

# Beowulf and Archaeology

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IN the Anglo-Saxon period, where both the written and the archaeological evidence have so many gaps and difficulties of interpretation, the picture of Anglo-Saxon society given in *Beowulf* must be fully considered by archaeologists while on the other hand no critic of the poem can afford to neglect the new material evidence that is constantly being produced. *Beowulf* is the only poem that gives a full picture of secular life in this period and as such it has constantly been used to articulate the archaeologist's dumb evidence: Bateman<sup>1</sup> in 1848 ended his account of the boar-crested helmet discovered at Benty Grange by quotations from the poem, and when the rich burial from Sutton Hoo was published<sup>2</sup> it seemed equally appropriate to quote from the account of the burial of Scyld in *Beowulf*. The poem in fact provides a picture of a royal and aristocratic milieu, which until quite recent years has been largely unrepresented by archaeological evidence. Nevertheless the archaeologist wishes to know how far this poetic evidence can be trusted: the rich gold treasure from Sutton Hoo brought the immediate recognition that descriptions of lavish burials and gold-adorned armour in *Beowulf* could no longer be dismissed as poetic exaggeration or folk memories of an age of gold before the Anglo-Saxons came to England, just as the luxury items in the grave culled from all over Europe have left the uneasy impression that the poet was not just speaking in clichés when he talks of 'many treasures and ornaments from distant lands',<sup>3</sup> among Scyld's burial equipment.

On the other hand the form of burial at Sutton Hoo revived the old controversy about Beowulf's funeral<sup>4</sup>—whether the cremation of treasure with the body followed by the inhumation of the dragon's hoard in the hero's mound was not 'too much of a good thing'<sup>5</sup> and a mingling of one or more funeral descriptions handed down from antiquity which the poet did not wholly understand. When it is a question of pagan customs as described by a Christian poet, however, it is obvious that archaeological propriety must be a secondary matter, and specifically pagan practices will be left out. As for the dragon's treasure, such heathen gold may be an embarrassment, but tales of fabulous treasure have always stirred men's imaginations, especially when it is said to be still lying somewhere intact. Moreover, the archaeologists have been answered by Miss Whitelock's common-sense defence of the poet:<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. Bateman, *Ten Years Diggings in Celtic and Saxon Grave Hills* (London, 1861), p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial: a provisional guide* (British Museum, 1947).

<sup>3</sup> ll. 36-7.

<sup>4</sup> ll. 3157-3177.

<sup>5</sup> K. Stjerna, *Essays on questions connected with the Old English poem of Beowulf* (Viking Club publications, extra ser. III, 1912), pp. 198-204; S. Lindqvist, 'Sutton Hoo and Beowulf', *Antiquity*, XXII (1948), 139.

<sup>6</sup> *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 82-3.

'If the procedure he describes is irregular, the circumstances are unusual also. A poet might feel that he could afford to do unorthodox, extravagant things with an enormous treasure which he had just won from a dragon; it is not safe to accuse him of ignorance of what was done at more normal funerals.'

There are in fact several points in the description of the hero's funeral that might support this defence. It is perhaps unsafe to place too much reliance on the late account of a Viking funeral by Ibn Fadlan,<sup>7</sup> but his description of the old woman who was in charge of the funeral ceremony may explain what the Beowulf poet means by the *geatisc meowle* (l. 3150), who sang the hero's lament. Likewise the property of the Viking dead was divided into three, one part only going to his heirs, the other two parts being used for funeral expenses and burial with the dead. In *Beowulf* (ll. 3010-12) it is decreed that 'not one part only shall burn with the brave warrior' because the heirs of Beowulf, his people, have not deserved their share of the dragon's hoard and it shall all go with the dead.<sup>8</sup> These may be chance parallels: nevertheless, without mentioning any specifically heathen ritual or sacrifice, the poet has given us a coherent account<sup>9</sup> and leaves the impression that he does know what was the norm and where he was departing from it.

Yet because *Beowulf* is an isolated literary type one can never be sure how much editing of heathen conditions to allow to its poet and how much had already been done for him. If archaeology could help to find a date for the poem this might be easier to decide, but in fact this is not easy to do, and a circle of arguments can develop, for the archaeologist has to understand the literary and linguistic problems of the poem before he can give an opinion as to whether the poet has mingled together objects and conditions that could never have existed simultaneously. The issue is, however, less complicated in dealing with material objects than with social conditions.

Since Stjerna's work, although specific points have been treated, there has not been any detailed attempt to consider the poem as a whole in the light of archaeological evidence. Yet the archaeological picture of Anglo-Saxon England has changed completely since 1912, and nothing less than another book could draw together all the material satisfactorily: in a shorter space one can only state the problems involved and provide selective illustrations. As a preliminary, however, there is one of Stjerna's contentions that can be dismissed: the rich burial at Sutton Hoo and the impressive buildings at Yeavinger have shown that there is no longer any need to seek a foreign milieu for the elaborate armour and buildings mentioned by the English poet. Such finds are invaluable as illustrations and even explanations of difficult passages in the poem, but today one would

<sup>7</sup> The fullest translation of this text in English is by A. Cook, in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, XXII (1923), pp. 54 ff.

<sup>8</sup> This does not explain why the gold is then buried and not burnt, but it is artistically satisfying that the treasure should still lie 'useless and unprofitable as it was before'.

<sup>9</sup> Lindqvist's contention that in ll. 3156-62 the poet is erroneously using some older account of the construction not of a mound but of a pyre, 'a hollow construction of logs reminiscent of a beacon', seems to rest on a misunderstanding of the word *ben* (l. 3160), which has the meaning 'sign', 'distinguishing mark', and which, like *taen* or *meare*, which have a comparable semantic spread, could perfectly well be applied to a grave-mound. The poet explicitly states (ll. 2802-8) that Beowulf wished the mound to be raised a distinctive memorial.

hesitate even more than Stjerna did to rely on archaeological evidence for dating *Beowulf*; gaps in the material evidence after the cessation of heathen burials are still too immense.

Moreover the poet describes most often rare or expensive things for which archaeology provides limited examples, and there can be a danger of overworking these in an attempt to make them fit too many contexts. It is also impossible with only a few examples to form a datable chronology. For instance Stjerna<sup>10</sup> recognized that boar-figures on helmets were part of a pagan tradition which could not have had a very long life in Christian times, when Christian symbols of protection<sup>11</sup> would take their place. He also saw that the Celts, like the Germanic peoples, used the boar-image on their helmets, shields and standards, a usage in which they may have influenced the Germans. Only two helmets have so far been found in England—those from Benty Grange (PL. X, A) and Sutton Hoo (PL. IX, A): both are probably sixth-century and both might be called 'boar-helmets' since the former has a full-scale figure of a boar on its top and the latter a stylized boar's head over the cheek-guards, but they derive from different traditions (pp. 60 ff) and their dating makes nonsense of the sort of chronology Stjerna attempted, whereby he takes the Celtic boar-helmet from the Gundestrup vessel of about the second century B.C. calling it 'before 500 A.D.' and then attempts to show the animal gradually subsiding into the helmet after Benty Grange through the stage of losing its legs in the Öland plates until by the early seventh century it had become the terminal of a comb, such as one finds on the Vendel helmets, and at the close of the century had been lost altogether.

As well as such difficulties of chronology, there are the related problems of heirlooms and conventional epithets. Unlike obsolete social conditions obsolete weapons could be preserved and seen many years after they were superseded. Prince Aethelstan in the early eleventh century bequeathed to his brother the 'sword that belonged to King Offa', which would then have been over 200 years old. It does not seem, then, to be foisting too sophisticated an antiquarianism on to the poet to assume that, when he says that items like the sword in ll. 1558 ff. and the helmet in 1445 ff. are of ancient manufacture, his audience would expect something different from what they knew to be modern. On the other hand when a weapon is said to have been made in former days, how far away are we to suppose this time to be? It could be two hundred years or a mere fifty.

As for conventional epithets, Girvan says:<sup>12</sup>

'It is well to distinguish here between conventional epithets or phrases inherited by tradition and real description which proves knowledge'.

This is a very difficult thing to do. Old English religious poetry shows us that terms from the heroic tradition had become appropriate in descriptions of personages from the past, as when Cynewulf in *Elene* tells us that Constantine's

<sup>10</sup> Stjerna, *op. cit.* in note 5, pp. 16-18.

