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BEOWULF AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Two Footnotes

I. GRENDEL'S POUCH: *dracan fellum* (2088)

When Beowulf, back at the court of Hygelac, recounts his fight with the monster Grendel, he adds one detail not mentioned before. Grendel as he seized Beowulf in Heorot had hanging by him a "broad and remarkable *glof*, fastened with cunningly wrought clasps or bands, skilfully fashioned with devilish devices and the skins of a dragon" (2085-88). The choice of the term *glof* may possibly have been influenced by the context: just previously Beowulf has described how the monster began his attacks by devouring a warrior named Hondscio (2076), 'Handschuh' or glove. At all events, *glof* appears to bear the special sense of a large bag or pouch, and its practical use is most obviously to hold whatever victim or loot Grendel managed to seize.¹

That Grendel's container should have "devilish devices" is no more than we should expect of an unhallowed creature who is frequently described as *feond* and who wishes to escape from Heorot *secan deofla gedræg* (756). The curious feature is the dragon pelts of which the pouch is made. This need not be a

¹ Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. with Supplements (Boston, 1951), p. 205. According to E. D. Laborde, "Grendel's Glove and his Immunity from Weapons," *Modern Language Review*, XVIII (1923), 202-204, the feature goes back to stories of Scandinavian trolls, in particular the giant Skrymir's large glove in which Thor and his companions, mistaking it for a building, once passed the night (*Gylfaginning*, see H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* [Harmondsworth, 1964], pp. 32-33). In the *Grettis saga*, 64 ff., the hero, in similar circumstances to Beowulf's in Heorot, encounters a troll-wife carrying a trough in one hand and a chopper in the other; see Klaeber, p. xv.

fortuitous detail. Grendel and his mother are earlier described as making their home in a kind of submarine lair. A host of similar stories drawn from folk-tales and the Scandinavian sagas has suggested something like a (natural) cave (below a waterfall) as the genetic setting for this abode.¹ But the poet of *Beowulf* frequently writes of the place as if it were a constructed hall, like Heorot, and also introduces one or two details reminiscent of the artificial barrow by the sea near where, in the closing episode, Beowulf fights the dragon. Like Heorot, the Grendel lair is a dwelling or court (*hof* 1507), hall (*sele* in compounds, 1513, 1545, 2139, and the significant term *hrofsele* 1515, "roofed hall"), building (*reced* 1572), and house (*hus* 1666). It has a floor (*flet* 1540), a wall (*weall* 1573, *wag* 1662) on which a sword hangs just as the tapestries in Heorot hang *æfter wægm* 995, and possibly a fire burning (1516-17). On the other hand, the lair is located in a district of "nesses" (1358, 1360, 1411, 1439), like the 'Hronesnæs' on which stands Beowulf's barrow, and is below a mere topped by *har stan* (1415), a "hoary rock," the same phrase as is used in connection with Sigemund's and Beowulf's fights with a dragon guarding treasure (887, 2553, 2744). The sword on the wall is the "work of giants" (*giganta weorc* 1562), reminiscent of the terms used for and folk-beliefs associated with burial-mounds, in particular *enta geweorc* (2717) for the one inhabited by Beowulf's dragon. So too the lair when examined by Beowulf is found to contain, beside Grendel's corpse, much treasure (1612 ff.), almost as if the Grendel clan were thought of as occupying a primitive grave-mound, the traditional site for buried wealth, from which they had ousted a dragon, its traditional guardian.

The detailed accounts of Beowulf's dragon fight put it

¹ Klaeber, pp. xiii ff., 182 ff., and bibliography, cxlii ff., to which an important addition would be Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (London, 1934), pp. 108-112.

beyond doubt that the poet was acquainted with these traditions. Even in the brief references to Sigemund's dragon fight (875 ff.) there can hardly be much doubt that, although the poet does not specifically mention a funeral mound, the feature is not far from his thoughts. Just as Beowulf's dragon, whose mound is minutely described, is reached *under harne stan* (2553, 2744) and in numerous expressions involving the term *weall* (2307, 2526, etc.), and is both *beorges hyrde* or *weard* (2304, 2524, etc.) and *hordweard* or *frætwa hyrde* (2293, 2302, etc., 3133), so too Sigemund's dragon is a *hordes hyrde*, to be fought with *under harne stan* (887) and transfixcd *on wealle* (891).

