

A Note on the Perfective Aspect in *Beowulf*

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Except for a very few sporadic examples, Latin makes an exclusive use of *esse* as a perfect auxiliary, which is demonstrated in the following examples;

subito totam causam ***oblitus est*** (perf.indic.pass.3rd pers.sing.of *oblivisci*) idque veneficiis et cantionibus Titinae ***factum esse*** (perf. pass.infin.of *facere*) dicebat. *Brutus*, Ix, 218 by Marcus Tullius Cicero

(he suddenly ***forgot*** all the case and said that it ***had been done*** by Titinia's sorcery and incantations)

omnisque ille sermo ***ductus est*** (perf.indic.pass.3rd pers.sing.of *ducere*) e percontatione fili quid in senatu ***esset actum*** (imperf.subj.pass.3rd pers.sing.of *agere*); *op.cit.*

(and all the speech ***was conducted*** from his son's inquiring what ***had been transacted*** in the senate)

From the morpho-syntactical point of view it is quite evident in Latin that there is no clear demarcation between a perfect tense and a passive voice but I am of the opinion that in case of so-called deponent verbs *esse* + *past participle* always expresses a tense-relationship instead of passivity. Compare *obliviscor* 'I forget' versus *sum oblitus* 'I have forgotten' or 'I forgot' .

Old English, on the other hand, basically expresses perfect and pluperfect con-

ceptions by means of compound tenses, making use of either *habban* or *wesan/bēon* as auxiliary verbs. The following are the specimens of compound tenses adduced from *Beowulf* (*Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg* : edited, with introduction, bibliography notes, glossary, and appendices by FR. Klaeber, third edition with first and second supplements, D.C. Heath and Company, 1950 Lexington, Massachusetts.)

wæs se grimma gæst Grendel hāten, / mære mearcstapa, sē Ðe moras heold, /
fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard/ wonsæli wer weardode hwile, / si Ðan him
Scyppend *forscrifen hæfde* (pluperf. indic. 3rd pers. sing. of *forscrifan*) / in Cāines
cynne – Ðone cwealm gewræc/ ēce Drihten, Ðæs Ðe hē Abel slōg; (*Beowulf*, I,
102-108)

(The grim spirit was called Grendel, an illustrious march-stepper, who held the moors, the fen and the stronghold. The unhappy one for a while dwelt in the home of the race of monsters since the Creator **had condemned** him with Cain's family---the eternal Lord avenged the murder, because he slew Abel.)

Gewāt Ðā nēosian, sy Ðan niht becōm, / hean hūses, hū hit Hring-Dene/æfter
bēorÐege *gebūn hæfdon*. (pluperf. indic. 3rd pers. pl. of *gebūan*).
(*Beowulf*, II, 115-117)

(He then departed to seek out, when night fell, the high house to see how the Ring-Danes after beer-drinking **had settled** in it.)

Hæfde se gōða Gēata lēoda / ceman *gecorone* (pluperf. indic. 3rd pers. sing. of
gecēosan) Ðāra Ðe hē cēnoste / findan mihte; (*op. cit.* 205-207)

(The strong man **had obtained** warriors from the tribes of the Geats, those whom he could find the bravest.)

Gewāt Ðā ofer wægholm winde gefýsed / flota fāmiheals fugle gelicost, /

oÐ Ðæt ymb āntid oÐres dōgores / wundenstefna *gewaden hæfde* (pluperf. indic.3rd pers.sing.of *gewadan*), / Ðæt Ðā liÐende land gesāwon,
(*op.cit.*217-221)

(Then went the foamy-necked ship, being impelled by the wind, over the billowy sea almost like a bird, until after the fixed time on the following day the ship with the curved prow *had advanced* so that the seafarers saw the land.)

