

Place Symbolism and Land Politics in *Beowulf*

Abstract

This essay provides a reading of the Old English poem *Beowulf*, with a focus on its symbolic and political geographies. The key question is the role of place or site in the poem in general terms, and the more specific issue of land. The essay first analyses three significant sites in the narrative—the locations of the battles between Beowulf and Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon. Each of these places—the hall, the *mere*, and the burial-mound—are shot through with powerful emotive, elemental, symbolic and material geographies. Analysis then moves to the politics of land, a resource which is gifted, distributed, disputed and fought over. While part of a larger project which seeks to look at the conceptual and historical relation between land, terrain and territory, this essay offers a more modest focused study of a single text from a particular period.

Land • Place • Elements • Old English Literature

Introduction

The Old English poem *Beowulf* has been receiving a great deal of popular attention in recent years.¹ Long the scourge of English undergraduates, the recent cinematic adaptations, notably the 2007 version directed by Robert Zemeckis and authored by Neil Gaiman, have brought the story to a whole new audience.² If that film, and other adaptations, take great licence with the story, the more literary merits have also been discussed in the wake of Seamus Heaney's verse translation of 1999.³ Whatever the problems of the films in terms of the story, or Heaney's supposed errors of, or interpretations in place of,

translation,⁴ they have undoubtedly raised the profile of a difficult and problematic text.

The concern here is with what *Beowulf* can tell us of the politics of land and the symbolism of place.⁵ This focus is one that has a solid textual basis and historical purpose. The last book of Nicholas Howe, a renowned medievalist, is entitled *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England* and bears the subtitle *Essays in Cultural Geography*.⁶ In this book, Howe makes the claim that "Beowulf is profoundly a work about place".⁷ Although Howe makes a number of suggestions about how that might be the case, the analysis is of some very particular passages, rather than the poem as a whole. Indeed, while his claim concerns place in general terms, the explicit analysis, as will be discussed later, is of the notion of *epel*, homeland. Here, in distinction, the focus is not just on places as sites, but on their political aspects, the question of land.⁸ While there have been a number of important monographs and edited collections looking at geography and space generally in the middle ages in recent years,⁹ with some exceptions this is not a period that has received much attention from geographers.¹⁰

In taking *Beowulf* as the focus here the interest is thus as much with the indications of the text as with its literary merits. In a pioneering piece of scholarship in 1936 Tolkien made a convincing argument that "so far from being a poem so poor that only its accidental historical interest can still recommend it, *Beowulf* is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content".¹¹ While this may be true, the text does offer some very valuable insights into the particular politics of land that can be found in the period of the early Middle Ages, sometimes known as the Dark Ages.

Caution is of course necessary, for as Earl suggests:

Though the world is not a text, *Beowulf* certainly is. It is only a map and not the world itself. The most fundamental error in literary criticism is to mistake the map for the territory—in this case, *Beowulf* for the world of Germania, Scandinavia, or Anglo-Saxon England.¹²

Nonetheless, even he suggests that “the best evidence we have for understanding early Germanic society is *Beowulf* itself, but its vision is idealized, archaic, anachronistic, and only partial”.¹³ For Girvan the assessment is even more positive: “it has been set alongside Tacitus as witness of the Germanic period, and it is not surprising for it is the most important Germanic document in extent and character which we possess”.¹⁴ It is one of the earliest surviving works of English literature, or indeed in any northern European vernacular language.

The reading offered here tries to steer a way through these ambiguities. It does not try to suggest that lessons from *Beowulf* can tell us anything particularly concrete about those places that are mentioned in the text. Many editions of *Beowulf* have a map of its geography at the beginning, showing the Geats in what is today southern Sweden, the Swedes and the Heathoreams to the North, and the Danes in the Zealand area of modern Denmark. The Old English *Gēat* is often taken to be the equivalent of the modern Swedish *Göt*, that is the region of *Götaland*, and the historical tribe of the Götar, who lived in that region.¹⁵ Various other tribes are loosely distributed across northern Germany, Poland, and the low countries, and the modern village of Lejre, near Roskilde, is often given as the location of Heorot.¹⁶ While some of this work is valuable, an attempt to find a historical basis for the sites of the events is not the purpose of this essay.¹⁷ Nor does it seek to generalise from what insights there are in the text that can be tied to archaeological evidence.¹⁸ Rather, the interest is in the particularly

symbolic and exchange geographies implied and presented in the poem itself, which are themselves intensely material.

In this sense it is closer to one of Tolkien's other insights:

The significance of a myth is not easily to be pinned on paper by analytical reasoning. It is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends: who presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography.¹⁹

Thus the focus here is on the text itself; its story, history and geography. A brief summary of the original story is in order, before the analysis begins, not least because of the changes made in recent better-known adaptations. A great mead-hall has been built named Heorot, where Hrothgar rules the Danes. The hall is attacked by the monster Grendel, a descent of the race of Cain. Beowulf of the Geats travels to Heorot and kills the monster with his bare hands. The next night the monster's mother seeks vengeance; Beowulf pursues her to her lair, and slays her too. Beowulf returns home, and in time becomes King of the Geats. Some fifty years later, Beowulf's people are attacked by a dragon. Beowulf meets the dragon in combat, and though he kills it, dies in the battle. Without his protection the Geats are overrun by the Swedes from the north and tribes from the south.

The reading here proceeds through a number of stages. The text indicates three set-piece battles—with Grendel, his mother, and the dragon; but rather less noted are the particular sites at which these take place—the hall, the *mere*, and the burial-mound. Following readings of these three sites, two more general themes are discussed: gifts of land and conflict over it. Generally then this reading offers something different from analyses which focus on themes such as dating or its relation to Christianity, or those that follow the poet's lead and

stress characterisation and narrative. For Orchard, “the sheer number and variety of characters depicted by the *Beowulf*-poet, when compared with his comparative disinterest in the specifics of place, signals his overarching concern for individuals and their individual perspectives”.²⁰ In distinction here, and in the company of those referenced in the notes, a range of symbolic and political senses of land are shown to saturate the narrative.

