

ILLiad TN: 270420

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Dat

Aedificia nova : studies in honor of Rosemary Cramp / edited b
Catherine E. Karkov and Helen Damico.

p. cm. -- (Publications of the Richard Rawlinson Center)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-58044-110-0 (casebound : alk. paper)
1. Art, Anglo-Saxon. 2. English literature--Old English, ca. 450
3. Archaeology, Medieval--Great Britain. 4. Anglo-Saxons--Mate
culture. I. Cramp, Rosemary. II. Karkov, Catherine E., 1956- II
Damico, Helen.

NX543.A43 2008
941.01--dc22

20080C

ISBN 978-1-58044-110-0

Printed in the United States of America
C 5 4 3 2 1

Borrower: GDC

Lending String: *SNN,OBE,WLU,IRU,ERE

Patron: Fee, Christopher

Journal Title: Aedificia nova ; studies in honor of
Rosemary Cramp /

Volume: Issue:
Month/Year: 2008**Pages:** 89-105

Article Author:

Article Title: Hines, John.,; Beowulf and
Archaeology-Revisited

Imprint: Kalamazoo, MI ; Medieval Institute
Publications, c2008.

ILL Number: 80460394



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7/25/11

The metonymy through which the compound "battle-boar" gets to mean "helmet" in skaldic poetry, the crest standing for the whole, recalls the description in *Beowulf*, lines 1327–28, of noble warriors battering the "boars" (i.e., helmets). Just as the material world portrayed in the Old English poem has been illuminated by sixth- and seventh-century grave goods, so, too, its lovingly described boar-helmets gain depth by being reunited with their cousins in tenth- and early eleventh-century skaldic verse.

The two poetries bear at moments an uncanny resemblance to each other, revealing the same allusiveness and habits of expression, and, sometimes, the same inventory of "things." The boar-helmets of *Beowulf* are rooted, like the heads they cap, in a North Sea culture whose poetic language had at some point gone its separate way. "Singularity," Sir Arthur Conan Doyle advised (not necessarily thinking of late Latin *singularis*, "wild boar"), "is almost invariably a clue."⁵⁵ The boar on the helmet is a little thing, but no object is so small that it cannot be seen to overshadow mountains if, as Rosemary Cramp has taught us, we pay attention to it for a long time and close up.

55. A. Doyle, "Boscombe Valley Mystery," p. 70. I am much indebted to Oren Falk, University of Toronto, for his thoughtful reading of this piece.

BEOWULF AND ARCHAEOLOGY—REVISITED

JOHN HINES

ARCHAEOLOGY AND LITERARY CRITICISM

It is difficult to imagine an Old English scholar who is not utterly familiar with *Beowulf*. There will, however, be few such scholars with even a similarly thorough understanding and knowledge of Anglo-Saxon archaeology. It is consequently all the more daunting a task to try to make the case to the Anglo-Saxonist establishment that there is something to be gained from revisiting the pairing of *Beowulf* and archaeology yet again. This is not least so because we already have two recent studies, by Leslie Webster and Catherine Hills,¹ that are as thorough as the space available to them allows for in providing an archaeological elucidation of the various categories of artifact referred to in the poem. These commentaries, however, represent only one of the ways in which Anglo-Saxon archaeology and the study of Old English literature can be integrated, and they do not attempt to involve archaeology in the criticism of the poem. By the latter I mean the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of it as a unitary work of literary art, and it is the purpose of this essay to show how substantial a role an archaeological perspective may play in such an enterprise.

In this respect, the polemical edge of the claim that *Beowulf* and archaeology should be revisited is directed against an overtextual approach to past cultural products that is characteristic of modern literary and especially Old English studies, rather than being a querulous criticism of archaeologists who have written about *Beowulf* for not having done enough. Nonetheless, even the latter have seemed to find it hard to escape a reductive position as they (literally) get down to details. Archaeological evidence would indeed seem to be of limited importance in critical terms if, in the end, all it can do, to quote Rosemary Cramp's conclusion to her 1957 article

I wish to thank Professor John D. Niles and Dr. Elizabeth Ashman Rowe for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, and in particular for helping me to recognize points that could be made clearer for a readership with a background primarily in literary studies. Responsibility for the shortcomings that remain is still, of course, entirely my own.

1. Webster, "Archaeology and *Beowulf*"; Hills, "*Beowulf* and Archaeology."

on *Beowulf* and archaeology, is "to enrich the study of the poem" by being able to "supply relevant illustrations so that simple words such as 'hall' or 'sword' conjure up a precise picture."² This is somewhat less than the fundamental exploration of insights into Anglo-Saxon "society" and "life," in respect of which it was initially suggested archaeology and the poem could complement one another.³ The problem may seem to be simple and irredeemable. Nearly all Old English poetry—with the possible exception of some of the riddles—is concerned to portray an ideal, not the real world. Meanwhile the splendid weapons and armor that are referred to, the horse trappings and ships, and the finest hall imaginable with its mead benches and ale cups, are meant to be rare and esoteric things, not the items and settings of mundane and daily Anglo-Saxon life. This is not to say that the elevated culture envisaged in the poem did not have its counterparts in the real world. But with such a limited interface between literature and life as it really was, what can archaeology do for the literature other than provide us with a rather limited series of illustrations? And what can the literature add to archaeology other than a set of names for things that we can already tell, on purely archaeological grounds, were special?

