Architectural Representation and the Dragon’s Lair in Beowulf

Heeschen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters_theses

Part of the Medieval History Commons

Recommended Citation

This Masters Thesis-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.
ARCHITECTURAL REPRESENTATION AND THE DRAGON’S LAIR IN *BEOWULF*

by

Margaret Heeschen

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
The Medieval Institute
Western Michigan University
December 2017

Thesis Committee:

Jana K. Schulman, Ph.D., Chair
Elizabeth C. Teviotdale, Ph.D.
Rand H. Johnson, Ph.D.
ARCHITECTURAL REPRESENTATION AND THE DRAGON’S LAIR IN BEOWULF

Margaret Heeschen, M.A.
Western Michigan University, 2017

Since the early twentieth century, the dragon’s lair of Beowulf has been primarily associated with the early megalithic mounds of northern Europe. This interpretation of the space, however, does not account for the many contradictions present in the poet’s descriptions. In order to fully understand the quiddity of the dragon’s lair, we must resolve three major issues with previous interpretations: the use of rare words with unclear meanings, contradictions in descriptions of the physical space, and an assumption by scholars that the poet is describing a single type of space identifiable in the historical record. By addressing each of these problems, this thesis will demonstrate that the apparent contradictions are in fact symptomatic of the Beowulf-poet’s appositive style, in which aspects of multiple spaces are overlaid to present a more complex, meaningful description. Throughout the descriptions of this space, the poet weaves together images and associations from numerous spaces in Anglo-Saxon England. He manipulates his vocabulary to highlight shifts in perspective and to demonstrate how changing experiences shape our view of the world around us. The lair represents not only the hellish abode of a supernatural monster or the dark finality of the grave, but also the memories of past civilizations and the warmth of present camaraderie.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the support and dedication of my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Jana Schulman. She has guided my education and research into early Germanic language and literature, and her instruction will surely shape my work in the field for years to come. I also acknowledge and thank Drs. Elizabeth Teviotdale and Rand Johnson, who were not only gracious enough to serve on my thesis committee, but also encouraged a rigorous dedication to research and writing.

Many thanks are also due to those who provided me with emotional and intellectual support over the course of this project, including Dr. Andrew Scheil, Rebecca Straple, Julie Polcrack, and Luke Chambers.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their unwavering support and encouragement of my academic pursuits.

Margaret Heeschen
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... ii
LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................... v
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ................................................................................................... vi
INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................... 1
CHAPTER

I. Defining the Dragon’s Lair ......................................................................................... 13

  Natural Landscape Terms ......................................................................................... 25
    Ñæs .............................................................. 28
    Holmwyrm and ñògewin ......................... 31
    Stänclif and ecgclif ......................................................... 34
    Wësten ........................................................................ 36
    Ñíñ .............................................................. 38
    Strëam .............................................................. 39
    Denn .............................................................. 42

  Natural or Constructed ......................................................................................... 45
    Hlíew and beorg ......................................................... 45
    Stänbearh .............................................................. 48
    Eorôsele, eorôreced, and eorôscræf ......................... 49
    Hröf and inwithröf ......................................................... 54
    Sess .............................................................. 56
# Table of Contents—Continued

- **Weall** ................................................................. 58
- **Stapol** ................................................................. 62
- **Constructed Features** ............................................. 64
- **Hearh** ................................................................. 64
- **Stänboga** .............................................................. 67
- **Enta geweorc** ....................................................... 68
- **Dryhtsele and hringsele** ......................................... 71
- **Hof** ..................................................................... 73
- **Treasure Items** ....................................................... 76
- **Seğn** ................................................................. 76
- **Bune and orc** ....................................................... 78
- **Disc** ................................................................. 79
- **Prepositions** ......................................................... 81
- **II. A New Reading of the Dragon’s Lair** ...................... 85
- **CONCLUSION** ....................................................... 107
- **BIBLIOGRAPHY** ................................................... 111
LIST OF TABLES

1. A Summary of Carr’s Compound Types ................................................... 25
2. A Summary of Scenes Describing the Dragon’s Lair .............................. 89
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS


**DOE**  *Dictionary of Old English: A to H Online*, eds. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amox, Antonette diPaolo Healey, (Toronto University), http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca.doe/.

**EME**  Early Modern English


**ME**  Middle English

**ModE**  Modern English

**OE**  Old English


**OF**  Old Frisian

**OHG**  Old High German
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OI</td>
<td>Old Icelandic / Old Norse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS</td>
<td>Old Saxon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Revisiting the Dragon’s Lair

Since the early twentieth century, the dragon’s lair of Beowulf has been primarily associated with the early megalithic mounds of northern Europe. This interpretation of the space, however, does not account for the many contradictions present in the poet’s descriptions. In order to fully understand the quiddity of the dragon’s lair, we must resolve three major issues with previous interpretations: the use of rare words with unclear meanings, contradictions in descriptions of the physical space, and an assumption by scholars that the poet is describing a single type of space identifiable in the historical record. By addressing each of these problems, this thesis will demonstrate that the apparent contradictions are in fact symptomatic of the Beowulf-poet’s appositive style, in which aspects of multiple spaces are overlaid to present a more complex, meaningful description.

Research concerning the dragon in Beowulf has tended to shy away from the lair and focus on its physical characteristics, relationship to Christianity, and role in Germanic heroism. The monsters of Beowulf began to draw attention as literary characters following J. R. R. Tolkien’s essay “The Monsters and the Critics,” in which he discusses the role of the dragon as a representation of evil. T. M. Gang contradicts his argument, believing that the dragon participates in actions that are “evil” but is not an evil-doer himself. Arthur DuBois also

---

1 Specifically, the prehistoric constructions in which large stones and earth are used to cover a place used for burial. These structures are also referred to as tumuli or passage graves.
weighed in on the symbolic nature of the dragon in 1957, suggesting that the original symbolic role of the dragon is now lost to modern readers and cannot be recovered.  

Alan Brown’s article, “The Firedrake in Beowulf,” focused on the origins of dragons and their characteristics in sources ranging from Northern Germanic to Biblical to Lithuanian. In 1979, James Earl examined the dragon’s role as a source of necessary evil. Norma Kroll later analyzed the dragon from a social perspective, considering the social and political repercussions of battles between monsters and heroes. Judith Garde and Margaret Goldsmith have both discussed the Christian perspective of Beowulf, including the role of the dragon in such an interpretation. For all these studies, however, there has been little interest in reconsidering the dragon’s lair in a literary context; this space remains widely understood as a megalithic burial mound.

In the note to line 2231 of Friedrich Klaeber’s 1922 edition of Beowulf, Klaeber explains the dragon’s lair as “one of those ancient, imposing stone graves covered with a mound.” He goes on to note that the “inconsistencies discovered by Stjerna in regard to the place where the hoard was deposited, the nature of the objects composing it, and the depositors… cannot be admitted to exist.” In 1906, Knut Stjerna published an essay discussing the archaeological evidence for the dragon’s hoard in Beowulf.” In this essay, Stjerna explored the inconsistent descriptions of the hoard’s deposition, but his ultimate conclusions related to the Scandinavian

---

9 Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, ed. Friedrich Klaeber (Boston: D. C. Heath & co., 1922), note to line 2231.
10 Klaeber’s Beowulf, first edition, note to line 2231.
similarities between the lair in *Beowulf* and the archaeological evidence in northern Europe. Many Anglo-Saxonists, including Klaeber, were quick to dismiss these theories, instead believing that the lair was related to the megalithic passage graves of Neolithic groups. Levin Schücking, however, also unearthed inconsistencies in the two stories of the hoard’s deposition. In *Untersuchungen zur Bedeutungslehre der angelsächsischen Dichtersprache*, Schücking’s discussion under *stanboga* examines the setting of the hoard as being in a burial mound as well as a space visually similar to the Roman ruins in England.

Despite these objections, scholars continued to understand the dragon’s lair as a megalithic mound. Their debates focused on what kind of megalithic mound the poet used as a model for his structure. In “The Chambered Tomb in *Beowulf*,” Alexander Keiller and Stuart Piggott suggest that the lair was based on the chambered tombs of Ireland and Scotland. In “*Beowulf* and Archaeology,” L. Whitbread comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that the stone arches associated with the tomb are likely elements of the “prehistoric tombs” in the British Isles. William Withrie Lawrence finds “no doubt” that the dragon’s lair is a type of “megalithic passage grave” but does not elaborate on the geographic location of the grave. Likewise, W. J. Sedgefield calls the poet’s description an “unmistakable attempt” to describe a megalithic burial. Klaeber reinforced these interpretations by including an image of a *jættestue* in Zealand.

---

12 See subsequent paragraph.
16 William Witherle Lawrence, “The Dragon and His Lair in *Beowulf*,” *PMLA* 33.4 (1918): 574.
in his edition of *Beowulf*.\textsuperscript{18} This image has remained a fixture of Klaeber’s *Beowulf* through its fourth edition.

Nevertheless, a small number of scholars have pointed out the inconsistencies in descriptions of the dragon’s lair and proposed different interpretations. H. R. Ellis Davidson argued that the lair was an Anglo-Saxon mound, not a prehistoric construction.\textsuperscript{19} In 1958, Kenneth Sisam approached the dragon’s lair intending to begin from scratch and re-analyze the lair based on textual evidence. He notes that the physical descriptions and history of the lair are “often vague or inconsistent,” and suggests that the dragon’s lair may in fact refers to a natural cave formation.\textsuperscript{20} E. V. Thornbury suggests that elements of the description indicate an influence of Roman architecture on the space envisioned by the poet.\textsuperscript{21}

Despite these studies, the argument for the lair as a megalithic burial mound remains dominant. This tradition is likely rooted in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century practice of reading *Beowulf* as a source of information concerning material culture, rather than a work of literature. By approaching the text as a description of a historical reality, we see only a single space informed by our modern archaeological knowledge. Instead, we must understand the lair as a literary space created and manipulated by the poet.

To understand the nature of the dragon’s lair, we begin with an overview of the words and phrases used by the poet to describe the lair’s qualities and characteristics as they are currently understood and agreed upon by scholars. These traits can be sorted into four categories: (1) the origins of the lair, (2) the descriptions of the structure in its entirety, (3) the setting and

\textsuperscript{18} Figure 5 in KL 1.
environment surrounding the structure, and (4) the details of the structure’s architectural
elements and the spaces and objects described therein.

The origins of the dragon’s lair are described in two scenes: immediately after the thief
takes the cup and when the retainers inspect the lair following Beowulf’s death. In the first
account, a man,22 commonly referred to as the Last Survivor, hid the treasure of a deceased race
in an unused barrow.23 After depositing the treasure, he commanded the earth to hold the treasure
because men could no longer hold it.24 The Last Survivor explains that his people perished in a
terrible battle,25 leaving him alone. After an unspecified length of time, a dragon appears26 and
takes over the hoard. There the dragon remained for three hundred years27 until the thief28
appeared and disturbed him. In the second account of the lair, two new elements are added to the
story. First, the retainers observe that the gold in the hoard has been placed under a spell.29 The
poet then reflects on the value of treasure to a man who will one day die before circling back to
the origins of the treasure. In this version, the poet explains that the treasure was placed in the
ground by glorious princes30 who cursed anyone who dared to touch the treasure.31 Unlike the
first account, the second account has multiple people placing treasure in the barrow and then
cursing anyone who attempts to disturb it.

That these accounts contradict each other has already been pointed out by the scholars
noted above. Lawrence notes that the story of the chiefs cursing the treasure neglects to

---

22 “gumena nāthwylc” [a certain one of men] (2233). All quotations from Beowulf follow KL 4.
23 “beorh…nīwē” [new barrow] (2241-43).
24 “hæleð ne m(ō)stan” [men are not allowed (to hold it as the earth does)], l. 2247.
25 “(f)eorhteal(o) frēcne” [terrible, deadly attack], l. 2250.
26 “eald ëhtsceaða” [old predator at dawn], l. 2271.
27 “þrēohund wintra” [three hundred of winters], l. 2281.
28 “mon” [person], l. 2281.
29 “iūmonna gold galdre bewunden” [the gold of the ancient people, wound with a spell], l. 3052.
30 “þēodnas mǣre” [glorious chiefs], l. 3071.
31 “se secg wǣre synnum scildig” [(so that) the man, guilty of hostilities (…)], (3071).
incorporate the Last Survivor, and he considers it possible that this later passage concerning the
chiefs represents an earlier version of the story. This understanding is similar to that described
by Klaeber, who synthesized the two versions by suggesting that the chieftains first placed the
hoard in the earth, and it was later taken over by warriors. The “Last Survivor” was part of the
warrior group, and he returned the treasure to the hoard after his own people had died out. The
editors of the fourth edition consider this reading to be somewhat forced, and note that many
scholars now view the inconsistency as a result of the poet valuing “narrative effect over factual
consistency.”

In addition to describing the processes by which the hoard came to rest in the structure,
the poet alludes to the process of the lair’s construction. As Beowulf gazes on the lair, both
before and after his fight with the dragon, he notes that the structure’s stone arches are the work
of giants. As a dying wish, Beowulf commands Wiglaf to enter the lair and bring the gold to
him. While describing the treasure inside the lair, the poet notes that he himself has heard that
the barrow was the work of giants. Exactly who these “giants” were is unclear. They are the
only group specifically referred to when the poet describes the lair’s construction (not its
ownership or user), yet the barrow was unused when the Last Survivor placed the treasure within
it. Given the traditionally Roman associations of enta geweorc, it seems unlikely that the lair
would be a megalithic burial mound. If we are to follow Klaeber’s interpretation of the stories,
in which the Last Survivor is reusing the barrow after the chiefs cursed the treasure, the

---

32 Lawrence, 559-560.
33 KL (all editions), note to line 2231.
34 KL 4, note to l. 2231.
35 “stānbogan” [stone arches], l. 2545, 2718.
36 “enta geweorc” [the work of giants], l. 2717.
37 “goldāht” [treasure of gold], l. 2748.
38 “iċ … gefrœgn” [I heard], l.2773.
39 “enta geweorc” [the work of giants], l. 2774.
40 See pages 68-71.
description of the barrow as “new” no longer holds, and we must read the barrow as “unused” for a reason we do not know. Likewise, it is unclear who placed the treasure in the ground, as a conflation between the stories of the Last Survivor and chiefs causes an inaccuracy in the age of the barrow.

A great deal more information about the lair is provided through descriptions of the structure itself. Like the descriptions of the lair’s origins, however, descriptions of the physical space tend to complicate rather than resolve our understanding of the structure. The words hlǣw and beorg are used frequently and apparently interchangeably by the poet to label the dragon’s lair as a mound or barrow. The term stānbeorh is also used once to describe the lair, suggesting that the space is constructed with stone. The poet describes the lair as a den when Wiglaf ventures inside and the soldiers imagine the dragon’s corpse returning to its lair. In the last instance, the poet aligns the space with an animal’s dwelling in the ground, but in the previous examples the lair was associated with human burial practices.

The poet also uses a variety of compound and simplex words to describe the spatial and structural qualities of the lair. Compounds with sele suggest that the structure of the lair is similar in some way to that of a hall. The structure is called a splendid hall as well as a ring-hall. Both terms conjure images of halls where, as in Heorot, warriors are rewarded by their leader. Likewise, the structure is called a home or residence. The same word is used to describe the chamber to which Hrothgar retires before Beowulf faces Grendel. In contradiction to these

41 See pages 45-48.
42 “stanbeorh” [stone-barrow], l. 2213.
43 “den” [den], l. 2759.
44 “dennes” [den], l. 3045.
45 “dryhtsele” [splendid hall], l. 2320.
46 “hringsele” [ring-hall], l. 2840.
47 “h(of)e” [residence], l. 2212.
48 “hofe” [residence], l. 1236.
images of halls and homes, the poet also employs three compounds that include the element “eorð.” The lair is called an earth-hall, \textsuperscript{49} earth-house,\textsuperscript{50} and earth-cavern.\textsuperscript{51} These words communicate a structure made of earth, conjuring imagery more in line with words like \textit{denn}, \textit{beorg}, and \textit{hlǣw}.

Finally, the poet uses the term \textit{hearh}, a heathen temple, to describe the lair in two instances: first, in the lay of the Last Survivor\textsuperscript{52} and second in the curse of the chiefs.\textsuperscript{53} The presence of \textit{hearh} in the \textit{Beowulf} manuscript is uncontested in the second instance, but is unclear in the first due to damage. By analyzing ink and spacing, R. D. Fulk has argued that in the first instance, \textit{hearh} is the correct reading.\textsuperscript{54} The poet’s two uses of \textit{hearh} complicate the identification of the lair’s structure. The space can be read as made of earth or stone, neither of which were common building materials in Anglo-Saxon halls, but must have an element of heathen ritual or religion present as well.

The lair’s location and surroundings also introduce contradictions. Several of the poet’s descriptions make it clear that the lair is on the coast, underneath a cliff, yet others suggest that the lair is located on top of the cliff. Likewise, the \textit{sele} compounds suggest a man-made structure, but the presence of a stream flowing out of the lair suggests a natural cave.\textsuperscript{55} First, the lair is located adjacent to the ocean. When the thief leads Beowulf and his men to the lair, they reach a destination near the surge of the sea\textsuperscript{56} and the tossing of the waves.\textsuperscript{57} The lair is located at

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{49} “eordse(le)” [subterranean chamber], l. 2232.
\item \textsuperscript{50} “eordreced” [earth-house], l. 2719.
\item \textsuperscript{51} “eordscrafə” [subterranean chamber], l. 3046.
\item \textsuperscript{52} “(hea)r(h on)” [heathen place], l. 2276.
\item \textsuperscript{53} “hergum” [heathen places], l. 3072.
\item \textsuperscript{55} See Sisam above.
\item \textsuperscript{56} “holmwylme” [surge of the sea], l. 2411.
\item \textsuperscript{57} “ȳðġewinne” [tossing water], l. 2412.
\end{itemize}
a headland,\(^{58}\) and Beowulf sits down on the bluff\(^{59}\) before he goes down to meet the dragon.

