

THE LEJRE CONNECTION IN BEOWULF SCHOLARSHIP

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When *Beowulf* was first made available to the reading public during the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, one question that naturally arose was where, geographically, the poet imagined the action of the poem as taking place. Clearly the action of the first part of the poem is set in the land of the Danes, at a hall that is located a fairly short distance inland, but that is the only geographical information the poet provides. The first modern editor of *Beowulf*, the Icelander Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, gave little help to his readers in this regard, for he located the hall Heorot at the town of Hiöring in Jutland on no stronger basis than a vague similarity in the two names (1815: 261). Despite Adam Oehlenschläger's immensely popular verse-novel *Helge* (1808), in which this influential poet drew attention to the dynastic quarrels of the Skjöldung kings and set the opening actions of that strife firmly in Lejre from the very first line, Thorkelin missed many of the proper names in *Beowulf* that might have alerted him to that story, translating these names as adjectives.

The first person in the modern era to recognize these words as names and through them to connect *Beowulf* specifically to Lejre was the great scholar and poet N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872). He announces his recognition of the names in his review of Thorkelin's edition and Latin translation (Grundtvig 1815; Shippey and Haarder 1998: 108–13), but we do not see evidence of his connection of this material to Lejre until five years later, in his 1820 adaptation of *Beowulf* into Danish ballad verse (the first translation of the whole of *Beowulf* into any modern language). There Grundtvig rendered line 1302a of the poem, *Hream wearð in Heorote* ('An uproar arose in Heorot'), as *Der Øprør blev i Leiren* (1820: 119), a literal translation of the OE verse except that the name "Leire" is substituted for "Heorot." It was natural for Grundtvig to make this equation once he had recognized the Scylding kings of *Beowulf* as more or less identical to the Skjöldung kings of early Danish tradition.¹ His changing of

¹ Grundtvig's recognition delighted Jacob Grimm, who was looking for cross-cultural identities to bolster his theory that myth could follow the dynamic of philology. He and other like-minded scholars wished "to take the scattered relics of Northern myth [. . .] and work them into the connected whole which they were sure must have existed before and around the surviving fragments" (Shippey 2005: 12). Thus in his review of the Danish translation of *Beowulf*, Grimm praises Grundtvig's *scharfsinn*

Heorot to Leire was also significant in terms of his patriotic agenda for constructing culture, for, through this one bit of onomastic slippage, Grundtvig succeeded in annexing the Anglo-Saxon poem to Danish soil.² Already in his *Roskilde-Saga* of 1814 he had claimed, in an account based on Saxo's and Snorri's histories that he was soon to translate, that Lejre was "the birthplace of Danish spirituality and nationhood, a place where Skjold ruled and after him 'Beo' and 'Ro'" (Busbee 2005: 107). Now that the Old English poem *Beowulf* had come to light, it too could be seen as an expression of early Danish spirituality and nationhood. Later in life Grundtvig confirmed his understanding that the *Beowulf* poet's world coincided in its essentials with the world of the early chroniclers of Lejre: "Borgen er naturligviis den berømte Leire-gaard" ("The stronghold" — that is, Hrothgar's hall Heorot — "is naturally the famous Leire-fortress" (Grundtvig 1850: 231; cited from Busbee 2005: 106).

In the course of the nineteenth century, Grundtvig's casual assumption about the location of Heorot gained general acceptance. The great German scholar Karl Müllenhoff put his considerable scholarly weight behind this equation (1889: 44–46). Alternative views continued to be expressed, however, often by those who wished to annex the landscape of *Beowulf* to their own home territory. As early as 1816, William Taylor (of Norwich) identifies the *Gar-Dena* as "Danes of the Yare" who were "sailing from the port of Yarmouth" (Shippey and Haarder 1998: 135), the Yare being a river that flows past Norwich. In the same year, Nicholas Outzen used place-names familiar to him to locate *Beowulf* in Schleswig so as to "bring the poem home" (Shippey and Haarder 1998: 19). He situated the hall at Hjordkær, about fifteen miles north of Flensburg near the German-Danish border,³ apparently for no stronger reason than the resemblance of the OE word *Heort* (or *Heorot*) to the first element of the toponym Hjordkær. In 1861, Daniel Henry Haigh argued that the action of the Danish part of *Beowulf* did not have its point of origin in Denmark at all, but rather in Northumbria during the fifth and sixth centuries (Shippey and Haarder 1998: 318). Haigh's relocation of the story to the parish of Hart in Durham won few or no adherents, however, both because of the inherent implausibility of this approach and because of his relative lack of authority in these matters.