The Hall

Hrothgar’s hall is a centrepiece of his realm, a great mead-hall, a place of celebration. The poet describes this as “a house greater than men on earth ever had heard of” (70-1). It is not a dwelling place, but a ceremonial and ritual site.²¹ As Earl suggests:

Originally, the hall was not primarily a form of habitation; it was a *meðelstede*, a formal place... the hall is a house, but it is not exactly a home—men drink and talk there, but they do not live there; they do not eat there (a feast is a *gebeorscip*, a beer-drinking, or a *symbel*, a ceremonial feast, and there is no mention of food), and for the most part they do not sleep there. The hall is a *meðelstede*, a formal place, a ceremonial place, a primitive form of court.²²

The hall is thus a place of repose but also the centrepiece of the community, both social and political. The various descriptions of the hall stress that it is “a beautiful building” (773); a “splendid timbered hall adorned with gold” (307-8), reinforced by “iron bands of skilful forging inside and out” (774-5). Inside it is described as a “goldhall gleaming with gold plating” (715-6), with “gold-worked mead benches” (775-6), and later, following the dispatch of the monsters, “gold-embroidered tapestries gleamed on the walls” (994-5). Yet, as Earl notes, it is

above all “a symbolic and a ritual space”.²³ The hall speaks of the power of the Danes, of their proud lineage from Scyld Scefing. Yet the hall is threatened almost immediately, it moves very quickly from being “a place of joy and security” to one “threatened by external forces of evil”:²⁴

The hall is no sooner built than its burning is foretold. No matter how strong its walls or brilliant its life, we are always aware of its fragility and transience. Grendel is Heorot’s shadow.²⁵

For the Christian narrator of the poem, who traces Grendel’s lineage to Cain (107), the monster is an outcast because he is, or at least descended from, evil.²⁶ Yet other interpretations have suggested that it is precisely his exclusion that has turned him to vengeance. This exclusion is both geographical and familial. Excluded from the hall and all that it symbolises, particularly celebration and order, he enters to disrupt the proceedings, spurred on by the noise of festivities (85-90). Cain, of course, was a farmer until he killed his brother, a shepherd. Among other things, his punishment was exile (see 109). Grendel’s parentage is the subject of some ambiguity. While his mother makes a powerful appearance later in the poem, his father is unknown (1355), and it is through the mother that he is descended from Cain (107, 1260-62).²⁷ Given the importance of patrimony, and the denial of a birth-right and inheritance, this makes further sense of the exclusion. For Orchard, “family relationships are everything in this close-knit text, which shows a keen interest both in blood-lines and (especially) in kings”.²⁸ Indeed, while Grendel’s original assaults are the product of “the spiteful response of a lordless man to his exclusion from the life of the hall”, the subsequent attack of his mother “is sheer vengeance for her kin”.²⁹

Grendel lives in darkness [*pystrum*] (87), and comes to Heorot at night (115). This gives rise to his common designation as a troll, a monster that traditionally shuns the light.³⁰ His carnage is fully seen with the “dawn’s light” (126), and the

poet directly opposes the “night’s feasting” with the “morning’s lamentation” (128-9). The next night brings new terrors (135-6). Grendel described as the “dark shadow of death [*deorc dēapscua*]” (160). On the night of his fight with Beowulf, the King retires just as “darkness drowns everything and under its shadow-cover shapes do glide dark beneath the clouds” (649-51), and soon “gliding through the dark night came the walker in the shadows” (702-3). As Beowulf attacks him, and he realises he has met a powerful foe, he is “eager to get away” and “ails for the darkness” (755). It is thus significant that the attacks by Grendel, and, later, his mother are made at night, but they are launched from their watery abode, and so on the one hand the *Beowulf* poet establishes the opposition of day/night, but simultaneously complicates any straight-forward distinction between earth and water. Grendel’s dwelling place will be discussed in the next section, but for the moment it suffices to note that Grendel comes in from the “misty moors [*mistige mōras*]” in the “endless night” (161-62); and walks the “misty slopes of the moors” (710). The figure of the mist, or the fog, is water over land; either coming in directly from the sea, or from marshes or otherwise boggy land. It is thus a blurring of boundaries, across the liminal zone of the moors, a mixing of water and earth, and thus prefigures the attacks.³¹

It is further worth noting Tolkien’s insight that, despite his monstrosity, “Grendel inhabits the visible world and eats the flesh and blood of men; he enters their houses by the doors”.³² Grendel is a monster on the edge of this world, “haunting the borders of human society, he is always present, neither in nor fully out of it”.³³ Through his attacks the order of the hall is replaced with the disorder of nature, a representation of the general chaotic order of life, which the poem communicates as continually surrounding the human outposts. As Earl notes “the storm and ocean are conventional symbols of this chaos”. As he continues, “others are the ruined hall, the fen and the battlefield”.³⁴ In all of these the stability of rock and earth is replaced with other elemental forces, notably the waters of the storm and sea, but also crucially the opening of the hall to the

elements, the fen as an admixture of water and earth, and the battlefield where blood is split. Hrothgar's description of the hall after Grendel's assault is instructive, since it is in a sense more concerned with the despoliation of the place than of the people: "in the morning this noble hall was blood-stained, blood had drenched its shining benches, the battle-gore in the hall" (484-87). This hall is not simply the site of battle, but its stake: Grendel is described as holding sway or ruling over [*rixode*] the hall until Beowulf arrives (144). Beowulf's task is to reclaim it.

This clash between elements is well indicated by Tolkien's invocation of the famous phrase *hæleð under heofenum* (52), which

May have meant in dictionary terms 'heroes under heaven' or 'mighty men upon earth', but he and his hearers were thinking of the *eormengrund*, the great earth, ringed with *garsecg*, the shoreless sea, beneath the sky's inaccessible roof... That even this 'geography', once held as a material fact, could now be classed as a mere folk-tale affects its value very little.³⁵

Grendel's *Mere*

As Grendel flees the mead-hall, leaving behind the arm Beowulf has wrenched from his body, he is already dying. He heads back to his lair, a place which had been earlier described as "the wasteland, the fen and fastnesses" (103-4). While in Christian imagery it has resonances of hell,³⁶ the more potent image is the intrusion of water into the solid earth. While there is certainly an opposition between monstrosity and humanity, barbarism and culture, with wasteland opposed to cultivated land, there is more than this. In the figure of water the poet is conjuring up the horrors of the sea—there are many references to sea-monsters in the poem—and the "diseases of the pestilent marshes".³⁷ It is

boggy, marshy land, something that is far more dangerous and intrinsically terrifying than either land or sea alone. Grendel himself is explicitly described as a *mearcstapa*, a march-stepper or border-wanderer (103), one who expelled from humankind had made a home with sea-creatures (105-108). When he leaves Heorot, dying, he is described as a water-monster (*nicor*) heading back to his *mere* (845). The water of the *brim* into which he has dived in his death-throes, surges and bubbles, mixed with blood and battle-gore (847-49).