When Beowulf rides to meet the dragon, he passes under stone cliffs\(^{60}\) to reach the lair which is itself located under Eagles’ Ness.\(^{61}\) Whether *under* is meant to describe a location within or at the base of the cliff is unclear, but the possibility of it perched atop the headland seems to be ruled out. After Beowulf’s death, Wiglaf sends word of Beowulf’s death to the retainers’ position at the top of the cliff.\(^{62}\) It seems that the battle has thus taken place below the cliff, probably between the cliff and the ocean. The lair is often described as being under something else in these scenes, but this is unlikely if the lair is a mound or barrow.

The scenery surrounding the lair is described sparingly with a few key exceptions. The poet describes the landscape as a wilderness,\(^{63}\) probably indicating uninhabited land. Approaching the structure is a path\(^{64}\) that is unknown to men,\(^{65}\) but no further details of this path—its direction or use—are given. Stones or a rock surface are present around the lair’s entrance as well—when the dragon leaves to search for the stolen cup, he sniffs along rock.\(^{66}\) The rocky nature of the area is also emphasized when Beowulf goes to meet the dragon under cliffs made of stone.\(^{67}\) Finally, there are two important features immediately outside of the entrance to the lair: the stream and the seat. As Beowulf approaches, he sees a stream\(^{68}\) flowing from within the lair. The stream appears to be either on fire or steaming\(^{69}\) from the heat of the battle.

---

\(^{58}\) “æt brimes nōsan” [at the sea’s headland], l. 2803.

\(^{59}\) “næsse” [headland], l. 2417.

\(^{60}\) “under stāncleofu” [under stone cliffs], l. 2540.

\(^{61}\) “under Earna Næs” [under Eagle’s Ness], l. 3031.

\(^{62}\) “up ofer ecgclif” [up over the edge of the cliff], l. 2893.

\(^{63}\) “wēstenne” [wilderness], l. 2298.

\(^{64}\) “stīg: fem. nom. sing. “path,” l. 2213.

\(^{65}\) “eldum uncūð” [unknown to humankind], l. 2214.

\(^{66}\) “stone ðā æfter stāne” [sniffed then across the rock], l. 2288.

\(^{67}\) “under stāncleofu” [under stone cliffs], l. 2540.

\(^{68}\) “strēam” [stream], l. 2545.

\(^{69}\) “headōfyrum hāt” [hot with battle-fires], l. 2547.
dragon, but the details are not clear. Located outside of the lair is also a place on which to sit. After Beowulf is wounded by the dragon, he rests on this seat next to the entrance and gazes on the stonework. A few lines later, Wiglaf passes by a seat to enter the lair – presumably the same seat on which Beowulf is sitting.

The architectural elements of the lair also pose difficulties to the traditional interpretation of the structure as a megalithic mound or barrow. First, the wall of the lair is often mentioned, but the exact location of this wall – or walls – can be difficult to pinpoint. Walls are used for indicating a part of the structure, as a relative place near action, and as a part of phrases in apposition to the treasure. When Beowulf is leaving to fight the dragon, he says that his fate will be decided at the wall. As he ventures down, he then sees the stone arches near a wall and again when he sits down after the battle on the seat by the wall. In these cases, the wall may indicate the structure as a whole or only the wall of the cliff where Beowulf will fight. The walls are also described as part of the lair’s structure. When the dragon finds out his treasure has been disturbed, he does not remain on the wall, but takes off in search of the culprit. What exactly “on” refers to is unclear – it could be within the lair or on the wall of the cliff.

Transitioning into the lair, there are descriptions of stone arches atop columns. First, Beowulf sees the stone arches above the flowing stream as he approaches the lair. He notes their presence again while sitting on the seat as well as the columns that support the arches.

---

70 See pages 39-42.
71 “sesse” [seat], l. 2717.
72 “sesse” [seat], l. 2756.
73 “æt wealle” [at the wall], l. 2526.
74 “be wealle” [beside the wall], l. 2542.
75 “bī wealle” [beside the wall], l. 2716.
76 “on wealle” [on the wall], l. 2307.
77 “stānbogan” [stone arches], l. 2545.
78 “stapulum” [column], l. 2718.
79 “stānbogan” [stone arches], l. 2718.
and hall.\textsuperscript{80} The barrow also has a roof,\textsuperscript{81} which seems to be fairly high based on how characters interact within the space. Wiglaf is able to enter and gather treasure for Beowulf, and the lair houses a 50-foot dragon. There is also a catalog of the items that comprise the hoard, including a standard that hangs high overhead,\textsuperscript{82} cups\textsuperscript{83} and plates.\textsuperscript{84} The interior space of the dragon’s lair not only has a high roof, but is spacious enough for a large dragon and his piles of treasure.

To explain the lair only as a megalithic tomb or mound is imprecise—the amount of contradictory evidence here suggests both that the lair is not necessarily a megalithic tomb, but also that it may not represent a physical space at all. Some evidence suggests Sisam’s conclusion that it is a natural cave, but the evidence is still contradictory. The structure is described in many ways that indicate a man-made construction. The stone arches are the work of giants and the plethora of words suggesting a hall and other architectural forms (wall, roof, column) lead to the conclusion that the structure is man-made. The stānboga themselves, which have been previously understood as the corbelled roofing or post and lintel constructions of megalithic tombs, would indicate a Stone Age construction.\textsuperscript{85} The use of boga, which may refer to a continuously curving arch, and the origin of the stānboga as the work of giants would suggest Roman architecture and the curving Roman arch. If a Roman ruin, the presence of a stream would again seem unlikely, unless it is connected to a hot springs.

It seems that all options for the dragon’s lair are at once feasible and impossible. To make sense of them, we must gain a better understanding of the textual evidence. Many of the words discussed above appear only once or twice in all of Old English. To understand them, their

\textsuperscript{80} “eordreċeđ” [earth-house], l. 2719.
\textsuperscript{81} “hrōf” [roof], l. 2755.
\textsuperscript{82} “segn” [standard], l. 2767.
\textsuperscript{83} “bunan ond orcas” [cups and pitchers], l. 3047.
\textsuperscript{84} “discas” [plates], l. 3048.
\textsuperscript{85} Lawrence, 578-9.
etymologies, occurrences in Latin glosses, and contexts, must be closely analyzed. Studying physical space in *Beowulf* will provide not only clarity to long-standing misconceptions about the dragon’s lair, but may also aid in interpreting the dragon itself. By studying the space in which the dragon exists, we gain a clearer understanding of how the poet viewed—and thus described—this creature. Through descriptions mimicking those of Roman ruins, heathen temples, megalithic constructions, and Anglo-Saxon grave mounds, the *Beowulf*-poet weaves a complex web of allusions to fallen civilizations and the passage of time, placing the dragon center stage in a discussion on the inevitability of decay.
CHAPTER I

Defining the Dragon’s Lair

As outlined in the Introduction, the descriptions of the dragon’s lair in *Beowulf* contain numerous contradictions. In order to reconcile these inconsistencies, this chapter will be devoted to the individual words used by the poet to describe the lair. I will approach each word etymologically and contextually to understand its semantic range. In addition to this philological approach, I provide a brief overview of the archaeological context of Anglo-Saxon England, considering building material, landscape, and appropriation of monuments.

As a result of the increasing interest in medieval applications of spatial theory, scholars have studied the Anglo-Saxon relationship to landscape from archaeological, historical, and literary viewpoints. This includes interactions with the natural landscape as well as structures created by Anglo-Saxons, Romans, and prehistoric peoples. Notable among these studies are Della Hooke’s *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England*,\(^8^6\) Lori Ann Garner’s *Structuring Spaces: Oral Poetics and Architecture in Early Medieval England*,\(^8^7\) Sarah Semple’s *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England*,\(^8^8\) and Nicole Gunther Discenza’s *Inhabited Spaces: Anglo-
In this thesis, I will rely primarily on Garner’s work to inform my reading and Semple’s work to provide archaeological context. Of particular significance are two concepts used by Garner: “vernacular architecture” and “traditional referentiality.” Unlike the traditional understanding of architecture as referring to grand spaces designed by an architect, those who study vernacular architecture attempt to “understand each building tradition in its own cultural terms.” In medieval applications, this can include everything from a hall such as Heorot, to domestic dwelling places, to the grave.

Garner defines “traditional referentiality” using John Miles Foley’s definition from *Homer’s Traditional Art*—it is “the resonance between the singular moment and the traditional context.” To explain this concept, Garner borrows the image of the log cabin in America. Log cabins are often associated with Abraham Lincoln, pioneer living, self-sufficiency, and “preindustrial simplicity.” In the mind of a modern American, the log cabin is not only connected with the style of building introduced by immigrants from northern Europe, it represents American values and ideals. When approaching Anglo-Saxon architecture, Garner argues that we must acknowledge and understand the connections between buildings and cultural values to understand the significance of these spaces as they appear in literature.

The first set of associations that must be acknowledged are those between wood, often the first choice of material for Anglo-Saxon builders, and stone. Various theories regarding the

---

90 For a more detailed discussion of the meaning of “architecture” in its modern sense, see Garner, 6-8.
dominance of wood over stone have been put forth, but Garner has suggested that the choice to build in wood may have been a result of a “genuine preference” for the material and not an attempt to imitate earlier Germanic structures.94 She goes on to explain that many Anglo-Saxon building choices made in stone reflected trends in wood, especially in their use of curved structures. Evidence for builders using timber to reinforce stone structures also suggests a greater trust in the reliability of wood over stone.95 Nevertheless, religious associations with building material could also supersede a preference for timber. Garner suggests that the use of stone was specifically chosen to align Anglo-Saxon structures with Roman predecessors, particularly in church architecture.96 She cites Bede’s commentary on the construction of Lindisfarne, in which Bede recounts King Edwin’s baptism in a church “de ligno… construxit” [built of timber] before Edwin ordered “maiores… de lapide fabricare basilicam” [a greater church be built of stone].97 In these passages, Bede implies that timber constructions, while adequate, are less desirable than stone in church architecture. In addition, timber could be a more significant material for construction than stone. In Garner’s analysis of the spaces of Beowulf, she concludes that Heorot, as a wooden hall, is “clearly aligned with the human world”98; the mere, dominated by references to stone, is an inverse of hall and space of the ‘other’99; the dragon’s lair, which emphasizes earth alongside stone, alludes to death and blurs the boundaries of “the natural and the man-made”100;
and Beowulf’s barrow, with its incorporation of wood, stone, and earth, represents a culmination of the poem’s themes.\textsuperscript{101}

Interactions with the natural world also moved beyond questions of material associations – the physical landscape of Britain played a significant role in Anglo-Saxon settlement patterns. In \textit{Early Anglo-Saxon Communities in the Landscape of Norfolk}, Mary Chester-Kadwell analyzes the relationships between Anglo-Saxon and pre-Saxon settlement features.\textsuperscript{102} She focuses primarily on soil composition and suggests that in many instances, settlements in this area overlap due to the nature of the land, not as a result of Anglo-Saxons wishing to associate themselves with Saxon sites.\textsuperscript{103} Although settlement pattern at this site was likely a result of practicality, Anglo-Saxons also ascribed cultural significance to landscape features. This tendency can often be seen in place-name evidence from charters. In Appendix 4 of \textit{Perceptions of the Prehistoric}, Sarah Semple provides a complete list of place-names that include references to pagan gods, giants, goblins, and other ‘evil’ or pagan creatures. She finds that all of these creatures appear in locations associated with “pits and fissures, old workings, stones, pools and wet places, hills, and notably ancient monuments.”\textsuperscript{104} Semple suggests that these types of landscape features may have represented “imagined interfaces… with other supernatural worlds” or “entrances to a hellish underworld.”\textsuperscript{105} It is possible that these locations, especially those associated with water, were originally places venerated in pre-Christian times and later re-cast as hellish places to discourage the continuation of pagan practices.\textsuperscript{106} It is also important to note that many of these place names were written down well after the Anglo-Saxons were

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{101} Garner, 64.
\item \textsuperscript{102} Mary Chester-Kadwell, \textit{Early Anglo-Saxon Communities in the Landscape of Norfolk} (Archaeopress Publishers of British Archaeological Reports, 2009).
\item \textsuperscript{103} Chester-Kadwell, 144.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Semple, 187.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Semple, 187.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Semple, 72.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Christianized, suggesting an “increasingly Christianized response to a legacy of memories… centred on the pre-Christian potency of ancient places.” In a post-Conversion world, attempts to vilify previously venerated sites would succeed in discouraging pagan practices. 

In some instances, landscape also influenced burial practices. In Perceptions of the Prehistoric, Semple analyzes Anglo-Saxon burials in proximity to earlier structures. Although her primary focus is on reuse of prehistoric, Roman, and Anglo-Saxon monuments and burials, she notes that landscape featured prominently in decisions about burial location within the landscape. She finds that in some communities (here she refers particularly to those of North Wiltshire, West Sussex, and East Yorkshire), “[c]emeteries and individual graves were placed with reference to inter-visibility, accessibility, proximity to land and coastal routes, settlements, the edges of the cultivated lowland, places frequently traversed or passed or visible to travellers, crossroads, and borders.” Although the role of natural landscape in choices about settlement location may be somewhat obscured by the community’s need for subsistence, selection of burial location demonstrates the need for a physical presence in the landscape. Inter-visibility and accessibility of burials also relate to social/political/historical context. Chester-Kadwell, for example, argues that the visibility of cemetery locations brought awareness of “kinship, lineage and ancestry” into everyday life. Along with monument reuse (to be discussed below), burial visibility emphasized community identity, for elite as well as common people.

In addition to location within the natural landscape, Anglo-Saxon choices regarding monument reuse, including prehistoric, Roman, and early Anglo-Saxon monuments, reveal Anglo-Saxon attitudes toward both the past and present. Semple argues that many instances of

---

107 Semple, 189.
108 Semple, 45.
109 Chester-Kadwell, 42.
110 Semple, 50.
this reuse process demonstrate “emergent and competing, regional and local community identities.” The evidence of Anglo-Saxon relationships with prehistoric and Roman sites in Dorchester-on-Thames and Sutton Courtenay, for example, “may represent the forging of a heartland of power” in the seventh century. In both instances, the Anglo-Saxon settlement appropriates the strategic location of the earlier settlement. The Anglo-Saxon settlement at Dorchester-on-Thames existed atop an earlier Roman town, and the site at Sutton Courteney, which became a “royal centre” during the ninth century, includes archaeological evidence from Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Roman occupation. Physical proximity was also important, as demonstrated by the location of the early medieval church of St. James in Avebury. This structure is located “within a vast complex of upstanding prehistoric remains” and “acted as a physical reminder of past lives and achievements, as well as foci in the landscape for on-going ceremonial and ritual activity.” By associating structures with prehistoric monuments, Anglo-Saxon elites were able to emphasize their relationship with past rulers and legitimize their rule.

Reuse of Roman sites was particularly significant in developing relationships with the past, although these instances tended to emphasize religious rather than secular power. Anglo-Saxons viewed reuse of Roman monuments as a way to “rebuild” the Roman church and also align the English Church with Rome. Semple notes the specific example of Benedict Biscop’s choice to use Gaulish masons to build his church, a decision that was “about wealth, position, 

---

111 Semple, 59.
112 Semple 210.
115 Semple, 114.
117 Semple, 190.
status, connection, … and harnessing the power of the surviving monumental Roman remains of the Tyne Valley.” Several passages from Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica, written in the heavily Roman Tyne Valley of Northumbria, demonstrate preference for Roman-style and stone construction over insular or wood-based construction. As discussed previously, the use of a timber church for King Edwin’s baptism was out of necessity and construction of a stone church soon followed. Bede also places value on Roman structures when Augustine establishes the church in Canterbury and the Christians assemble at St. Martin, which was “facta dum adhuc Romani Brittaniam incolerent” [made while the Romans still inhabited Britain]. Bede’s emphasis on the Roman influences of Anglo-Saxon Christianity highlights the importance of Rome in the ecclesiastical culture of Northumbria.

Whereas early Anglo-Saxon reuse tended to emphasize community development through appropriation and incorporation of prehistoric monuments, later Anglo-Saxon reuse focused on community development through demarcation of liminal spaces. Many prehistoric and ancient constructions became closely associated with hellish creatures, perhaps as a continual effort to shift Anglo-Saxon Christians away from their earlier, pagan practices. Barrows, for example, began to be avoided during this time because of their associations with the supernatural. Semple notes this shift by analyzing the location of cwælmsōw (‘killing-places’). Although early reuse appropriated barrows and other ancient sites as highly visible locations for elite burial, later reuse found these monuments used for execution sites and criminal burials.