There is more than one solution to this basic problem. For one thing, it is possible to approach a work of literary art as an artifact capable of analysis in essentially the same terms as the diverse forms of material artifact that constitute archaeology's primary domain, so that the literature can consequently be fitted into a general cultural history. Such is an approach that has long been prominently championed by so well-known a figure as Jacques Le Goff,⁴ although in fact textual sources remain dominant in his studies of the Middle Ages. Crucially for the present essay, however, this is a particularly awkward approach to take to *Beowulf*, where we have a single Anglo-Saxon manuscript copy of the poem of reasonably well-defined date but then a distinctly contentious debate over the origins, accretion, and transmission of the material that makes up this one version of the poem through something like the previous four centuries. I do not in fact regard the controversy over the date of *Beowulf* as an insuperable problem for such an approach, as is implicit in some of what follows, but nevertheless judge it simply unnecessary (for the purposes of the present discussion) to become entangled in this whole complex of problems.

The alternative approach that I shall seek to demonstrate through selected examples in this short essay takes its starting point in an understanding of archaeology as not simply a specialist knowledge of ancient

2. Cramp, "Beowulf and Archaeology," p. 77.

3. Cramp, "Beowulf and Archaeology," p. 57.

4. E.g., in his essays first published from 1956 to 1985 collected in Le Goff, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge* and *L'imaginaire médiéval*.

artifacts but rather a study of a more abstract phenomenon called "past culture"—culture being something that is implicit in and common to even such apparently different material products as, say, a type of grave, a pot, a ship, or a garment that can somehow be associated with a common source.⁵ Archaeology is thus not concerned just to identify, classify, and date the artifactual inventory of past contexts but is far more profoundly concerned to understand what was done with those artifacts and how the many particularities of past behavior reflected by individual finds may relate to one another as part of some more coherent whole. I do not intend to attempt to give some all-embracing explanation and justification of such a concept of cultural coherency at this point. We can, I believe, amply justify assuming it to be a valid starting point in the present context by exploring *Beowulf* and looking for some system or systems of material culture there. This will be to read the text as the archaeologist reads material culture, and therefore to do much more than to approach the text as a catalogue of artifacts, of which we may or may not happen to have found examples.⁶

A different form of reading of the poem, not only informed by archaeology but really dependent upon it, is that of Gale Owen-Crocker,⁷ who effectively suggests that a familiarity with particular material-cultural features is crucial to the full semantic recognition and interpretation of a key part of the poem. Drawing on parallels in a set of Migration Period to Viking Age furnished burials in central Sweden (the territory of the poem's *Sveoðeod*), she identifies allusions to funerary practices in the "lay of the last survivor" (2247–66),⁸ which she then locates within the elaborate thematic structure she postulates for *Beowulf*, based upon this as one of four funerals. The poem is still, in her view, a late Anglo-Saxon Chris-

5. For a particularly clear definition and concise explanation of the archaeological concept of culture, see Childe, *Short Introduction to Archaeology*, pp. 16–19.

6. It would be improper not at least to acknowledge the need to discuss the relationship between the approach(es) advocated in this essay and Allen J. Frantzen's thoughtful and thought-provoking case for interdisciplinary—or rather comparative disciplinary—studies in his "Prologue: Documents and Monuments." It is not, however, purely an evasive rhetorical ploy to invoke *occupatio* here, on the grounds that this essay is not the place for an adequate or useful evaluation of Frantzen's more theoretical paper; the empirical contents of which are essentially retrospective, reviewing (inter alia) the limits and biases of monodisciplinary traditions, and in particular the emphasis on the rich and the aristocratic in the links drawn between *Beowulf* and the Sutton Hoo ship burial excavated in 1939. I believe there is a fundamental congruency of purpose between what I seek to advocate here and the prospects optimistically outlined by Frantzen (*ibid.*, esp. pp. 22–33); however, this essay seeks to yoke theory to practice from the start.

7. Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals in Beowulf*.

8. All line references to and quotations from *Beowulf* are taken from B. Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*. All translations are my own.

tian reflection upon a pagan past. It is undoubtedly important to be aware that any literature may use contextual allusions in a crucial way, which only a knowledge of the relevant archaeology will make accessible to a modern reader. Among my concerns about Owen-Crocker's argument, however,⁹ is the fact that in this case it again limits the contribution of archaeology to a highly particularized and indeed esoteric association: one has both to know the material-cultural reference and then to make (and indeed believe in) the connection. Toward the end of the present discussion I offer an alternative interpretation of the dragon's hoard as unused treasure—unusable, as it appeared to the last survivor, who buried it as there was nobody else left to bury it with him as grave goods. The funerary associations of this vignette in *Beowulf* also appear to me to be much more significantly drawn out by its close association with two further cases of grievously inchoate mortuary rituals: the death of Herebeald (2435–71), slain by his brother, whose father cannot remedy the hostile blow (*fæghðe gebetan*, 2465), and the young man's body hanging on the galls, pecked by ravens and bringing agony to his father (2444–59). Here indeed, I would rather argue, the explicit absence of proper obsequies acts as a powerful reminder of the pagandom in which *Beowulf* is set, a paganism that lurks just below the surface of the mythical, literary, and material allusions of the poem.¹⁰