“Wæs Ðū, HrōÐgār, hāl! Ic eom Higelāces / mæg ond magoÐegn; *hæbbe* ic mārÐa fela/*ongunnen*(perf.indic.1st pers.sing. of *onginnan*) on geogoÐe.
*op.cit.*407-9

(May you, Hrothgar, be healthy! I’m Hygelac’s kinsman and young retainer; I *have undertaken* many glorious deeds in my youth.)

Sorh is mē tō secganne on sefan minum / gumena āngum, hwæt mē Grendel *hafað* / hȳnÐo on Heorote mid his heteÐancum, / fārniÐa *gefremed*
(perf.indic.3rd pers.sing.of *gefremman*);*op.cit.*473-6

(It is sorrowful in my mind to tell anyone what injury and hostile attack Grendel *has brought* me by his thought of hate in Heorot)

Wulfgār maÐelode tō his winedrihtne: / “Hēr *syndon geferede* (perf.indic.act. 3rd pers.pl. of *geferan*), feorran cumene / ofer geofenes begang Gēata lēode;
op.cit. 360-3

(Wulfgar spoke to his friendly lord: “Here *have reached* the Geat people, coming from afar over the expanse of the sea)

Hæbbe ic ēac *geāhsod* (perf.indic.act.1st pers.sing.of *geāhsian*), Ðæt se āglāca / for his won-hȳdum wāpna ne recceÐ.*op.cit.* 433-4

(I *have* also *heard* that the monster in his recklessness does not care for weap-

ons)

Hrēo wāron y̅Ða , / *wæs* merefixa mōd *onhrēred* (pluperf.indic.pass.3rd pers.sing.of *onhrēran*); 548-9

(Savage were waves and the temper of the sea-fish *had been stirred up*.)

ac hē *hafap̅ onfunden* (perf.indic.3rd pers.sing.of *onfindan*) Ðæt hē Ðā fāhÐe ne Ðearf, / atole ecgÐræce ēower lēode / swiÐe onsittan, Sige-Scyldinga; *op.cit.* 595-7

(but he *has found* that he need not so fear the enmity and horrid fight of your people, the ‘Victory-Scyldings’)

ac hie *hæfdon gefrūnen* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.pl.of *gefrignan*) Ðæt hie āer tō fela micles / in Ðām winsele wældēaÐ fornam, / Denigea lēode. *op.cit.*694-6

(but they *had learned* that the murderous death had formerly carried off so many people of the Danes in the wine-hall.)

Hæfde Kyningwuldor / Grendle tōgēanes, swā guman gefrungon, / seleweard *āseted* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *āsettan*) 665-8

(The King of Glory *had appointed* a hall-guardian against Grendel, so people heard.)

sōna *hæfde* / unlyfigendes eal *gefeormod* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *feormian*), / fēt ond folma.744-5

(he *had* immediately *eaten up* all, even the feet and hands of the dead person)

ac hē sigewāpnum *forsworen hæfde*(pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *forswerian*), / ecga gehwylcre. 804-5

(but he *had made* each victorious arms of swords *useless by a spell*.)

Hæfde Ðā *gefælsod* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *fælsian*), sē Ðe ær feorran
cōm, / snotor ond swyðferhÐ, sele HrōÐgāres, / *generated*

(pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *nerian*) wiÐ niÐe; 825-7

(Then the one , prudent and brave, who previously came from afar , *had purged*
the hall of Hrothgar and *had protected* it against hostility.)

swā hie ā wæron / æt niÐa gehwām nýdgesteallan;/ *hæfdon* ealfela eotena
cynnes / sweordum *gesæged*(pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.pl.of *sægan*).881-4

(so they were always comrades in each battle; they *had slain* the race of giants
with their swords.)

hæfde āglæca elne *gegongen* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *gegangen*), /
Ðæt hē bēahhordes brūcan mōste / selfes dōme; 893-5

(the warrior *had* valiantly *reached* so that he might enjoy the treasure in his
own choice.)