120 Baedae Opera Historica, I.26.
121 Chester-Kadwell, 149.
122 Semple, 194.
Locating these *cwealmstow* at features associated with the supernatural led to a “full blown association between burial mound and hellish torment” by the tenth century.¹²³

Associations between landscape, burial mound, and an emerging Christian sense of hell and damnation are corroborated in several Old English Poems, including *Andreas*, *Guthlac A*, *Beowulf*, *The Wife’s Lament*, *The Phoenix*, and others. These poems tend to emphasize fear of openings in earth or rock, which Semple argues were “dangerous places in the minds of late Saxon Christian communities,” representing a “form of living death, trapped within the fissures and cracks of the hellish underworld.”¹²⁴ *Andreas* and *Beowulf*, for example, both include imagery of dangerous, even deadly waters located within the earth. In the Grendel-mere, Beowulf faces Grendel’s mother where he almost loses his life. In *Andreas*, a wave of water bursts from the base of a column, sweeping the Mermedonians into deep cracks and pits in mountains.¹²⁵ The story of St. Guthlac and his dwelling within the natural landscape demonstrates the danger associated with these areas.¹²⁶ *Guthlac A* relates the confrontations between Guthlac and the hellish demons attempting to corrupt his soul. By living in the wilderness, Guthlac has uprooted the demons from their natural dwelling places. In *The Wife’s Lament*, the narrator lives alone in some kind of earthen dwelling.¹²⁷ Although an exact interpretation of the narrator’s living condition is debatable, the space clearly associates living

---

¹²³ Semple, 194.
¹²⁴ Semple, 71.
¹²⁶ “Guthlac I,” *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936) 49-72. Scholars are divided on the interpretation of Guthlac’s dwelling—although the Old English *beorg* is used to describe the location, it is unclear if this should refer to a barrow used for burial as it is in Felix’s *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* or to a natural hill. For a summary of this debate and exploration of each side’s arguments, see Stephanie Clark, “*Guthlac A* and the Temptation of the Barrow,” *Studia Neophilologica* 87 (2015): 48-72.
underground with torment. Finally, the landscapes of *The Phoenix* outline the difference between rocky, dangerous spaces and safe, gentle spaces. At the beginning of the poem, the poet associates craggy slopes and high mountains with mundane life and smooth plains and flowing rivers with the Phoenix’s paradisiacal home.

In the poems discussed above, associations with hellish creatures tend to focus on one specific location, but in each example, the spaces described also carry allusions to and associations with other spaces. For example, understanding the nature of Guthlac’s residence in a *beorg* hinges only on the definition of one word, but a consensus cannot be reached between the two interpretations (see pages 45-48). In *The Wife’s Lament*, the narrator describes her dwelling with multiple words, causing numerous theories to be put forth explaining the location. In *Beowulf*, dozens of terms are used to describe the location, shape, construction, and contents of the dragon’s lair. In order to understand how these descriptions function in one space, we must turn to the individual words used by the poet.

The words used to describe the dragon’s lair are wide-ranging, from simplex words with numerous occurrences to hapax legomena and rare compounds. Many of these words, both the common and rare, deal with the structure of the lair or its component parts. A number of words also describe the landscape setting of the lair. Words for the items of treasure within the lair are also common. As components of the treasure, however, they are less important to understanding the lair’s structure and architecture and may be discussed briefly. Finally, many of the words in this study are ambiguous due to their rarity and lack of context. These terms, including *stānboga*,

---

128 Alaric Hall, “The Images and Structure of *The Wife’s Lament*,” *Leeds Studies in English* 33 (2002): 1-29. In this essay, Hall suggests that the terms used to describe the narrator’s dwelling highlight the “hellish” nature of the abode (9).
130 See Hall, “The Images and Structure of *The Wife’s Lament*.”
eordsele, and others, cause the greatest tension in debates concerning the nature of the lair and consequently do the most harm in obscuring our understanding of the structure. In addition, or, as a result, it is often these words that lead us to the most intriguing, colorful possibilities.

In the following word study, each term that the poet uses to describe the dragon’s lair has been defined and contextualized, with etymological evidence and cognates provided where possible. Some terms have few enough occurrences that all instances have been noted, but others are so numerous that only a few examples will suffice. When a term has numerous occurrences, I have given preference to uses in poetry and provided a detailed discussion of the term’s use in *Beowulf*. I have organized the terms into four groups:

1. Terms that describe natural objects or landscape. This includes words describing the lair’s location atop a *ness*, the crash of the waves, and the lair as a natural cave.
2. Terms that could be interpreted as natural or man-made elements. Many of the terms used to describe the lair, particularly compounds, could reasonably be interpreted in multiple ways.
3. Terms that describe man-made or constructed spaces. In addition to terms that describe the lair as a hall, this section also includes non-Anglo-Saxon structures, including *enta geweorc*.
4. Terms that describe treasure items. Although these words do not describe the space, they are the objects that occupy the space. In some cases, especially the terms *segn, bune, orc*, and *disc*, the words for treasure have strong Roman or pagan associations and should be discussed briefly.

At the beginning of each section, I will provide a brief overview of the section’s organization and the relationships between the words.
Finally, a note on the complexity and ambiguity of Old English compounds is required. Working with compounds is a blessing and a curse – although these words provide us with a fascinating insight into the Anglo-Saxon worldview, it is nearly impossible for modern scholars to elicit the nuances of the words and understand their full semantic range. The meanings of compounds rely heavily on context, as the relationship between their constituent parts can often be interpreted in numerous ways. In his *Introduction to English Morphology*, Alexander Tokar uses the phrase *headache pill* to illustrate the inconsistent relationships between a compound’s parts. Speakers of English know that a *headache pill* is used to remove the headache, but this cannot be known based on the words alone. Neither can it be known by examining the role of *pill* in other compounds. A *sleeping pill* does not remove sleeping – it causes sleep. Likewise, the *star of starfish* describes the shape of the fish, but the *star of starship* in science fiction refers to location. When considering the relationship between parts of Old English compounds, this problem becomes more complex.

In *Nominal Compounds in Germanic*, Charles Carr lays out the origins, borrowings, and uses of compound words in early Germanic languages. Like Tokar, he notes that compounds by their nature lead to ambiguity, but also that “what the compounds lose in precision, they gain in flexibility and suggestiveness.” He gives the example *rainbow*, a short word whose meaning would require a far clunkier phrase to communicate, something like “the bow that appears after rain.” Although accurate, this phrase would not capture the feeling and memories conjured by the term *rainbow*. As they still do today, compounds in early Germanic languages serve to create fluid imagery and spark associations, not to provide accurate, specific meanings.

---

132 Tokar, 152.
134 Carr, 319.
Compounds generally fall into four groups: copulative (or co-ordinate), endocentric, exocentric, and numerical. The classification of a compound into these categories relies on the “headedness” of that compound. The “head” of a compound is the part of the compound (if any) that indicates the referent. If a compound is copulative, both parts of the compound could act as the “head.” In the classic copulative example were-wolf, both were and wolf refer to the person being labeled as such. Thus, both terms are the “head” of the compound. In endocentric compounds, such as flagpole, one part of the compound is the head and the other modifies it. If one were to remove the flag from flagpole, the word would still indicate the same referent, namely, the pole. If, however, pole were removed, the referent would change to the flag. In exocentric compounds, neither part is the head. The term redneck indicates a kind of person, not a color or part of the body. These types of compounds are more common in inflected languages in which the gender of the compound does not match the gender of the second part. In the French porte-feuille, the gender of feuille is feminine, but the compound is masculine. Numerical compounds contain a number as one of the elements, for example, a five-star rating. The compounds of Old English, Modern English, and other Germanic languages tend to follow these patterns and occur in adjective-noun, adjective-adjective, noun-noun, and other combinations, but this study will focus solely on noun-noun compounds, most of which are endocentric.

In his study of the typology of compounds in Old English, Carr identifies four primary types by describing the relationships between the “parts” of the compounds. Here, part 1 refers to the word in the left-hand position and part 2 to the word in the right-hand position.

1. Co-ordinate: Parts 1 and 2 describe the same head

136 Bauer, 348.
137 Bauer, 349.
138 Carr, summarized from 320.
2. Case or Prepositional: Part 1 limits Part 2

3. Attributive: Part 1 is an attribute of Part 2

4. Appositional: Parts 1 and 2 are “different aspect(s)” of the same head

In their broad meanings, these categories make sense – they describe the ways in which two concepts can relate to each other. When we begin to apply them to specific words, however, they become problematic. Carr continues his analysis by describing the various sub-classes of these relationships for different kinds of compounds. Here, we will focus only on the noun-noun compounds, labeled by Carr as Substantive + Substantive, and the relationships he discusses for case/prepositional relationships (number two above) and appositive relationships (number four above). Co-ordinate compounds (number one above) will not be discussed in the following study, and attributive relationships (number four above) can be subsumed under “I” in Table 1 below, which briefly summarizes the ten classes of compounds that will be used to describe terms in this thesis. One of the main issues with understanding these compounds is, as can been seen from the Old English examples, that Part 1 tends not to be inflected, even when a case or prepositional relationship is clear. Only two of the below examples have a genitive ending, and they are in the minority.

Table 1
A Summary of Carr’s Compound Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Old English example given by Carr with translation^a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A 1 is the subject of 2, when 2 comes from an intransitive verb</td>
<td>Eordœofung [earthquake] earth + tremor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>1 is the object of 2, when 2 is a verbal noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1 is a place, 2 is a noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1 is the place from which 2 comes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>1 is the goal of 2 when 2 is a verbal noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>1 is the time at which 2 takes place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>1 is the purpose for which 2 is used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>1 is the means by which 2 is carried out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>1 is the substance of which 2 is made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>1 is the possessive genitive of 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Comparison between 1 and 2 (often plants and animals)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The compounds in this study fall into the categories C, I, J, N, and P. Although Carr’s classification system is helpful in organizing types of compounds, it does not necessarily bring us closer to definitions for these terms. For example, *stanboga*, one of the most contentious terms used to describe the dragon’s lair, clearly falls into the category I: 1 is the substance of which 2 is made. This classification, however, does not (and cannot) tell us about the details of the construction – is the *stanboga* man-made or natural? A smooth, curving arch or a jagged corbelled vault? Some compounds also fight classification, as in the three *eord* compounds discussed in this study – *eordreced*, *eordsele*, and *eordscaef*. It is unclear if we should interpret these as structures built out of earth or located within the earth. Classification of compounds is a
necessary first step to establishing meaning, but the nuances of these spaces’ associations must be teased out carefully, combining evidence from etymology, cognates, and context.

Natural Landscape Terms

The terms in this section describe the natural landscape. The first five, næss, holmwyrm, yðgewin, stānclif, and ecgclif, indicate and describe natural features. Næss indicates a promontory, holmwyrm and yðgewin refer to the shape of the waves, and the clif compounds describe the face of the ness. The next three terms, wēsten, stīg, and strēam, also refer to features found in nature, but their definitions require a more nuanced interpretation. With these terms, it is particularly important to consider how Anglo-Saxons perceived these features. Denn, the final term, is unique in this category. Although found in nature, a den is often constructed, either by an animal or human. The Anglo-Saxons seemed to associate denn with natural spaces, although it is a creature’s construction.

Næss

OE næss and its OI cognate nes both refer to a piece of land projecting into a body of water. Næss also appears in many place names, although Bosworth and Toller note that these occurrences are often the result of OI influence. Næss can also indicate an underground location when used in conjunction with the prepositions under and niðer.

All three usages appear in Beowulf. Næss is used several times to describe various promontories over water. The term twice describes the coastline seen by the Geats as they sail across the sea. When Beowulf and his men first reach Heorot, they look upon the “side

---

139 BT s.v., “næss”; CV s.v., “nes.”
140 BT s.v., “næss.”
141 All quotations from Beowulf are from KL 4.
sānæssas” [wide sea-headlands] (223). Likewise, when the Geats return home, they look upon the “næssas” [headlands] of Geatland (1912). When Beowulf and the Danes are searching for the Grendel-mere, they “oferēode… næssas” [passed over… headlands], which, despite their location near the water of the mere, seem to suggest the idea of a mountainous or craggy protrusion (1408-1411). Although there is obviously water within the mere and probably in the surrounding area, the næss in this instance is not described as being near open water, as the headlands of Heorot and Geatland are. It is possible that in this case, næss refers to the shape of the promontory, rather than its relationship with other physical features. The dragon’s lair is also described as being located on a næss. Beowulf sits “on næsse” [on the headland] before he goes out to meet the dragon (2417), and the barrow in which the Lone Survivor hides the treasure is located “be næsse” [by the headland], which could be interpreted as being either adjacent to or on top of the cape (2243).

As a place name, næss occurs twice in Beowulf. First, Beowulf’s men walk under “Earna Næs” [Eagles’ Ness] to gaze upon the newly slain body of their lord (3030). Beowulf’s body is later transported home to “Hrones Næsse” [the Whale’s Ness] for funerary rites (3134). Both instances of næss in a place name occur in highly visible settings, a trait often favored for Anglo-Saxon burial mounds (see page 18).

Finally, næss, when combined with the preposition “under,” may indicate that the space being described is underground. In the above examples, prepositions like “on” and “be” guided the reader to understand that Beowulf was above or within (“on”) the ness, and the barrow was next to or on top of (“be”) the ness. The preposition “under,” however, seems to complicate the issue. In Elene, næss appears unrelated to open water.142 When Judas reveals the location of the

---

True Cross to Elene in Jerusalem, he digs down “under neolum niðer næsse” [deep down, under the ness] (831). In this instance, næss does not even seem to be a protrusion of land, much less one related to water. Rather, the “næsse” seems to be the earth covering or ‘protruding over’ the space where the three crosses are located. A similar use of under and næss may appear in Beowulf. Hrothgar describes the waters of the Grendel-mere as being “under næssa ľenipu” [under the darkness of the headlands], and a “flōd under foldan” [a flood under the earth] (1360, 1361). William Witherie Lawrence has suggested that the “fyrġenstrēam signifies a waterfall” and that “næssa ľenipu” might be translated as the “mists of the heights.”143 The fourth edition editors of Beowulf, however, note that strong objections have been made to Lawrence’s interpretation.144 They suggest the more likely interpretation that the “næssa ľenipu” of the mere may be the “shadow of cliffs with overhanging trees” and that “foldan” ought to be interpreted as the cliff, not the ground.145

As seen in the examples above, næss is primarily used to describe landscapes in which there is both land and sea. When considering the meaning of the term næss, it is necessary to move beyond a simple definition and recognize the associations with the word’s referent. The kinds of spaces that are described using næss often occur at moments of transition in Old English poetry. In Andreas, for example, the Mermedonians stand “æt brimes næsse” [at the sea’s headland] to bid Andrew farewell as he sails away to Achaia. In Beowulf, the Geats see the næss when they approach the shores of both Denmark and Geatland. In each situation, the presence of a næss occurs alongside a moment of parting or arrival, key moments of transition in the poems. Andreas leaves the Mermedonians once they have been converted; his work in their land is done. Likewise, Beowulf and his men see a næss as they approach a place where they will have a

144 KL 4, note to lines 1359-1361, p. 201.
145 KL 4, note to lines 1359-1361, p. 201.
significant impact. Beowulf’s arrival at Heorot signals the beginning of Grendel’s defeat, and his return to Geatland marks a turning point in the poem that shifts from Beowulf’s heroic triumphs to his kingship and eventual demise. Even the naess of the Grendel-mere represents transition – as the Danes cross the wild fens, they transition from the human realm of Heorot into the monstrous, wild realm of the mere. Similarly, the dragon’s lair is on a naess, perhaps because it is the place where Beowulf transitions from strong hero to dying king. This is also the location at which the treasure entombed by the Lone Survivor transitions to being possessed by the dragon. In addition to the physical headlands denoted by naess in Beowulf, it is interesting to note the term’s close relationship with transition and space.

Holmwyrm and ýðgewin

In lines 2411-2412, holmwyrm and ýðgewin appear in apposition to each other to describe the location of the dragon’s lair, located “holmwyrlm nēh / ýðgewinne” (2411b-12a). Both terms are related to the power and danger of the sea. Holmwyrm, meaning “the surge of the sea,”\(^{146}\) is comprised of holm (“ocean,” “sea”)\(^{147}\) and wilm (a “welling” or “font”).\(^{148}\) Holmwyrm can be classified as Carr’s type I: “1 is the substance of which 2 is made” because the ocean is the material form that the welling takes. Ýðgewin, meaning “wave-strife,”\(^{149}\) is comprised of ýð (“wave”)\(^{150}\) and gewin (“battle,” “strife”).\(^{151}\) Although the meaning of the term is similar to holmwyrm, ýðgewin could be classified as a type I, “1 is the substance of which 2 is made,” or type C, “1 is a place, 2 is a noun.” If interpreted as I, the term would be taken to mean that the

\(^{146}\) BT s.v., “holmwyrm.”  
\(^{147}\) BT s.v., “holm.”  
\(^{148}\) BT s.v., “wilm.”  
\(^{149}\) BT s.v., “ýðgewin.”  
\(^{150}\) BT s.v., “ýð.”  
\(^{151}\) BT s.v., “gewin.”
waves are the form of the battle, suggesting waves breaking on rock. If C, then ḳoğewin refers more to the contests or strife that take place on and within the sea, for example Beowulf’s swimming contest with Breca or the prow of a boat crashing into the waves.

_Holmwylo_ occurs only once in the corpus of Old English, but its constituent parts are more common. In earlier Germanic languages, holm referred to land, not sea. It originates from Gothic hallus, meaning rock, and is related to OE holmr (“island”), and OS holm (“hill”). In Old English, it takes on a new meaning of “sea,” but may retain the original idea of a rising landscape through the curved shape of rising waves on the sea. When Scyld Sceafing dies, his people “lēton holm beran” [let the sea carry (him)] (47), and no mention is made of the sea as dangerous. Likewise, when Beowulf speaks to Wealhtheow, he says “þā ic on holm ġestāh” [when I set out upon the sea] (632). Some occurrences of holm, however, appear specifically when water is dangerous or riled. Holm is used to describe water as being full of blood during battles in _Beowulf_ and _Exodus_. When Beowulf recounts his battle with Grendel’s mother, the “holm heolfre wēoll” [sea flowed with blood] (2138), and in _Exodus_ the “holm heolfre spaw” [the sea spewed out blood] just as the Egyptians turned back to Egypt (450).