We all ought to be familiar enough with the principal categories of material artifact referred to in *Beowulf*. Pride of place is taken by a special type of building that served as an elite gathering and meeting place, the hall, and various requisites for group entertainment and hospitality that go with it—the ale cup, the mead bench, and the harp, for instance. This is effectively the only element within the human settlement hierarchy and landscape that is evoked in the poem; apart from (even here only possibly) brief references to *londbuend* and *bufolc* (1345, 2920), no notice is taken of any substructure of farms and villages, or a farmed landscape like that which is regularly and formulaically recorded in Anglo-Saxon charters. The next most prominent category is military equipment, weapons and armor, and means of transport in the form of riding gear and ships. Jewellery is not exclusively female, but this category nonetheless serves as the equivalent, for the *goldhroden* woman, of the man's body armor of helmet and mailshirt.¹¹

9. See Hines, review of Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals in Beowulf*.

10. Consider, for instance, the propositions that Herebeald, Hathcyn, and the old man are euhemerizations of Baldr, Høð, and Óðinn in situations recorded for us in Old Norse mythology, and the then-conspicuous absence of the story of the attempts to retrieve Baldr from Hel after his violent death in those sources.

11. Cf. Fee, "Beag & Beaghröden."

Very importantly, in view of archaeology's concern with what was done with the artifacts of the past as well as with the fact of their existence, a further major category of material construct portrayed in *Beowulf* is a range of contexts for the deliberate deposition of objects. The type encountered most frequently, and conspicuously at the beginning and end of the poem, is the furnished funerary deposit, as in Scyld's burial at sea and Beowulf's grave in his barrow. There is also nonfunerary hoarding—obviously in the case of the dragon's lair; more arguably so in the case of the collection of weaponry and treasures in Grendel's underwater den. With this category we can see especially clearly how the artifact may serve not solely as a purely utilitarian, function-serving, and thus passive item—something that is simply used—but can also be used creatively in the negotiation of human relations, both social and circumstantial, and thus become invested with growing and changeable value, power, and significance. Therefore let us not jump to, or fail to pass beyond, those common, simplistic explanations of the provision of grave goods: that they mark the deceased's status or are for use in an afterlife. Why, then, bury artifacts like dead people in nonfunerary votive hoards? Should we perhaps look at things the other way round, and see the dead human body as treated as, in effect, an inconvenient or even dangerous encumbrance, to be disposed of like inanimate artifacts?¹² On the basis of such observations and questions, I propose to take a fresh look at instances of the use of material culture where I believe it forms a vital interpretative crux in each of the three main sections of the poem.

WEAPONS AND ARMOR—BEOWULF'S JOURNEY TO FIGHT GRENDEL

For all the familiarity of the importance of weaponry and armor to the heroic military elite portrayed in *Beowulf*, I am not aware that there has ever been any very detailed analysis of precisely how these items are used.¹³ When Beowulf himself finally makes his entrance into the poem, in lines 189–98, after the building of Heorot and Grendel's depredations have been recounted, the main visual picture put before us is that of his

12. For careful discussions of the possible range of explanations of the early Anglo-Saxon furnished burial rite and the pitfalls associated with that, and at the same time striking examples of the almost automatic association between (non-Christian) burial practices and (pagan) religion, see Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons*, pp. 67–125, and Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, pp. 67–180. See also Elizabeth O'Brien's essay in this volume.

13. The discussion that follows here may be compared with van Meter, "Ritualized Presentation of Weapons," especially in respect of the lack of distinction amongst categories of weaponry and armor, and the maintenance of the conventional value attributed to the sword, in that study.

ship crossing to Denmark—evoked in considerable detail, and thus also echoing Scyld's arrival and departure across the sea. But there is a very marked change as soon as the troop of fifteen disembarks onto land, which is typically referred to with the simple word *wang* (225), a word that implies nothing more than a bare, open stage upon which the heroes can act. As the men move around rather than being carried, almost magically, in the boat, there is a completely new focus on their armor and weapons, which even chime in with the sound of the poem: *syrcau hrysedom, / gūðgewædo* (mailcoats shook [or were clinking], war-garments, 226–27).

Such are certainly the terms in which we perceive the Geatish troop through the Danish coastguard's eyes: he sees them carrying their bright shields, their ready war-gear (*fyrðsearo fusticu*, 232—it is very difficult to translate this halfline without personifying the armor); and in his challenge to them, he seems to identify their armor as a sort of uniform, and as being the particular point that he needs to ask them about: "Hwæt syndon ge searohæbbendra / byrnum werede?" (What armored men are you, troop in mailcoats?, 237–38). Now there is, of course, nothing very remarkable in a situation in which a group of men turning up fully armed should be perceived as a potential threat for precisely that reason and challenged to explain themselves. But the guard's words go beyond this. He says he has seen no shieldbearers (*lindhæbbende*) arrive *cūðlicor* (more conspicuously), and that one of them is the greatest warrior he has seen: "nis þæt seldguma / wæpnum geweorðad" (that is no hall-man adorned with weapons, 249–50). Thus both the appearance and behavior of the armed troop in these circumstances appear noble, and their war-gear plays a substantial part in this. The coastguard is, however, astute enough to know that appearances and material symbols alone are not enough to prove true identity and character, and thus they have to be questioned.