Nū scealc *hafað* / Ðurh Drihtnes miht dæd *gefremede* (perf.indic.act.3rd
pers.sing.of *gefremman*), / Ðē wē ealle ær ne meahton / snyttrum besyrwan.939-
42

(Now a retainer *has brought* about an action through the power of the Lord
which we all formerly could not accomplish skillfully.

Ðū Ðē self *hafast* dædum *gefremed*, (perf.indic.act.2nd pers.sing.of
gefremman) Ðæt Ðin [dōm] lyfaÐ/ āwa tō aldre.953-55

(You yourself *have performed* such actions that your glory will live for ever
and ever.)

nō Ðý leng leofaÐ lāÐgetēona / synnum geswenced, ac hyne sār *hafað* / in
nidgripe nearwe *befongen* / (perf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *befōn*) balwon
bendum; 974-7

(no longer lives the loathely spoiler, afflicted with crimes but pain *has* closely
seized him in the coercive grip with pernicious bonds)

Him *wæs* ful *boren* (pluperf.indic.pass.3rd pers.sing.of *beran*), ond frēondlaÐu
wordum bewægned, ond wunden gold / ēstum geēawed, earm[h]rēade twā, /
hrægl ond hringas, healsbēaga mēst / Ðāra Ðe ic on foldan *gefrægen hæbbe*
(perf.indic.act.1st pers.sing.of *gefrignan*) 1192-6

(A filled cup *had been brought* to him, and an invitation had been offered with
words, and the wound gold had kindly been presented together with two arm-
ornaments, corslet and rings, and greatest collars that I *have heard* in the world.)

hraÐe hēo æÐelinga āne *hæfde* / fæste *befangen* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd
pers.sing.of *befōn*), Ðā hēo tō fenne gang.1294-5

(Quickly she *had seized* one of the noble men tightly and then she went to the
fen.)

Ne wæs Ðæm oÐrum swā, / syÐÐan hē hine tō guÐe *gegyred hæfde* (pluperf.
indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *gyrwan*) 1471-2

(It was not so with the other when he *had made himself ready* for the battle.)

Hæfde Ðā forsipod (pluperf.subj.act.3rd pers.sing.of *forsipian*) sunu
EcgÐēowes / under gynne grunde, Gēata cempa, / nemne him heaÐobyrne helpe
gefremede, 1550-2

(Then the son of Ecgtheow, Geat warrior, *might have perished* under the spa-
cious earth, unless his war- corslet had performed any help,)

Ðā Ðæs monige gewearÐ, / Ðæt hine sēo brimwylf *ābroten hæfde*

(pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *ābreotan*) 1598-9

(then many agreed in thinking that the she-wolf of the sea *had destroyed* him.)

Ic Ðæt unsōfte ealdre gedigde, / wigge under wætere, weorc genēÐde /
earfoÐlice; ætrihte *wæs* guÐ *getwāfed*(pluperf.indic.pass.3rd pers.sing.of
getwæfan), nymÐe mec God scylde.1655-8

(I painfully survived it alive in the warfare under water and braved my work
with difficulty;immediately the battle *had been finished* , except that God pro-
tected me.)

Hafast Ðū *gefēred* (perf.indic.act.2nd pers.sing.of *fērian*), Ðæt Ðām folcum
sceal, Gēata lēodum ond Gār-Denum / sib gemāne, ond sacu restan, / inwitniÐas,
Ðē hie ær drugon, /wesan 1855-9

(You *have brought it to pass* that the shared peace is sure to exist for these
peoples, i.e.Geats and Spear-Danes, and that the strife and enmity through which
they passed is sure to rest,)

Ðēah Ðe wintra lyt / under burhlocan *gebiden hæbbe*(perf.subj.act.3rd
pers.sing.of *gebidan*), / HæreÐes dohtor;1927-9

(although Hæreth's daughter *has lived* through a few winters under the castle
enclosure;)

syÐÐan mergen cōm, ond wē tō symble *geseten hæfdon* (pluperf.indic.act.1st
pers.pl.of *gesittan*)2103-4