_Wilm_ is often used in conjunction with the sea, although it can also be used figuratively. Hrothgar uses the term literally when he warns Beowulf to remember his own mortality. He tells Beowulf to beware of many dangers, including the “flōdes wylm” [flood’s surge] (1764). Hrothgar also uses wilm to identify the flood sent by the Lord to destroy the giants (1693). During the tale of the Last Survivor, the poet uses the term figuratively to describe the Survivor’s death as occurring when “dēaðes wylm” [the surge of death] reached his heart (2269). Wilm is also used to describe the burning stream that bursts forth from the dragon’s lair (2546).

---

152 GED, s.v., “hallus.”
153 See pages 39-42 for discussion of _strēam_.

32
combination of *holm* and *wilm* suggests both the physical reality of the sea, as evidenced by *holm*, and the shape of the roiling waves from *wilm*.

Like *holmwyrm*, *ŷðgewin* appears only in *Beowulf*, and its constituent parts are very common. In *Beowulf*, the compound appears twice. In addition to its use alongside *holmwyrm* to describe the sea near the dragon’s lair, it is also used to describe one of the sea-monsters in the Grendel-mere. A Bowman shoots one of the creatures and “fēores ġetwēfdē, / ŷðgewinnes” [put an end to the life of the swimmer] (1433b-4a).\(^{154}\) Here, the term applies to the “wave-strife” created by the monster as it moves through the water.

*Ŷð* occurs more than a dozen times throughout *Beowulf*, meaning “sea” in all but one of its occurrences. When Beowulf fights the dragon, his “swāt ŷðum wēoll” (blood flowed in waves) (2693).\(^{155}\) Here, the flow of blood mimics the welling of the waves. All other instances of *ŷð* occur with clear reference to bodies of water, either in sailing over the sea (464, 210, 1907, 46,1909), the swimming competition (548, 515, 534), or monsters dying in the water (421, 1437, 848).

*Gewin*, meaning a “battle,” “contest,” “strife,” and “sorrow,” occurs seven times in *Beowulf*, indicating both physical and mental suffering.\(^{156}\) Physical conflicts include the Geats’ fight against Grendel (798, 1781), Sigemund’s struggles in his youth (877), and Unferth’s unwillingness or inability to face the underwater battle with Grendel’s mother (1469). In addition to these instances, Hrothgar’s mental anguish from Grendel’s attacks is also mentioned twice (133, 191) as is Heremod’s suffering after his cruel treatment of the Danes (1721). Although *gewin* can be used for physical and mental strife, its place alongside *ŷð* suggests a more physical

---

154 See the note to line 1433 in KL 4 for an explanation of this interpretation of the text.
155 Swāt can mean “blood” or “sweat,” but the previous lines makes it clear that this line refers to Beowulf’s blood: “[h]e ġeblódgedod wearð / sāwulдрore; swāt ŷðum wēoll” (he became bloodied with life-blood, blood flowed in waves) (2692b-3).
156 BT s.v., “gewin.”
use in *Beowulf*. Like *holmwylm*, *ȳðgewin* is likely a direct indication of physical strife and physical water.

**Stānclif and ecgclif**

*Stānclif* and *ecgclif* both refer to the location of the dragon’s lair. Both compounds contain the term *clif*, defined by the *Dictionary of Old English* as “cliff,” “mountain,” or “headland” used literally or figuratively.\(^{157}\) Old English *clif* is also related to Old Norse *klif*, which has a similar meaning.\(^{158}\) In poetry, *clif* is often used specifically for cliffs next to the sea. In *Beowulf*, the Geats see the cliffs of Geatland as they sail home from Heorot (1909). In *The Seafarer*, the narrator refers to the times when his ship is thrown against cliffs.\(^{159}\) The cliffs of *Andreas*, however, are not as clear-cut. When God speaks to Andrew on the ship, He describes the journey as traveling across the “cald cleofu” (310). In this instance, it seems that the “cold cliffs” the poet refers to is the sea itself, not a rocky face. Although *clif* often indicates physical cliffs, it occasionally slips into more figurative meanings.

*Ecgclif* appears only once in the corpus of Old English. *Bosworth-Toller* defines it as a “sea cliff,” but, as is often the case with compounds, this definition relies significantly on the context of the term.\(^{160}\) The constituent nouns – “edge” and “cliff” – do not indicate an association with water except that cliffs are often found on headlands. The *Bosworth-Toller* supplement adds the further definition “a cliff with an edge or brink,” which is more accurate.\(^{161}\)

---

\(^{157}\) *DOE* s.v., “clif.”

\(^{158}\) *BT* s.v., “clif” and *CV* s.v., “klif.”


\(^{160}\) *BT* s.v., “ecgclif.”

The *Dictionary of Old English* agrees with the latter, defining *ecgclif* as a “cliff at the edge of the sea; precipitous cliff.” On its own, *ecg* appears multiple times in *Beowulf* meaning “sword” as well as “edge.” It is worth noting that it also appears in three other compounds: *ecgbana* “sword-killer,” *ecghete* “sword-hate,” and *ecgræc* “sword-strength.” Like *clif*, *ecg* tends to be used literally, though the poet often employs synecdoche in its use. For example, when Hrunting is described, the poet calls it an edge made of iron (1459). Hrunting’s edge is mentioned again when it fails to pierce Grendel’s mother (1524). Fifty lines later, Beowulf uses another “ecg” to decapitate Grendel’s corpse (1575). During the fight with the dragon, Beowulf’s sword does not pierce the dragon’s hide (2577), and after the battle, the poet twice notes the “ecg” that slew the dragon (2772, 2778). Likewise, Hrothgar warns Beowulf of the dangers of mortality, that “ādl oðdæ ecg” [sickness or edge (of a sword)] might kill him (1763). Here, the *ecg* represents the sword which in turn represents the threat of death in battle.

Based on this usage, *ecgclif* seems to fall into Carr’s category P, in which the two parts of the compound are synonymous. This classification is only tenuous, however, due to the multiple layers of metonymy and lack of context for the compound. For example, *ecgclif* could be interpreted in a similar way to *holmwylm*, as discussed above. Just as *holm* emphasized the physical nature of the water and *wylm* indicated the shape, so too does *clif* focus on the physical landscape and *ecg* describe the shape of that feature. Thus in one extant use, it seems highly likely that the phrase “up ofer ecgclif” where Beowulf’s retainers await the outcome of his battle with the dragon indicates that they are located at the top of a sharp cliff (2893). That the first part

---

163 *BT* s.v., “ecgbana.”
164 *BT* s.v., “ecghete.”
165 *BT* s.v., “ecgræc.”
of the compound is *ecg* may also emphasize the danger of the situation with its close associations to swords and battle.

Like *ecgclif*, *stānclif* likely refers to a real, physical landscape feature. According to Carr’s system, it is classified as an I compound, indicating that the first part describes the substance of which the second is made. The term appears elsewhere in poetry, including *Elene*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Seafarer* in addition to *Beowulf*. In *Elene*, the soldiers fleeing Constantine’s army seek shelter “æfter stanclifum” [past the stone-cliffs] (135). The narrator of *The Phoenix* describes the paradisiacal land of the Phoenix as lacking the harsh landscape features the reader is familiar with: “Beorgas þær ne muntas / steape ne stondað, ne stanclifu / heah hlifiað, swa her mid us” [neither hills nor steep mountains stand there, nor do tall stone-cliffs tower, as (they do) here with us] (21b-23). These stone-cliffs likely refer both to physical harsh landscape and also the metaphorically harsh mortal world of earth. Finally, in *The Seafarer*, the narrator tells how the storms he has experienced “stanclifu beotan” [beat upon the stone-cliffs] (23). Here, the narrator refers to storms he has witnessed in his life. Just as in *The Phoenix*, the harsh landscape is likely representative of inner turmoil, but, in the case of *The Seafarer*, the metaphor draws on lived experience in a harsh world. In *Beowulf*, *stānclif* is used to describe the location of the dragon’s lair; when Beowulf approaches the dragon’s lair for the first time, he moves “under stānclēofu” (2540). In this instance, the context is more similar to *Elene*, in which the landscape provides a backdrop on which the main events unfold, but, knowing that Beowulf is going to a dangerous battle, the foreboding landscape also foreshadows the challenges ahead, as in *The Phoenix* and *The Seafarer*. 
Wēsten

Wēsten refers to a “desert” or “wilderness,”¹⁶⁶ but it can also be used to describe uninhabited, wasteland settings ranging from swampy marsh to desert. In religious poetry, wēsten indicates the desert wastelands of the Bible. For example, in Genesis, God’s light shines “ofer westenne” [over the wilderness] during the process of creation (125).¹⁶⁷ At this point in the poem, land has not been created; wēsten refers to the emptiness of the earth, in which there exists only daylight, water, and God’s presence. Also in Genesis, Abraham travels “ofer westen” to sacrifice his son to God (2875). Here, wēsten applies to what is presumably an uninhabited desert region. References to desert (or similarly uninhabited, mountainous terrain) also appear in Exodus, when God speaks to Moses “on westenne” (8).¹⁶⁸ Use of wēsten in non-religious Anglo-Saxon poetry, however, tends to shift away from images of a desert and focus on the uninhabited regions of England, particularly uninhabited lands between groups of peoples.¹⁶⁹

The word appears twice in Beowulf, first when the poet describes the origin of Grendel, and second when the dragon searches for the stolen cup. After murdering his brother, Cain fled to the “wēsten,” where his descendants came into being (1265). Although the Biblical Cain may have fled into a desert, this topographical feature does not exist in England. It is much more likely that the poet envisions the wēsten of Beowulf as a stretch of land uninhabited by man.

When the dragon leaves his lair to search for the missing cup, we are given no information about the surrounding geography except that it is a “wēstenne” (2298). Again, it is easy to presume that there is not a desert in this northern region, so wēsten is likely being used to indicate an

¹⁶⁶ BT s.v., “wēsten.”
¹⁶⁹ Discenza, 142.
uninhabited (or inhospitable) wasteland, not necessarily bereft of foliage, but surely distant from civilization. The uses of wēsten in Beowulf and religious poetry suggest that in addition to a desert, wēsten can be used to refer to any dangerous, uninhabited land.

Stīg

Stīg, cognate with Gothic staiga, can mean a literal or figurative “path,” a “footpath,” or a “(narrow) way.” Stīg’s OI cognates, steig, stigr, stigi, mean “ladder,” “stair,” or “step,” and its OHG cognates, steiga, stīg, mean a “path” or “small bridge.” In the gloss to Aldhelm’s De laude virginitatis, stīg is given for “tramite.” According to the DMLBS, the word trames, like stīg, can be used literally for “path,” “track,” and “road” and figuratively for “course,” “route,” and “way.”

In Beowulf, stīg is used only to describe literal paths. Any qualities associated with these paths vary greatly, making it difficult to draw conclusions about the connotations of stīg, in particular its relationship with the dragon’s lair. Stīg first occurs when Beowulf and his men arrive in Denmark where they walk along a “stīg” to reach Heorot (320). In this occurrence, “stīg” is in apposition to “strāet” [street or path] that is “stān-fāh” [paved with stones], suggesting a road created by the Danes (320). Then, when the men follow Grendel’s mother to the mere, they traverse “stīge nearwe” [narrow paths] (1409). Here, it seems likely that the path is smaller

---

170 BT s.v., “stig.” It is interesting to note the simultaneous literal and figurative uses of stīg in the Old English Psalm 118 (119 in modern numbering) verse 105 that result from metaphor. In this verse, the speaker says that the Lord’s word is a light to “stigre minre” [my path]. The speaker’s path through life is described as a physical path lit by the Lord, who guides actions both physically and spiritually. “The Metrical Psalms of the Paris Psalter,” The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius, ed. George Philip Krapp (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932) 1-150.

171 BT s.v., “stig.”


than that leading to the Danish settlement. In the third instance, the poet describes the way leading to the dragon’s lair as “stīġ under læġ / eldum uncūð” [the path lay under (the stone-barrow) unknown to men] (2213b-14a). No further details about the path are provided. Without better understanding the structure and location of the lair, it is impossible to qualify the path. Stīġ does not seem to be used in any particular setting or carry positive or negative associations, although the physical attributes (when provided) emphasize qualities of the path’s location. Just as the path leading to Heorot, a pinnacle of civilization, is paved with stones, the path leading to the Grendel-mere, a wild and foreboding location, is narrow and overgrown.

Strēam

Strēam, the etymon of ModE stream, is related to many early Germanic words, including OF strâm, OS strōm, and OI straumr, all related to the “Indogermanic root *strou-” meaning “to flow.” The term seems to be used exclusively to indicate physical water features, and it can be used in the plural to mean “sea.” In “Poetic Meanings in the Old English Poetic Vocabulary,” Dennis Cronan emphasizes the use of strēam to indicate water features, concluding that “figurative expression played a limited role among the poetic simplexes.” Even in compounds, strēam tends toward literal references to water. In Andreas, for example, Saint Andrew commands waters to burst forth as a punishment for the sins of the Mermedonians: “Læt nu of þinum staþole streamas weallan” [Now let the sea bubble forth from your column] (1503).

Of the 600 occurrences of strēam in simplex and compound forms, at least 200 instances of strēam appear in the Charters, which often use water systems as visual markers for land

---

174 OED s.v., “stream.”
175 BT s.v. “strēam.”
176 Dennis Cronan, “Poetic Meanings in the Old English Poetic Vocabulary,” English Studies 84.5 (2003), 397-425. p. 413
boundaries. Over two dozen such occurrences can be found in the charters from Abingdon Abbey alone in such phrases as “ut ongean stream” [outside the stream], “up be streame” [up by the stream], and “on Temese streame” [on the river Thames].

Several more occurrences of strēam appear in Latin glosses and focus on literal water and streams. Strēam is given for various Latin terms, such as “fluentis,” and “torrentibus.” Fluentis derives from fluere, meaning “to flow,” “to stream forth,” and “to liquefy.” Torrentibus derives from torrere, meaning “to heat and dry up or out” or “to flow swiftly.” In each instance, strēam is connected to a term that indicates the physical flow of water. Whereas ModE uses stream for literal waterways and metaphorical outpourings (e.g., “stream of consciousness”), Old English seems to have reserved strēam for physical water features.

Strēam appears three times in Beowulf. When Beowulf and his men are sailing to Heorot, the plural form is used, indicating that the word refers to the sea: “strēamas wundon” [the sea curled] (212). In the second instance, the poet uses the term to describe Grendel’s mother as living in “ċealde strēamas” [cold waters] (1261). Although stream is used in the plural here as well, the water at the Grendel-mere could also take the form of a lake or river. The third appearance of strēam is more complicated. When Beowulf leaves his companions to challenge the dragon, he walks toward the opening in the cliff and sees a “strēam út þōnan / brecan of beorge” [stream bursting forth through the opening of the barrow] (2545b-2546a). The nature of this stream is debated. In the following lines, a description of intense heat appears:

177 Charters of Abingdon Abbey, ed. S. E. Kelly, two volumes (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2001), charter numbers 25a, 51a, and 110 respectively.
180 DMLBS s.v., “fluere.”
181 DMLBS s.v., “torrere.”
strēam ūt þōnan
brecan of beorge       wæs þære burnan wælm
headofyrum hāt,     ne meahte horde nēah
unbyrne de off     Æniȝe hwīle
dōp ēdēgan      for dracan lēge. (2545b-2549)

[A stream broke thence from the barrow, the welling of the stream was hot with deadly flames, he might not survive for any time unburned near the hoard because of the dragon’s breath]

John D. Niles has noted that this passage is often mistranslated.\textsuperscript{182} In the Old English, the subject of “meahte” is unclear – it could refer to the hero or the stream. Niles argues that it is the stream that “meahte” burn and gives the new translation as: “Then he saw by the wall […] some stone vaulting [and] a stream emerging out from the barrow. That surging stream was hot with deadly flames; deep down there nearby the hoard, it could not endure for any amount of time without flaming on account of the dragon’s fire.”\textsuperscript{183} Niles suggests that the grammatical subject of meahte is the stream itself, not an implicit human subject as assumed in earlier translations. Unlike the natural streams discussed previously, this stream may be burning or steaming. Niles suggests that the stream may be literally flaming; he cites other instances where flaming water indicates a “hellish abode,” including Hrothgar’s description of the mere as having “fyr on flōde” [fire on the water].\textsuperscript{184} Kenneth Sisam notes that early interpretations of the lair identified the stream as the fiery breath of the dragon, although he also states that strēam is “not used

\textsuperscript{183} Niles, 32.
\textsuperscript{184} Niles 33.
figuratively elsewhere in Old English verse, and there is nothing to suggest to a listener that [it] mean[s] anything but “water” here. The syntactical ambiguity of the subject of “meahte” leaves us without a clear understanding of the stream in *Beowulf*. Niles’ interpretation of the hot stream does not contradict Sisam’s observation against figurative use, so the interpretation of *strēam* as flowing water remains literal, albeit fantastic. Niles’ suggestion also requires consideration of the “hate streamas” found in *The Ruin* (43). In the last legible stanza, a *strēam* casts heat into the surrounding area: “stream hate wearp / widan wylme” [the stream cast heat in a wide distance] (38-9). A few lines later, multiple hot “streamas” flow over the rocks: “ofer harne stan hate streamas” [hot streams (flow) over hoary stone] (43). Assuming the common interpretation of the poem’s subject to be the ruins of a Roman bath, this stream likely originates from a hot spring, which would explain its continued heat after the man-made bath fell into disrepair. The stream’s heat in *Beowulf*, however, as Niles points out, does not necessarily need to be a natural phenomenon because its heat can be easily explained by the dragon’s presence and the poet’s affinity for hellish description.