By the time there is a discussion of visiting this second site the quarry is Grendel's mother, who had attacked the hall in vengeance for her son's death. Now both she and Grendel are described as *mearcstapan*, march-steppers, who trod "the path of exile" (1348-1352). Dispatching the mother will put an end to her line, thus truly ending Heorot's problems. At this point their lair is the topic of a remarkable description, first by Hrothgar (1357-1379), and then by the narrator (1408-17).³⁸ The lair is close to Heorot—"it is not far from here measured in miles [*milgemearces*]" (1361b-1362b)—but figuratively remote. One of the things that is significant about this encounter is that it is not simply with a monster—the mother—but in a monstrous place as well—the *mere*. The description of the *mere* by Hrothgar is, as many have noted, powerful in its imagery, but problematic.

The passage as a whole is worth reading:

They inhabit a mysterious land [*land*], wolf-haunted slopes, windy headlands, gruesome fen-paths where a mountain torrent goes down dark cliffs and plunges under the earth. It is not far from here, by the measure of miles, that the *mere* stands forth. Over it hang groves hoary with frost; a crag-rooted trees overshadow the water. There, each night, can be seen a fearful wonder: fire on the flood. Of the sons of men there does not live one old and wise

enough to know the bottom. Though the heath-stepper, pressed by hounds, the hart strong of antler, will hide in the forest, chased from long, rather will he give his life on the bank, rather than go in the water to save his head; that is not a pleasant place. Thence the surging waves rise up, dark, to the skies when the wind stirs, awful storms, until the air becomes gloomy, the heavens weep (1357b-76a).

This is certainly clear, though the full richness of the imagery and word play of the description is not easily rendered into modern English. The key point of dispute is, however, what the *mere* is, a question evaded here by leaving the term untranslated. In the literature there is a issue as to whether it is a part of the sea or an inland pool.³⁹ While many accounts stress the sea part, perhaps as a kind of lagoon or estuary, others insist that the moor-setting implies a land-locked body of water. Crucial is the blurring of a usually clear boundary. The term *brim* is a word which usually refers to the sea, and some relation to at least partly open waters seems more likely.⁴⁰ One of those who takes the inland water interpretation is Alain Renoir, who renders *mere* as a pond. Nonetheless, his general point is helpful:

Only three statements in the passage fail to evoke a sharply delineated image: the mention of the proximity of the Pond (1361b-62b), the assertion that no man has explored the bottom of the Pond (1366b-67b). and the conclusion that the Pond is not a safe place (1372b).⁴¹

While Renoir is correct that all the other statements imply a particular place [*stōw*], even these three statements are profoundly geographical, invoking the distance, depth and safety of this uncanny or unhappy, or perilous place (1372, 1378).⁴² One of the reasons for the nature of this place is its geographical

confusion or monstrosity as much as its monstrous inhabitants. For Orchard "the geography of the place... is exceedingly hard to reconcile",⁴³ and for Lawrence "the descriptions of the haunted pool are hopelessly inconsistent".⁴⁴ This has created much work for the critics. Lawrence suggests that this inconsistency is due to textual corruption and emendation:

The descriptions of the haunted mere reveal three conceptions of its nature and location: (1) in the moor or fen, (2) in high and rocky land, (3) in or near the sea; that it is impossible to reconcile all these so as to give a single consistent picture of natural scenery; and that in view of mutually contradictory elements appearing elsewhere in *Beowulf*, and in other epics, it is most reasonable to assume that different conceptions were here amalgamated, despite their unlikeness, in the usual course of epic evolution.⁴⁵

This is to explain the problem through philological error. But this may be in part deliberate by the poet. As Malone notes,

We have seen that Grendel's abode or, rather, his realm centers on a body of water represented as part of the ocean... The approach to this body of water must be made through a desolation where earth and water are mysteriously mingled: a great marsh inhabited by monsters and beast of prey... This investigation has proceeded on the assumption that the *Beowulf* poet's description of Grendel's abode is worthy of study in its own right and that its qualities can and should be brought out within the limits of the poet's own *milieu*.⁴⁶

It seems that this interpretation is more in keeping with the careful balance kept between earth and water imagery by the poet. In the ocean, as compared to

solid land, there is a clear separation, yet the geography of Grendel's abode complicates this. Marshes are where the water intrudes into the earth, treacherous and desolate; marginal areas. One indicator of this is the description of the stag as a *hæðstapa*, a heath-stepper (1368), thus recalling Grendel the marsh-stepper [*mearcstapa*] (108).⁴⁷ The stag, of course, refuses to take to the *mere* at all, preferring to cross the boundary of life to death than the one from dry land to the water. Beowulf however, has long proved himself to be adept in the sea as much as the land. The poem is filled with boasts about his prowess in the sea. These include Beowulf's claim to have "crushed on the wave sea-serpents by night" (421-22), the swimming match with Breca (506ff), the journey over the sea—the "swan's road" (200)—to Heorot's rescue, and his escape from the battle of Friesland by swimming the ocean (2359-60).

Beowulf is, here, an exemplar of the people at the time: able to traverse considerable distances by sea. Hrothgar is, on the contrary, somewhat strangely and unlike his forebears, resolutely shore bound, even land-locked. Irving has made much of the symbolic resonances of the landscape described by the King of the Danes.⁴⁸ As Robinson characterises this reading: "his imagination has been so captured by the horrors that face him, and in describing a landscape so sad and menacing that it seems to have a soul Hrothgar is in fact displaying the desolate landscape of his own mind".⁴⁹ In making this description Hrothgar is throwing down a further, only slightly veiled, challenge to Beowulf. This is one that the latter is eager to take up, vowing that he will pursue Grendel's *māge*, his kinswoman, the mother. "She shall not disappear under darkness, neither in the bosom of the earth, nor in the mountain wood, nor to the bottom of the sea, wherever she goes" (1392-4). As Orchard notes:

Immediately following this vow, which might be seen as a purely rhetorical outburst, Beowulf is soon to take his pursuit literally underground, beneath mountain-forests, and on the sea-bed in his

relentless search for Grendel's mother into her lair, which this promise neatly (if perhaps from Beowulf's own view, unintentionally) describes.⁵⁰

When they reach the *mere*, a home of sea-monsters [*nicorhūs*] (1411), once more the water is mixed with blood, this time of the retainer who had been seized by the mother the previous day. The poet invokes "strange sea-dragons [*sellice sædracan*]... water-monsters [*nicor*]... serpents and wildbeasts" (1426-1430). Beowulf alone dives into the *mere*, but it is some time before he can see the ground at the bottom (1495-6).⁵¹ Once in the lair, Beowulf struggles with the mother, and other weird creatures [*wundra*] and sea-beasts (1509-10). He is dragged to a place that again mixes the elements—a dry cave lit by a fiery light, but deep under water (1515-16). Having no name but Grendel's mother, the poet continually finds ways to describe her—"she-wolf of the water [*brimwylf*]" (1506, 1599); and "worm of the deep, sea-woman [*grundwyrgegne, merewif*]" (1518-19)—that stress her monstrosity, femininity and aquatic nature in equal measure. She had apparently "been doomed to dwell in the fearsome waters in the chilling currents" because of her kinship with Cain (1259-61). Beowulf engages in a fight with the mother, ending with her death.⁵² Once again blood bubbles to the surface of the *mere* (1592-94), and Beowulf's retainers fear that it is his. Beowulf returns to Hrothgar to gain his reward, and then takes his leave of the Danes.