In 1885 the German scholar Gregor Sarrazin visited Lejre and found the scenery there compellingly "Beowulfian." Although few of his detailed arguments relating to Lejre have won adherents, his several studies on that topic confirmed the general tendency of scholars to associate the *Beowulf* poet's Scyldings with the Skjöldungs of Danish tradition and to

'sharpsightedness' for discovering that the Scyld Scefig proem provides an opening for "den mythus, welcher den eingang des ganzen gedichts ausmacht" ("the myth that makes up the entire first part of the poem"; 1823; repr. in 1869, 4: 184): that is, for recognizing what we would describe as the *legend* of the Skjöldung dynasty in Lejre.

² According to in his own understanding, Grundtvig is recovering the story of *Beowulf* for Denmark. He begins his 1815 review with a statement that reveals his perspective: "Everyone who now feels a love of ancient Denmark and our fathers' commemoration will have seen with joy that the ancient Anglo-Saxon poem about Danish deeds, which lay buried for so many centuries in the English bookshelves [. . .], has appeared . . ." (1815: col. 945, cited by Shippey and Haarder 1998: 108).

³ Outzen 1816: 519–20, cited by Shippey and Haarder 1998: 128.

locate the seat of this line of kings in the immediate vicinity of Lejre.⁴ Wentworth Huyshe, the author of a stylish translation of the poem that was accompanied by many images of early Germanic antiquities, thus subsequently located Heorot at “Leidre” without discussion (1907: 49). Similarly, John R. Clark Hall, the author of a fine prose translation of *Beowulf*, accepted that Heorot “must probably be located at or near Leire, [. . .] the ancestral seat of the Danish kings as far back as Hrolf Kraki (the Hrothulf of *Beowulf*) and possibly farther back still” (1911: xxv).

One of the most influential persons to weigh in on the question of the location of Heorot was the Danish medievalist and folklorist Axel Olrik in his book *The Heroic Legends of Denmark*. In chapter 6, “The Royal Residence at Leire,” he says, concerning the Lejre of ancient documents, “The century-old fame of Leire is in no wise built on great and decisive events. Only one is really memorable, Hrolf’s fall. This episode is, to be sure, so indissolubly connected with Leire, that the mention of the place recurs in all [Danish] sources” (1919: 337). As for the exact location of the stronghold of the Skjöldung kings, Olrik wisely refrained from speculating, given the lack of archaeological evidence available in his time: “We have, at present, no means of determining with certainty whether popular tradition is right or wrong in maintaining Leire village and its environs to be the site of the old castle” (1919: 346). He too connects *Beowulf* with Lejre, though in an offhand way: “The only royal names credibly connected with it [Lejre] are those of Hroar and his successor Hrolf. The name *Hleiðrar* itself probably means ‘huts’ (cf. Gothic *hlaiþrs* ‘hut’) and would seem to indicate a settlement that grew from a small beginning. Besides, we have the name *Heorot* (hart, stag) applied in the English epics to Hroar’s slender royal hall.”⁵

Although also on guard against making definitive pronouncements, R.W. Chambers wrote of Lejre in 1921: “The tourist, walking amid these cottages and mounds, may feel fairly confident that he is standing on the site of Heorot [. . .]. In these matters absolute certainty cannot be reached: but we may be fairly sure that the spot where Hrothgar built his ‘Hart-Hall’ and where Hrothulf held that court to which the North ever after looked for its pattern of chivalry was Leire, where the grave mounds rise out of the waving cornfields” (Chambers *Intro*. [1st ed.] 16, 19–20). These passages — repeated verbatim in the third edition of Chambers’ book, published in 1959 — did much to canonize the identification of Heorot with Lejre in *Beowulf* scholarship.