*Denn*

*Denn* refers to the “den” or “lair” of an animal but can also indicate a “grove” or “woodland pasture” when used in charters. The *Dictionary of Old English* also cites several occurrences in glosses in which *denn* is given for *lustrum*, meaning “marsh,” “bog,” “den,” “lair”

---

187 Niles, 33-34. Also see the note to lines 1365-6a in *KL* 4, which notes that burning lakes or rivers are “a common feature of European and Asian descriptions of hell.”
188 *DOE* s.v., “denn.”
(of wild beast), and “cave.” In these instances, denn’s appearance alongside lustrum emphasizes the term’s associations with wilderness, animals, and the natural settings reminiscent of the supernatural dwelling places discussed earlier. Ælfric’s Grammar, however, glosses “denn” with “cubile,” meaning “bed,” “bedroom,” “den” or “lair” (of beasts), “den” or “haunt” (fig.), or “resting-place” (of books). Here, denn’s meaning as a dwelling place, possibly even a human dwelling-place, is emphasized.

In poetry, the meaning of denn encompasses natural terrain as well as the habitation of an animal. In The Phoenix, the poet describes the world of the Phoenix as being “ne dene ne dalu ne duncrafu” [without dens, dales, or caves] (24). In order to emphasize the paradaisical nature of this place, the poet removes any trace of a jagged or dangerous terrain. It is unclear if the lack of “dene” indicates an absence of dangerous creatures or dangerous spaces, but the associations with denn are clearly antithetical to the Phoenix’ beatific home. Likewise, the “dena” of The Wife’s Lament signal danger and despair. When describing her new surroundings, the narrator says that “sindon dena dimme, duna uphea” [the caves/dens are dark, mountains high] (30). This foreboding landscape mimics the narrator’s emotional distress at losing her husband and home. In both examples, denn carries clear, negative connotations of dangerous landscapes, yet the speakers do not directly associate denn with animal dwellings. In Beowulf, both occurrences of denn apply to the dragon’s lair. When Wiglaf enters the lair to bring treasure to Beowulf, he notes that the treasure hangs on the walls within the “wyrmes denn” [worm’s den] (2759). Here, the denn specifically belongs to the dragon. The poet emphasizes this fact again when he recounts how the dragon “ģewāt / dennes niosjan” [went to seek (his) den] (3044b-3045a).

189 DMLBS s.v. “lustrum.”
190 Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar, ed. Julius Zupitza (Berlin: Weidmann, 1890) p. 34, l. 6.
191 DMLBS, s.v. “cubile.”
These instances suggest an intriguing nuance in the meaning of *denn*. If the term can be used to describe both landscape features and animal dwellings, what is the relationship between these two kinds of spaces? One possibility is that *denn* originally indicated an animal’s lair, and small spaces found in rocky terrain came to be called by the same term due to their visual similarities. Alternatively, *denn* may have referred to a specific kind of landscape feature found in the wilderness that animals often chose to live in. Finally, the associations of animals with a *denn* may have been so strong that it eventually came to imply the animal’s presence even without explicitly referring to it. It is possible that a ‘correct’ interpretation of the origin of the term *denn* can never be settled. Nonetheless, the implications behind this word could have a significant impact our interpretation of the space. If the primary definition is a landscape feature, the lair is likely located in a craggy opening on the cliff face. If an animal’s dwelling, we know only the function of the lair, no details of its physical qualities.

Finally, it is interesting to note that *denn* also appears in the late Old English / early Middle English poem *The Grave*, the only extant version of which appears in a twelfth-century manuscript.¹⁹² There are two possible interpretations of this poem’s narrator: either the speaker addresses the reader of the poem, or the soul addresses the body.¹⁹³ The speaker describes the decay of the body, the loneliness and isolation of death, and the physical space that the body will occupy after it has died. This space is described in various ways, including as a home, hall, grave, and “den.”¹⁹⁴ When considering this use of the term *denn* in relation to its occurrences in *Beowulf*, we are confronted with a fascinating parallel. Like the dragon’s lair, the grave is

---

¹⁹³ Dudley, 436.
compared to homes and halls as well as spaces found in nature. Similarities between descriptions of these spaces also demonstrate the Anglo-Saxon interest in layering contradictory descriptions onto a single space.

Natural or Constructed

The words in this section do not lend themselves to easy classification. Hlǣw and beorg, the two most common terms in descriptions of the dragon’s lair, are ambiguous. Hlǣw alone is most often used to describe a constructed barrow for an individual’s burial, but beorg can indicate a natural hill as well as a man-made barrow. Likewise, a stānbeorh could be natural or constructed, depending on the context. The eorð-compounds (eorðsele, eorðreced, eorðscræf) present a similar problem, but in this case the difficulty lies in understanding the nature of Old English compounds. All three terms begin with eorð-, which under different circumstances would indicate a space underground or carved into the land, but the second part of the compound suggests a man-made hall, much like Heorot. Hrōf, inwithrōf, sess, and weall identify the function of structures but do not provide evidence of physical qualities. Hrōf, for example, can refer to the covering of a man-made space, a natural space, or even a mouth or helmet. The section concludes with stapol, a term that likely indicates a man-made column but which can also refer to natural features, as evidenced in the term’s prevalence in charters.

Hlǣw and beorg

The two words used most often to describe the lair are hlǣw and beorg, which can both be translated loosely as “barrow.” ModE barrow, however, is in itself a problematic term. The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition for barrow is “a mountain, mount, hill, or hillock,” none
of which carry connotations of burial.\textsuperscript{195} The earliest attestation for “a mountain, mount, hill, or hillock” is from 885 and the latest in 1661.\textsuperscript{196} The \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} also defines \textit{barrow} as “a mound of earth or stones erected in early times over a grave; a grave-mound, a tumulus” with the attestations ranging from 1000-1954. Although ModE \textit{barrow} specifies a mound used for burial, the term also indicated natural rises in the landscape well into EME.

\textit{Beorg} comes from the Gothic *\textit{bairgs} and is cognate with OI \textit{berg} and \textit{bjarg}, OS \textit{berg}, and OHG \textit{berg}, all of which mean “mountain” or some kind of natural rise.\textsuperscript{197} OE \textit{beorg} shares this meaning, referring variously to a “mountain,” “cliff,” or “headland.”\textsuperscript{198} In addition, \textit{beorg} indicates a “barrow,” “tumulus,” or “burial mound.”\textsuperscript{199} Given \textit{beorg}’s cognates, it is likely that the term originally referred to a natural hill or mountain but was also used to indicate a constructed burial mound because of its similarities with natural mounds. This duality of meaning complicates our understanding of the dragon’s lair. Unlike modern archaeologists, with the technology and opportunity to excavate such mounds, the Anglo-Saxons may not have been able to distinguish between natural and constructed barrows.

\textit{Beorg} occurs in multiple poems, often to describe hills or mountainous areas. In \textit{The Dream of the Rood}, the cross is placed “on beorg” [on a hill] (32), and “beorgas” surround the city of the Mermedonians in \textit{Andreas} (840).\textsuperscript{200} In \textit{The Ruin}, the ruined city is “gebrocen to beorgum” [broken into hills (or piles)] (32). In \textit{The Phoenix}, \textit{beorg} is used to describe a landscape lacking mountains or hills. \textit{The Phoenix} is set in a place where “beorgas… ne muntas / steape ne stondað, / ne stanclifu heah hlifiað” [neither barrows nor steep mountains stand, nor do

\textsuperscript{195} \textit{OED} s.v., “barrow.”
\textsuperscript{196} \textit{OED} s.v., “barrow.”
\textsuperscript{197} \textit{OED} s.v., “barrow”; \textit{GED} s.v., “bairgahei.”
\textsuperscript{198} \textit{DOE} s.v., “beorg.”
\textsuperscript{199} \textit{DOE} s.v., “beorg.”
high stone-cliffs tower above] (21-23). Here, the poet uses negative definition to describe the landscape as being smooth and gentle without dangerous features. As the dwelling place of the Phoenix, which is associated with Christ, the shape of the land visually imitates its paradisical qualities and holiness. In *Beowulf*, *beorg* describes the landscape around Heorot twice and around the dragon’s lair eighteen times.\(^{201}\)

*Hlǣw*, from Gothic *hlaiw* (“grave”),\(^{202}\) can be defined as a “burial mound,” “barrow,” or “tumulus.”\(^{203}\) Like *beorg*, this term can also indicate a “natural mound,” “knoll,” or “low rounded hill.”\(^{204}\) Finally, the *Dictionary of Old English* gives a secondary definition for *hlǣw* as “the interior of a barrow, a cave, underground lair (of a dragon).”\(^{205}\) The *Dictionary of Old English*, however, only provides two examples of this meaning, one from *Beowulf* and the second from *Maxims II*: “Draca sceal on hlæwe” [the dragon shall be in/on the mound].\(^{206}\) In *Beowulf*, *hlǣw* is used only to describe the dragon’s lair, but it is unclear how this connection to dragons is related to the previous definitions as a “burial mound” or “natural mound.” The *Dictionary of Old English* does not specify (or speculate) if the use of the term to describe a dragon’s dwelling arises from the dragon’s inclination to guard the treasure of burial mounds or the association of certain landscapes with dangerous creatures. Perhaps, like *beorg*, *hlǣw* came to mean both types of landscape features because of the features’ visual similarities.

To draw a clear distinction between uses of *beorg* and *hlǣw* in *Beowulf* is beyond the scope of this study. Both terms are used numerous times to describe the dragon’s lair, making it

\(^{201}\) When *Beowulf* and his men set sail for Heorot, they see things described as “barrows” twice, first their boat sits on the water under “beorge” (211), and second when they see the cliffs of Denmark, which are described as “beorgas stēape” [steep hills] (222).
\(^{202}\) *GED*, s.v. “hlaiw.”
\(^{203}\) *DOE* s.v., “hlæw.”
\(^{204}\) *DOE* s.v., “hlæw.”
\(^{205}\) *DOE* s.v., “hlæw.”
most likely that the poet used them when he wanted to refer to the space without directly
describing any of its features. In addition, the choice between which of these “filler” terms to use
may have been influenced by the poet’s need to fulfill requirements of alliteration, but that is
beyond the scope of this thesis. It is interesting to note, however, that in place name evidence,
there seems to be a distinction drawn between natural and artificial mounds. In The Landscape of
Place-Names, Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole suggested that hlǣw may be used to describe
mounds that were or looked man-made.207 Moreover, Gelling suggests that hlǣw was more often
joined with the genitive form of a personal name, suggesting association with burial mounds.208
The beorg, on the other hand, was more often associated with “wild animals… vegetation and
covering” and described using “terms indicative of the erosion and excavation of the
monuments.”209 L. V. Grinsell also suggested that beorg may have been more closely associated
with prehistoric barrows and hlǣw with Anglo-Saxon barrows.210

Stānbeorh

The constituent parts of stānbeorh are stān, meaning “stone,” and beorh, meaning
“barrow” or “hill.”211 This compound is defined by Bosworth-Toller as a “stone elevation” or
“rocky hill,” which follows the Carr type I compound, in which 1 is the substance of which 2 is
made.212 Stānbeorh could also be classified as Carr’s type C compound: 1 is a place, 2 is a noun,

& Sons Ltd., 1978) 134.
209 Semple, 168.
211 BT s.v., “stan” and “beorg.”
212 BT s.v., “stanbeorh.”
indicating that the “stone” is the place where the barrow exists. In this case, the lair might be
to better interpreted as a natural cave located within rock than as a burial mound.

Stānbeorh is a common term in the charters, but appears only once in poetry. In Beowulf,
the dragon guards a “hord,” which is in apposition to a “stānbeorh stēar(c)ne” [strong stone-
barrow] (2212, 2213). Thus the general function of the word in Beowulf is clear – it indicates the
dragon’s lair. The exact meaning of the term, however, remains elusive for both its lack of
attestation in poetry or prose and the ambiguities of the relationship between the two parts of the
compound. In charters, stānbeorh may be interpreted simply as a “hill” without any implication
of barrow or burial. In her analysis of weargbeorg, Carole Hough notes many of the compound
terms used to describe landscape, which she takes from the Thesaurus of Old English’s entry for
“hill.” Among these words is stānbeorh, which Hough takes as a word that might indicate a
natural hill, much like the term’s secondary element, beorg. In the case of the dragon’s lair,
interpreting the structure as a natural hill would contradict several key features of the lair. We
know (or at least, take for granted), that entering the lair is possible—Wiglaf, the dragon, and
various Geats all do so during the course of the poem. It is also necessary for this structure to
contain a 50-foot dragon surrounded by treasures. Although reading the lair as a hill would
contradict these uses of the space, the dual uses of stānbeorh (like beorg and hlāw) as both
natural hills and man-made burials must be kept in mind.

Eordsele, eordreced, and eordscraef

The eord-compounds in Beowulf present an interesting dilemma: the first part of these
compounds seems to be related to the physical earth covering the land, yet the second part of the
compound often refers to a constructed/man-made space. In order to classify these compounds

---

correctly, the function of the word *eorþe* (the simplex form) must be better understood.

Etymologically, *eorþe* comes from Gothic *airtha* *,* which relates to the ground, plowing, and, in cognates, the preparation of land for farming. The *Dictionary of Old English* lists its many definitions as including the earth as the “ground” or a “solid stratum,” a “place of burial” or “cultivation,” the planet “earth,” “an extent of land” or a “country,” or “the material of which the ground is composed.”

It seems then that any compound including *eorþe* requires a connection to the physical earth, but the nature of this connection is unclear. The usage of *eorþe* in compounds does not limit the definition. Terms like *eorðcyning* [earth-king] and *eorðcynn* [earth-race] use *eorþe* in a sense more akin to that of ModE *earthly*, meaning that they are of the earthly world as opposed to the heavenly world. *Eorðbyrgen* [earth-grave] and *eordærn* [earth-house] use *eorþe* in a more literal sense, referring to a person’s grave – a ‘dwelling’ in the earth.

The definitions of the three *eorþe* compounds under consideration here, then, hinge on the use of *eorþe*—do these structures exist within the earth in the form of natural or excavated caves, or do they indicate earthly, transient structures, built by man? The *eorð*-compounds in this study could reasonably be placed into either of Carr’s type I or type C classes (type I: 1 is the substance of which 2 is made; type C: 1 is a place, 2 is a located at the place). Because *eorþe* can describe the substance that covers the earth as well as the earth itself, a distinction between the two categories cannot be made with confidence, as will become evident in the following discussion.

---

214 *GED* s.v., “airtha* *.”
215 *DOE* s.v., “eorþe* *.”
216 *CH* s.v., “eorðcyning” and “eordærn* *.”
217 *CH* s.v., “eorðbyrgen” and “eordærn* *.”
Eorðsele, which appears four times in Old English, is defined simply as an “earth-hall” or “dwelling in the earth.”\textsuperscript{218} Sele comes from the Gothic weak verb saljan, meaning to stay or be a guest of someone.\textsuperscript{219} In its noun form, sele came to mean building or room in Old English, Old Saxon, and Old High German.\textsuperscript{220} Sele appears eleven times in Beowulf, nine of which describe Heorot (81, 323, 411, 713, 826, 919, 1016, 1640, 2352), one Hygelac’s hall (1984), and one the dragon’s hall (3128). Bosworth-Toller defines sele as “a hall,” “house,” and “dwelling,” including such dwellings as Hell, halls, and hermitages.\textsuperscript{221} In a general sense, sele’s primary meaning is a space in which something dwells, and it does not seem to carry any connotations about the kind or status of dwelling. Based on sele’s use in Beowulf, however, it seems that the poet envisioned the word as most closely linked with halls, as demonstrated by its ten uses to refer to the Danish and Geatish halls. Sele is also used once outside of the hall context in the compound “selegyst” [hall-guest] to describe Beowulf when he is in the Grendel-mere (1545).

Eorðsele appears four times in Old English: once in the Wife’s Lament and three times in Beowulf. In the Wife’s Lament, the narrator labels the area in which she lives as an “eorðsele” under an oak tree (29). The nature of this “earth-hall” is unclear. Some interpretations of the poem understand this space as a natural cave,\textsuperscript{222} which would highlight the woman’s separation from her lord and her dismal new “hall.” Alternatively, this “hall” could be interpreted as a grave, emphasizing the finality of the woman’s banishment. In Beowulf, all three uses of eorðsele refer to the dragon’s lair: first when the thief flees after stealing the cup (2231), again when the thief leads Beowulf and his men to the lair (2409), and finally during Beowulf’s boast (2510). Although these examples give us little more information than to reinforce that the lair is

\textsuperscript{218}DOE s.v., “eorðsele.”
\textsuperscript{219}GED s.v., “saljan.”
\textsuperscript{220}GED s.v., “saljan.”
\textsuperscript{221}BT s.v., “sele.”
\textsuperscript{222}Hall, 1-2.
an *eorðsele*, it is important to note that, unlike other *sele* compounds in this study, *eorðsele* is never applied to Heorot. This, in combination with the term’s application to what is either a grave or cave, suggests that the compound noun *eorðsele*, although it contains *sele*, is unlikely to refer to a lord’s hall. Rather, *sele* was likely chosen to contrast the positive characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon hall with negative associations of the earth as a place of darkness, demons, and graves. While *sele* evokes the light, camaraderie, and life found in Anglo-Saxon halls, the addition of *eorð-* to create the compound *eorðsele* emphasizes the contrast between the bright hall and these dark and isolated spaces within the earth.