On its own, this episode would not give the material culture of the poem any more than a banal and self-evident significance, but these are terms of reference that not only remain at the forefront of attention from here on but play an increasingly powerful dramatic role. After Beowulf's speech declaring their purpose (260–85), in which he pointedly refers to Grendel as *seadōna ic nat hwyrc* (a ravager, I know not what, 274), they are told to proceed, in and with their war-gear: "Gewitaþ forð beran / wæpen ond gewædu" (Go and carry forth weapons and garments, 291–92), shortly after which we have the first reference to the famous boar-helmets, on which the *eoforlic scionon* (boar-shapes shone, 303–05). One can really note only in passing here that this image links the armor with a vitally important theme of light within the poem—immediately followed at this juncture, in fact, by a reference to the light of Heorot shining over many lands (307–11).

As the troop enters the hall, we again are told that their armor shines and sings: *gūðbyrne scan* (the war-corslet shone, 321), *hringiren scir / song in searum* (the bright ring-iron sang in the armor, 322–23), *byrnan hringdon* (the mailshirts rang, 327). Here, in fact, we also can begin to see the division of the war-gear into significantly different categories of body-armor and arms, as the shields and spears are put down, stowed into their proper place and almost, one might conceive, added to the structure of Heorot like the shields along the sides of the Gokstad ship (325–30).¹⁴ The troop is truly identified with its armor as an *irneþreal* (iron-force, 330), and of course the first question of the spokesman, Wulfgar, is the same as the coastguard's:

"Hwanon ferigeað ge fætte scyldas
græge syrcan ond grimhelmas,
heresceafra heap?" (333–35)

("Whence do you bring [these] plated shields, grey mail-shirts
and visored helmets, [the] mass of troop-shafts?")

Beowulf replies:

heard under helme. "We synt Higelaces
beodgeneatas. Beowulf is min nama." (342–43; my emphasis)
(hard under helmet. "We are Hygelac's table-companions. Beowulf
is my name.")

Accordingly, in recommending them to Hrothgar, Wulfgar associates their equipment with their status, "Hy on wiggetawum wyrdre pinceap / eorla geæhtlan" (In their war-gear they appear worthy of the status of distinguished men, 368–69), and they are explicitly directed finally to approach Hrothgar in their armor but without their weapons:

"Nu ge moton gangan in eowrum guðgeatawum
under heregriman Hroðgar geseon.
latað hildebord her onbidan,
wudu walsceafas, worda gepinges." (395–98)

("Now you may advance in your war-gear, beneath the visored
helmets, to see Hrothgar. Let the slaughter-shafts of wood await
here what words will decide.")

14. Nicolaysen, *Langskibet fra Gokstad ved Sandefjord*; Sjøvold, *Viking Ships in Oslo*, pp. 53–68.

At this point again, Beowulf's speech is introduced with emphasis on the fact that he speaks in his helmet and mailcoat (405–06). What is very clear in all this, then, is that the body-armor of helmet and mailcoat is understood and treated as being particularly personal in the sense of expressing the identity and status of its wearer in a way and to a degree beyond what any weapon does. From an archaeological perspective, we ought not to be in the least bit surprised by such an instance of culturally variable ways of clothing, grooming, or presenting the human body being used to express identity like this.¹⁵

All of this could, however, still be regarded as merely familiar and even predictable. The most startlingly dramatic use that is made of it in *Beowulf* is the turn that is announced in Beowulf's first speech to Hrothgar, when he forswears the use of weaponry (specifically sword and shield, at this point) in his anticipated battle with Grendel (433–40). Subsequently, indeed, we are told that he (finally) takes off his helmet and corslet when the Geats are left alone in Heorot that night awaiting Grendel (669–74). If this armor is so integral a part of his identity and status as we have been directed to believe, what are the implications of his divesting himself of it to fight Grendel? It is, of course, an ostentatious display of both courage and physical strength on Beowulf's part for him to do this, but I do not find that, on its own, a sufficient explanation. Beowulf does not seem abashed to have taken to the waters in a mailshirt and carrying a sword during his contest with Breca (530–606). We also learn retrospectively that a sword would be no use against Grendel anyway (798–805), but this appears to me more significant as one instance among a remarkably large number in which swords fail those who wield them at the point of need in *Beowulf* than as an explanation of Beowulf's conspicuous decision.¹⁶

15. See Hines, "Culture Groups and Ethnic Groups in Northern Germany," esp. pp. 225–29.

16. The most salient examples are the failure of the sword Hruting, which Beowulf has accepted as a loan from Unferth to aid him in his battle with Grendel's mother (1455–64, 1522–28; see below), and the failure of the sword Nægling, which Beowulf has relied on in his final battle with the dragon (2516–24, 2575–80), a point to which particular attention appears to be drawn by being twice recalled subsequently (2680–82, 2904–06). Wiglaf's sword is admittedly more effective against the dragon, although it is Beowulf's *weallstæc* that finishes the monster off (2697–705). A parallel to lines 794–805 occurs with the ineffective swords drawn by the men in Heorot, against Grendel's mother (1288–95). Of course, the sword does not have exclusively negative connotations, as Hrothgar's gift of a *mere mappumscæord* (a famous treasure sword) as a reward to Beowulf (1023) and Beowulf's exchange of swords as gifts with Hygelac on his return to Geatland (2144–99) show. But these again can be balanced against the ominously central role played by swords in the tragedies of the rekindled feuds in the Finnsburgh and Heatho-Beard stories, closely juxtaposed in the text with the accounts of these gifts (1142–45, 2041–62).