<sup>11</sup> The protective value of boar images is stressed by the poet in ll. 303-6, but even as early as the date of the Benty Grange helmet (see PL. X, A) a cross has been attached to the nose-piece as additional protection.

<sup>12</sup> *Beowulf and the Seventh Century* (London, 1935), p. 38.

Roman soldiers wore the Germanic boar-sign, *ænlic eofof cumbul*, on their armour, and that Constantine, before he saw the image of Christ's cross, was asleep, *eofof cumble bepæht*<sup>13</sup>, 'overshadowed or covered by the boar-sign'. These references to the boar-sign, however, show no more than that Cynewulf knew from older Old English poetry what was the conventional dress for pagan soldiers—he is unconcerned that these particular ones are Romans. He merely tosses in such brief phrases where the earlier *Beowulf* poet describes in detail; although even the *Beowulf* poet's long descriptions are so impressionistic—a mere highlighting of one or two outstanding features of an object—that there is often difficulty in reconstructing it.

#### HELMETS

This poetic method of description is in fact the main stumbling-block in any attempt at reconstruction and can only be illustrated by detailed examples, of which some present difficulties that archaeologists can resolve, and some remain enigmas. Helmets are described in greater detail than any other item of war-equipment in the poem, and despite the paucity of archaeological material so far discovered, a study of their descriptions provides some interesting results.

The length of the poet's descriptions in ll. 303 ff. or 1448 ff. is a measure of the aristocratic importance of the helmet which Alföldi sees as a *Herrschaftssymbol*<sup>14</sup> among the Germanic peoples. Certainly the all-metal helmet does not seem to have been common in the earliest Anglo-Saxon period, and even in the tenth century, when helmets and corslets seem to have been more widely worn,<sup>15</sup> laws and wills show that twice as many spears and shields as helmets, corslets and swords were to be paid for heriot.

In the sixth and seventh centuries—the period from which examples have survived—two types of helmets were known among the Germanic peoples. One type derived from late Roman prototypes with solid crown comb, and some form of face and neck protection, examples of which have been found in the Swedish graves of Vendel and Valsgärde (PL. IX, B), as well as at Sutton Hoo (PL. IX, A). This last example may be a Swedish import, but it was found in an English grave and so would have been seen, and no doubt copied, here.

The second is the ribbed helmet or *Spangenhelm* which may have been eastern in origin and introduced into western Europe by the Ostrogoths.<sup>16</sup> So far twenty examples of these elegant conical helmets are known (cf. PL. X, B, from Batajnica).

<sup>13</sup> l. 76. It has usually been assumed that the reference here is to a boar-crested helmet, but since the emperor is asleep when he sees the vision this would seem a rather peculiar addition of Germanic local colour. However, the phrase could mean a boar-standard: this is a common meaning of *cumbol*, and it is clear that the protective boar-image was known in this form; cf. *Beowulf*, l. 2152, *eofof heafodsegn*. The OE. poet has then added point to the well-known story of the creation of the *labarum*, by stressing that when the new standard of victory, the cross, was shown to the emperor, he was lying overshadowed by the old heathen symbol of protection.

<sup>14</sup> 'Eine spätromänische Helmform', *Acta Archaeol.*, V (1934), 142-3.

<sup>15</sup> For example the will of Archbishop Aelfric (D. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, xviii, 52) bequeaths to the king his ship and sixty helmets and corslets for the marines who would man it. See, too, depictions of Vikings on gravestones and the fighters on the Bayeux Tapestry.

<sup>16</sup> For recent discussions see J. Werner 'Zur Herkunft der Frömittelalterlichen Spangenhelm', *Prähist. Zeitschr.*, XXXIV-XXXV (1949-50), 178 ff., and Z. Vinski, 'Ein Spangenhelmfund aus dem ostlichen Sirmien', *Germania*, XXXII (1954), 176-82.

dating from the fifth to the seventh centuries.<sup>17</sup> These helmets, moreover, have a much longer life and history than the Roman derived type, the latest depictions of which, if one excludes the mysterious gravestone from Aberlemno (PL. x, c), are seen on the Franks Casket (PL. xi, A). The conical type, which no doubt never died out on the continent, seems to have been adopted by the Scandinavians by the ninth century, since gravestones in Gotland and in England<sup>18</sup> have clear depictions of them. Whether this form of helmet was introduced into England by the Danes, or earlier, it is impossible to say, but by the time the Bayeux Tapestry was embroidered, it was the only form of helmet worn by both English and Norman alike. Now in *Beowulf*, although the poet concentrates on exceptional or noteworthy features of helmets and leaves more mundane points of construction unstated, it is quite clear that he describes the romanesque and not the continental *Spangenhelm* form. When mentioning the helmet Hroðgar gives to Beowulf the feature he chooses to describe in detail<sup>19</sup> is the comb, *wala*, which passes round the roof of the helmet, *ymb þæs helmes hrof*, and is wound round with a wire inlay, *wirum bewunden*. Bruce-Mitford's lucid note on this passage<sup>20</sup> has put this interpretation of the difficult word *wala* beyond doubt. Wire-inlay was an expensive technique and so it is easy to see why the poet singled out this as worthy of comment.

Similarly, in what is the fullest description of a helmet in *Beowulf*,<sup>21</sup> the poet tells how the helmet is shining *hwit* and *befongen freawrasnum*, a phrase that has given much difficulty to commentators. The form *wrasen*<sup>22</sup> occurs in glosses: *nodus—wrasen*; *ost* (Corpus 1387), and is the second element of a compound in *Andreas* l. 1107, *fetorwrasen*; ll. 63 and 946, *inwitwrasen*. In the first quotation in *Andreas* the word is used in a concrete sense—the chains of the fetters with which a victim is bound—and in *Solomon and Saturn* (ll. 293 ff.) we find the compound *hilde-wrasen*:

*Ylde beoð on eorðan æghwæs cræftig;  
mid hiðendre hildewræsne,  
rumre racenteage, ræceð wide  
langre linan—*

which has been explained by Bosworth and Toller (A.-S. Dict.) as 'a chain used to secure those taken in war', but which probably should be taken in an abstract sense as 'hostile chain'.

In *Andreas*, ll. 63-4 and 941-7, *inwitwrasen* refers to the toils of heathen malice,<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The helmet from Benty Grange (PL. x, A) has sometimes been called a *Spangenhelm*, but, though it is of a ribbed construction, it is a unique and strangely primitive form of helmet, not only because of the boar-image but also because of the plates of bone which covered the iron ribs, perhaps the remains of the primitive idea of wearing part of a totem animal so as to share its qualities.

<sup>18</sup> For example the little figure from Kirk Levington: W. G. Collingwood, 'Anglian and Anglo-Danish Sculpture in the North Riding of Yorkshire' *Yorks. Archaeol. J.*, XIX (1907), fig. 3, facing p. 352.

<sup>19</sup> ll. 1030-4. My quotations throughout are taken from *Beowulf*, ed. F. Klaeber (3 ed., New York and London, 1941).

<sup>20</sup> R. H. Hodgkin, *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (3 ed., 1952), pp. 752-4.

<sup>21</sup> ll. 1448 ff.

<sup>22</sup> For examples of this word in both the abstract and concrete sense in other Germanic languages see A. Johannesson, *Isländisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, p. 248: 'Zu ureik'.

but the use of the word *searonett* in the same context is interesting, since in *Beowulf*, l. 406, this word is used as a synonym for corslet.