The Dragon's Lair

On returning to the land of the Geats, and ascending the throne, Beowulf rules for many years. When he is again called to action against a monster it is a dragon. The lair of the dragon, in contrast to the *mere*, is resolutely land-based, indeed it is a burial mound filled with treasure.⁵³ The first description is of it as a *stānbeorh*, a stonebarrow (2113). We are told that the treasure house is "in the

earth [*on hrūsan*]" (2278), that it is a "earth-hall [*eorðsele*]... a grave under ground [*hlæw under hrūsan*]" (2410-11). It is a tomb or a grave [*hlæw*] (2296, 2773), in a barrow [*beorh*] (2241), which Lawrence suggests "may be either a natural hill or elevation, or an artificial mound or tumulus", but which here is "clearly of the artificial variety".⁵⁴ The *hlæw* is sometimes simply the grave, and sometimes the mound or barrow itself.⁵⁵ Inside the mound is an "earthen hall with stone arches based on pillars" (2718-19). The burial mound is therefore interesting, and geographically ambiguous, since it is both above the earth—soil heaped over bodies and treasures—and below the newly created surface. The treasure was left by a warrior (2231-70), or by tribal chiefs (3047-75); the poem is contradictory on this point. The hoard is cursed (3052-57), and the dragon is enraged because a thief has sought to plunder the treasure hoard, and so seeks vengeance. Somewhat in distinction to Grendel—excluded from the hearth—but like his mother—acting in vengeance for her son—the dragon too is provoked to action. With the dragon, it is the violation of a place that is the spur. Yet it is not simply the Geats who suffer from the curse, for the dragon too dies, despite killing Beowulf in the process.

Like Grendel and his mother the dragon attacks only at night, and, like them, he is an "elemental, primeval" enemy.⁵⁶ Yet the elemental conflict is somewhat different. The dragon's targets are Beowulf's people, the Geats, a proud sea-faring race who inhabit coastal lands. Their hall is on a sea-cliff (1924), and Beowulf's eventual tomb will be a "mound on the headland" that could be seen by sailors (3156-68). Indeed the parallel between the dragon's lair and Beowulf's future tomb is hard to escape: with almost his dying breath Beowulf asks Wiglaf to go underground, to examine the treasure hoard, "beneath the grey stone" (2743-4). Rather than a challenge from the sea then, the Geats are challenged by the weapon of fire and through the medium of air. Among many descriptions, the poet tells us that "the fire-dragon's flames blasted the coastal land and people's stronghold" (2333-5). Yet as well as being described as a fire-dragon—

līgdraca (2333, see 3040) or *fyrdraca* (2689)—it is also named as a *eorðdraca*, an earth-dragon (2712, 2825), and a *wīðfloga*, literally a wide-flyer (2830).

The barrow and dragon thus show another dimension to the geographies of the poem, showing the verticality of volume rather simply areas or surfaces. Like the descent into the *mere* it highlights the importance of what is below the surface, the subsoil, and the flight demonstrates the significance of the air, what is above the ground. Significantly the dwellings of all the monsters in the poem are underground, those of the humans above it.⁵⁷ Yet fire, earth and air all appear to be the dragon's element. Only water appears to be outside. Indeed, although the dragon's barrow is close to the crashing sea waves (2241-2, 2411-2), its dead body is eventually pushed off the cliff into the sea (3131-33).

Gifts of Land

These three sites are thus given detailed descriptions, mixing elemental, symbolic and material geographies. Yet, crucial though they are to the drama of the poem, the question of land exceeds these particular sites, as it can be seen to be a significant theme throughout. In the Anglo-Saxon *Maxims*, the aphorism "holding land he is hated, giving much he is much loved" is sometimes seen as indicative of land-politics of the period.⁵⁸ In *Beowulf* the Christian poet suggests that God:

Distributes wisdom, land [*eard*] and nobility [*eorlscipe*] among mankind... he will grant him earth's bliss in his native land [*ēþle*], the sway of the stronghold of his people, and will give him to rule regions [*dælas*] of the world, broad realms [*rice*]: he cannot imagine, in his folly, than an end will come (1725-34).

However in *Beowulf* there are two rather distinct economies at work. The first is the distributive politics of Hrothgar. We are told at the beginning of the poem that Hrothgar was going to distribute “the gifts God had given him... apart from common land [*folcscaru*] and lives” (73-74). While the second exception is supposed to show that he is no tyrant, the former—while certainly open to that interpretation—indicates something more. That is supported by his actions later in the narrative.

After the death of Grendel, Hrothgar showers Beowulf and his retainers with gifts, and even names him as his son, but the Queen intervenes to ensure that the realm itself passes to *her* sons. The speech is notable, since though this is a patriarchal society, she still has an important role as the reproducer of a line:

Heorot is cleansed, the ring-hall gleams again: therefore bestow
while you may these blessings generously, and leave to your
kinsmen the realm and its people [*folc und rīce*] when your passing
is decreed (1176-1180).

Hrothgar follows his Queen’s advice, and does not skimp on the treasures, while reserving any gifts of land. Even after the end of Grendel’s mother, and Beowulf’s departure from the Danes, Hrothgar presents him with twelve new treasures, and Beowulf departs “proudly gold-adorned [*goldwlan*” (1881). But he does leave, retaining no ties to that land other than friendship and loyalty. When Beowulf returns to the Geats, he in turn presents the treasures to the King, Hygelac, his maternal uncle (2145-62).

