust. (Zettl 1935, 103)
ocit] out MS; Zettl

According to the chronicle's editor, the authority for this passage is unknown (Zettl 1935, lxxxiv). Its 'facts' would appear to be derived from the romance – though in the second part differing slightly from it – without further, historical, justification; and, though there is an interesting correspondence between the pacific nature attributed to the historical Edgar (Brooke 1963, 140) and the way in which he is characterized in the romance (see e.g. Fellows 1979, II, lines 5896–9), this is probably coincidental.

The majority of those writers who treat Bevis as an historical figure present him as an Englishman who resisted the Normans at the time of the Conquest. This tradition, which was current until the eighteenth century, seems to have originated in Philemon Holland's translation (1610) of William Camden's *Britannia*. In Cam-

den's Latin work, Bevis is mentioned only in connection with Arundel Castle (Camden 1586, 157); but Holland, on unknown authority, includes the following passage in his entry for 'HANTSHIRE':

In the first time of the Normans, *Bogo* or *Beavose* the English man, who fought against the Normans in the battell at *Cardiff* in Wales, is reputed to have been Earle of Southampton, a man for warlike prowesse much renowned, whom whiles the Monks laboured to set out with their fained fables, they have obscured his doughtie deeds in greater darknes. (Holland 1610, 272)

John Selden, in his 'Illustrations' (1612) to Drayton's *Poly-olbion* (in which the story of Bevis is told in summary by the river Itchin), agrees with Holland in assigning the existence of the historical Bevis to the late eleventh century, and adds that 'Duncton in Wiltshire [was] known for his residence' (Drayton 1613, I, 37); while Thomas Fuller, in his *Worthies of England* (1662), elaborates Holland's account by the addition of circumstantial detail and alters the site of Bevis's battle against the Normans from Cardiff to 'Carcliffe':

BEAVOIS an *English man* was Earle of *South-Hampton*, in the time of the *Conquerer*, and being unable to comport with his *Oppression*, banded against him with the *Fragments* of the *English-men*, the strength of *Hastings* the *Dane*, and all the assistance the *Welch* could afford. In whose Country a *Battel* was fought, near *Carcliffe*, against the *Normans*, anno *Domini* 1070. Wherein Three Nations were conquered by One. *Beavois* being worsted (*Success* depends not on *Valour*) fled to *Carlile*, (a long step from *Carcliffe*;) And afterwards no mention what became of him. (Fuller 1662, 'Hantshire', 9)

It was probably from 'the learned Selden' (Percy 1765, III, 216) that Thomas Warton the younger derived the belief expressed in his *History of English Poetry* (1774–8) in Bevis's historicity (Warton 1871, II, 143); and his account,

together with Bishop Percy's reference in the *Reliques* to Selden's (Percy 1765, III, 216), was probably influential in that, at a time of resurgence in antiquarian interest and activity, it lent the weight of 'scholarly' authority to the perpetuation of the tradition.

John Speed, the eighteenth-century Southampton historian, expresses, indeed, certain doubts as to Bevis's historical existence: he points out that neither his own ancestor, John Speed the great cartographer (1552?–1629), who had given 'Bogo' arms (azure, 3 lions passant gardant or) in his map of Hampshire (Speed 1627, 13^v–14^r; see also Heylyn 1671, 418), 'nor Mr. Camden quote [*sic*] any authority for the existence of such a man' (Davies 1883, 247). Since, however, Speed's history was not published for over a hundred years after his death, being incorporated by the Reverend J Silvester Davies in his own history (Davies 1883), it was left to Joseph Ritson to make the first authoritative repudiation likely to reach any considerable public of the belief in Bevis as an actual historical personage. This he does, with characteristic asperity, in the 'Dissertation on Romance and Minstrelsy' which forms a preface to his *Ancient English Metrical Romancees* (1802): he dismisses Holland's account of Bevis as an instance of 'singular puerility', citing in support of his own view that no 'ancient or veracious historian mention[s] either *Bogo*, *Beavose*, or the battle of *Cardiff*', and labels Warton's restatement of its substance 'highly ridiculous' (Ritson 1802, I, xciii–xciv). He concludes: 'Bevis and Guy [of Warwick] were no more "English heroes" than Amadis de Gaule or Perceforest: they are mere creatures of the imagination, and only obtain an establishment in history because (like mister Wartons) it was usually written upon the authority of romance' (Ritson 1802, I, xciv; see also Ellis 1805, II, 93–4).