*Eorðreċed*, meaning “earth-house” or “dwelling in the earth,” occurs only once in the Old English corpus. In *Beowulf*, it is used when Beowulf is gazing upon the lair as he dies; the stone arches “ēċe eorðreċed innan healde” [supported the eternal earth-hall] (2719). *Reċed*, meaning a “house,” “hall,” or “palace,” is common, appearing eleven times in *Beowulf* alone. Nine of these occurrences refer to Heorot, one to the underwater cave found in the Grendel-mere (1572), and one to the dragon’s lair as described by Wiglaf (3088). In each use, *reċed* is specifically associated with treasure, from its use in Heorot where Hrothgar distributes treasure to the lairs of Grendel and the dragon, both of which contain treasure. Like *eorðsele*, the problem with interpreting *eorðreċed* comes when we attempt to reconcile the two parts of the compounds. *Eorpe* often refers to the physical ground covering the earth and, as noted by Garner (see pages 16-17 of this thesis), tends to be associated with graves and death. *Reċed*, on the other hand, is associated with the rituals of treasure giving in Anglo-Saxon halls. Based on these associations, it would seem antithetical to use both terms to describe the same space. As will become evident, however, the nature of the dragon’s lair is more fluid than other spaces in the poem. The uniting

---

223 DOE s.v., “eorpréced.”
224 BT s.v., “ræced.”
characteristic between *eorpe* and *reċed* may not be related to the type of spaces described by each but the connection between the two. The treasure of the dragon’s lair is, in many ways, a double-edged sword; it is the last thing our hero wishes to see before he dies, but it can also function as an object of greed. In addition, as *Maxims* tells us, it is perfectly natural for a dragon to seek a treasure. How natural is it, however, for a dying man to seek treasure and not God? The significance of *eordreċed* lies not in the shape or construction of the space it describes, but on the function and objects associated with that space.

*Eordscraef* is the most common of the three earth compounds. The term occurs twenty-five times and can indicate a “cave,” “fissure in the earth,” or “grave.” Unlike *eordsele* or *eordreced*, the two terms in the compound *eordscraef* can easily describe the same space – a cave within the earth. In *Andreas*, the term is first used when Andreas tells the story of the Living Stone and the resurrection of three Patriarchs from their “eordscraef” (here, specifically used to refer a grave) (780). Later, Andreas sends the waters of the flood into an “eordscraef” in the mountain along with the sinful Mermedonians (1588). Both occurrences of *eordscraef* indicate a hollow space within the earth, although the function of the space varies slightly. In the second instance, the term seems to suggest only a chasm or fissure in the earth. Given that it is used after the earlier use as a grave of the Patriarchs, however, the poet’s use of the term reinforces the death of those swallowed into the fissure. In the *Wife’s Lament*, the narrator uses the term *eordscraef* to describe her dwelling in exile. In addition to the occurrence of *eordsele* discussed above, she calls her dwelling an “eordscraef” and “eordscrafu” (28, 36). As discussed previously, most scholars read the

---

225 *DOE* s.v., “eorgescraef.”
226 *BT* s.v., “scraef.”
dwelling as a kind of natural cave, although there is not a strong consensus. Like the interpretation of *eorðscraef* in *Andreas*, the term’s use in the *Wife’s Lament* could also highlight the similarities between a natural cave and a grave. Because the narrator has been exiled from her society, her new dwelling will likely become her grave.

In *Beowulf*, the only use of *eorðscraef* is when the retainers have gone to view the dragon’s body. The poet remarks that the dragon will never again see the inside of his *eorðscrafa* (3046). Based on the term’s use in *Andreas* and *The Wife’s Lament*, it seems more likely that the term *eorðscraef* in *Beowulf* is referring to some kind of cave. This seems to contradict the meanings of *eorðsele* and *eorðreċed*, which both referred to the lair as a hall-like space. However, just as the constituent parts of *eorðsele* and *eorðreċed* seemed to indicate both hall-like spaces and locations within the earth, it is possible that the associations with *eorðscraef* and the previously discussed compounds may overlap. Just as *eorðscraef* was associated with the earth and possibility of death in *Andreas* and the *Wife’s Lament*, it likely brings these associations to its use in *Beowulf*. This term describes the lair after the dragon has died, and, although the poet emphasizes that the dragon will not enter the space again, as he would if it were a grave, it does tie the scene of the dragon’s death to the space of the lair. In addition, *eorðreċed*’s associations with treasure may further connect the lair to death, as it is the treasure within the lair that will be burned with Beowulf on his funeral pyre.

*Hrōf and inwithrōf*

Like its ModE descendant *roof*, *hrōf* has many meanings, including “roof of a house,” “ceiling,” “covering of a pit,” “lid of a coffin,” “sky” or “heaven,” and “highest point”\(^\text{228}\) A *hrōf,*

\(^{227}\) Hall, 1-2.

\(^{228}\) *DOE* s.v., “hrōf.”
then, seems to be defined not by its physical attributes, but by its function as a covering over an open space. This can include natural and constructed spaces, shelters, dwellings, graves, the sky, a summit, or even the roof of one’s mouth.  

In *Beowulf*, *hrōf* is used six times to describe structures and once to describe Beowulf’s helmet. The poet calls the helmet given to Beowulf by Hrothgar the “helmes hrōf” [helmet’s roof] (1030). The poet uses *hrōf* to refer to Heorot’s roof five times (403, 836, 926, 983, 999), and once to the dragon’s lair (2755). First, Beowulf and his men enter the hall “under Heorotes hrōf” [under Heorot’s roof] (403). In the next three instances, the poet describes the placement of Grendel’s severed arm, hanging under the “hr(ōf)” (836, 926, 983). The poet also describes the roof as the one part of Heorot that survived Grendel’s attacks (999). Finally, the poet uses *hrōf* to describe the lair when Wiglaf goes “under beorges hrōf” [under the barrow’s roof] to bring treasure back to Beowulf (2755). Although *hrōf* occurs primarily in descriptions of Heorot in *Beowulf*, it is not safe to assume that this term is meant to suggest a hall-like structure inside the dragon’s lair. *Hrōf*’s semantic range is much wider, so it is quite possible that the term is used only to state that there is indeed something covering the open space of the lair. This provides us with no characteristics, associations, or physical details of the space.

*Hrōf* also appears once in the compound *inwithrōf* to describe the dragon’s lair. This term appears once in the corpus of Old English and is used by the poet to describe the dragon’s lair when Wiglaf brings a group of retainers “under inwithrōf” [under the evil one’s roof] to collect the treasure (3123). It is defined by *Bosworth-Toller* as a “deceitful, evil roof” and by the *Clark Hall* as an “unfriendly roof.”  

---

229 *DOE* s.v., “hrōf.”
230 *BT* s.v., “inwithrof.”
231 *CH* s.v., “inwithrof.”
the reader to “inwid,” a neuter noun.\textsuperscript{232} If the compound were translated as noun-noun, the definition would be something like “the roof of the evil one.” The term would then be classified as a Type J of Carr’s compounds (1 is the possessive genitive of 2).\textsuperscript{233} This definition is distinctly different and shifts our understanding of the space of the dragon’s lair. For example, Carl Berkhout has analyzed this term based on both the adjective-noun definition and the noun-noun definition, suggesting that the dragon, which represents evil, is covered by a roof that belongs to him.\textsuperscript{234} In addition, the roof itself becomes evil because it serves to conceal the evil within it (the roof is itself evil).\textsuperscript{235} Although this possibility of personification is intriguing, it does not lead us to any further conclusions about the structure of the dragon’s lair.

\textit{Sess}

Near the entrance of the dragon’s lair is something called a \textit{sess}. Here I choose to introduce \textit{sess} as a “something”; the \textit{Bosworth-Toller} defines \textit{sess} as a “seat” or “bench,” but the nature of this object resists a more specific definition.\textsuperscript{236} Part of \textit{sess}’s ambiguity stems from the rarity of its occurrences—the term can be found fewer than a dozen times in the Old English corpus with appearances in \textit{Beowulf}, glosses, and possibly charters.\textsuperscript{237} Perhaps the only

\textsuperscript{232} \textit{BT} s.v., “inwid”; \textit{CH} s.v., “inwid.”
\textsuperscript{233} Old English compounds implying possession rarely include the first part’s genitive ending.
\textsuperscript{235} Berkhout, 428-9.
\textsuperscript{236} \textit{BT} s.v., “sess.”
\textsuperscript{237} \textit{BT} s.v., “sess.” \textit{BT} gives examples from \textit{Beowulf} and glosses. Searches using the \textit{Dictionary of Old English Corpus} return a few more results, but searching with this tool can be unreliable due to spelling variation.
exception to the ambiguous meaning is the term’s use as a gloss for Latin *transtrum*, which specifically refers to the kind of bench on which a rower sits.\(^{238}\)

*Sess* appears twice in *Beowulf*. First, Beowulf “ġesæt on sesse” [sat on the seat] after being wounded by the dragon (2717). At this time, he gazes on the stonework of the barrow, including the “enta ġeweorc” [the work of giants], “stānbogan” [stone-arches], and “stapulum” [columns] (2717, 2718). The *sess* appears again when Wiglaf “bī sesse ġēong” [went by the seat] on his way into the treasure chamber (2756). In addition to the obvious fact that the *sess* is something on which a person may sit, it also seems to be a “thing” – not just a space defined by the possibility of being sat upon. Beyond the fact that it is an object on which a person may sit, the shape and nature of the thing are unclear. W. J. Sedgefield suggests that this *sess* is a stone slab of the type found near prehistoric mounds, such as New Grange. At this site, a “large flat stone lies sunk in the ground across the entrance, originally allowing the passage to be entered only between each of its ends and the adjacent upright stone.”\(^{239}\) Sedgefield argues that this evidence indicates that the *Beowulf*-poet is describing a place he has seen in real life. While this type of feature may indeed be a *sess*, Sedgefield does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that *sess* is necessarily this kind of Neolithic feature. As discussed in the introduction, much of Sedgefield’s argument is predicated on his belief that the lair is (1) a specific kind of archaeological feature and (2) that this feature is specifically a Neolithic burial mound. Due to lack of evidence and context, we do not know how literal or specific the meaning of *sess* is.

Given that the term appears to gloss *transtrum* and to describe the “something” outside of the

---


dragon’s lair, it seems likely that the *sess* in *Beowulf* is referring to the function of the object rather than a particular material or shape.

*Weall*

*Weall*, the etymon of ModE *wall*, shares many meanings with its descendant. The term refers to a structure’s shape or function and can indicate a wall that is either natural or man-made. Like *hlæw* and *beorg*, the term *weall* is used by the *Beowulf*-poet to describe the dragon’s lair in a general sense without specifying or singling out a particular architectural or structural element. In *Genesis*, the stone wall built around Shinar is referred to as a “stænenne weall” [stone wall], demonstrating the use of the term for man-made structures (1676). In *Exodus*, *weall* takes on a more figurative meaning. Before the Egyptians are swept away by the Red Sea, they look upon “weallas standan” [walls standing]—the walls of water on either side of them (572). In this instance, *weall* refers to the function and general appearance of the water, not its material or construction.

In *Beowulf*, the term *weall* is often used to indicate natural “walls,” specifically the wall of a cliff or border around the sea. The first instance of this use occurs when the Danish coastguard sees the Geats approach over the sea. He “of wealle ġeseah” [saw from the wall] the arrival of Beowulf and his men (229). This could indicate that the coastguard was located at the top of a natural cliff or on a constructed rampart of some kind. Beowulf then recounts his battle with the sea-monsters and how he saw the “windiġe weallas” [windy walls] and “sænæssas” [sea-headlands] after fighting off his foes. Here, the “windy walls” are in apposition to the sea-headlands, demonstrating *weall*’s use to describe natural cliffs (571-2). Wealhtheow speaks of

---

240 *OED* s.v., “wall.”
241 *BT* s.v., “weall.”
weall metaphorically when she says that Beowulf will be praised “swā wīde swā sæ be būgeð, ‘windġeard, weallas” [as wide as the sea, the home of the winds, surrounds the shores] (1223-4). In this instance, weall is used to describe the shore—a border between land and sea. This occurrence focuses less on the shape of the weall and more on its function as marking the division between two areas.

The occurrences of weall in descriptions of the dragon’s lair are more ambiguous. Whereas the context in the previously discussed instances could be used to reasonably interpret the weall as indicating a natural cliff, the occurrences with reference to the dragon’s lair do not lend themselves to a clear conclusion. In descriptions of the dragon’s lair, the term weall may not necessarily distinguish between man-made or natural structures. A brief exploration of these instances will demonstrate the difficulty in understanding the weall of the dragon’s lair:

- The dragon leaves his lair after realizing the cup has been stolen. The poet describes his absence from the lair by stating that he “nō on wealle læn[ġ] / bīdan wolde” [did not remain long on the wall] (2307-8).
- The dragon returns to his lair after attacking the Geatish people. Here, he “beorges ġetruwode, wīges ond wealles” [trusted in his barrow, his fighting force and wall] (2322-3). Here, “wealles” is in apposition to “beorges,” indicating that the dragon trusts in both of these things to defend himself.
- Beowulf boasts that he will not run from the dragon, but will fight it “æt wealle” [at the wall] (2526).
- When Beowulf arrives at the dragon’s lair, Beowulf sees stone arches and a stream “be wealle” [by the wall] (2542).
• Beowulf, injured and dying, sits “bī wealle” [by the wall] and gazes upon the stone arches and columns again (2716).

• Wiglaf enters the dragon’s lair and sees the treasure within, which he calls a “wundur on wealle” [marvel under the wall] (2759).

• The poet says that the dragon, who had lived “under wealle” [under the wall], did not profit from his greed (3059).

• The poet repeats the description of the treasure as a “wundur under wealle” [marvel under the wall] (3103).

These descriptions of the dragon’s lair paint an inconsistent picture of the space – in some instances, the term weall seems to be used metonymically to represent the lair as a whole. In others, the use of weall seems to be literal. The physical context of this wall, however, is unclear; it could be the wall of a cliff face, the interior wall of a cave, or even a man-made wall. The meaning of weall is further obscured by the prepositions used to describe its location:

• The dragon can remain “on” the wall (nō on wealle læ[n]g bīdan wolde)

• The dragon can take solace in the wall (ġetruwode … wealles)

• Beowulf will fight “at” the wall (æt weall)

• Beowulf sits “by” the wall (bī wealle)

• The dragon lived “under” the wall (under wealle)

First, it should be observed that the wall is always in the singular. The dragon does not have “walls,” he has a wall. In the examples of man-made walls in poetry discussed earlier (see pages 59-60), the term appeared in both singular and plural forms. In the singular, it tends to represent an entire structure. The use of singular “wall” throughout the descriptions of the dragon’s lair does not necessarily preclude the possibility of it referring to a man-made structure, or even a
structure with multiple walls. Conversely, it is also equally possible that the single “wall” of the structure is the cliff face, whose presence has been made known through such compounds as *stānclif* and *ecgclif*.

As discussed below in the entry for *stapol*, “on” has a semantic range so wide it is virtually meaningless. A dragon that lies upon a wall suggests a wall that is a sort of rampart or fortification, yet if “on” is taken to mean “in,” it would indicate simply that the dragon is living within an enclosed space. In order to demarcate a space, one must have a wall of some kind. The concept of the dragon taking solace in or within a wall is intriguing, but it seems that the poet is using this *weall* figuratively, i.e., the dragon takes comfort within his lair. Like *on*, *æt* has an extremely long list of uses, although these uses are narrowed significantly when taken with the accusative (of motion or time: “up to,” “as far as”; of manner: “away from”). Beowulf’s fight “æt” the wall is thus likely indicating motion toward. Unfortunately, this does not give us much information about the wall itself. Likewise, *be* carries many of the same senses as ModE *by*, including position “near” and “alongside” as well as figurative meanings. That Beowulf sits down “be” the wall and then looks “on” elements of its structure tells us very little. We do not know if this wall is located inside or outside of the barrow. We cannot say for certain if the dragon’s lair has multiple chambers or is one cavern, and without a better idea of what the *sesse* is, we cannot identify it as something inside or outside of a structure. *Under*+dat. in its literal senses generally indicates one object vertically above another, one object at the foot of another, or when one object is within another. Again, it is clear from other scenes in the poet’s description that the dragon lives in the lair, and so in this case, the preposition “under” provides little useful context.

---

242 *DOE* s.v., “æt.”
243 *DOE* s.v., “be.”
244 *BT* s.v., “under.”
Stapol

Stapol is rare in literary texts, occurring only twice each in Beowulf and Andreas. According to Bosworth-Toller, the term means “post,” “pillar,” and “column.” Stapol’s ON cognate, stōpull, describes an object or location’s general shape. The first entry for stōpull in Cleasby-Vigfusson is “steeple” or “tower” followed by “a beacon-tower,” “a pillar,” and “a pillar of smoke.” It is unclear to what extent OE stapol shares this more wide-ranging definition. In Andreas, the columns described are clearly real, physical, monuments constructed by men. First, Andrew seats himself next to a “stapul ærenne” [brass column] as he awaits the hostile crowd (1062). He later looks upon columns, referred to both as “sweras” [columns] and “stapulas” [columns] that are “enta geweorc” [the work of giants] and also “marmanstan” [(made of) marble] (1493, 1494, 1495, 1498). In both instances, the columns are clearly architectural features made by men out of specific materials.