Hygelac receives these gifts with pleasure, and then reciprocates. Alongside Hygelac’s father Hrethel’s sword, which is given to Beowulf, the gift of land then comes from *this* King:

He bestowed on him seven thousand hides of land, a princely throne and a hall. Inherited land, a domain by birthright, had come down to them both in the Geat nation; ancestral domain, the greater realm [*rice*] to the higher born of them (2195-2199).⁵⁹

Very quickly, a matter of lines later in the poem, Beowulf inherits the “broad realm [*rice*]” of Hygelac’s lands when he is slain (2207-8). Somewhat later in the poem the full story is told. Hygelac’s widow offers Beowulf “hoard and realm [*rice*], rings and a princely throne”, because she does not trust that her son is strong enough to repel foreign invasion. Beowulf refuses this honour, staying merely as an advisor and ally, until the son himself is killed, “which allowed Beowulf to hold the princely throne and rule the Geats” (2389-90). In these passages there are two key things stressed: land through inheritance on death, and land through gift. While Beowulf owned land by birthright he is given the seven thousand hides before Hygelac dies, only inheriting the balance later. Elsewhere we are told Hygelac made a gift of “land and linked rings worth a hundred thousand” to the retainers Eofor and Wulf for their deeds in battle against the Swedes (2989-90).⁶⁰

Much later, when Beowulf has been king for many years, the death of Hrethel—Hygelac’s father and Beowulf’s grandfather—is recounted as a prelude to the war between the Swedes and the Geats, but also as a prelude to Beowulf’s own imminent demise. It is also mentioned in terms of inheritance. We are told Hrethel “left to his sons his land and towns at his life’s faring forth, as the fortunate man does” (2469-71). Beowulf adds that he was able to repay Hygelac in battle “for the treasures he had given me. He had given me land, dwelling and delight in homeland [*eard ēðelwyrn*] to leave to my heirs” (2492-3). In addition, when Beowulf does confront the dragon, and all his companions flee, the one who returns is Wiglaf. Of all the favours he remembers from Beowulf, to whom he owes allegiance, he explicitly recalls “the wealthy dwelling-place of the

Waymundings, confirming him in the common landrights his father had held” (2606-08). Here then it is not so much the gift of land, but the support for the property rights of the commons that is important.

On Beowulf’s death, lacking an heir, things are more complicated. Wiglaf tells them that because too few came to Beowulf’s aid,

Now there shall cease for your race the receiving of treasure, the giving of swords, all satisfaction of ownership, all comfort of home [*eðelwyn*]. Each of your kin [*cynne*] shall become wanderers without land-rights as soon as athelings over the world shall hear the report of how you fled, a deed of ill fame (2884-90).

This comes to pass, but not quite in the way anticipated. It is less because of a loss of prestige, than because with the death of Beowulf his overseas enemies become emboldened (see 2910-15).

Conflict over Land

As well as these senses of distribution, the word ‘land’—an English word directly linked to the Old English *land*, *lond*—has multiple meanings. Many of these are indicated in the poem. Land can be used in a straight-forward, unstressed sense, in opposition to sea, such as when sailors sight or make land at the end of a voyage (221, 1913), or when Beowulf surfaces from the mere after the fight with Grendel’s mother (1623). It can be limited or marked, with a boundary, although here that is only used of the coastline [*landgemyrcu*] (209). It can be used in a way that means little more than place, such as the “mysterious land” Grendel and his mother inhabit (1357), or with a sense of region, speaking of the strongest in a land (2836), or the people of a land (2310). It can be plural, with Hrothgar’s hall having a “radiance that shone over many lands” (311). It can also

be an advantage, in that someone “knowing the land well” might “escape with his life” (2062).⁶¹

Yet even concerning distribution, ‘land’ is used not simply to designate the property of a person or a King, such as Scyld Scefing being hailed as the “beloved leader of the land [*lēof landfruma*]” (31), but also of a people more generally. The land of the Danes [*land Dena*] is mentioned when Beowulf arrives on his quest against Grendel (242, 253), and again when they depart (1904). When Beowulf is recounting his swimming contest with Breca, for instance, he claims that the sea currents carried him “to the land of the Lapps [*on Finna land*]” (580). There are other examples in the poem—the land of the Brondings (521) and the land of the Frisians (2915). It is this sense of land and its relation to a people that is the topic of this last section, for it leads to the question of conflict over this resource, both as the object and terrain of struggle.

Howe notes that “Anglo-Saxons conceived of the land itself and all that grew on it as more enduring than anything human beings could build on it and thus as more useful for legal purposes”.⁶² While he does not pursue all the resonances of the term within the poem, he does offer an important illustration of his earlier-cited claim that it “profoundly a work about place”.⁶³ Howe shows how the “breakneck chronology” of lines 2200-2214, discussed above, is “a political genealogy... [a] dynastic progression”, showing the passage from Hygelac to Heardred to Beowulf, but that this is not simply a line of kings, but establishes the land they rule over: “these lines from *Beowulf* clearly demarcate a kingdom by offering its line of dynastic succession”.⁶⁴ He suggests that the poem is in part “a political poem that asks what it means to be an *epelweard*”, a guardian of the homeland, “then it must also be a poem about place, about the meaning of *epel*”.⁶⁵

The poet uses *eþel*, homeland, and *rice*, kingdom or realm throughout the poem, often juxtaposed with no clear distinction. A prince's son, for instance "should prosper, succeed to his father's rank, guard the people, treasure-hoard and stronghold, the realm [*rice*] of heroes, homeland [*eþel*] of the Scyldings" (910-3). Alongside the use of *eþelweard*, Beowulf describes Hrothgar as "*rice weard*", guardian or ward of the realm (1390), and there are a couple of instances where Hrothgar or Beowulf are described as a *rices hyrde*, which effectively means the same thing (2027, 3080). What is intriguing, Howe suggests, is that there are only two instances of the verb *ricsian*, derived from *rice*, which means to rule. But these are not used of humans. It is used to describe the dragon ruling over the hoard (2211), and earlier, of Grendel effectively ruling over the hall until Beowulf arrives (144). In both instances a monstrous rule is opposed to a heroic leadership of the homeland—in the case of the dragon the lines in the poem come immediately after the invocation of Beowulf's role as *eþelweard* (2210).⁶⁶

When dying, Beowulf recalls that he has ruled his people for fifty winters, and that in that time "not a single king of all the neighbouring peoples [*ymbesittendra*] about has dared to affront me with his friends in war or threaten terrors" (2733-2736). Yet the whole of the second part of the poem—that is, Beowulf's return to the Geats, the death of Hygelac and the passing of the realm to Beowulf—concerns three key things: the fight with the dragon; the war between the Geats and the Swedes; and unrest on the southern borders.⁶⁷ These stories are continually intertwined, so that on Beowulf's death in combat with the dragon it is not surprising that the full force of the other conflicts are unleashed: the poet has continually prefigured it.