Whatever the learned view of Bevis's historicity – and as late as the mid-nineteenth century certain writers maintained an open mind on the question (see Turnbull 1838, xi–xii; Jones [1860?], [i]) – popular belief, or willing suspension of disbelief, in the hero as an historical personage seems to have been strong until a comparatively late date: local tradition with

regard to him flourished throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Daniel Defoe, in 1724, says: 'Whatever the fable of Bevis of Southampton, and the giants in the woods thereabouts may be derived from, I found the people [of Southampton] mighty willing to have those things pass for true' (Defoe 1971, 154).

The anonymous author of a manuscript account of Southampton in 1635 writes of entering

at the Northgate [= the Bargate] thereof, with no little fear, between the Jaws of 2 ramping lions and 2 thundering warriors Exipat, that fearful giant on the one side, and brave Bevis of Southampton on the other, if above them had not been placed our late renowned virtuous Q. Elizabeth, to daunt their courage and quell their fury, and to suffer peaceable passengers to have quiet and safe entrance. (Duthy 1839, 440; cf Latham & Matthews 1970–6, III, 71)

The wooden figures of the two lions are first mentioned in the mayor's accounts for 1593–4, and there are periodic references to their restoration, as well as to the repainting of the Bevis and Ascopart panels, apparently set up in 1522 (Rance 1986, below), throughout the seventeenth century and well into the eighteenth. In 1743 the original wooden lions were replaced by leaden ones (Davies 1883, 66), which are there still; and by 1883 the pictures of Bevis and Ascopart had been removed to the town-hall – a matter, as the Reverend J S Davies says, 'rather to be regretted' (*ibid.*). They are now in Southampton's Bargate Museum.

Further evidence as to the currency of the Bevis legend in local Southampton tradition is provided by Speed's reference to 'a hill called Bevois Hill, from a legendary tradition that Bevois of Southampton lies buried under it' (Davies 1883, 6; see also Warton 1871, II, 143). Dr Philip Saunders has drawn my attention to references to Bevois Hill in court leet records of 1576 and 1605, and I am indebted to Dr Ernest Blake for the information that a 1658 plan gives 'Bevois Hill' as the name of the most southerly

field in the Manor of Portswood. This was bought by Charles Mordaunt, Third Earl of Peterborough, who joined it and another field to the Padwell estate to create his grand house and gardens, which he called 'Bevois Mount'. The Earl of Peterborough, known for his literary associations, erected here a classical structure he called Bevois's grave. A pre-existing long-barrow associated with Bevis might have provided the basis of this attribution. Perhaps the Southampton street names which incorporate the name 'Bevois' were devised when the Mordaunt estate was sold up for building development in the nineteenth century. Regarding 'Bevois Castle', however, Dr Saunders has pointed out to me, that there are documentary references to 'Boefs Chastel' (in the area of Castle Street) as early as 1331, when there is a record of an 'Inquisitio pro constructione capelle in honore beate Katherine apud Boefs Chastel' (Reg Stratford, fol 55^v). In 1922, G W Eustace noted that 'in Southampton the [hero's] name is perpetuated in "Bevois Valley," and "Bevois Street"; while the south-western portion of its ancient Castle is still known as "Arundel Tower"' (Eustace 1922, 248). The name of the tower is probably more directly connected with John, Earl of Arundel, who contributed to its building c 1377 (Davies 1883, 61), than with Bevis's horse – though horse and earls become associated in the legends relating to Arundel Castle (see below). In the 1790s, Bevis's head appeared more than once on money tokens issued by Southampton's Brewery and Block Manufactory company (Davies 1883, 246).