Friedrich Klaeber’s comments concerning Lejre in his 1922 edition of *Beowulf* echo this opinion: “The seat of the Danish power, the fair hall Heorot, corresponds to the ON. *Hleiðr* (*Hleiðargarðr*, Lat. *Lethra*) of Scandinavian fame, which, although reduced to insignificance at an early date, and now a tiny, wretched village, Lejre (southwest of Roskilde on the island of Zealand) is habitually associated with the renown of the Skjöldung kings” (1922: xxxvii). As for Sarrazin’s claim that the scenery of *Beowulf* “could be clearly recognized” in the neighborhood of Lejre, Klaeber viewed it with skepticism. He too had visited this locale and had failed to see there more than “a very general topographical resemblance” to the scenery

⁴ For excerpts from these studies in English translation, see pp. 435–47 below.

⁵ 1919: 340. By “epics” in the plural, Olrik refers to *Widsith* as well as *Beowulf*.

evoked in the Old English poem (1922: xxxvii).⁶ Similarly, W.W. Lawrence, while accepting that Heorot is generally identified with “the ancient Lethra on the island of Zealand, now the small village Leire, near Roskilde,” went on to specify: “But the traveler who visits this quiet hamlet, with its swampy meadows pierced by arms of the sea, will find little to recall the rugged landscape in *Beowulf*.” The reason for this discrepancy, he says, is that “the domains of Hrothgar were pictured in the epic by a man who knew the sea-cliffs of northern England, but he was, as we shall see, telling a tale of waterfall-trolls, which had derived its characteristic scenery from Norway” (1930: 32). In short, Lawrence did not suppose that the *Beowulf* poet had any direct knowledge of Zealand; on the contrary, he thought that a wilder landscape must have been the source of the poet’s descriptions of nature.⁷

Since the time of Chambers and Klaeber, most scholars have been willing, if pressed, to locate Heorot at Lejre even if with caution.⁸ By the middle of the twentieth century, however, interest in the “real-world” topography of *Beowulf* began to wane in the absence of new evidence with a bearing on this topic. The purposes of neither New Critical nor exegetical approaches to *Beowulf* were furthered by attempts to locate the poem’s action at any real-world locale. In an article published in 1964, for example, Lewis E. Nicholson places the poem in “fantasy-land,” and this is where modern readers uninterested in geographical connections with *Beowulf* have generally been content to leave Heorot and the hero’s fight with Grendel and his avenging mother.⁹

⁶ The two remarks by Klaeber quoted here are unchanged in later editions.

⁷ Indeed the poet was influenced in this manner, though aspects of this wilder landscape were literary, as has now been shown. This does not mean that he could not have combined more than one source for his landscape.

⁸ E.g., Schaubert 1961: 3: 275, col. 1; Wrenn 1973: 297; Swanton 1978: 189; Mitchell and Robinson 1998: xiii. Again, voices dissenting from this orthodoxy have occasionally been heard. In an article published in 1935 titled simply “Heorot,” Stephen Herben proposed to locate the action of *Beowulf* at a village to the northeast of the city of Roskilde, a tiny settlement near Værebros where he finds the rare farm names *Stor Hjort* and *Lille Hjorte*, ‘Big Hart’ and ‘Little Hart,’ i.e., Heorot (1935: 943). He could have made a better case for finding the Scylding hall at this location if he had known about the Danish folktale situating “King Frode’s Barrow” at Værebros, where Frode is said to have been killed by trolls from nearby Roskilde fjord (Thiele 1968: 1: 20–1, derived from Saxo), but the connection that he proposes remains practically groundless. In 1988, building on work by Niels Clausen Lukman, Lars Hemmingsen took strong issue with the Lejre location, wanting to place an earlier version of the “Danish” action of *Beowulf* on the Danube. He finds numerous names similar to those of characters in the poem and to Heorot, and suggests that stories about these heroes were current in that area long ago, before tribes migrated north. Anderson 1999: 100–16 reviews and criticizes both these theories. In the unique OE version of *Beowulf* it is made very clear that the hero sails to the land of the Danes from somewhere else in Scandinavia, so whatever merit there is in the studies of Lukman and Hemmingsen (which deserve more attention than they have received) pertains to the prehistory of *Beowulf*, not to the text as we have it.