Beowulf's predecessor as King, Hygelac, had actually died in an ill-fated raid on the southern tribes of the Frisians and the Franks. We are told that "fate carried him off when, out of pride, he went looking for trouble, a feud with the Frisians" (1205-07). It is from this battle that Beowulf escapes by swimming away (2359-

60). Jack and Swanton note that there is historical evidence for the battle and death of Hygelac, at least, in Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum*, and the *Gesta Francorum*.⁶⁸ As Mitchell and Robinson put it, switching back to the poetic, rather than historical, narrative:

This disaster so weakened the Geatish nation that only the presence of mighty Beowulf on the throne could keep surrounding enemies at bay, and so when he dies the nation (we are told repeatedly) is doomed. This being the case, each of the four times that the Frisian raid is recounted (II. 1202-14, 2354-66, 2501-8, 2913-21) is a reminder of the baleful future awaiting the Geats.⁶⁹

Yet this is a conflict that has been going on for some time.⁷⁰ Recounting the history of his line, Beowulf recalls that it was after the death of Hrethel, Hygelac's father, that "there was hostility and strife between Swedes and Geats, a mutual grievance across the broad water" (2472-74). Yet Hygelac makes this worse by inflaming tensions to the south too, with the Frisians and the Franks, thus presenting the Geats with a war on two fronts. On Beowulf's death, Wiglaf recognises that "the people can expect a period of conflict, once the fall of the king becomes openly known abroad among Franks and Frisians" (2910-13). A few lines later, having offered a detailed account of the stages up to this point, Wiglaf notes that "this is the feud and the enmity, deadly hatred of men, for which I expect the people of the Swedes to come looking for us, once they hear that our lord has lost his life" (2999-3003). The loss of the king, *cynning*, produces a vulnerability for his kin, *cynn*; the absence of the *ebelweard* or *riceweard* removes the protection from the homeland and realm.⁷¹ As Earl puts it: "Beowulf's death will release tremendous, deeply rooted forces waiting to engulf his world. His successful kingship has only been a holding action against this chaos".⁷² In this the geopolitical conflict parallels Beowulf's previous three battles with monsters: holding the forces of disorder at bay from a human world of

pockets of isolated order. And yet the poem continually insists on the interrelation, and the crossing between such arbitrary borders.⁷³ What happens with Beowulf's death is that a much wider world intrudes: distance and proximity are reordered.

Conclusion

The claims of this essay are necessarily modest. It does not seek to generalise from what the poet tells us, but rather to set it out and show the force of his allusion and argument. In the first part of the poem, Beowulf confronts two monsters, Grendel and his mother, in two distinct places, the hall and the *mere*. Elemental conflicts between earth and sea, and in particular their problematic intermingling, shape the narrative. In the second part he gains the throne of the Geats, who are beset by external enemies. Losing his life in a final struggle with a dragon, Beowulf leaves a realm behind that has little future left. The Swedes, off-stage for most of the poem, begin to encroach. In all this, the essay provides a much more detailed account of a claim Heaney makes in his introduction to the poem.

The Swedish dimension gradually becomes an important element in the poem's emotional and imaginative geography, a geography that entails, it should be said, no very clear map-sense of the world, more an apprehension of menaced borders, of danger gathering beyond the mere and the marshes, of *mearc-stapas* 'prowling the moors, huge marauders / from some other world.'⁷⁴

The "emotional and imaginative geography", important though it is, needs to be balanced with the land-politics and geopolitics discussed in the last two sections of this essay. The poem does not have a "very clear map-sense of the world", but rather a much more narrow focus on immediate geographies. Looking at the

use of language here does provide a great deal of illustration of the understandings of place and land, and their relation to politics and the people. While part of a larger project which seeks to look at the conceptual and historical relation between land, terrain and territory, this essay offers a more focused study of a single text from a particular period.

In this text, site and place are given a range of symbolic, material and emotive resonances. Land, as an indicator of a set of relations that mix economic and political concerns, is the operative geographical question. The interrelation of the people with the land they inhabit is a key theme. 'Territory' is a much later category that does not make any sense in the period and place of *Beowulf*.⁷⁵ Sometimes, though barely hinted at in the poem, land becomes a political-strategic rather than simply political-economic question, which implies what we might think through the question of 'terrain'. Terrain is, of course, itself a complicated term with a distinct etymology and lineage to that of land, and it is a term which is strictly speaking foreign to this text. But the interrelation of the site and stake of struggle is important: land is not simply where battles take place, but often the focus of the struggle itself. This text thus gives a partial glimpse of the political-strategic issue alongside its very particular political economy of land. Though he was speaking of Greek tragedy, Marx might as well have been speaking of all epic poetry when he asked if their "conception of nature and of social relations" was still "possible when there are self-acting mules, railways, locomotives and electric telegraphs?"⁷⁶ A careful reading of *Beowulf* provides insight into how very different historical conditions gave rise to very particular geographies, as well as the reverse.

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Biography Note

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Notes

- ¹ Citations from *Beowulf* are given in the text by line number. I have used the Old English text presented in George Jack (ed.), *Beowulf: A Student Edition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. The translations are usually based on the one by Michael Alexander, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1973, though I have regularly departed from his renderings. Alterations to translations do not intend to improve his excellent work, but to make apparent the uses of specific vocabulary, which is often accomplished through the inclusion of the Old English words in brackets in the text. In this I have often made use of Jack's line glosses; and Michael Swanton (ed.), *Beowulf*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, which is bi-lingual, with helpful notes. Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson (eds.), *Beowulf: An Edition with Relevant Shorter Texts*, Malden: Blackwell, 1998, has a detailed glossary which has also proved very useful.