It seems then a likely conjecture that in his references to the Grendel abode the poet drew not only on folk-tales using a natural cave, but on the knowledge of halls and barrows he displays more fully elsewhere. In particular, the detail that Grendel's *glof* is made of dragon's skins appears to reflect his obvious interest in the dragon lore of funeral mounds. As archaeological evidence accumulating in recent years from both Scandinavia and Britain is tending to show, in all essential details both the great timbered hall of Heorot¹ and the chambered tomb guarded by Beowulf's dragon² are described in terms strongly suggesting precise factual knowledge of such

¹ Thus, the excavations made during 1953-56 at Old Yeavinger in Northumbria, for which a full account is in preparation by the director, Brian Hope-Taylor, revealed traces of a complex of buildings clustered round a large hall, some 100 feet by 45 feet, which appears to go back to the seventh century and have many distinct points of resemblance to the details given of Heorot. From a later period, ca. 1000, significant comparison is possible with the large timber houses of the encampment, investigated from 1934 to 1941, at Trelleborg, near Slagelse on the west coast of Sjælland, and the several closely associated Danish sites which have come to light since.

² To be compared especially with such famous megalithic tombs, with corbelled roofing, as New Grange, County Meath in Ireland, Bryn Celli Ddu in Anglesey, and Maes Howe on Orkney Mainland.

structures and the ways of life associated with them.¹ The widespread notion which linked funeral mounds with treasure held by dragons, or with giants and similar creatures, is illustrated, from literature, archaeology and place-names, in especial abundance.²

II. BEOWULF'S BARROW: *ond belimbredon on tyn dagum* (3159)

Beowulf's retainers, directed by his loyal helper Wiglaf, appear to carry out in full the instructions he gives regarding the disposal of his body. He is cremated with his treasures, and on the very site of the pyre (*in bælstede* 3097, compare 3160-61)

¹ It is perhaps worth adding that the poet's interest in megalithic remains and the legends attached to them does not necessarily stamp him as a pagan. As Glyn Daniel, *Lascaux and Carnac* (London, 1955), p. 92, observes, "At first the Christian Church was opposed to megaliths as survivals of paganism, and then, with graceful compromise, arranged for them to be Christianised." He cites menhirs surmounted by crosses in Brittany and megalithic tombs incorporated into churches at St. Michel near Carnac in southern Brittany and near Oviedo in northern Spain.

² For barrows named after giants and dragons, see John Thurnam, "On Ancient British Barrows, I," *Archaeologia*, XLII (1869), 202, 204; lists in Bertram C. A. Windle, *Remains of the Prehistoric Age in England*, 2nd ed., Antiquary's Books (London, 1909), pp. 153-173; L. V. Grinsell, *The Ancient Burial-Mounds of England*, 2nd ed. (London, 1953), pp. 67, 78, 82; and the full study by Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, "The Hill of the Dragon: Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds in Literature and Archaeology," *Folk-Lore*, LXI (1950), 169-185, together with her recent work, *op.cit.*, pp. 159-162. For the numerous place-names associated with Old English *draca*, *wyrn*, and Norse *dreki*, see O. G. S. Crawford, "Place-Names and Archaeology," *Introduction to the Survey of English Place-Names*, I, E.P.-N.S., I. 1 (Cambridge, 1924), 161-162; Bruce Dickens, "English Names and Old English Heathenism," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, XIX (London, 1934), 159-160; A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, E.P.-N.S., XXV, XXVI (1956), I. 134, II. 282.