A further consideration, whose significance we cannot easily set so low, is Beowulf's faithful and fatalistic trust in God:

"ond sibpan witig god
on swa hwæpere bond halig dryhten
mæroo deme swa him gemet pince." (685–87)
(and then may wise God, the holy Lord, grant the glory on
whichever side seems fitting to Him.)¹⁷

Potentially of substantial relevance to this, too, is Beowulf's further motivation, again revealed only later, of desiring to capture Grendel as a living prize (960–70). The frustration of this wish makes its own critical point: Grendel's body "failed" (*his lic swice*, 966) and broke apart, while at the same time even Beowulf's great bodily strength had failed to achieve what he desired—*was to forenithig / feond on felle* (the foe was too greatly powerful in his movement, 969–70). Altogether, then, the drama of signs has moved on through the fight with Grendel from a familiar type of functional material culture in which artifacts have a symbolic value in human terms to one in which they dramatically represent elemental forces and values. In the approach to and presentation of the fight with Grendel, material culture thus plays a substantial discursive role in expressing the deeper meanings of the poem.

THE OBJECT AS TOKEN—BEOWULF'S RETURN FROM THE MERE

The dynamic role played by objects as signs is nowhere more evident in the narrative of *Beowulf* than in the passage of just over six hundred lines in the middle of the poem dealing with the fight with Grendel's mother. The preceding four hundred plus lines have served to establish a familiarity with the major signs involved here: primarily, of course, Grendel's severed arm as a trophy and token of Beowulf's victory over him (832–36, 918–29, 970–90), but also the bloody tracks across the landscape and the bloodstained mere (840–41, 847–49), the gifts with which Hrothgar rewards Beowulf (1020–49), and even the sword Hunlafing placed in Hengest's lap in the Finnsburgh interpolation (1142–45). Grendel's arm is retrieved by his mother, and as its counterpart she leaves Æschere's head on the path to the mere for her pursuers to find (1417–21). Correspondingly, Beowulf decapitates Grendel, and brings his head back as his second trophy, along with the surviving hilt of the superlative sword with which he had achieved the feat. Reminding us that signs can be misread,

17. See also 312–19, 381–84, 441–42, and 478–79.

Beowulf's Geatish and Danish companions had assumed that this infusion of blood into the waters meant Beowulf's death (1591–95).

Beowulf goes to fight Grendel's mother in her lair, which is explicitly an antitype of the hall in which he met Grendel: *in nǫðele nathwylcum* (in a hostile hall of unknown kind, 1513)—note again the unknown, indefinable element. The contrast in context is signified in other ways too. In the deployment of weaponry, it is implicit when Beowulf takes a bow and arrow (not a noble weapon) gratuitously to kill one of the lake beasts (1425–41): in case one should doubt the point, the only others to use the bow and arrow within the poem are the diabolical spirit who metaphorically strikes *oferhygd* into the unwary hero in Hrothgar's sermon (1740–47) and Hæthcyn killing his brother Herebeald (2435–40). As in his sea battle with the *niceras* during his swimming match with Breca, Beowulf equips himself and behaves appropriately as a man hunting down and defending himself against the beasts in their own element. Immediately after the beast is dragged to shore, "Gyrede hine Beowulf / eorlgewædum" (Beowulf equipped himself in warrior's clothing, 1441–42), and indeed the two items then described in detail are his mailcoat and helmet, followed by Unferth's sword Hrunting. Ironically, we hear of the sword that "næfre hit æt hilde ne swac / manna ængum" (in battle it never failed any man, 1460–61), because this indeed is what it is just about to do. It is interesting then to note that Grendel's mother is armed with a *seax*: presumably the one-edged knife/sword that proves a consistently reliable weapon, as Beowulf himself discovers, using his own *seax* to finish off the dragon (1545–56, 2702–05, 2900–06).¹⁸

When Beowulf emerges from the mere, it is striking how quickly he is greeted and disarmed. The surprise, pleasure, and celebrations of his remaining Geatish companions are dealt with in three rather prosaic lines:

Eodon him þa togeanes, gode pancodon,
ðryðlic þegna heap þeodnes gefegon
þæs þe hi hýne gesundne geseon moston. (1626–28)

(They went toward him, and thanked God, the valiant troop of retainers; they rejoiced for their lord, that they were able to see him unharmed.)