- ² *Beowulf*, directed by Robert Zemeckis, 2007. Other recent adaptations include *Beowulf and Grendel*, 2005, directed by Sturla Gunnarsson; *Beowulf*, directed by Graham Barker, 1999; and *Beowulf*, directed by Yuri Kolakov, 1998. Only the last makes any pretence of keeping to the original story.
- ³ Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Translation*, London: Faber & Faber, 1999. See Terry Eagleton, "Hasped and Hooped and Hirpling", *London Review of Books*, 11 November 1999; Matt Jordan, "Marxism, Not Manhood: Accommodation and Impasse in Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*", *Men and Masculinities*, Vol 4, 2002, 368-79.
- ⁴ The most critical account is Nicholas Howe, "Scullionspeak," *The New Republic*, February 28th 2000, pp. 32-37. For discussions, see Joseph McGowan, "Heaney, Caedmon, Beowulf," *New Hibernia Review*, Vol 6 No 2, 2002, pp. 25-42; and especially Thomas McGuire, "Violence and Vernacular in Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*", *New Hibernia Review*, Vol 10 No 1, Spring 2006, pp. 79-99.
- ⁵ Its account of these issues is shaped by Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, new edition, 1998. As Cosgrove himself notes (p. xxv), the conception of symbolism is left unclear, while the materiality of social formations is much more explicitly theorised. What my attempt here seeks to do is to show how the symbolic and the material interrelate in this text.
- ⁶ Nicholas Howe, *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Cultural Geography*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.
- ⁷ Howe, *Writing the Map*, p. 188.
- ⁸ In this its attempt is closer to Fabienne Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English*

Literature, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, Chapter Five, a work I make occasional reference to below.

⁹ See, for example, Paul Zumthor, *La mesure du monde: représentation de l'espace au Moyen age*, Paris: Seuil, 1993; Evelyn Edson, *Mapping Time and Space: How Medieval Mapmakers Viewed Their World*, London: British Library, 1998; Sylvia Tomasch and Seely Gilles (eds.), *Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998; Barbara A. Hanawalt and Michal Kobiałka (eds.), *Medieval Practices of Space*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000; Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000–1534*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006; and Andrew Spicer and Sarah Hamilton (eds.), *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Ashgate, 2008.

¹⁰ The classic text is George H.T. Kimble, *Geography in the Middle Ages*, London: Methuen & Co, 1938. Some recent studies include Rhys Jones, "Changing Ideologies of Medieval State Formation: The Growing Exploitation of Land in Gwynedd c.1100-c.1400", *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol 26 No 4, 2000, pp. 505-516; and "Medieval Biographies and the Geography of Power: The *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*", *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol 30 No 3, 2004, pp. 459-69; and David C. Harvey, "Territoriality, Parochial Development, and the Place of 'Community' in Later Medieval Cornwall", *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol 29 No 2, 2003, pp. 151-165. In distinction to these texts I am attempting here to be rigorously textual and historically contextual in the use of terms like land and not to allow more modern conceptions to intrude. More generally, see Robert A. Dodgshon, *The European Past: Social Evolution and Spatial Order*, Houndmills: Macmillan, 1987; and Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in*

- the Western Imagination*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; *Geography & Vision: Seeing, Imagining and Representing the World*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2008.
- ¹¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, London: Proceedings of the British Academy, 1936, p. 5.
- ¹² James W. Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 10.
- ¹³ Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, p. 116.
- ¹⁴ Ritchie Girvan, *Beowulf and the Seventh Century: Language and Content*, London: Methuen & Co, 1971, p. 27. The Tacitus reference is to *On Britain and Germany*, translated by H. Mattingly, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948.
- ¹⁵ George Jack, "Introduction", in Jack (ed.), *Beowulf*, p. 8; Fred C. Robinson, *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, p. 39. An attempt to deny this, and to suggest that the Geats, like Beowulf and the monsters, are fantasies, is found in Jane Acomb Leake, *The Geats of Beowulf: A Study in the Geographical Mythology of the Middle Ages*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967.
- ¹⁶ See, for example, the map entitled "The Geography of Beowulf", in Mitchell and Robinson (eds.), *Beowulf*, p. xiii.
- ¹⁷ In this it differs from the attempt in Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn, *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994; or the discussion of place-names in Margaret Gelling, "The Landscape of Beowulf", *Anglo-Saxon England*, Vol 31, 2002, pp. 7-11.
- ¹⁸ Such attempts are found in R. T. Farrell, "Beowulf, Swedes and Geats", *Saga Book of the Viking Society*, Vol XVIII, 1970-73, pp. 220-96; and B. Raw, "Royal Power and Royal Symbols in *Beowulf*", in M. O. H. Carver

- (ed.), *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998, pp. 167-74.
- ¹⁹ Tolkien, *Beowulf*, pp. 14-15.
- ²⁰ Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003, p. 173.
- ²¹ Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, pp. 114-5.
- ²² Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, p. 116. Sleeping did take place there, but the poem is explicit that both Hrothgar and Beowulf spend nights away: Beowulf after he has killed Grendel. See Howe, *Writing the Map*, p. 55.
- ²³ Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, p. 100.
- ²⁴ Leslie Webster, "Archaeology and *Beowulf*", in Mitchell and Robinson (eds.), *Beowulf*, p. 186. See also Gwyn Jones, *Kings, Beasts and Heroes*, London: Oxford University Press. 1972.
- ²⁵ Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, p. 74.
- ²⁶ See Fred C. Robinson, "Apposed Word Meanings and Religious Perspectives", in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Beowulf: Modern Critical Interpretations*, New York: Chelsea House, 1987, pp. 81-110, p. 83; Joseph L. Baird, "Grendel the Exile", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, Vol 67, 1966, pp. 375-81, p. 377; and more generally Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995, Chapter III; John Block Friedmann, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000, Chapter Five. On the topic generally see David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996; and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

- 27 See Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, p. 170. Recent films have resolved this by suggesting Grendel is the offspring of Hrothgar (Zemeckis), or of a troll killed at the beginning (Gunnarsson).
- 28 Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, p. 171.
- 29 Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, p. 123.
- 30 Michael Swanton, "Introduction", in Swanton (ed.), *Beowulf*, p. 10.
- 31 On this generally see Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley, "Living on the *Ecg*: The Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Contexts", in Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing (eds.), *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, Penn State University Press, 2006, pp. 85-110.
- 32 Tolkien, *Beowulf*, p. 23.
- 33 Swanton, "Introduction", p. 21; see Baird, "Grendel the Exile", p. 378.
- 34 Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, p. 63; see Howe, *Writing the Map*, p. 67.
- 35 Tolkien, *Beowulf*, p. 18.
- 36 See, for example, the note in Jack (ed.), *Beowulf*, pp. 109-10; Swanton, "Introduction", p. 21, and the note to lines 1357-76 on p. 198 of his edition.
- 37 William Witherie Lawrence, "The Haunted Mere in Beowulf", *PMLA*, Vol 27 No 2, 1912, pp. 208-45, p. 211.
- 38 On this see Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, pp. 155-7.
- 39 For valuable discussions see Roberta Frank, "'Mere' and 'Sund': Two Sea-Changes in *Beowulf*", in Phyllis Rugg Brown, Georgia Ronan Crampton and Fred C. Robinson (eds.), *Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, pp. 153-72, pp. 154-6; and Lawrence, "The Haunted Mere in Beowulf", pp. 208-9. Jack notes that *mere* means "pool, lake" in prose, but in verse "it is used of the sea" (*Beowulf*, p. 110 n.). See also the exchange between Lawrence and Mackie: W. S. Mackie, "The Demon's Home in Beowulf", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol 37, 1938, pp. 455-61; William Witherle