In Beowulf, the nature of the stapol is more heavily debated. The term occurs twice: first when Hrothgar gazes at Grendel’s arm and second when an injured Beowulf looks upon the entrance to the dragon’s lair. The first instance is a great source of debate. The poet says that Hrothgar “stōd on stapole” as he gazed at the arm (926), which has led to the possible definition of stapol as “threshold,” rendering the translation as “stood on the threshold.” In a recent article, Larry Swain examines the function of stapol in Heorot. In addition to its meaning as a post or column, stapol once also included a definition as a flight of stairs or step:

245 BT s.v., “stapol.”
246 CV s.v., “stōpull.
247 BT s.v., “stapol.”
Thomas Miller in 1889 argued that *stapol* was better read as a set of steps by examining derivatives from the word in Old English and Middle English such as step, staple, and similar developments in continental Germanic languages. Miller concludes that *stapol* in this passage means the landing at the top of the stairs that enter the door of Heorot. This interpretation has been accepted by most commentators, largely popularized by its inclusion in Klaeber.  

Swain goes on to refute this idea and reinforce *stapol*’s meaning of post or column using evidence from numerous Old English sources as well as cognates in Old French and Old Frisian. The role of the preposition “on” in determining the meaning of *stapol* is also significant. Swain theorizes that *standan on* may mean “to stand at,” based on examples from Aldred’s gloss to the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Paris Psalter where “the combination of *standan* and its compounds and the preposition on” must clearly be translated using the preposition “at.” Using this interpretation, Hrothgar would be standing “at the pillar,” perhaps implying “at the base of the pillar.” Although the exact location of Grendel’s arm is still a point of controversy, and it must be known to determine Hrothgar’s spatial relationship to it, it seems likely that *stapol* can be translated as a “column” or “post” in this context.

In the second occurrence of *stapol* the term’s meaning as a column, pillar, or post is still debatable, but to a lesser extent. The poet describes the architecture of the dragon’s lair as “enta ġeweorc, / hū ēdā stānbogan stapulum fæste / ēc eorðreċed innan healde” [the work of giants, how the strong stone arches on columns supported the enduring earth-hall within] (2717b-2719). As stated previously, many scholars have interpreted *stapol* to refer to the post and lintel construction at the entrance to megalithic tombs. Alone, this interpretation is feasible, but, as will be discussed, there are many aspects of the dragon’s lair that do not support a megalithic tomb. In this particular occurrence of *stapol* it is also worth noting that the phrase *enta ġeweorc*...
is used to describe the construction. The same phrase appears in the description of the columns of Mermedonia. Perhaps this suggests a connection between the man-made columns of Andreas and Beowulf, but this lacks sufficient evidence to become definitive.

**Constructed Features**

This section deals with the words that describe the dragon’s lair in terms of constructed spaces. The first two terms, *hearth* and *stānboga*, refer to constructed spaces, but their use in context leaves room for the possibility of natural associations. *Enta geweorc, dryhtsele, hringsele, and hof* describe constructed spaces, but the builders or creators of these spaces are unclear. As with all instances of descriptive language, we are limited in our understanding of the poet’s intended effect. Although these words would seem to indicate definitive constructed spaces, perhaps even of Anglo-Saxon origin, we cannot know if the poet is speaking literally or metaphorically.

**Hearth**

According to the *Dictionary of Old English*, *hearth* indicates a “heathen place of worship,” “idol,” “image,” or “effigy.” In *Andreas*, for example, Andrew destroys the “herigeas” [temples] in the city of Mermedonia to persuade the people to follow God (1687). *Hearth* is also often used to indicate pagan shrines in the Old English *Heptateuch*. In Leviticus 20.2, the Lord forbids the Israelites from sacrificing children “on Moloches hearth” [on Moloch’s altar, to Moloch’s idol, or in Moloch’s temple]. In Leviticus 26.1, the Lord again commands the Israelites not to make “hearga ne agrafene godas” [idols or graven images].

---

253 *DOE* s.v., “hearth.”
Old English also provides several specific occurrences of hearth in glosses, including as a gloss for the Temple of Hercules, a “sacred grove,” and a “(heathen) temple” or “church.” Thomas Markey considers hearth to be a “learned translation of ‘heathen temple’ in Christian texts.” He argues that its use in the compound “heargrafum” [heathen temples] in Beowulf (l. 175) reflects practices of Norse immigrants as observed by the poet. Based on place-name evidence, Markey also suggests that hearth may have “originally denoted an (elevated) area in the open where pagan rites were conducted,” but sees little evidence of “a temple or enclosure as referent” in these instances. Semple argues that hearth may have “specifically … denoted a cult site with a long biography, that was topographically distinctive, and that was either actively in use or had recently been used by local communities.” As to the origins of a hearth, Semple further suggests that the hearth was “a naturally significant location that formed a place of gathering and ritual for many generations over a long period of time.” Whether or not a structure or monument of some kind was simultaneously erected over this “significant location” cannot be known. Hearth is also cognate with OI hörgr, a “heathen place of worship” that was often made of stone according to Cleasby-Vigfusson, suggesting that a monument of some kind was constructed over, around, or near the hearth.

Hearth is used twice in Beowulf. Its occurrence in line 2276 has been disputed due to manuscript damage. R. D. Fulk interprets the word as “hearth,” although other editors have also

255 *DOE* s.v., “hearth.”
257 Markey, 368.
258 Markey, 368.
259 Semple, 383.
260 Semple, 385.
261 *CV* s.v., “hörgr.”
suggested “bearn” and “hord.” The *Dictionary of Old English* omits Fulk’s emendation in the examples it provides, but his argument in “Some Contested Readings in the *Beowulf Manuscript*” uses strong manuscript evidence along with contextual clues to argue that *hearth* is the most likely reading because of the “reference to heathen gold in the off-verse.” Fulk also cites C. M. W. Grein’s early edition, *Beovulf nebst den Fragmenten Finnsburg und Valdere*, which defines *hearth* as “hain, wald” [grove, woods] and “götterhain, daher für die Christen überhaupt verruchte Stätte” [grove of the gods, hence for the Christians actually a wicked site]. In *Beowulf*, the dragon “gescecean sceall / hearh on hrusan” [shall seek a heathen place on the earth] (2275-6). The meaning of *hearth* complicates this passage – dragons are known for seeking out treasure (hence the previous reading of the term as “hoard”), but their penchant for heathen temples seems out of place. Markey, however, does note that *hearth* tends to be a term used by Christian Anglo-Saxons to refer to other peoples’ pagan practices. Perhaps it is unnecessary for the *hearth* to be a literal temple; it is possible that in this case the term only refers to an area associated with heathen practices. In the second occurrence, the poet reflects on the origins of the lair as a place where “þēodnas mǣre” [mighty chiefs] hid the gold and condemned anyone who disturbed it to hellish torments (3070). Specifically, the interloper was “hergum ġeheaðerod, hellbendum fæst” [confined to heathen places, fast with hell-bonds] (3072). In this alternate history of the treasure’s deposition, *hearth* seems to refer to places that are controlled by or infested with demons, not simply the pagan places at which one would worship. Whether or not the dragon lives in a temple or simply in an area inhabited by evil creatures is thus unclear.

265 Markey, 368.
Stānboga

*Bosworth-Toller* defines *stānboga* as a “natural stone arch.”266 This definition specifies a “natural” arch, although there is little evidence to support this reading. The only occurrences of *stānboga* are in descriptions of the dragon’s lair in *Beowulf*. The poet notes the *stānboga* twice: first, when Beowulf approaches the lair he sees “sto[n]dan stānbogan” [stone arches standing] (2545); then again when Beowulf, injured, gazes on the lair from a seated position: “seah on enta ġeweorc, / hū ēā stānbogan stapulum fæste / ēċe eorōrēċed innan healde” [he saw the work of giants, how the strong stone arches on columns supported the enduring earth-hall within] (2717-19). Without fully understanding the structure of the dragon’s lair, we cannot be certain if the *stānboga* is natural or not. As mentioned in the introduction, the lair is often interpreted as a megalithic burial mound with the *stānboga* being the corbelled roofing or the lintel over the doorframe.267 This interpretation, whether accurate or not, does not support *Bosworth-Toller*’s definition of a “natural stone arch” because neither structure occurs naturally and, in the instance of a lintel, the “arch” shape is not present. The compound term would fall into Carr’s Type I category, in which part 1 is the substance of which part 2 is made – the arch is made of stone. OE *boga* is related to Gothic *biulan* “to bend” and OHG *biugu* “bow, semi-circle.”268 It is also related to terms for rings, including OI *baugr*, OE *beag*, and OHG *boug*.269 *Boga* can be defined as a “bow” for shooting arrows, an “arch” or “vault,” a “rainbow,” a “saddlebow.”270 The *Dictionary of Old English* also gives the Latin terms glossed by *boga*, including *arcus*, meaning

266 *BT* s.v., “stanboga.”
267 Lawrence, 579.
268 *GED* s.v., “biulan.”
269 *GED* s.v., “biulan.”
270 *DOE* s.v., “boga.”
“bow,” “rainbow,” “arch,” or “something bow-shaped”;\(^{271}\) *fornix*, meaning “arch,” “vault,” crypt,” or “foundation”;\(^{272}\) and *camera*, meaning “arch,” “chamber,” or “council chamber.”\(^{273}\)

Based on these definitions, it is clear that *boga* had a broad enough semantic range to be used to describe various objects and spaces, often those with some kind of arch or curvature. This is corroborated in the OI cognate *bogi*, meaning “bow,” “arch,” or “rainbow.”\(^{274}\) Like *boga*, *bogi* is used to describe objects of a similar, curved shape. OI compounds of *bogi* include *himin-bogi* [the sky], *bloð-bogi* [a gush of blood], and *regn-bogi* [a rainbow].\(^{275}\) A compound of particular interest is *steina-bru*, a “stone-bridge, stone-arch, a natural one, not made by human hands.”\(^{276}\) The Cleasby and Vigfusson note that the idea of a stone-bridge being natural indicates that “the ancient Scandinavians, like the old Germans, knew not the arch, as their buildings were all of wood.”\(^{277}\) Given the emphasis on *boga* as something smoothly rounded, it seems reasonable that this term could apply to the rounded arches common in Roman architecture, perhaps even more so than corbelled vaulting.

*Enta geweorc*

The formulaic phrase *enta geweorc* is common in Old English poetry, occurring six times in *Andreas*, *The Wanderer*, *The Ruin*, *Beowulf*, and *Maxims II*. A literal translation renders *enta geweorc* as “the work of giants,” although it is commonly interpreted as the work of earlier civilizations. *Enta ærgeweorc*, a variation meaning “early work of giants,” also appears in *Andreas* and *Beowulf*. In *Beowulf*, this phrase become particularly problematic because it can

\(^{271}\) DMLBS s.v., “arcus.”
\(^{272}\) DMLBS s.v., “fornix.”
\(^{273}\) DMBLS s.v., “camera.”
\(^{274}\) CV s.v., “bogi.”
\(^{275}\) CV s.v., “bogi.”
\(^{276}\) CV s.v., “steina-bru.”
\(^{277}\) CV s.v., “steina-bru.”
refer to early construction in general but in other poems (The Ruin, Andreas) is often closely associated with Roman stonework.

The word *weorc* is related to Gothic *waurkjan*, which is often associated with gaining (money), completing (an action), and conducting business. The verb was also often combined with *handu*, indicating “work made by human hands.” The connotations of tangibility are also present in Old English. For example, “temples geweorce” describes the construction of the Temple of Solomon in the “De Initio Creaturae” of MS Harley 3271. The word *geweorc* has many definitions, including a “work” (Latin *opus*), “fort,” “labor,” “deed,” or “action.” *Geweorc* is also understood to indicate a completed action because of its prefix, *ge-*.

The *enta* of *enta geweorc* have been closely studied in Chris Bishop’s article, “‘Ýyrs, Ent, Eoten, Gigans’: Anglo-Saxon Ontologies of ‘Giant.’” In this study, Bishop examines four common words to describe non-human entities in Old English. He concludes that the “ents” are particularly prevalent in the Anglo-Saxon imagination in contexts of constructing “mighty buildings” and “monuments that punctuated the ‘wastelands.’” Ælfric, for example, uses the term to describe the descendants of Enoch and the people(s) who constructed the tower of Babel. Likewise, Wulfstan imagines the “ents” as great builders with ancestry tracing to Nimrod. Unlike the creatures labeled *pyrs, eoten*, and *gigans*, the “ents” appear to be human,

---

278 *GED* s.v., “waurkjan.”
279 *GED* s.v., “handu.”
284 Bishop, 262.
285 Bishop, 262.
286 Bishop, 262.
although exactly what kind of human or how human-like they are is hard to discern. The humans of the Old Testament must have seemed remote to an Anglo-Saxon but not monstrous or inhuman, as in the cases of gigans or thyrs.

*Enta geweorc*’s greatest significance, however, is its use as a formulaic phrase in Old English poetry. In *Maxims II* and *The Wanderer*, *enta geweorc* describes Anglo-Saxon constructions. The speaker of *Maxims II* says that the king should uphold the “enta geweorc,” referring to his city (2). The poet goes on to describe the same city as a “weallstana geweorc” [work of wall-stones], suggesting a fortified wall (3). In *The Wanderer*, the speaker enumerates the ways in which society withers under the passage of time. He describes the crumbling halls as a place where the “eald enta geweorc idlu stodon” [old work of giants stood empty] (87). In both instances, the poets describe Anglo-Saxon construction, or at least Anglo-Saxon dwellings, as *enta geweorc*, but the term can also be used to describe ancient construction. In *Andreas*, Andrew, after having been mistreated by the Mermedonians, gazes on a series of columns that are “eald enta geweorc” [the old work of giants] (1495). As part of the city’s architecture, the columns are clearly man-made. This column is later directly addressed by Andrew as “marmanstan” [marble], emphasizing that the stone has been worked deliberately (1498). In “The Thematic Significance of *Enta Geweorc* and Related Imagery in *The Wanderer*,” P. J. Frankis notes that the Mermedonians likely live in a land meant to represent a “Roman province.” The use of columns, roads, and building materials like marble and bronze support this theory and also support the reading of the *enta geweorc* in *The Ruin* as dilapidated Roman buildings. This poem, which laments a crumbled and broken city, most likely focuses on the site of a Roman bath. The “wealstan” [wall-stone], “burgstede” [location of a city], and “eald enta

---

geweorc” [old work of giants] fall into disrepair, and the poem speaks of the inevitable decline of powerful societies (1-2).

Although enta geweorc in these texts refers to buildings from Roman (or Roman-like) and Anglo-Saxon societies, the phrase’s use in Beowulf remains understood as a reference to pre-Roman constructions. The poet uses the phrase three times in Beowulf. First, it describes the metalwork of the sword Beowulf finds in the Grendel-mere as “enta Ærgeweorc” [early work of giants] (1679). It is then used twice to describe the dragon’s lair – first when Beowulf sits down after being attacked by the dragon (2717), and second when Wiglaf enters the dragon’s lair (2774). In the note to line 2717b, Klaeber connects the phrase to a passage of Saxo that refers to “barrows and caves in Denmark, understood by him to be the work of giants.”

In line 2774, Klaeber notes only that enta geweorc probably refers to the structure of the dragon’s lair and not the treasure within. In contrast to popular readings of the lair as a work of prehistoric construction, E. V. Thornbury has suggested that the enta geweorc of Beowulf may, like that of Andreas and The Ruin, refer to a Roman structure. She notes the use of several terms from the “vocabulary of Roman architecture” that are used in the Beowulf passages, especially stapol and stanboga (discussed above, pages 63-65 and 68-69), the stream that bursts from the lair, and the standard that hangs over the hoard.

Dryhtsele and hringsele

Along with eordsele (see page 52-53), dryhtsele and hringsele comprise the sele compounds that describe the dragon’s lair. Both dryhtsele and hringsele draw clear connections

---

288 KL 4, note to line 2717b.
289 KL 4, note to line 2773.
290 Thornbury, 87-89.
291 Thornbury, 89
to Anglo-Saxon halls. Sele refers to a “hall,” “house,” or “dwelling.” It has eleven occurrences in Beowulf, ten of which refer to Anglo-Saxon halls and one to the dragon’s lair. Although sele can indicate a space used by someone (or something) as a dwelling, it is most closely associated with halls (see page 52).

Dryhtsele and hringsele have clear connections to Anglo-Saxon halls. The Dictionary of Old English defines dryhtsele as a “noble hall,” “splendid hall,” and, originally, “the retainers’ hall.” The first part of the compound, dryht is defined as a “multitude” or “host.” The Dictionary of Old English specifically notes that dryht’s uses in compounds are “associated with the sense ‘retinue, troop, the noble.’” Dryhtsele then becomes the place where the noble warriors gather, placing it in the J classification of Carr’s compounds, indicating that the term should be translated as “the retainers’ hall.” The compound only occurs in Beowulf, referring twice to Heorot (485, 767) and once to the dragon’s lair (2320).