He is similarly swiftly disarmed: "Ða wæs of þæm hroran helm ond byrne / lungre alysed" (Then the helmet and mailshirt were swiftly removed from

18. On *seaxes*, see Gale, "The Seax"; Siegmund, *Merovingenzeit am Niederrhein*, pp. 87–94; Jørgensen, *Waffen und Gräber*, pp. 44–67 and 120–75.

the mighty fellow, 1629–30). The emphasis at this point shifts, in the following nineteen-line passage, to the trophies, particularly Grendel's head, that are being carried back to the hall. There is a parenthesis to underline the labor of bearing Grendel's head back:

—fewer scoldon
on þæm wælstenge weorcum geferian
to þæm goldsele Grendles heafod— (1637–39)
(—four of them were obliged laboriously to carry, on the slaughter-shaft, to the gold hall, Grendel's head—)

And this fitt remains focused on the spectacle, the "witleson wrætlíce; weras on sawon" (marvelous spectacle; the men gazed upon it, 1650). Beowulf's account of the battle, which follows immediately afterward, appropriately begins with direct reference to the *se lac* (sea-booty) that they have brought Hrothgar, *tires to tacne* (as a token of glory, 1652–54).

Grendel's head is both a token of Beowulf's victory and a reminder to the Danes of the terror they had faced; it is also compensation for Æschere's head. The other item Beowulf presents Hrothgar with is the hilt from the similarly truncated sword, *wundorsmipa geweorc* (the work of wonder-smiths, 1681). It is noteworthy how often the term *wundor* is used in *Beowulf* in a way that implies significance, often Christian. These wonders are things to be pondered. *Wundor scaawan* (to scrutinize a wonder/marvel) occurs twice as a formulaic halfline (840, 3032), and after Beowulf's victory over Grendel Hrothgar avers, "a mæg god wyrca / wundor æfter wundre" (God can always perform wonder after wonder, 930–31).

At the end of the poem, *wundur* refers to the unknown end of the story of human life, just as at the beginning no one knows who received the load of Scyld's funeral ship:

Wundur hwar þonne
eorl ellenrof ende gefere
lifgesceafta. (3062–64)

(It is a [matter off] wonder where, then, a distinguished man famed for his courage should meet the end of his allotted life.)

Just over forty lines after the hilt is attributed to "wonder-smiths," Hrothgar marks the beginning of the moralizing application of his synopsis of Heremod's life to Beowulf in his *gidd* (song, utterance) inspired by the hilt with the words:

"Wundor is to secganne

hu mihlig god manna cynne
 purh sidne sefan snyttru bryttað
 eard ond eorlscepe." (1724–27)

("It is a wonder to be told how mighty God with his expansive heart apportions wisdom to humankind, land and nobility.")

It is true that in a number of other cases, *wundor* is associated with nouns apparently with a basic sense of "extraordinary," "magnificent."¹⁹ But this semantic range from magnificent to significant seems only to underline the elastic but inseparable relationship between object and burgeoning significance in the material culture of *Beowulf*.

Even within this context, however, the hilt is an extraordinarily eloquent artifact. "Written" in some way on it, it has the beginning (*or*) of the struggle between God and the giants, the descendants of Cain; in looking toward God's *endlean* (final blow) in his battle with this kindred it had in some way foreseen what has now, narratively, just happened (1687–93). Also written on it, probably in runic letters (*runstafas*), is "for whom," "by whom," or possibly even "for what" (*hwam*) the sword was primarily made (1694–98). Immediately after this, the same combination of narrative and anticipation as is embodied in the hilt and its markings occurs in the sermon of Hrothgar inspired by his scrutiny of it: he summarizes Beowulf's achievement to date, tells the warning tale of Heremod, and gives Beowulf explicit moral advice for the future.

Here, therefore, at what we can properly see as a pivotal point within the poem, is an artifact that functions as the material, pictorial, and inscribed equivalent of a literary artifact, while the interpreter of that artifact is thus necessarily like a poet. Artifacts are literally described as singing, or as fundamentally involved in the generation of a *gidd*, surprisingly frequently in the poem.²⁰ They occupy a commemorative and instructive place alongside and very close to the lays of the *scop* in the culture of the heroic world portrayed in *Beowulf*. Critical theory has, in the relatively recent past, been tempted to overemphasize the significance of autoreferentiality in a work of literature.²¹ We ought, however, to be careful still to attach sufficient weight to the engagement with material signs in this poem and the reading of the tales they tell, especially in comparison with the critical significance widely attributed to *literary* allusions and echoes in the conventional study of *Beowulf*.

19. I.e., *wundorheoh* (mysterious prompting), *wundordeað* (wondrous death), *wundor-sion* (wondrous sight), *wundurmaddum* (marvelous treasure), B. Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*, Glossary, p. 306.

20. See also lines 321–23, 628–30, 1423–24, 1520–22, 2152–54, and 2444–59.

21. See, for instance, T. Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, esp. pp. 59–73.

THE DRAGON'S HOARD

Oferhygd is indisputably a, if not the, key moral theme linking Hrothgar's sermon with the final section of *Beowulf*. As we have seen, Hrothgar's comments on *oferhygd* are inspired by an artifact, and the theme is worked out in Beowulf's later life in relation to an assemblage of artifacts, the dragon's hoard. In many respects, the use of material culture in this section is fully consistent with what has gone before—for instance in Wiglaf's choice of imagery to crown his assertion of loyalty to Beowulf:

"urum sceal sword ond helm

byrne ond beaduscrud bam gemæne." (2659–60)

(to both of us shall the sword and helmet, the corslet and battle-coat, be in common.)