Popular local tradition regarding Bevis is interesting in that, as far as the visual evidence goes, prominence is given to the episodes of the lions and of Ascopart, and in that it sometimes fails to agree with the written version of the story (see Rance 1986, p 147 below). Thus, Speed says that the

story told of him here [Southampton] is, that he fought with a giant named Ascapart on the sea-shore near the town, and that Ascapart struck at him with his club, but missing his blow, the club stuck fast in the mud, and that while he was pulling to get it out, Bevis

despatched him with his sword. (Davies 1883, 247)

In the printed romance (cited here from an edition produced by William Copland in the 1560s), the episode is as follows:

Than Askaparte was full woo,
And smote at Syr Beuys tho.
He smote to haue hit Syr Beuis crown;
His fote slypped and he fell downe.
And, or that he ryse myght,
Beuis was redi *with* his sworde bright
To haue smyten of his heed;
But Iosyan did it forbeed:
'Syr,' she sayd, 'ye shall him saue,
And let him lyue and be your knaue.'
'Dame,' he sayd, 'he wyll vs betraye.'
'I wyll be borowe,' she sayde, 'naye.'
Ascaparte made Beuis homage,
And became Syr Beuis page.
(Fellows 1979, III, lines 2175–88)

Still more anomalous, if the literary Bevis tradition be taken as the norm, are the legends surrounding the figure of the hero in association with Arundel Castle, supposedly built by Bevis to honour his horse after he has won a race on him:

Nowe hath Beuis the treasure wone
Through Arundell that [wel had] runne;
Wherefore, with that and other catell,
He made the Castell of Arundell.
(Fellows 1979, III, lines 3199–202; slightly emended)

Sir Thomas Elyot was probably responsible for giving a wider currency to this tradition, although he does not commit himself to any personal opinion on the subject; in *The Governour* (1531) he writes:

Other remembrance there is of diuers horsis by whose monstrous power men dyd exploite incredible affaires: but by cause the reporte of them contayneth thinges impossible, and is nat written by any approued autour: I will nat in this place reherce them: sauynge that it is

yet supposed that the castell of Arundell in Sussex was made by one Beauuize, erle of South hamton, for a monument of his horse called Arundell, whiche in ferre countrayes had saued his maister from many periles. (Elyot 1880, I, 183-4)

Although Camden denies that the name of the castle is derived from that of Bevis's horse (Camden 1586, 157), it is clear that an association between Bevis and Arundel Castle persisted in popular tradition. Thus, Fuller alludes in 1662 to 'the Sword preserved and shewed to be this *Beavoises* in *Arundel-Castle*' (Fuller 1662, 'Hantshire', 9; see also Warton 1871, II, 143). A fourteenth-century tournament sword is still displayed at Arundel Castle as that of Bevis (North 1978, 187-9; for a picture of it, see Hearnshaw 1904, facing p 30). Professor Legge (1963, 159) has speculated that the Anglo-Norman *Boeve* may have been written to flatter William de Albini, Second Earl of Arundel (d. 1154) (cf, however, Weiss 1986, where it is argued that the romance might more plausibly be associated with the Third Earl (d. c 1190)).

Gibson, revising Camden's *Britannia* in 1722, writes: 'That Bevis was founder of the Castle . . . is a current opinion handed down by tradition, and there is a tower in it still known by the name of Bevis's Tower, which they tell you was his own apartment' (Elyot 1880, I, 185). Eustace thinks that the tower may have been named after an historical personage (Eustace 1922, 248), but this seems unlikely given the literary association between 'our' Bevis and Arundel Castle (cf Lucas 1904, 70). A fuller account of the traditions surrounding the Bevis Tower (still so named to this day) is given by William Gilpin, writing in 1804. In his description of Arundel Castle the following passage occurs:

On the left stand the ruins of another tower, known by the name of Bevis tower. Bevis was a giant of ancient times; whose prowess was equal to his size. He was able to wade the channel of the sea to the Isle of Wight, and frequently did it for his amusement . . .