there is raised "a barrow high, large and famous, one befitting his exploits" (3096-98). Details of the cremation appear to agree substantially with actual pagan practice as known from such famous royal mounds as Ottarshögen in Swedish Vendel, the three at Gamla Uppsala now fairly conclusively identified with kings Aun, Egill (Ongentheow) and Aðils (Eadgils),¹ and, on a less impressive scale, from such early Anglo-Saxon cremations as those found in barrows at Broomfield in Essex² and at Asthall in the Cotswolds.³

One detail is however rather surprising. If the poet's words are given the usual interpretation, only ten days are taken to construct Beowulf's high and large barrow. As a finale to the obsequies, twelve companions ride slowly round the barrow,

¹ Knut Stjerna, "Beowulf's Funeral Obsequies," *Essays on Questions connected with the Old English Poem of Beowulf*, Viking Club Publications, Extra Series, III (Coventry, 1912), pp. 221-239. For Ottarshögen and Uppsala, see Sune Lindqvist, "Ottarshögen i Vendel," *Fornvännen*, XII (1917), 127-143; *Uppsala Högar och Ottarshögen*, Kongliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Arkeologiska Monografier, 23 (Stockholm, 1936), with English summaries; "Uppsala Högars Datering," *Fornvännen*, XLIV (1949), 33-48; Göta Klingberg, "Uppsala Högar och Traditionen," *Upplands Fornminnesförenings Tidskrift*, XLVII (1944-52), 231-235. It must remain a matter of opinion whether all the distinct textual changes and special interpretations proposed for *Beowulf* by Lindqvist (1936), pp. 251-259, 347-348, on the basis of these parallels are justified; they do not appear to have found a place in recent editions of the poem.

² Sir Charles Hercules Read, "On the Exploration of a Saxon Grave at Broomfield, Essex," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, 2nd series, XV (1894), 250-255; Reginald A. Smith, *Victoria County History: Essex*, I (London, 1903), 320-326, and *A Guide to the Anglo-Saxon and Foreign Teutonic Antiquities* (British Museum, 1923), p. 63.

³ E. Thurlow Leeds, "An Anglo-Saxon Cremation-Burial of the Seventh Century in Asthall Barrow, Oxfordshire," *Antiquaries Journal*, IV (1929), 113-125, and in the *Victoria County History: Oxford*, I (London, 1939), 365-366.

lamenting their dead ruler, and reciting his achievements and his nobility of character.¹ Unless a large force of workers had been employed, to which no allusion is made, ten days seem a very short time for the completion of a barrow which, we are told, was to be high and impressive enough to serve as a landmark to seafarers. Even if the poet merely used a conventional number, as he does elsewhere,² he would scarcely have selected one out of proportion to actuality.

But in fact lines 3156 ff. seem to allow for three distinct stages in the making of the barrow: first is the actual reference to a time-period, the builders *betimbreðon on tyn dagum* (3159); second, *bronda lafe wealle beworhton* (3160-61), they surrounded the cremation remains with a wall, presumably of stone or stone and timber; and last, they placed and sealed Beowulf's treasure inside the structure, leaving it *eorðan healdan, gold on greole* (3166-67). There is nothing archaeologically implausible in the succession of these details. In the first stage the verb used however is *betimbran*, and if by this term an actual timber structure is meant, the (laborious) covering over, implied in the further two stages, with stones and earth or sand and gravel (*greot*) to finish the mound, may perhaps be thought of as happening later, after the ten days, if not the final ceremonies, are over.

In particular, that a sepulchral chamber of wood was first set up over the funerary remains seems distinctly probable in the light of archaeology,³ and in that event ten days seem a

¹ Praising, as is often noted, his more spiritual virtues rather than his warlike prowess. We may perhaps compare Plato's final words on Socrates (*Phaedo*, 67, transl. Jowett), "concerning whom I may truly say, that of all the men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest and justest and best."

² See Klaeber, p. 133, note to line 147.