Just like the Grendels' den, the dragon's lair is an antitype of the noble hall: a *beorh* (hill, barrow) rather than a *burh* (stronghold), where *niðða nathwyle* (an unknown person: note the unknown element, yet again), ironically looking for a home (*ærnes þearfa*: in need of a house, 2225), steals the cup that in the hall serves to create social unity—the *sceted uage* (gold-plated cup), the *friðowær(-)* (peace-agreement, 2282).

One respect in which there is a very perceptible difference between this section and the previous ones, however, is the ever more pragmatic terms in which the contest with the fire-breathing dragon—otherwise no less imaginary and symbolic a creature than Grendel—is viewed. Hence the description of Beowulf's commissioning and carrying of an iron shield into the fight (2337–39). Particularly persistent is the emphasis on the practical economics of a well-armed kingdom: the need for treasure and land with which to reward one's troops and lieutenants. Beowulf recalls how he repaid the *maðmas* (treasure) and *lond* (land) that Hrethel gave him (2490–93), and Wiglaf remembers what he owes Beowulf likewise, for being allowed to inherit the dwelling place and "folkright's" his father had possessed and for gifts of weaponry and treasure (2606–08, 2633–42). The treasure hoard prized from the dragon's keeping should therefore be of practical value to the Geats, all the more so if bought with their ageing king's life (2747–51, 2794–801, 3011–14).

The final, challenging enigma of *Beowulf* therefore resides essentially in a set of material-cultural phenomena: objects and what is done with them. Why is the treasure hoard reburied with Beowulf? The morally ambivalent portrayal of Beowulf at the end of the poem should long have been familiar enough to all serious readers of the poem not to need reca-

pitulation here²²—the pertinent question to be articulated is rather in what ways the reburial of the treasure might affect our reading of that portrayal. Is the action to be understood as judgmental, with Beowulf's soul consigned to face his Maker by way of a pagan funeral in which his body has been burned and interred with heathen treasures that he proudly, covetously, and fatally sought? Or is it tonal, with the extravagant waste of the treasure, like the melancholy reflections and predictions of Wiglaf, the messenger, and the female mourner (2862–91, 2897–3027, 3150–55), to be taken as essentially rhetorical ways of marking the loss of such a great king? If one adopts the latter alternative, one might have to concede that at this point the archaeological perspective and the more purely literary or artistic reading part company, for, from the realistic standpoint, the ending of *Beowulf* is almost remorselessly bleak. The most substantial element creating this atmosphere is the (pseudo)historical realism of the wars between the Geats, the Swedes, and the Frisians, the renewal of which can now be anticipated. This goes hand in hand with the economically pragmatic view of military loyalty already noted in this section. The *hearpan sweg* (voice of the harp) is proleptically stilled (3023), and where the poetic tone has been persistently elegiac throughout the section the final occurrences of the word *gidd* refer to a dirge:

woldon care cwiðan ond cýning mænan
wordgyd wrecan ond ymb wer spreca(n) (3171–72; cf. 3150–55)
(they wished to lament their care and keen for the king, utter a
word-*gidd* and speak about the man.)

Even the *wundor* at the end of this story is explicitly an ignorance of where the warrior goes after death (quoted above, 3062–65).

Nevertheless, God's final judgment remains deferred, and the final, human, verbal *dom* is in a series of superlatives, three out of four of which are morally unambiguous:

manna mildust ond monðwærust,
leodum liðost ond lofgeornost. (3181–82)
(mildest of men and kindest among them, most gentle to his
people and most eager for renown.)

And heaven receives the smoke of the pyre (3155). The introductory emphasis on the heathenism of the gold is interesting (2216, 2276). It would be quite justifiable to take these deliberate references as invitations

22. Cf. Greenfield, *Interpretation of Old English Poems*, pp. 1–29 and 115–17.

to an exegetical reading, equating the *hæðen gold* with the treasures of the Egyptians, which were rightly appropriated by the Israelites and converted to the service of God.²³ Morally, then, the reburial of the treasure represents a failure on the part of the pagans of the poem to use such treasure properly in a Christian sense. In this context, it is impossible to ignore one particularly prominent feature of the hoard as it is seen by Wiglaf:

Swylc he siomian geseah segn eallgylden
heah ofer horde, hondwundra mæst
gelocen leodocræftum; of ðæm leoma stod. (2767–69)
(He also saw a standard covered in gold standing high over the
hoard, the greatest of works of skill, dexterously crafted; from
it came a light.)

The standard towering over the hoard strongly recalls the *segn gylden(ne)* that stands high over Scyld's head in his funeral ship (47–48). The sign or standard (*cumbol*, *hildecumbor*, *segn*) is frequently referred to in the poem and, archaeologically, is probably represented for us by the Sutton Hoo standard.²⁴ The most significant testimony to a sign in a relevant historical context is Oswald's Constantinian use of the cross at the battle of Heavenfield.²⁵ What is more, it was to a significant degree in the form of ecclesiastical treasures such as crosses that gold was taken out of social circulation and thesaurized by the Anglo-Saxon church.²⁶ In their effective rejection of the pre-Christian treasures, therefore, the pagan Geats could be seen as performing their own catharsis, rejecting the pagan system in readiness for the Christian one.