Great, however, as Bevis was, he condescended to be warder at the gate of the earls

of Arundel; who built this tower for his reception, and supplied him with two hogsheads of beer every week, a whole ox, and a proportional quantity of bread and mustard. It is true the dimensions of the tower are only proportioned to a man of moderate size, but such an inconsistency is as nothing when opposed to the traditions of a country. (Gilpin 1804, 32)

This legend, on which John Heath-Stubbs draws in his poem 'Bevis of Hampton' (Heath-Stubbs 1978, 17-18), bears little relation to the literary Bevis tradition. The figures of Bevis and Ascopart appear to have been conflated, and the story of the gigantic Wade may also have influenced the development of the tradition here described (see Robinson 1957, 714). Of course, the fact that Bevis and Ascopart were represented on panels of equal size at Southampton's Bargate (see p 141 above) may have contributed to the growth of a tradition that both were giants. (Defoe (quoted p 141 above) might also be taken to imply that Bevis was a giant.)

The influence of the Robin Hood legend is apparent in another tradition associated with Arundel Castle. In 1876 the Duke of Norfolk wrote to H H S Croft:

the sword said to have belonged to Bevis is now hanging in the gallery here. It is nearly eight feet long, it is two-edged, and intended to be used with both hands. The tradition is that when Bevis was dying he threw his sword from the battlements of the tower, saying that he wished to be buried where it fell. A large grave-shaped mound in a valley in the downs now enclosed in the park is said to be his grave on the spot where the sword fell. (Elyot 1880, I, 185-6; cf Dobson & Taylor 1976, 138)

With regard to the association between Bevis, his horse and Arundel Castle, Croft notes that one of the heraldic supporters of the Dukes of Norfolk, whose seat the castle is, is 'the white horse of Arundel' (Elyot 1880, I, 185); and by a curious coincidence the office of marshal held by Bevis in the Middle English romance (cf Fellows

1979, II, lines 4385–90, 4456–65) is a hereditary dignity pertaining to the Norfolks, who are also Earls of Arundel (Doubleday & de Walden 1910–40, IX, 611, n. (j); I, 259). Coincidence, however, it must be; for the Fourth Duke of Norfolk (1580–9) was the first to hold the title of Earl of Arundel also (*ibid* I, 252), and no Earl of Arundel before him had been Lord or Earl Marshal (Haydn & Ockerly 1890, 325–6). Thus, Bevis's fictional association with both Arundel Castle and the office of marshal, though shared now in reality by the Dukes of Norfolk, cannot have owed its origin to historical factors.

For obvious reasons, most of the popular traditions about Bevis are associated directly with Southampton itself or with Arundel Castle, and most bear some relation (albeit in certain cases tenuous) to the written romance of *Bevis*. Not all the popular Bevis traditions, however, share both these features. Bevis Marks, in London EC3, is supposedly the site of Bevis's battle against the massed citizenry of London (see Fleming 1897, 258; Prideaux 1897, 385–6); the name 'Bevis's Grave' was attached at an unknown date, and for an unknown reason, to an Anglo-Saxon cemetery near Bedhampton in Hampshire (see *Archaeological Excavations* 1974,

23; 1975, 92–3; 1976, 58, 120; I am indebted to Dr Barry Knight for these references); and E V Lucas states that 'a heavy pole, known as the staff of Bevis of Southampton . . . , was of old kept in Bosham church' (Lucas 1904, 56). No doubt other examples of the use of the hero's name in contexts not obviously connected with his romance or supposed place of origin could be adduced.

It seems extremely unlikely that there was ever an historical Bevis; but, as has been seen, local traditions about him flourished and, though they seem to have originated in slight distortions or variations of the material of the written romance, developed away from the central, written tradition to acquire a life of their own. This in itself attests the imaginative hold that the figure of Bevis must have had upon the 'popular mind'; and the fact that the traditions surrounding him had peculiar associations with particular places probably increased the hero's interest and appeal, at least locally. His status as a figure of local legend no doubt helped to keep alive interest in his written story, thus accounting in part for the extraordinary and prolonged popularity of the Middle English romance.

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