This evidence is, I think, sufficient to indicate that the word *frewrasnum* in *Beowulf* could plausibly mean some sort of chain-mail protection on the helmet, and in fact 'encircled with lordly<sup>23</sup> or noble chains' has been the usual translation of the phrase, although this has not been further amplified.<sup>24</sup>

In recent years, however, the find of the two helmets from Valsgärde graves has provided a full explanation. The first helmet to be found (in Valsgärde grave 6,<sup>25</sup> PL. IX, B) is of a latticed construction, unlike the more normal Vendel type with a solid crown, but Miss Arwidsson sees a link with the Benty Grange type of helmet in the Valsgärde specimen. In most respects, however, this helmet conforms to the normal Vendel style, and has been dated *c.* 650-700, but in contrast to the slatted neck-protection of Vendel helmets discovered earlier it had neck- and cheek-guards of chain-mail. This mail curtain, which is cylindrical in shape, tapers from a depth of about thirty-four rings in front to about half that number behind. The mail was fastened on to the helmet by iron wire which ran through the upper rings. Another helmet with a cylindrical mail protector has been found in grave 8 at Valsgärde,<sup>26</sup> this time together with body armour consisting of a combination of chain-mail and staves, and it would seem that the Vendel XII helmet<sup>27</sup> and one from Vestre Englaug in Norway were also provided with mail curtains. In fact it would seem that such protection on Scandinavian helmets of the seventh century was 'at least equally common as the plates suspended on hinges'.<sup>28</sup> There is no archaeological evidence that such helmets were known in England during the Anglo-Saxon period,<sup>29</sup> but Sutton Hoo has shown that helmets of the Vendel type were known here, and when *Beowulf* tells us so unambiguously that Beowulf wore a shining helmet encircled with noble links or chains, it seems sufficient proof that this sort of truncated camail was meant.

The other feature of the helmet with the camail that the poet chooses to mention is the protective boar-image telling how the smith who made it *besette swinlicum*, 'set it around with boar-images'. Here the plural form of *swinlicum*, where only one helmet is in question, seems to refer not to one figure set on the helmet's top as at Benty Grange, but to two or more little figures, perhaps set over the cheek-guards as at Sutton Hoo. This may also be what is meant in ll. 303 ff. where the boar-images on the helmets of Beowulf and his followers shine *ofer*

<sup>23</sup> The word *frea* here is not used in its normal prefix sense as an intensitive (see Bosworth and Toller), but may perhaps indicate the aristocratic nature of the helmet's appendage. Chain-mail was rare and costly among the Germanic peoples.

<sup>24</sup> S. J. Herben, 'A note on the helm in *Beowulf*', *Modern Language Notes*, LII (1937), 34-6, compared the *Beowulf* description with the Valsgärde grave 6 helmet, but, as I had reached my conclusions independently and further archaeological evidence has been discovered, it has seemed profitable to give a more detailed discussion of the word.

<sup>25</sup> G. Arwidsson, 'A new Scandinavian form of helmet from the Vendel-time', *Acta Archaeol.*, V (1935), 243-57; *id.*, *Die Gräberfunde von Valsgärde, I: Valsgärde 6* (Upsala, 1942).

<sup>26</sup> G. Arwidsson, 'Armour of the Vendel Period', *Acta Archaeol.*, X (1939), 31-59, pls. iii-iv; *id.*, *Die Gräberfunde von Valsgärde, II: Valsgärde 8* (Upsala, 1954), pp. 22-8.

<sup>27</sup> *Acta Archaeol.*, V (1935), 255, fig. 11.

<sup>28</sup> *Acta Archaeol.*, V (1935), 254.

<sup>29</sup> The helmet with camail is, however, a popular type of post-conquest armour, and the warriors on the Bayeux Tapestry wear a combination of helmet over mail, although not attached together.

*hleorberan*—over the cheek- or face-protectors. On the other hand in l. 1286 *swin ofer helme*, and the *swin ealgyldan*, *eofer irenheard* which are plainly to be seen, *eþgesyne*, on a funeral pyre in ll. 1111-12 more plausibly refer to the larger, free-standing type of figure. In fact it is a tempting supposition that the poet used *swin* or *eofer* uncompounded to indicate a boar-image on a helmet's crown, and the *-lic* compounds for the small stylized figures set elsewhere.

It is difficult now-a-days to know what would constitute a distinguishing term between one form of helmet and another, and perhaps the most one can say is that despite the limited archaeological evidence no feature of the poetic descriptions is inexplicable and without archaeological parallel. Moreover these features—ornamented comb, visors,<sup>30</sup> and chain-mail neck-protection—can most closely be paralleled by the type found at Sutton Hoo and related to Scandinavian graves.

## SWORDS

If a discussion of helmets shows how very illuminating even a limited amount of archaeological material can be, descriptions of swords in the poem illustrate to the full the difficulties provided by the poetic technique even when there is a much larger body of material for illustration.<sup>31</sup> This is not, I think, because limited archaeological evidence gives a falsely clear picture, but because in describing swords the poet concentrates on rather generalized terms of ornament, and our knowledge of which of these may be technical terms is hazy. This is particularly seen in compounds of the words *fah* and *mæl*, which, as their dictionary definitions show, seem to sum up the total effect of ornament.<sup>32</sup> That is to say, such words do not always appear to have been used solely with application to a play of light and shade or colour, to shape or to texture—all these effects are simultaneously present, but one or the other is made predominant by the addition of a prefix, e.g. *wunden-mæl*, *græg-mæl*.

The aesthetic sense shown here linguistically can be paralleled from archaology in the Anglo-Saxon preoccupation with techniques of ornament which produce an effect of light and shade, for instance pierced or interlace work, or the setting of dark garnets against a background of glittering gold or opaque white paste. Precisely this combined effect of pattern and a play of light and shade that gives the effect of colour contrast is what stirred the admiration of Theodoric when he thanked the king of the Vandals for his marvellous gift of pattern-welded swords:<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> I have not stressed this feature, which is mentioned in ll. 334, 2049, 2257, 2605 of *Beowulf*, since visored helmet is an epithet found elsewhere in OE. poetry, but here, in combination with the other evidence, it is an added pointer to the sort of helmet the poet means, since *Spangenhelmen* do not have the full visor.

<sup>31</sup> Standard reference books which provide full illustrations are E. Behmer, *Das zweischneidige Schwert der germanischen Völkerwanderungszeit* (Stockholm, 1939), and J. Petersen, *De Norske Vikingsverd* (Kristiania, 1919).

<sup>32</sup> As L. D. Lerner has pointed out in 'Colour Words in Anglo-Saxon', *Modern Language Review*, XLVI (1951), 246-9, we tend today to specialize our colour perception of hue, but unlike the Anglo-Saxons, have not many words to describe the effects of absorption or reflection of light; 'we tend not to notice that different hues of similar brightness may give a very similar sensation'. This is an important distinction for the terminology of AS. ornament.

<sup>33</sup> Cassiodorus, V (J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, LXIX), 645.

‘Harum media pulchris alveis excavata, quibusdam videntur crispari posse vermiculis, ubi tanta varietatis umbra conludit (colludit), ut intentium (intextum) magis credas variis coloribus lucidam metallum.’<sup>34</sup>

It is perhaps because of this aesthetic similarity in the patterning of blades and other patterns that could occur on hilts that has caused the long wrangle about what part of the sword such terms as *sceadenmæl*, or *wyrmfah* referred to.<sup>35</sup> Only a detailed analysis can illustrate such linguistic difficulties, and the poet’s description of the sword Beowulf finds under the mere is the best illustration, because the most complete (ll. 1557 ff.):

‘Geseah ða on searwum sigeeadig bil,  
ealdsweord eotenisc ecgum þyhtig,  
wigena weorðmynd; þæt (wæs) wæpna cyst,—  
buton hit wæs mare ðonne ænig mon oðer  
to beadulace ætberan meahte,  
god ond geatolic, giganta geweorc.’

‘Then he saw among the weapons a victory-blest blade, an ancient giant-made sword, mighty of edge, a glory for warriors; it was a weapon of weapons,—but it was greater than any other man could bear into battle, serviceable and splendidly adorned, the work of giants.’

There is a good artistic contrast here with the passage where Hroðgar examines the hilt in detail; in the above passage the epithets used are much more general—consistent with a first impression: when Beowulf first catches sight of it he sees it as a weapon that could save his life, *sigeeadig bil*, an ancient mighty weapon, as were all the best swords, but differing from other such swords in that it was much larger, the sort of weapon only a hero like Beowulf could wield. It is also ‘the work of giants’. In his reference to the *gigantas* the poet introduces a word that is much rarer than the other term meaning ‘made by giants’, *eotenisc*, but the learned Latin word *gigant* occurs again later in the description of this sword’s hilt, and it is typical of the poet to provide such a link.