- Lawrence, "Grendel's Lair", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol 38, 1939, pp. 477-80.
- 40 See, for instance, Kemp Malone, "Grendel and His Abode", in A. G. Hatcher and K. L. Selig (eds.), *Studia Philologica et Litteraria in Honorem L. Spitzer*, Bern: Francke Verlag, 1958, pp. 297-308.
- 41 Alain Renoir, "The Terror of the Dark Waters: A Note on Virgilian and Beowulfian Techniques", in Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974, pp. 147-60, p. 153.
- 42 'Uncanny' is suggested by Lawrence, "The Haunted Mere in Beowulf", p. 208.
- 43 Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, p. 156.
- 44 Lawrence, "The Haunted Mere in Beowulf", pp. 241-2.
- 45 Lawrence, "The Haunted Mere in Beowulf", p. 225.
- 46 Malone, "Grendel and His Abode", pp. 305, 307; see Richard Butts, "The Analogical Mere: Landscape and Terror in *Beowulf*", *English Studies*, Vol 68 No 2, 1987, pp. 113-21.
- 47 There is also a relation to *Heorot*, the hall, and the term *unheoru*, which is used to describe Grendel's claw (987) and the dragon (2413). See Edward B. Irving Jr., *A Reading of Beowulf*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, p. 117 n. 25. On the *mearcstapa*, see the remarks in Manish Sharma, "Metalepsis and Monstrosity: The Boundaries of Narrative Structure in *Beowulf*", *Studies in Philology*, Vol 102 No 3, 2005, pp. 247-75, pp. 265-6; and S. L. Higley, "Aldor on Ofre, or the Reluctant Hart: A Study of Liminality in Beowulf," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, Vol 87, 1986, pp. 342-53.
- 48 Irving, *A Reading of Beowulf*, pp. 76ff.
- 49 Robinson, *The Tomb of Beowulf*, p. 59.
- 50 Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, p. 69.

- 51 For a discussion of these lines see Alfred Baumesberger, "Beowulf's Descent into Grendel's Mere", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, Vol 96, 1995, pp. 225-7.
- 52 On this fight, see Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, pp. 28-9; and E. G. Stanley, "Did Beowulf Commit 'Feaxfeng' Against Grendel's Mother?" *Notes and Queries*, Series 3, Vol 23, 1976, pp. 339-340.
- 53 The reading here is indebted to William Witherle Lawrence, "The Dragon and His Lair in Beowulf", *PMLA*, Vol 33 No 4, 1918, pp. 547-583.
- 54 Lawrence, "The Dragon and His Lair in Beowulf", p. 569.
- 55 Lawrence, "The Dragon and His Lair in Beowulf", p. 570 n. 22.
- 56 Swanton, "Introduction", p. 24.
- 57 See Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*, pp. 79-80; trading on Marie-Françoise Alamichel, "Voyage dans les paysages du *Beowulf*", in Marie-Françoise Alamichel (ed.), *Beowulf: Symbolismes et interprétations*, Paris: Éditions du Temps, 1998, pp. 87-106.
- 58 *Maxims*, II, quoted in Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, p. 65.
- 59 The introduction of the phrase "hides of land" is a standard interpretation, explained by Jack, *Beowulf*, p. 156 n. The Old English phrase is *seofan pūsendo*: "*pūsend* is sometimes used of value without expression of the unit (which is understood from the context). A hide was the normal holding of a peasant, sufficient to support a *ceorl* and his household; its extent varied". See also Swanton (ed.), *Beowulf*, p. 201, who notes that this was an extensive estate. For a fuller discussion see F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford: Clarendon, Second Edition, 1971, pp. 278-9; Diana Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, Chapter Four, and Dodgshon, *The European Past*, pp. 158-9.
- 60 Swanton (ed.), *Beowulf*, p. 204, notes that this cannot imply hide, unlike line 2195, since the area would be larger than Geatland itself. He suggests

- that "the unit of value must be applicable to both land and bullion, and was presumably therefore monetary".
- 61 There is of course an extensive literature on land, and the related term landscape. Little looks at the period of the early Middle Ages in which *Beowulf* is situated. See, generally, Kenneth Robert Olwig, *Landscape, Nature and the Body Politic: From Britain's Renaissance to America's New World*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002;
- 62 Howe, *Writing the Map*, pp. 45-46.
- 63 Howe, *Writing the Map*, p. 188.
- 64 Howe, *Writing the Map*, pp. 188-9; see Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*, p. 74.
- 65 Howe, *Writing the Map*, p. 189
- 66 Howe, *Writing the Map*, pp. 190-1.
- 67 Mitchell and Robinson, "The Geatish-Swedish Wars", p. 181.
- 68 Jack, "Introduction", p. 12; Swanton (ed.), *Beowulf*, p. 197. The references are to Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* III, 3 and the *Gesta Francorum*, XIX.
- 69 Mitchell and Robinson, "Introduction", in Mitchell and Robinson (eds.), *Beowulf*, p. 29; see Jack, "Introduction", p. 12.
- 70 Mitchell and Robinson, "The Geatish-Swedish Wars", pp. 181-2, is helpful here.
- 71 On the *Cyning* as "the man of, or from, or representing the kin", see J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings and other Studies in Frankish History*, London: Methuen and Co., 1962, p. 153.
- 72 Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, p. 77.
- 73 This is a key theme of Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*. See, especially, pp. 91, 107.
- 74 Seamus Heaney, "Introduction", in Heaney, *Beowulf*, p. xv.

- ⁷⁵ This account thus differs from the claim of Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*, pp. 74-75, that "to secure a territory and to prosper is a recurrent concern of the *Beowulf* poet, thus testifying to the importance of spatial control and of land possession" (see also pp. 109, 114). In her otherwise remarkable account, Michelet uses the term 'territory' in a way that lacks precision and textual reference. The same point could be made about her use of 'space' more generally, references to Lefebvre notwithstanding.
- ⁷⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Literature and Art*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976, p. 83. The hint to look to this quote is due to Eagleton, "Hasped and Hooped and Hirpling".