⁹ A mere “fantasy-land” is too close to hand for certain persons who have retold the story of *Beowulf* in recent years. In a far deviation from any attempt to visualize the action of *Beowulf* at Lejre, in

Again, however, an exception to that last generalization can be pointed out. In August of 1985, just a hundred years after Sarrazin published his first claims regarding the landscape at Lejre, Marijane Osborn visited Lejre with Gillian Overing, returning in 1988 with the graphic artist Randolph Swearer. All three of these literary adventurers found it possible to *imagine* the action of *Beowulf* taking place there, though at that time it was necessary to disguise any faith in the poet's actual knowledge of the place with sarcasm about Sarrazin's credulity.¹⁰

Specialists in *Beowulf* have not yet had time to assimilate the new archaeological evidence dating from 2004–2005 that is presented for the first time in print in the present book (pp. 109–26 above). Curiously, however, almost no one has chosen to address the implications for *Beowulf* of the excavations undertaken at Lejre in the late 1980s. One exception is Catherine M. Hills, who, in a chapter on “*Beowulf* and Archaeology” included in the 1997 *Beowulf Handbook*, reports briefly on the excavation of the great Viking Age hall (or halls) and its satellite buildings at Lejre. She also calls attention to another hall of similar proportions that was built at Gudme, on the island of Fyn, several centuries before the action of *Beowulf* is imagined to have taken place, then comments: “If a hall this big could be built in the third century, it is perfectly reasonable to set a king of the fifth or sixth centuries in one of equal size and magnificence” (1997: 303). Hrothgar's Heorot is not at all implausible at the time or place it is supposed to have existed, she concludes — that is, at Lejre during the fifth or sixth century.

“Nothing endures,” said the artist Janko Varda, “unless it has first been transformed into myth.”¹¹ From a human perspective, landscape, of course, does endure, but myth or other forms of story can change it in our minds. *Soft* is the impression one has when looking out over the rolling green hills above Lejre in summertime, or *bucolic*, as cows graze on those hills; and when walking across these fields shimmering in the sunlight, through grasses bending with light winds, it is hard to imagine violent events occurring here. Just beyond these hall sites, however, stand steep slopes and thick woods, and on a windy winter night, as the hall fires flickered and the storyteller evoked dark deeds, those woods would

“*Beowulf* and the Creatures of Denmark,” chap. 11 of his book *After the Flood*, the Creationist Bill Cooper regards *Beowulf* as a real person and struggles mightily to relate the Grendel monsters to a “species of predatory dinosaur” (1995: 146–61). But others have had this thought before him. Wondering where *Beowulf*'s “hideous monsters of the marshes” came from, the American poet Sidney Lanier said in a lecture of 1879, “In meditating upon them, one begins to remember those old geologic periods, Devonian and Jurassic times, when the terrible reptiles, the gigantic Saurians, floundered about the fens. Some of these were biped monsters . . .” (1902: 46). The location for *Beowulf* absolutely the farthest removed from reality is surely that imagined in the 1987 science fiction novel, *The Legacy of Heorot*. The writing team of Niven, Pournelle and Barnes, having no interest in any real-world aspect of the source story in their retelling, set “Heorot” on a distant planet, where the human *Beowulfian* hero Cadmann Wayland battles a bloodthirsty horde of saurian “Grendels.”

¹⁰ Overing and Osborn 1994: 22. See also Osborn 2007.

¹¹ Quoted by Anais Nin in her diary for 1947 after visiting Janko Varda in Monterey, California (Nin 1966–1980: 4: 219).

draw ever nearer. No one today would agree with Sarrazin that this landscape “is” that of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, because the poet enhances his story location with features drawn from many sources. Grendel never stalked these precise fields. In former days, however, both human and monstrous foes were thought to lurk in this vicinity,¹² and traces of ancient halls are being excavated now, in “the very place” (as Sarrazin liked to say) where the *Beowulf* poet may have imagined Heorot to have stood, even if the poet never ventured near that place in person.

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¹² See, for example, the folktales “Kong Frodes høj ved Værebro” and “Havtrolde i Isefjord,” in Thiele 1968: 1: 20–1 and 155–56, respectively.

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