Attention is now concentrated on the sword-hilt as Beowulf grasps at it, *gefeng þa fetelhilt* (l. 1563). It has been assumed by some commentators<sup>36</sup> that *fetelhilt* and *hringmæl* in the next line mean that the sword was a ‘ring sword’ such as are found in Kentish graves of the late sixth century and Scandinavian graves of the seventh century,<sup>37</sup> and, because this type of sword has a limited life, that references to ring-swords in *Beowulf* could be used for dating the poem. In fact, the memory of such swords could have lingered on in Old English literature<sup>38</sup> (as it

<sup>34</sup> Modern research on the construction of such blades can be found in the following works: H. Maryon, ‘A sword of the Nydam type from the Ely Field’s Farm’, *Proc. Camb. Antiq. Soc.*, XLI (1947), 73-6; *id.*, ‘A sword of the Viking period from the River Witham’, *Antiq. J.*, XXX (1950), 175-9; A. France-Lanord, ‘La fabrication des épées damassées aux époques mérovingienne et carolingienne’, *Pays gaumais* 1-2-3 (1949), 1-27; A. Liestøl, ‘Blodrefill og Mål’, *Viking*, XV (1951), 71-96.

<sup>35</sup> For the latest contribution to this discussion see A. T. Hatto, ‘Snake-swords and Boar-helms in *Beowulf*’, *English Studies*, XXXVIII, 4 (1957), 145-60.

<sup>36</sup> Stjerna, *op. cit.* in note 5, pp. 25-7.

<sup>37</sup> For a full discussion of these swords and the possible significance of the ring see E. Behmer, *op. cit.* in note 31, pp. 135-7, pls. xxxviii-xlv.

<sup>38</sup> H. Falk, *Altnordische Waffenkunde* (Kristiania, 1914), pp. 27-9.



did in Norse) long after their type was superseded and in this particular *Beowulf* context the epithets do not seem to refer to this feature at all. The evidence of Old English wills shows that a *fetel* is an appendage to a sword that could be considered in separation from it.<sup>39</sup> It therefore seems more reasonable to follow the suggestions of Falk<sup>40</sup> and Keller,<sup>41</sup> who connect the word with the Norse *fetill* and translate it as a sword-belt. 'Belted hilt' would imply that the hilt was in some way attached to a belt, and not just that the belt was fixed in the more normal way to the sheath, and one is reminded of the Snartemo sword (PL. XI, B) which has a small ring on the lower guard, no doubt to bind the sword into the sheath or to the sword-belt. Beowulf then would snatch at the sword and belt and draw out the sword, so *hringmæl gebrægd* would mean 'he drew out the ring-patterned sword'. Later (ll. 1612-6), the poet tells how Beowulf took away from the mere only the hilt of this sword, for the blade had melted away, corroded by Grendel's poisonous blood, *sweord ær gemealt|forbarn brodenmæl*. Here surely it is a question of the blade, but the latest commentator, whilst pointing out that *broden-* and *hring-mæl* are 'near equivalents'—the former can refer to a woven or braided pattern and the latter to a coiled pattern—would see both these epithets as referring to the hilt.<sup>42</sup> Circular and interlacing patterns are certainly found on Anglo-Saxon sword-hilts throughout the period, but they are also found on blades. Moreover, as Liestøl points out,<sup>43</sup> weaving terms are used to describe pattern-welding in Norse and this is appropriate since the patterns are built up in the blade by twisting, plaiting or pleating the bands of hard and soft iron. One does not, however, have to assume that the poet knew the manufacturing secrets of such swords; he merely described the finished effects most aptly.

The other passage where the Grendel sword is described is ll. 1687-98, when Beowulf has handed the treasure-adorned hilt (*since fage*, l. 1615) to Hroðgar. Again its mysterious giant manufacture is referred to (l. 1679). This idea no doubt arose because the best pattern-welded swords were imports—the products of inherited trade secrets. Hroðgar examines the hilt:

*'on ðæm wæs or writen  
fyrngewinnes syðþan flod ofsloh  
gifen geotende, giganta cyn,  
frecne geferdon; þæt wæs fremde þeod  
ecean Dryhtne; him þæs endelean  
þurh wæteres wylm Waldend sealde.  
Swa wæs on ðæm scennum sciran goldes  
þurh runstafas rihte gemearcod  
geseted ond gesæd, hwam þæt sweord geworht,  
irena cyst ærest wære  
wreoþenhilt ond wyrmfah.'*

<sup>39</sup> D. Whitelock, *op. cit.* in note 15, xvi. 3 and ii. 6.

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.* in note 38, p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> 'The Anglo-Saxon weapon names', *Anglistische Forschungen*, XV (1906), 163-4.

<sup>42</sup> Hatto, *op. cit.* in note 35, pp. 146-7.

<sup>43</sup> A. Liestøl, *op. cit.* in note 34, English summary.

‘On it was engraved the beginning of the ancient struggle when the Flood, the rushing tide, slew the giant race; they behaved insolently, they were people hostile to the eternal Lord; the Ruler gave them a last requital for this by the onslaught of the water. Also on the pure gold covering of the hilt was set out and made known, fittingly marked in runes, for whom that sword was made, that best of weapons with its hilt spirally adorned its blade glinting red.’

The elaboration and detail of this description is quite different from any other sword description in Old English literature, and unless one assumes it to be a complete fantasy one is compelled to think that the poet is describing an elaborate weapon he had seen, or at least a type he had seen. Lines 1694-5 are of crucial importance for the interpretation of the whole passage: Falk<sup>44</sup> sees the word *scenna* as deriving from the Germanic form \**skanjo* and cognate with other Germanic words which mean a skin or covering, so here *scenna* would refer to thin metal plates covering the sword-handle in part or in whole. If one translates *swa*, like Klæber,<sup>45</sup> as ‘also’, then not only the runes but the preceding material was on the pure gold plating of the hilt, and so it seems most likely that the whole hilt was overlaid with gold. On it then was *writen* the beginning of primaeval strife and the overthrow of the giants by the flood, seemingly a reference to *Genesis*, vi. 4-7. This passage was perhaps stressed more in Anglo-Saxon biblical teaching than today—certainly Ælfric sees ‘the works of giants’ as one of the four significant episodes in *Genesis*.<sup>46</sup> Here *writen* must, I think, be taken in the sense of engraved, since any sort of inscription or poem lengthy enough to give this information, such as Girvan suggests, would be highly improbable on such a small area as a sword-handle. One could, however, imagine a combat-scene such as the now unintelligible figure-groups on the Vendel or the Sutton Hoo helmets. The poet was, no doubt, influenced in his choice of subject-matter for the engraving less by the anomaly of showing the triumph of good over evil on a monster’s sword, than by a desire to point the moral and make a striking analogy with Beowulf’s achievement. There is a possibility that the account of the fight under the water is drawing on pagan folk-legend, where the sword had a more obviously magical part to play, and was engraved with some heathen device; but if this be so the poet has obviously changed his material as carefully as he has traced Grendel’s descent from Cain.

Lines 1694 ff. tell us that on the gold plates of the hilt was also engraved in runes, *hwæm þæt sweord geworht*. The only Anglo-Saxon runic inscription on a hilt is on the Gilton sword, but that is unintelligible.<sup>47</sup> Klæber points out that on grammatical grounds the *hwæm* should refer to the original owner’s name, and this interpretation seems reasonable, although no hilt with an owner’s name in runes has yet been found. The one-edged dagger from Sittingbourne, however, has both the owner’s and the maker’s name set on the blade in Latin

<sup>44</sup> *Op. cit.* in note 38, p. 30.

<sup>45</sup> *Beowulf* (3rd ed. 1941), p. 189 note.

<sup>46</sup> *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church* (ed. B. Thorpe, London, 1844-6), II, p. 198: ‘*ærest be frumsceafte, þe nan eorðlic man ða nyste, and siððan be Adames ofspringe, and Noes flode, and þære enta getimbrunge, and swa forð*’.