³ On (prehistoric) English long barrows containing wooden sepulchral chambers, see Grinsell, pp. 54, 159, 199. Traces of wooden peristaltics ('peristazules') are sometimes found which once served as a retaining wall or revetment for barrows, see

reasonable period for the collecting and shaping of the wooden boards needed. At Ottarshögen the pyre was hollow and was covered with a cairn of stones before the earth mound was raised, but pagan burials elsewhere indicate that wooden constructions were often used. In the large barrow at Sutton Hoo the ship revealed amidships clear traces of a large burial chamber made of planks, over 17 feet long, covered with oak boards and probably in the form of a cabin with sloping roof, strewn with bracken to provide a floor for the burial objects.¹ The pagan Saxon interment, of the earlier seventh century, in the barrow at Taplow² was contained in a rectangular grave, about 12 by 8 feet and 6 feet deep, originally covered with planks. Another Saxon barrow, at Lapwing Hill in Derbyshire, contained a body laid on an animal skin which rested on the floorboards of a wooden coffin.³ The (tenth-century) mound now known as Thyra's Høj at Jelling in central Jutland,⁴ identified as the first grave of queen Thyra, the mother of Harald 'Blue-tooth', has now been shown to have been erected over a burial chamber, with a ceiling of oak beams, divided into two com-

Grinsell, pp. 215, 217; and coffins of wood are frequent, pp. 34, 150, 166-167, 232-233, 236-237.

¹ See now Charles Green, *Sutton Hoo, The Excavation of a Royal Ship-Burial* (London, 1963), pp. 33-36.

² Joseph Stevens, "The Remains from a Tumulus at Taplow," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, XL (1884), 61-71; Reginald A. Smith, *Victoria County History: Buckingham*, I (London, 1905), 199-204, and *A Guide to Anglo-Saxon . . . Antiquities* (1923), pp. 63-65; E. Thurlow Leeds, *Early Anglo-Saxon Art and Archaeology* (Oxford, 1936), pp. 75-78; R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, "British and Medieval Antiquities 1753-1953," *British Museum Quarterly*, XIX (1954), 21-22; L. V. Grinsell, *The Archaeology of Wessex* (London, 1958), p. 288.

³ Grinsell, *Burial-Mounds*, pp. 228-229.

⁴ Ejnar Dyggve, "Jelling Kongehøje," *Fra Nationalmuseets Arbejdsmark 1943* (Copenhagen, 1943), pp. 19-34, and "The Royal Barrows at Jelling, East Jutland: Results of the 1941, 1942 and 1947 Excavations," *Antiquity*, XXII (1948), 190-197.

partments by a wooden plank. Its companion, Gorms Høj, the monument to Thyra's husband king Gorm, revealed on excavation no trace of a burial chamber, but on its summit were found the remains of a wooden structure, possibly a dais for a throne, or some fixture connected with the consecration ceremonies at the time when the mound was erected.

A more problematic addition to this evidence would be the scene carved on the right side of the Franks Casket.¹ The overall interpretation of this illustration and its inscription remains highly controversial, but it is safe to say that some kind of ceremony connected with mound-burial seems intended. One central detail is clearly a hump-backed tomb (in cross-section) containing a man's body resting on or in a group of rectangular objects, which may conceivably be intended to represent wooden planks, for just to the left, most obviously as a label for that part of the illustration, is cut the isolated word *wudu*.

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L. WHITBREAD

THE PERSONIFICATIONS IN *DEATH AND LIFFE*, A MIDDLE-ENGLISH POEM

Though it enjoys the distinction of having been edited twice by noted scholars during this century,² and is regularly

¹ See E. V. K. Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, VI (New York, 1942), pp. cxxvii ff., 116, 205-206, and plate opposite p. 117.

² J. H. Hanford and J. M. Steadman, Jr. (eds.), "Death and Life: an Alliterative Poem," *Studies in Philology*, XV (1918), 221-294; Israel Gollancz, ed., *Death and Liffe*. Preface by Mabel Day (London, 1930).