(when the morning came and we *had sat down* for the banquet)

Swā se Ðēodkyning Ðēawum lyfde; / nealles ic Ðām lēanum *forloren hæfde*

(pluperf.indic.act.1st pers.sing.of *forlēosan*), 2144-5

(The king of the nation loved the custom very much; I **had** not **lost** the rewards at all)

hē Ðæt sōna onfand, Ðæt **hæfde** gumena sum goldes **gefandod** (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of (*ge*)**fandian**), hēahgestrēona.2300-2
(he instantly found it out that someone **had tampered** the gold of splendid treasures)

Hæfde landwara lige **befangen**(pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *befōn*), / bāle ond bronde;2321-2
(He **had seized** the people of the land with fire, flame and burning)

Hæfde ligdraca lēoda fæsten, ēalond ūtan, eorÐweard Ðone glēdum **forgrunden** (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *forgrindan*);2333-5
(The fire-dragon **had destroyed** the fastness of the people, the outside waterland and the stronghold with the flames)

hæfdon hȳ **forhealden**(pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.pl.of *forhealdan*)helm Scylfinga, Ðone sēlestan sēcyinga 2381-2
(they **had rebelled against** the lord of Scylfings, best of sea-kings)

Swā hē niÐa gehwane **genesen hæfde** (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *genesan*), sliÐra geslyhta, sunu EcgÐiowes, 2397-8
(Therefore he, son of Ecgtheow, **had survived** each contest and terrible battle)

hæfde Ðā **gefrūnen**(pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *gefrignan*), hwanan sio fāhÐ ārās, bealoniÐ biorna;2403-4
(then he **had learned** whence the feud, warriors' dire affliction, arose)

Ðæt se wyrm onfand, syÐÐan hie tōgædre *gegān hæfdon* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.pl.of *gān*).2629-30

(as the dragon found out when they *had come* together in a hostile meeting)

ond hi hyne Ðā bēgen *ābroten hæfdon* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.pl.of *ābrēotan*), sibæÐelingas;2707-8

(and then they, both related nobles, *had killed* him)

wisse hē gearwe, Ðæt hē dæghwila *gedrogen hæfde* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *drēogan*), eorÐan wynn(e);2725-6

(he surely knew that he *had passed through* his days, joy in the world)

hæfde āghwæÐer ende *gefēred* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *gefēran*) lānan lifes.2844-5

(each of the two *had reached* the end of the transitory life)

hæfde Higelāces hilde *gefrūnen* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *gefrignan*), wlonces wigcræft;2952-3

(he *had learned* Hygelac's valor and his proud prowess)

wæs Ðā dēaÐe fæst, *hæfde* eorÐscrafa ende *genyttod* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *genyttian*).3045-6

(when he was fixed with death, he *had made* his last use of earthly caverns)

næfne goldhwæte gearwor *hæfde* Agendes ēst ær *gescēawod* (pluperf.subj.act.3rd pers.sing.of *scēawian*).3074-5

(unless Owner's favor *had* before more readily *examined* into those eager for gold)

oÐ Ðæt hē Ðā bānhūs *gebrocen hæfde* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.sing.of *gebrecan*) / hāt on hreÐre.3147-8

(until it(=the flame) *had destroyed* the body, hot to the heart)

swylce on horde ær niÐhēdige men *genumen hæfdon* (pluperf.indic.act.3rd pers.pl.of *geniman*)3164-5

(which the hostile men *had* previously *taken away* from the hoard)

From the foregoing examples we notice that *habban* is overwhelmingly used as an auxiliary verb of so-called compound tenses and that there is no instance of a perfect passive compound tense which is profusely found in the literature of Middle English. Moreover we must closely examine the relationship between *wesan/bēon* + *past participle* and *(ge)weorthan* + *past participle*.