<sup>47</sup> G. Stephens, *Handbook of Runic Monuments* (1884), p. 115.

characters, and blades with the maker's stamp are known on Germanic weapons from sub-Roman to Viking times, as well as more rarely—in Viking times—blades with the owner's name.<sup>48</sup> The difficulties of the terms *wreopenhilt* and *wyrmfah* are well illustrated by the conflicting conclusions reached by those who have discussed them.<sup>49</sup> *Wreopen* means 'bound or twisted' and Bosworth and Toller consider that it must refer to a hilt bound with wire; but this is impossible, since the hilt is said to be covered with gold plating on which the giant-combat is engraved. The word should therefore refer to some sort of spiral or twisted ornament on the pommel or guard. Such ornament is known on Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic swords from the migration period until the ninth century, and I think it is of little use to try to pin it down to ornament on any known sword.

*Wyrmfah* could refer to ornamentation on the hilt or on the blade, for although Hroðgar is examining the hilt only, ll. 1697-8 could be taken as a sort of summary of the whole weapon, as *irena cyst* suggests. I have pointed out above (p. 63 f.) the difficulty of knowing when compounds with *-fah* refer more specifically to colour or a play of light and shade as *hasufah*, *readfah*, *bleofah*, or when they are used to convey a more general ornamental effect as *goldfah*, *stanfah*, *banfah*. Now the epithet *wyrmfah* could be used in the latter sense and refer to serpentine interlace on the hilt, but in view of what is known about the effect of colour in pattern-welded blades, I prefer to think that this epithet refers to the blade. *Wyrm* could then, as Nora Kershaw suggests in her notes on the *Wanderer* (l. 98)<sup>50</sup> 'come from *wurma*, *wyrma* as in *wyrmbasu*, coccus'. The blade would be straked or variegated with red, and, no doubt, as in the letter of Theodoric, both the serpentine effect of the wriggling patterns and the play of colour of the pattern-welding would be present in the poet's image.

To sum up the description of the Grendel sword: it does not conform exactly to any example yet discovered, but it does not seem to be a fantastic type, and is at least comparable with such elaborate gold-hilted swords as that from Snartemo (PL. XI, B). This is a large and costly weapon with pommel, handle and guards completely covered with gold plating, and one could imagine similar plating engraved with the giant-combat scene. The Snartemo example has also spiral ornament on the pommel and guards, and so could be called *wreopenhilt*, and it has a little ring on the lower guard whereby it could be bound into a sheath or belt, but here the resemblance ceases. The Grendel sword was pattern-welded as English swords, unlike their Scandinavian counterparts, seem to have been from the migration period onwards, and it has a runic inscription which could be on the back of the pommel, as on the Gilton sword.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps, when other richly adorned English swords are found, a nearer analogy to the description in *Beowulf* will be forthcoming.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242, for what seems to have been the owner's name set in runic characters. The sword guard from Exeter, however, which is dated about 1000, has on it the maker's name in Latin characters, as opposed to the normal placing on the blade.

<sup>49</sup> See especially, Stjerna, *op. cit.* in note 5, pp. 22-4, 29; Girvan, *op. cit.* in note 12, p. 36.

<sup>50</sup> *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poetry* (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 166-7, note.

<sup>51</sup> G. Stephens, *l.c.* in note 47.

## HOUSES

Descriptions of Hroðgar's palace in *Beowulf*—they are the only full-scale picture of a secular building in Old English literature—have in the past presented different problems. Our knowledge of Germanic grave-goods, such as swords or helmets, has been accumulating for a long time, but discoveries of habitation-sites are still comparatively few and recent. In 1936 Suse Pfeilstücker<sup>52</sup> gave a valuable summary of earlier reconstructions of Hroðgar's hall *Heorot* from evidence based on a few continental sites, manuscript illustrations and English churches and post-conquest buildings. At that time the only Anglo-Saxon houses known were the squalid huts such as Leeds found at Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire, or Dunning at Bourton-on-the-Water, Gloucestershire.

These may in fact have been the living as well as the working quarters of the lowest orders of Anglo-Saxon society, but an increasing mass of evidence from the continent has shown that there such huts are always found in association with longhouses of a more elaborate type,<sup>53</sup> and that they are in no way typical living quarters. As Tischler<sup>54</sup> says:

'Wir kennen die Grubenhütten seit der Goldberggrabung in Verbindung mit grössern Häusern und das gilt auch für die Befunde in Bärhorst/Nauen, Haldern Hodorf, Westick/Kamen, Hessens, Ziejen/Rhee, Warendorf, Burgheim, Gladbach. Diese Beispiele reichen von Hallstatt C-Periode bis in die Karolingerzeit und bezielen geographisch einen Raum von Basel bis zur Nordsee ein.'

The typical Germanic house, then, was a long, rectangular building, which sometimes had the roof supported by two or more rows of internal pillars, as at Ezinge,<sup>55</sup> or external buttresses as at Warendorf (FIG. 16, c),<sup>56</sup> sometimes with neither of these supports, but with a cruck-roof.<sup>57</sup> The commonest West-Germanic building material<sup>58</sup> from migration to Viking times was wattle-and-daub, although in parts of Scandinavia<sup>59</sup> stone-and-earth was used, as at Vallhagar (FIG. 17). From the ninth century onwards, however, a more advanced form of building with upright or horizontal planks was introduced, the earliest continental example so far known being the small house from the late-eighth-century site, Visselhövede, Kreis Rothenburg.

<sup>52</sup> *Spätantikes und germanisches Kunstgut in der frühangelsächsichen Kunst* (Berlin, 1936), pp. 42-54.

<sup>53</sup> Warendorf, for instance, has provided a clear and typical series of rectangular buildings of diminishing size and solidity of construction representing living halls, cattle-sheds, servants' quarters, sheds and outhouses (FIG. 16), and there are others from Bärhorst (FIG. 18); see also C. A. Raleigh Radford, *supra*, pp. 27 ff., for a discussion of recent English and continental evidence.

<sup>54</sup> 'Der Stand der Sachsenforschung, archäologisch gesehen', *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission*, XXXV (1954; Berlin, 1956), 137.

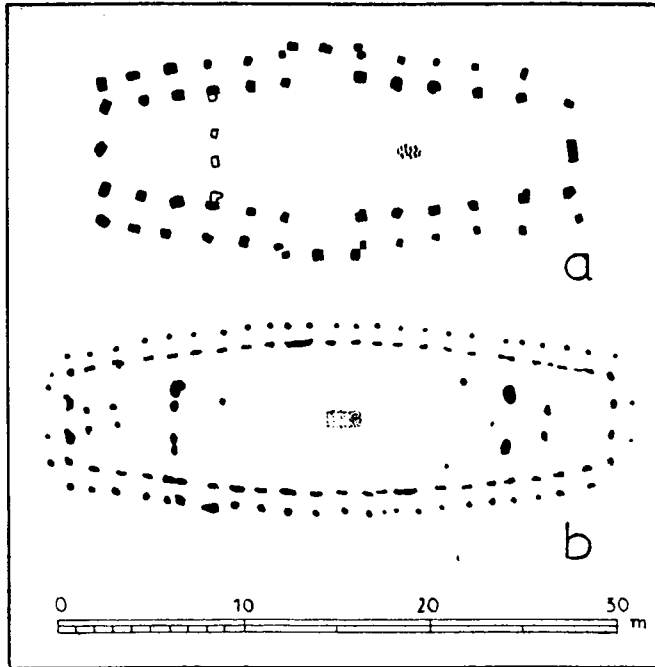
<sup>55</sup> 'Der Warf in Ezinge', *Germania*, XX (1936), 40-7.

<sup>56</sup> W. Winkelmann, 'Eine westfälische Siedlung des 8. Jahrhunderts bei Warendorf', *Germania*, XXXII (1954), 189-213.

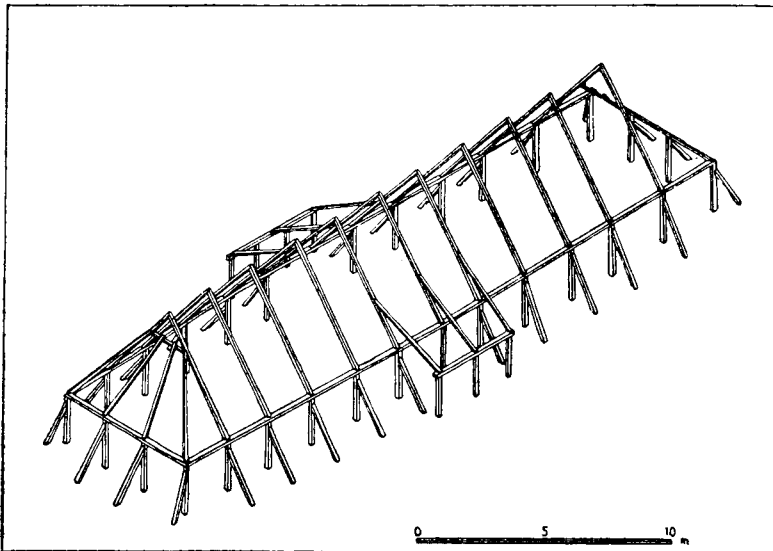
<sup>57</sup> J. Walton, 'The Development of the Cruck-framework', *Antiquity*, XXII (1948), 68-77.