It is of crucial importance to note here that, in archaeological terms as well as to some degree in historical terms, *Beowulf* is demonstrably dealing with a *real* past, not an imagined one created out of references that are no more than a cluster of emblems. Within the text of the poem there is a knowledge, a recognition, and a demonstration of the fact that the honorific practices of the pagan past are no longer practiced, in the Anglo-Saxon community at least, and that there is a Christian alternative to them. I am not sure whether or not *Beowulf* as a poem has a definite concept of the Heroic Age, but it certainly had at its heart a consistent sense of the pagan past. That past was an era that had ended, but some

23. Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* 2.40, pp. 124–27.

24. See now also the possible standard from the Prittlewell burial, a tall iron stand with a bowl for a lamp on top. Museum of London, *Prittlewell Prince*, pp. 29–30.

25. Bede, *Hist. eccl'es.* 3.2, pp. 214–19.

26. See Webster and Backhouse, *Making of England*, passim.

of its key principles and glories—its military heroism—were still effective, and still needed. It appears, then, to be especially through the use of the material culture of the past that the poem can express an appropriately ambivalent attitude to the pagan period, selecting and endorsing some elements while rejecting others.

CONCLUSION

What I have sought to provide examples of in the discussion above represents just one way in which archaeology and literary criticism can productively be integrated. This approach has involved reading the poem in the same way as an archaeologist would (or at least should) approach the totality of Anglo-Saxon archaeology, seeing the archaeology of *Beowulf* not just as a collection of exotic and valuable artifacts but as a highly meaningful system of material culture. As an attempt to contribute to the development of Anglo-Saxon studies, this does not consciously seek to change the way literary scholars view *Beowulf* by compelling them to take due account of the insights of archaeology so much as to affect the way literary scholars perceive Anglo-Saxon archaeology and the way archaeologists may view *Beowulf*. It may indeed be claimed that literary critics need no lessons or encouragement in the use of semiotics for the interpretation of poetry.²⁷ Good; and so there ought to be all the greater appreciation there of the potential contribution of archaeology, both as a sister discipline in Anglo-Saxon studies and as a methodologically neglected area in Old English studies.

In this particular case, the archaeological perspective not only encourages an awareness but provides examples that have not, so far as I know, been articulated before of the richness and sophistication with which *Beowulf* dramatizes the tensions of a human society's struggles to know and control its circumstances, and to come to terms with its dependency upon events of the past as it seeks to make the best of conditions for the present and future—and doing so using material culture as a key expressive medium, albeit vicariously, if not additionally, in a translated form, through the medium of literary discourse. In this case, too, the archaeological approach advocated depends upon an understanding of the character of archaeology as a generalized view of material culture, rather than a specific knowledge of Anglo-Saxon archaeology in the sense

27. See, *inter alia*, Niles, "Sign and Psyche in Old English Poetry"; Frantzen, "Writing the Unreadable *Beowulf*"; Schrader, "Language of the Giant's Sword Hilt"; Cronan, "Wiglaf's Sword"; Fee, "*Beag & Beaghröden*"; and van Meter, "Ritualized Presentation of Weapons."

of being able to identify and picture the objects alluded to. Whoever (singular or plural) wrote *Beowulf* likewise did not rely on an audience or readership's ability to classify and contextualize the objects referred to in an academic way; to this extent, yes, the work of literature is autonomous in that sufficient context is provided by the text of the poem itself. Yet it is inconceivable that the material artifacts are purely imaginary and symbolic creations, and that their well-attested, diverse, and detailed counterparts in the real world exist by sheer coincidence; while at the same time a key implication of the foregoing discussion is that the archaeology of the poem is not merely incidental realism—the product of a blind and unconscious frame of reference that thus encodes and can reveal the character (and date) of an original context for the poem.²⁸ Archaeology, as an intellectual and scientific appreciation of the systemic role played by material culture in human life in both the past and the present, is truly fundamental to the conception and achievement of *Beowulf*. For the richest possible reading of *Beowulf*, then, archaeology is neither an illustrative curiosity nor a pedantic factual burden. The archaeology is truly a vital part of the poetic composition.

28. As noted above, I wish to avoid being sidetracked into the controversy over archaeology and the possible date(s) of the poem in this essay. As Leslie Webster writes, however ("Archaeology and *Beowulf*," p. 184, n. 4), it is simply undeniable that, both in respect of specific details and as a whole inventory of material-cultural phenomena, the real counterparts to what is portrayed in the poem belong predominantly in seventh- and eighth-century England and Scandinavia rather than anywhere else (*pace* Hills, "*Beowulf* and Archaeology," esp. pp. 309–10; see also Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals in Beowulf*, pp. 114–23). In view of the poem's incorporation of a Christian perspective on pre-Christian circumstances discussed in this essay, it is far from insignificant that this date embraces both the late pagan/Early Christian transition in England and a period when England had become Christian while Scandinavia, and much of the Germanic Continent, remained pagan, although within the sights of English missionary ambitions.

What this constitutes, however, is part of the background of *Beowulf*, not its date. The realism of the material imagery may have come into the poem by way of the accumulation of conventional imagery in poetic, perhaps specifically heroic, tradition, or from a knowledge of real archaeology as artifacts survived or were exhumed in the Anglo-Saxon period. Both of these sources nonetheless involve a form of direct diachronic contact with the material-cultural phase concerned.