<sup>58</sup> That this was the normal building material in ninth-century England is proved by the extended simile of house building which King Alfred uses in the preface to his *St. Augustine's Soliloquies*. The ninth-century boat-shaped houses from Thetford were also built in this material.

<sup>59</sup> The most complete recent discussion of these Scandinavian longhouses is to be found in M. Stenberger and O. Klindt-Jensen, *Vallhagar; A Migration-period Settlement in Gotland, Sweden* (Copenhagen, 1955).



a-b



c

FIG. 16

a, b. Ground plans of houses from Warendorf (Germany) and Trelleborg (Denmark).  
c. Reconstruction of frame-work of a house from Warendorf.

(After W. Winkelmann, in *Germania*, XXXII (1954), figs. 11 and 7)

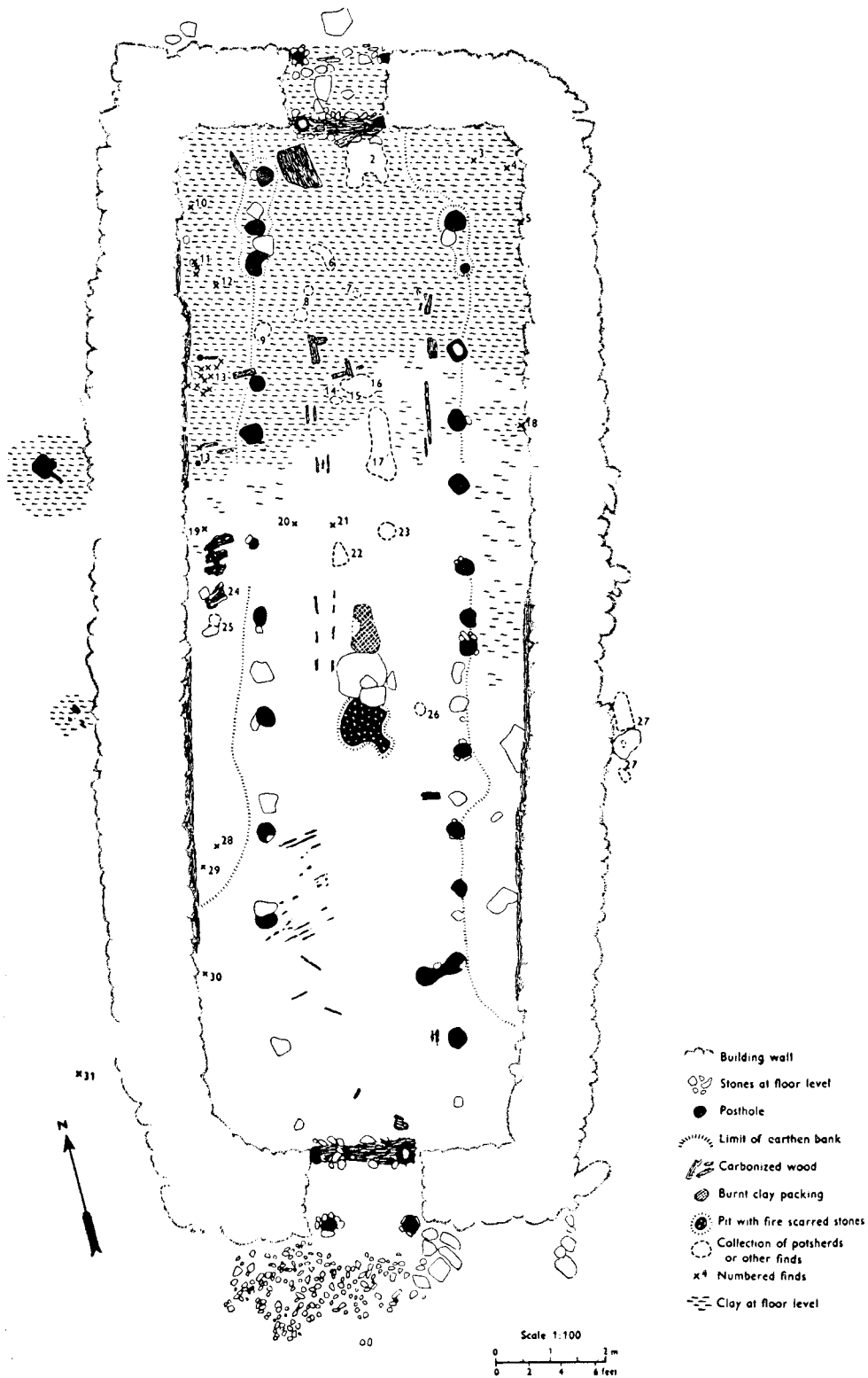


FIG. 17  
 Plan of Building 7, Vallhagar, Gotland  
 (After M. Stenberger and O. Klindt-Jensen, *Vallhagar*, fig. 42)

The newly discovered site at Yeavering in Northumberland of the *villa regia* mentioned by Bede (*H.E.*, II, 14), has, however, provided examples of this advanced plank construction of at least a century earlier than any so far known. A full report of this important site is still to be published, but what has so far been made public has shown the amazing building skill that a seventh-century English king could command. The excavator says:

'The focus of the township was the great hall of the palace. We have not found one such building but a great complex of seven structures, representing different phases. The most impressive are four halls each nearly a hundred feet long; two with a porch at each end; the others of a simpler plan but elaborately buttressed. Set about these main palace buildings were eleven smaller halls. Most were the private halls of noble retainers, but one appears to have been a native servants' house, and another a pagan temple later put to Christian purposes.'<sup>60</sup>

All the halls were of heavy planks set in the Trelleborg manner<sup>61</sup> except for the presumed servants' quarters, which were of wattle-and-daub, and only one, the temple, had a double row of supporting inner pillars. These magnificent buildings, the grandest in the Germanic world before the Viking age, are worthy to be set beside descriptions of *Heorot* in *Beowulf*, although it is too much to expect that this site can answer all the problems posed in the poem. The difficulties of reconstructing the buildings arise here, as elsewhere, mainly because the poet naturally concentrates on their more interesting or unusual features, and we still have not enough knowledge of the norm. However, in view of the recent interest in Anglo-Saxon habitation-sites, it seems worth while to reconsider what the poet says.

Most of the poet's descriptions are lavished on the great hall of the palace, to which building alone it seems the name *Heorot* is given.<sup>62</sup> Here all public business such as the reception and feasting of visitors takes place, and here before the attacks of Grendel Hroðgar's *comitatus* slept. There were other buildings, however, in the palace complex: the normal pattern of a royal Anglo-Saxon palace seems to have been hall, *buras* and other, presumably domestic, buildings, *swa swa ælces cynges hama; beoþ sume on bure, sume on healle, sume on odene*.<sup>63</sup> The *buras* in *Beowulf* were perhaps behind the hall,<sup>64</sup> and certainly at some distance from it, for after Grendel's attacks on the hall the poet ironically says (ll. 138-40):

*þa wæs eaðfynde þe him elles hwær  
gerumlicor ræste (sohte)  
bed æfter burum.*

<sup>60</sup> Extract from a talk by Brian Hope-Taylor, *The Listener*, 25 October, 1956, p. 650.

<sup>61</sup> P. Nørlund, Trelleborg (Copenhagen, 1948), p. 20; and see fig. 16 b.

<sup>62</sup> ll. 77-9.

<sup>63</sup> 'So in all king's residences; some men are in his private room, some in the hall, some on the threshing-floor: *King Alfred's Old English Version of St. Augustine's Soliloquies*, ed. H. Hargrove (Yale Studies in English, New York, 1902), p. 44.

<sup>64</sup> This would be supported by the fact that visitors to the palace seem to follow a path that leads straight to the hall, and in Ælfric's description of St. Thomas building a palace for the King of India he builds first the hall and then the other buildings which include *wynsume buras* behind the hall: *Lives of the Saints*, IV (ed. W. Skeat), XXXVI, 404.

‘Then it was easy to find the man who sought out a resting-place elsewhere further off, a bed in the women’s quarters.’

A *bur* was a private room, as is stressed by such Old English glosses as *camera—bur*,<sup>65</sup> often a woman’s or women’s quarters. Thus Hroðgar and his queen retire to the *brydbur* for the night. However, the word could also refer to a guest-house or the private quarters of a young man in his father’s household.<sup>66</sup> There is no evidence that such buildings would be anything more than small rectangular ones, and perhaps the eleven smaller ‘halls’ found at Yeavinger were the *buras* of the site.

The hall however was obviously the most impressive building in the palace. A ‘stone adorned’, *stanfah*, path leads up to it<sup>67</sup>—a feature that is known from several Germanic sites—and although the poet says (ll. 75-6) that the hall was ‘adorned by the skill of many nations’, it is constructed in the native timber tradition, unlike the exotic stone buildings that are found in Old English religious poetry. *Heorot* is a (*s*)*æl timbred* (l. 307), doomed to a future destruction by fire,<sup>68</sup> but the only clues to its type of timber construction are rather enigmatic: during Beowulf’s bitter fight in the hall with Grendel the poet remarks that it was a wonder that the building did not fall to the ground with the impact, but (ll. 773-6):

*he ƿæs fæste wæs  
innan ond utan irenbendum  
searoƿoncum besmipod;*

and again (ll. 997-8):

*Wæs ƿæt beorhte bold tobrocen swiðe  
eal inneward irenbendum fæste;*

while in l. 722 he also says that the doors were *fyrbendum fæst*. Now, it is easier to imagine doors strengthened by bands hardened by fire,<sup>69</sup> which is what this unique word *fyrband* seems to mean, than whole walls strengthened by iron bands, and so far nothing that could serve as an example has been found from the pre-conquest period. The nearest analogy are the small flat pieces of iron that were found lying around the line of the wooden superstructure over the Sutton Hoo burial.<sup>70</sup> Pfeilstücker supposes that the hall was built of split logs and that *innan ond utan* meant that these logs were fastened in bundles with iron binders passing in and out.<sup>71</sup> It seems equally justifiable however to suppose that the phrase could mean ‘inside and outside’, in which case the clamps could be bolted through

<sup>65</sup> *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies* (ed. T. Wright and R. Wülker), 184. 25.

<sup>66</sup> *Beowulf*, ll. 2455-7; *op. cit.* in note 64, XXXV, 380.

<sup>67</sup> l. 320.

<sup>68</sup> ll. 82-3.

<sup>69</sup> These would be a more pretentious equivalent of the wooden cross-piece known from doors of migration-period farm-houses without necessarily being as elaborate as the iron work on late Viking or Saxon doors: D. Talbot Rice, *English Art, 871-1100* (Oxford, 1952), p. 237, pl. xci; see also *Christ*, ll. 309-10, *duru . . . wundurclommum bewripen*.

<sup>70</sup> See plan of the deposit: *op. cit.* in note 2, pl. 24.

<sup>71</sup> *Op. cit.* in note 52, p. 51. Pfeilstücker compares the *Beowulf* passages with l. 20 of *The Ruin*, where the Anglo-Saxon poet describes a Roman building where the stone blocks are clamped together with metal. It is not impossible that a similar technique could have been taken over by Anglo-Saxons into their timber architecture.



planking walls, in pairs with the bolt passing right through the wall into a plate on the other side, or the iron bands could be both inside and out without any conjunction. Whatever the poet means, he implies that the hall was built in the most outstanding technique that he knew of, and iron bands on timber work best fit a type of stave walling, which, as Yeavering has shown, appeared at an early date in England in buildings with an almost Roman solidity and precision of structure.

As the building is approached from outside the striking features are its height, to which several references are made, and which seems to have been accentuated by the steep roof (ll. 926-7) *steapne hrof|golde fahne*, and its wide gables (ll. 81-2):

*sele hlifade  
heah ond horngeap.*

This description reminds one of early Anglo-Saxon churches such as Bradwell or Escomb, and the steeply-gabled roofs of the Celtic world, that are known from their churches, and from crosses, such as Durrow and Muiredach, and the Book of Kells.<sup>72</sup>

The references to the gold or gilding of *Heorot* seem the most unreal and inexplicable thing about it. The poet is quite explicit, however; he mentions this feature three times,<sup>73</sup> and one hesitates to dismiss it as poetic fancy when this seems so alien to his style elsewhere. Moreover, this is not the only reference to buildings ornamented with precious metals in Anglo-Saxon times; Asser says of King Alfred, 'how can it be told of *aedificiis aureis et argenteis incomparabiliter, illo edocente, fabricatis*?'<sup>74</sup> and Stevenson states,<sup>75</sup> on the doubtful authority of William of Malmesbury, that King Ine built a chapel of gold and silver at Glastonbury. It seems unlikely that archaeology will ever be able to resolve this problem, for it is too much to hope that if such an expensive item as a gold-adorned roof ever existed it would have remained for the present day excavator. If we accept the idea that the poet means real gold and not just a golden effect, then a gold-plated shingle roof is at least imaginable.

Compounds with *horn* such as *hornsele* or *horngeap*, which most commentators agree refer to the gables,<sup>76</sup> are found in other contexts in Old English poetry, but the unique epithet *banfag* to describe the hall is more controversial. It has been supposed that the term refers to a stag's head nailed over the door, but it seems more likely that this is a coinage on analogy with *horn*,<sup>77</sup> and that *fag* is used in its weakest sense, so that the phrase means adorned with gables.

It is not clear in the poem whether the main door of the hall was on the long or short side of the building; there were usually two or more doors in a large Germanic building, and the traditional placing of them varies; for example, the

<sup>72</sup> I. A. Richmond, 'Irish Analogies for the Romano-British Barn Dwelling', *J. Rom. Stud.*, XXIII (1932), pls. 22-23; F. Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period* (London, 1940), p. 78.

<sup>73</sup> See above, ll. 926-7, and ll. 308 and 715-16.

<sup>74</sup> *Life of King Alfred* (ed. W. Stevenson, Oxford, 1904), chap. 91, p. 77.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 329-30.

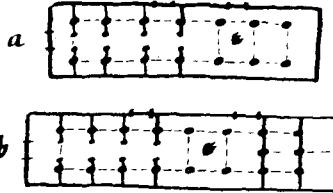
<sup>76</sup> T. Miller, 'The position of Grendel's arm in Heorot', *Anglia*, XII (1889), 396-400.

<sup>77</sup> For example the word *ban-helm* in the *Fight at Finnsburg*, 30, seems to mean 'horned helmet'.

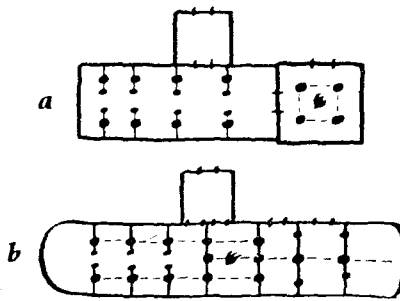
Nauen-Bärhorst-1935  
*Übersicht über die Hausformen*

*A. Langhäuser*

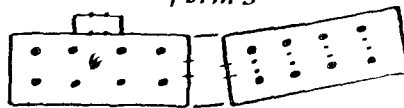
*Form 1*



*Form 2*



*Form 3*



*B. Grubenhäuser*



FIG. 18

Ground plans of buildings from Nauen-Bärhorst, Germany (pp. 68, 75)  
(After O. Dopferfeld, *Prähist. Zeitschrift*, XXVIII-XXIX (1938), fig. 11)

doors are in the gable walls in Gotland and Bornholm but in the long walls in Öland, Norway and Denmark. However, there seems to be an outer and an inner door at the main entrance to the hall, perhaps divided by a porch: when Grendel pays his last visit to *Heorot* (ll. 721-4):

*Duru sona onarn  
fyrbendum fæst, syððan he hire folmum (æth)ran;  
onbræd þa bealohydig, ða (he ge)bolgen wæs,  
recedes muþan.*

‘The door, fortified by iron bands, at once sprang open when he touched it with his hands; then intent on evil, for he was enraged, he flung open the entrance to the hall,’

and immediately after that he stepped on to the hall floor. There is a definite progression of events here, and the *recedes muþan* does not seem to be the same as the iron-bound outer door. It would be quite in keeping with Hroðgar’s great public hall that it should have a reception-room with two sets of doors, one leading to the outside and one to the hall proper; and no doubt, like the halls with porches at Yeavinger or Bärhorst (FIG. 18),<sup>78</sup> the doors would be placed eccentrically to avoid draughts. Whether we are to assume a basilican type of plan like the former, or a porch on the long side like the latter, it is not possible to say.

Two other much discussed features of *Heorot* must be mentioned. When Beowulf tears off Grendel’s arm and shoulder in the fight, he places this trophy under *geapne hr(of)* (l. 836), and in the morning many people come to look at it, including the king who comes with his queen and retainers from the *brydbur* (ll. 925 ff.):

*he to healle geong  
stod on stapole, geseah stapne hrof  
golde fahne ond Grendles hond.*

The word *stapol* seems to be something on which one steps or stands, cf. *foþ stap(p)el*, and although elsewhere *stapol* can mean a pillar or support (see *Beowulf*, l. 2718), that cannot be the meaning here, as Hroðgar is definitely outside the hall when he sees at the same time Grendel’s arm and the high, gilded roof. Nevertheless, if this most reasonable placing of the hand is accepted, and *stapol* is taken to mean a step, what exactly does this mean? Is it the top step or landing of a flight of steps leading up to the hall, as Miller, followed by Pfeilstücker, suggests; is it a reference to an outside staircase leading to an upper room as Addy<sup>79</sup> suggests; or is it, as Earle thinks, ‘an erection in the open air in an area in front of the hall’?<sup>80</sup>

The idea that Hroðgar has come down an outside staircase<sup>81</sup> in *Heorot* can,

<sup>78</sup> *Prähist. Zeitschr.*, XXVIII-XXIX (1937-8), 299, fig. 11.

<sup>79</sup> S. O. Addy, ‘The meaning of *stapol* in *Beowulf*’, *Notes and Queries*, May 1927, pp. 363-5.

<sup>80</sup> See the note to this passage in Klaeber’s edition of *Beowulf*.

<sup>81</sup> The occurrence of the word as a gloss for the Latin *patronus* (*petronus*) in a list of the parts of a house, Wright/Wülker, *op. cit.* in note 65, 126. 8, is further proof that the word did not mean a stair, for in the same list appears *stæger* glossing *ascensiorum*.

I think, be ruled out. There is no other mention of such a room in this poem, and ll. 920-5 give a clear impression of a leisurely procedure towards the hall of the king, queen and attendants from the *brydbur*, which, as mentioned above, was probably some way from the hall. The idea of a platform at some distance from the hall on which the king stood, is tempting in view of the 'grand stand' that has recently been found at Yeavinger,<sup>82</sup> but it certainly seems from the text as though Hroðgar went right up to the hall until he could see the very nails of the hand.

The best solution seems to be that the king stood on a step or small landing at the entrance to the hall and looked directly up at the monstrous hand and arm propped up under the overhanging roof. Archaeological parallels are known for both these features: heavy stone or wood thresholds raised above the ground level and so forming a step are widely known from Germanic sites, and one of the houses from the ninth-century site at Haithabu<sup>83</sup> has an entrance on its gable end approached by two shallow steps and a small landing.

The other controversial feature of *Heorot* is the poet's reference (l. 725) to its *fagne flor*. The difficulties of this word in Old English have already been discussed above; in its simplest form it could mean something as vague as 'gleaming' or as specific as 'variegated'. It is this latter sense which those who interpret this passage as referring to a tessellated floor would see here. In Anglo-Saxon glossaries *tessere* or *tessellae* are explained pedantically with reference either to substance, *tesellis—stanflorum* (*Old English Glosses*, 14. 3), or to their square shape, *tessellae—lytle feverscite florstanas* (Wright/Wülker, 150. 27), and not by the word *fah* or any decorative term. Nevertheless, place-name evidence has shown that the Anglo-Saxons could use *fah* to describe mosaic work: a mosaic pavement has been discovered at Fawler in Oxfordshire, and other place-names may contain the same element<sup>84</sup>. This does not prove, of course, that the term *fah flor* could not have been extended in sense, especially by a poet.

Stone flooring is found in Germanic building, but in the form of flags or cobbles. It seems, then, on the present evidence as though a mosaic floor in *Heorot* would either be a reused Roman one, or the work of foreign craftsmen, or a poetic fancy. There is as yet no evidence for Saxon superstructures over Roman flooring, and although foreign workmen might have been called in, as they were in Anglo-Saxon church building, it seems rather an exotic possibility. In fact a stone floor to which wooden benches were clamped seems odd anyway,<sup>85</sup> and perhaps the poet merely meant a gleaming wooden floor. All interpretations seem rather dubious and only further excavation of housing sites might give a solution to the problem.

What then is the final picture of *Heorot* that emerges? It was built of wood

<sup>82</sup> Brian Hope-Taylor, *op. cit.* in note 60.

<sup>83</sup> H. Jankuhn, *Haithabu* (Neumünster, 1956), p. 103, plan II.

<sup>84</sup> A. H. Smith, 'English Place-Name Elements', *Engl. Place-Name Soc.*, XXV (Cambridge, 1956), 164 and 176.

<sup>85</sup> Pfeilstücker, *op. cit.* in note 52, p. 50, assumes that the sides of the hall had a wooden flooring, but in the middle around the fire the flooring was of 'gemustertem Stein'. This would be an excellent safety precaution, but wooden floors are known from Trelleborg for example, and seem to be mentioned in *Finnsburg*, l. 30, *buruh ðelu dynede*; while a similar phrase in *Beowulf*, *healwudu dynede* (ll. 317) occurs in the description of Beowulf entering Hroðgar's *bur*.

clamped together with iron bands, which seems to fit a heavy planking construction best, though of a variety not so far discovered. Its roof was high gabled, and covered in some way with gold: the steeply-gabled roof of a wooden building would perhaps be most easily supported by internal or external pillars, but these are nowhere mentioned; the roof, if it was really overlaid with gold, was probably of shingles. To enter the hall one went up a step or steps and passed through two sets of doors, i.e. presumably through an anteroom or porch, and inside, the floor of the hall was decorated or gleaming. Future archaeological discoveries may add more to this picture, but what emerges already is a not impossible description of a royal building that the poet takes care to tell us was the greatest of halls the children of men had ever heard of.

#### CONCLUSIONS

As W. P. Ker said:<sup>86</sup> 'The poem of *Beowulf* has been sorely tried; critics have long been at work on the body of it to discover how it is made.' It is a measure of the poem's strength that it emerges alive from this continual vivisection, but the newest archaeological evidence has transfused new vigour into the body. The recent analyses of literary critics have shown the careful artistry of the poem, its lack of empty statement and vain allusion, and archaeologists must equally have examined the work as a whole before criticising a unit of its statement.

What archaeology brings to the poem is not yet a solution of its date; there is not a sufficient body of relevant evidence to do this. If enough of such evidence is ever forthcoming to prove that the poet muddled together objects and conditions of widely different dates, then the latest of these might give a clue to the poet's own time. However, even if all the background could be closely fixed to one era, it would still be necessary to refute or support the undoubted historical sense he sometimes shows. The archaeological evidence that is now available, however, can enrich considerably the study of the poem; it can supply relevant illustrations so that simple words such as 'hall' or 'sword' conjure up a precise picture in the mind of the modern reader. Moreover a knowledge of the excellencies and refinements of Anglo-Saxon craftsmanship enables us to appreciate what governed the poet's choice of epithet in stressing the features that he did stress in more complicated passages of description.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>86</sup> *Epic and Romance* (1908: reprinted New York, 1957), p. 158.

<sup>87</sup> I should like to thank Professor D. Whitelock and Professor C. F. C. Hawkes for their kind help in the preparation of this work.