Hringsele is defined as a “hall in which treasure is distributed or stored.” The first part of the compound, hring, can indicate the kind of metallic ring distributed by a lord or worn on a finger and an object or concept of something in the shape of a “ring.” The compound is used only in Beowulf to describe Hrothgar’s hall (2010), and the poet uses the term twice to describe the dragon’s lair (2840, 3053). It seems most likely that the hring part of the compound should be read as indicating physical rings, perhaps those distributed by a lord to his faithful warriors. If hring were being used to describe the shape of a ring, it would indicate that Heorot was constructed in this shape. The compound hringsele, then, is closest in meaning to Carr’s G type

---

292 BT s.v., “sele.”
293 DOE s.v. “dryhtsele.”
294 DOE s.v., “dryht.”
295 DOE s.v., “dryht.”
296 1 is the possessive of 2.
297 DOE s.v., “hringsele.”
298 DOE s.v., “hring.”
compounds\textsuperscript{299}—the hall is used for the purpose of distributing rings. Using this reading, the compound describes the hall not just as a space to be used for distributing treasure, but also as the heart of an Anglo-Saxon warrior community—a space where the lord rewards his loyal warriors.

That both \textit{dryhtsele} and \textit{hringsele} are used to describe the dragon’s lair is quite surprising—both terms have strong associations with Anglo-Saxon halls and the traditions practiced therein. \textit{Dryht} alludes to the loyalty of retainers and the \textit{comitatus} band, while \textit{hring} elicits memories of treasure and wealth. In the case of the dragon’s lair, it is a dragon, not a king, who presides over the “hall,” and, instead of distributing treasure among people, the dragon guards it fiercely, attacking anyone who dares to disturb his hoard. A place identified with either one of these terms ought to be used as the center of a community, but here the opposite exists. A dragon, not a lord, inhabits the hall and it threatens, not protects, the surrounding community.

\textit{Hof}

Before defining \textit{hof}, it is important to note that it is only used once in describing the dragon’s lair, and this use is contested. Although the editors of \textit{Klaeber’s Beowulf} have chosen to interpret this word as \textit{hof}, many other editors have disagreed. Other interpretations include \textit{hæþe}, \textit{hope}, \textit{heþe}, and \textit{hæþe}.\textsuperscript{300} \textit{Hæþ}, meaning “heath” or “wasteland,” and \textit{hop}, meaning “enclosed in a marsh,” would both be in line with the use of \textit{westen} discussed previously (see page 36-38).\textsuperscript{301} I will follow the Klaeber 4 in reading the damaged word as \textit{hof}, but it will be noted in the next chapter’s discussion that without further evidence, the use of \textit{hof} cannot be taken as a definitive indication of the nature of the dragon’s lair.

\textsuperscript{299} 1 is the purpose for which 2 is used. 
\textsuperscript{300} KL footnote to line 2212. 
\textsuperscript{301} CV s.v., “hæþ” and “hop.”
The *Dictionary of Old English* defines *hof* as a “building,” “house,” “hall,” and “dwelling,” including such specific buildings as royal courts and bedchambers.\(^{302}\) Markey also argues that in Continental West Germanic, *hof* “describes secular enclosures [like courtyard and farmstead] and has no religious significance.”\(^{303}\) Its basic meaning from Old High German is “hall,” specifically relating to a king or court.\(^{304}\) In *Genesis*, *hof* refers multiple times to Noah’s ark (beginning at line 1316) and once to the world (1380). In *Elene*, *hof* also refers to the place where the True Cross is buried underground (833).

Despite Markey’s assertion, *hof* also has a second definition as a “temple,” “sanctuary,” or “shrine.”\(^{305}\) *Cleasby-Vigfusson* notes that OE *hof* is distinct from *hörgr*, a “roofless place of worship” (which is cognate with *hearth* discussed on pages 65-67).\(^{306}\) Nonetheless, *hof* is used several times throughout the *Poetic Edda*\(^ {307}\) to indicate a pagan, religious space, and “plays a major role in the cult vocabulary of the North.”\(^ {308}\) Old English *hof* may have a similarly wide variety of meanings. In addition to its use as a term for a room, the *Dictionary of Old English* lists *aedicula*, *sacellum*, *sanctuarium*, and *basilica* as Latin terms glossed by *hof* in manuscripts. According to the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, *aedicula*, like *hof*, can be applied to structures including a “small house,” “tomb,” or “chapel.”\(^ {309}\) *Sacellum*, however, refers only to religious structures.\(^ {310}\) *Sanctuarium* and *basilica* both refer to Christian places of worship during the Middle Ages, with *basilica* retaining some of its earlier meaning as palace.\(^ {311}\)

---

\(^{302}\) *DOE* s.v., “hof.”  
\(^{303}\) Markey, 366.  
\(^{304}\) *CV* s.v., “hof.”  
\(^{305}\) *DOE* s.v., “hof.”  
\(^{306}\) *CV* s.v., “hörgr.”  
\(^{308}\) Markey, 366.  
\(^{309}\) *DMLBS* s.v., “aedicula.”  
\(^{310}\) *DMLBS* s.v., “sacellum.”  
\(^{311}\) *DMLBS* s.v., “sanctuarium” and “basilica.”
Hof appears seven times in Beowulf, referring to Heorot, the Grendel-mere, the Geatish court, the dragon’s lair, and unspecified dwellings. The poet uses hof to describe the Danish settlement around Heorot twice: first, when the coastguard brings Beowulf and his men from the shore to the hall (312), and second, when Hrothgar goes “tō hofe sīnum” [to his dwelling] (1236). When Beowulf and Grendel’s mother fight under water, Grendel’s mother brings the fight “tō hofe sīnum” [to her dwelling] (1507). After successfully defeating Grendel and his mother, Beowulf prepares to depart from the Danes. He says that Hrethric will be welcome “tō hofum Ġēata” [at the Geats’ court] (1836), and when the Geats return home, they “tō gongan hofe” [go to (Hygelac’s) court] (1974). After Beowulf has ruled fifty years, a dragon arrives and guards his hoard “on hēa(um) h(of)e” [in the high dwelling?] (2212). When the dragon departs to seek the missing cup, he “beorht hofu bærnan” [burned bright dwellings] in his attacks on the Geats (2313).

The majority of hof’s occurrences in Beowulf apply to rulers’ courts and Anglo-Saxon halls, yet the uses in the case of the Grendel-mere and dragon lair do not easily fit this pattern. Dryhtsele and hringsele describe the lair in terms of Anglo-Saxon halls (see pages 71-73). This may suggest that the monsters rule over their own “courts,” but these words alone are not conclusive. The definition of hof as a temple or sanctuary cannot be ruled out, as the lair is also described twice as a hearh (see pages 64-67). In “Hørge, hov og kirke,” Olaf Olsen argues that Old English hof as temple may only appear as a result of the Norse invaders.\footnote{Qtd. in Markey, 366.} Markey concludes that hof may not have had an original religious significance in Old English before the Norse influence, a significant aspect that would require serious consideration of composition date and intended audience beyond the scope of this thesis. In addition, the Old Norse religious meaning likely only arose as a result of individuals gathering at farmsteads to perform religious
rituals.\textsuperscript{313} Perhaps in \textit{Beowulf} we see the early use of \textit{hof} as solely a dwelling place related to a royal court.

\section*{Treasure Items}

The wealth of words related to material culture, and in particular, treasure objects, in \textit{Beowulf} has been noted and studied for many years. Many of these terms are found in either descriptions of the gifts given to Beowulf or the treasure of the dragon’s lair. As this study aims to focus on the architecture and spaces described in the poem, full attention to the treasure words cannot be given here. In this section, I will limit the discussion to \textit{segn}, \textit{bune}, \textit{orc}, and \textit{disc}, the terms, which, in my opinion, will provide the most significant analyses in the next chapter and are the most representative of the treasure as a whole. It should be noted, however, that there are numerous terms describing the treasure, including “hǣðen gold” [heathen gold] (2276), “sinċfæt” [precious cup] (2300), “drinċfæt” [drinking cup] (2306), “mā(ð)þumfæt” [precious cup] (2405), as well as several references to swords. The terms I discuss in this section are not representative of the treasure items in general, but are the terms most closely related to the architecture discussed in previous sections.

\subsection*{Sēgn}

The term \textit{sēgn}, much like ModE \textit{sign}, can indicate a “military banner” or a “sign,” “mark,” or “token.”\textsuperscript{314} The Old English term was introduced to the language from Latin and

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{313} Markey, 367.  
\textsuperscript{314} \textit{BT} s.v., “segn.”
“revived or re-defined by Christian usage.”

The earliest group of Latin loan words entered Old English from the Roman and sub-Roman periods and often related to Roman institutions and daily life. *Seğn* may have entered Old English through Latin *signum*’s use in the military culture of Roman Britain and been adopted by the pagan Germanic residents of the island in the first centuries of their occupation.

*Seğn* also has the same range of meaning in Old English as the Latin *signum*, including military standards and symbolic imagery. In *Elene*, the “segn” [standard] flies above Constantine’s army as he fights the Huns (124). In *Genesis*, God ordered “þæt segn” of circumcision to visually mark the Jewish people as belonging to God and to symbolize their devotion (2372). In the *Phoenix*, however, the use of *seğn* becomes more abstract. The “sunnan segn” [sign of the sun] plays a more metaphorical role in this allegory when it renews the ashes of the phoenix (288).

In *Beowulf*, *seğn* is used exclusively in its meaning as a military standard. The poet describes Hygelac in battle “under segnē” [under the standard] (1204) and Hygelac’s “seğn” over the people he conquered (2958). Beowulf was given a “seğen” as a gift for killing Grendel (1021), and a “segen” was placed over Scyld Sceing at his funeral (47). In the dragon’s lair, the poet describes the “segn” over the hoard (2767), the same “segn” that Wiglaf takes to Beowulf (2776). It seems clear that all the instances of *segn* in *Beowulf* refer to a standard or banner, like Constantine’s standard in *Elene*. This does not tell the reader much about the space of the dragon’s lair, but the use of a Latin term coupled with the Roman associations of the other terms

316 Wollman, 176.
317 Wollman, 189. One of Wollman’s arguments in support of *segn*’s early entrance into Old English is that it demonstrates the lowering of L /i/ > /e/ as in the verb L *signare* > OE *segnian*.
318 *DMLBS* s.v., “signum.”
for the treasure (see below) seem to cast an ancient, and possibly specifically Roman, sheen on
the treasure and, thus, the lair as a whole.

Bune and orc

Bune and orc are two types of treasure found in the dragon’s lair. The Dictionary of Old
English defines bune simply as a “type of drinking vessel,” and Bosworth-Toller defines orc as a
“cup,” “tankard,” or “flagon.”319 Roberta Frank closely analyzes both terms in her chapter
“Three ‘Cups’ and a Funeral in Beowulf.”320 Frank suggests that the words used to describe
treasure in Beowulf conjure an image of the past. Because bune and orc do not appear in Ælfric’s
Latin-Old English glossary of words commonly used in a monastery, they are likely to be
specialized words not generally used in “daily life.”321 According to Frank, bune occurs eight
times in Old English. Its etymology is unknown and it has no German cognates, but its
occurrences point to ancient associations. In Beowulf, Wiglaf gazes on the “bunan ond discas”
cups and plates] within the dragon’s lair (2775). The other retainers too take note of the “bunan
ondo roras” [cups and goblets] lying in the chamber when they enter the lair (3047). “[B]unan ond
orcas” also appear at Holofernes’ feast in Judith (18). In the Wanderer, the speaker laments the
loss of a heroic age by evoking a “beorht bune” [bright cup] (94). In glosses, bune is often
equated with carchesium, a “kind of ‘sacrificial vessel’” in classical Latin writings.322 In all three
of its instances in glosses, bune “conveys the antique, exotic, and darkly sacral overtones of
Greek/Latin carchesium: for the audience of Beowulf, it similarly aged and made strange the

319 DOE s.v., “bune”; BT s.v., “orc.”
320 Roberta Frank, “Three ‘Cups’ and a Funeral in Beowulf,” Latin Learning and English Lore (Volumes I
321 Frank, 409.
322 Frank, 411.
metallic cups of the dragon’s hoard.” Frank concludes that bune “accessorize[s] well with precious metal and old-style royalty.”

Orc, another kind of drinking vessel, comes from the “Latin/Greek orca ‘large earthenware vessel, amphora.’” Orc occurs twice in Beowulf, once in Exodus, once in Judith, and once in The Passion of Saint Christopher. Frank notes that in Judith and Saint Christopher, the “orcas” in question “are heathen, eastern, early, and hellbent’ (411). In the Old English Exodus, Moses places the blood from his sacrifice into an orc, which is translated from “Latin/Greek crateras.” The dark overtones of the word continue in its appearance in glosses: “orc renders the harlot’s sinister golden calix [cup] in Rev. 17:4, as well as the pagan Roman simpuvium [sacrificial bowl] in Prudentius’s Peristephanon.” Frank suggests that “by the time Beowulf was written down… this three-letter word had acquired an antique patina and a pagan mythological charge.”

Disc

Alongside bune and orc, disc is also used to describe the treasure of the dragon’s lair. Unlike the previously discussed heathen terms for cups, disc comes from Latin discus and carries specifically Christian associations. This term indicates a “broad, shallow dish” and is used in ecclesiastical contexts for the plate which holds the Eucharist. In its primary definition, disc is easily related to its Latin origin, discus, defined by the DMLBS as a “discus,” “dish,” or

---

323 Frank, 411.
324 Frank, 410.
325 Frank, 411.
326 Frank, 411.
327 Frank, 411.
328 Frank, 411.
329 OED s.v., “dish.”
330 DOE s.v., “disc.”
“bowl.” In OE, *disc* can also carry specifically Christian connotations, as noted in the *Dictionary of Old English*’s entry. The phrase “calic ond disc” refers specifically to the cup used to hold wine and the platter used to hold bread during the Eucharist. This usage appears in the charter “Notes with Regard to Food- rents, Charitable Gifts, etc. from Bury St. Edmunds” in A. J. Robertson’s edition of the Anglo-Saxon Charters. Brihtric, the prior at St. Edmund’s, has “I mæssereaf calix 7 disc” [one mass vestment, cup, and plate] in his possession at the monastery. Although *disc* occurs roughly eighty times in the Old English corpus according to the *Dictionary of Old English*, only two of these instances occur in poetry (specifically *Beowulf*) too infrequently to ascertain whether the term tended toward secular or sacred affiliations in poetry.

As stated above, Wiglaf looks upon the “bunan ond discas” [cups and plates] when he enters the dragon’s lair (2775). The retainers, upon entering the area containing the hoard, see where the “bunan ond orcas, / discas lágon” [cups, goblets, and plates lay] (3047-8). If the Anglo-Saxon reader would have perceived the Christian associations with *disc*, this scene would contain a significant contrast between pagan and Christian objects. To a post-Conversion Anglo-Saxon audience, such terms for heathen objects would lead them to associate the space with the ancient barrows dotting the landscape and the supernatural creatures thought to dwell among them. The presence of *segn* and *disc* in the same scene also bring Roman associations to the foreground, eliciting associations not only with their own current, Christian practices, but also with the old Christianity present on the island before the fall of the Roman Empire.

331 *DMLBS* s.v., “discus.”
333 Robertson, 195.
334 *DOE* s.v., “disc.”
Prepositions

To understand the relationship between spaces, a final note must be made concerning prepositions, although we shall soon see that these devilish lexemes do more to confuse than clarify. It is not the aim of this study to examine every prepositional phrase with relation to the dragon’s lair, but a few of the most significant instances will be presented here. To construct our space, I begin with the basic instances of the characters’ motions in and around the dragon’s lair (leaving out such examples as when people go “to” the lair):

- The Lone Survivor buried the treasure “in” the lair (2232).
- The barrow is located “on wonge”, “nēah” the water, and “bi” the ness (2242, 2243).
- The dragon “ymbehwearf / ealne ūtanweardne” [moved about all the outside] of the lair (2296-7).
- The dragon can situate itself “on wealle” (2307).
- Beowulf sat “on” the cape and spoke to his warriors.
- Beowulf hopes that the dragon will “of earðsele ūt ēesēċēð” [go out from the earth-hall] to meet him in combat (2515).
- Beowulf says that the fight will take place “æt wealle” [at the wall] (2526).
- Beowulf commands his men to wait “on” the barrow while he fights the dragon (2529).
- Beowulf moves toward the dragon’s lair and “hiorosercean bær / under stāncleofu” [wore (his) battle-shirt under the stone cliffs] (2539-40).
- The stream burst “of” [from] the barrow (2546).
- The dragon breathes fire(?) “ūt of stāne” [out from the stone] (2557).
- Beowulf stands “under” the barrow to meet the dragon (2561).
• Wiglaf moves “þurh þone wælrēc” [through the deadly fume(s)] to aid Beowulf (2661). No further details of his movement are given.
• Beowulf sits “on” the seat “bī” the wall (2717, 2716).
• Wiglaf goes “under” the barrow’s roof to bring treasure back to Beowulf (2755).
• Wiglaf sees the sign hanging “hēah ofer” the hoard (2768).
• The dragon lies dead “nēah” his lair but apparently not within it, suggesting that the three attacks took place outside of the structure (2831).
• After Beowulf’s death, the retainers who fled come to the place of battle where Wiglaf chastises them. Wiglaf then sends word to the “hagan” [enclosure?] “up ofer ecgclif” [up over the cliff’s edge] (2892, 2893). Presumably this ‘enclosure’ represents another group of men who had come to the fight, although this is not clear.
• This second group of warriors went “under” Eagle’s Ness to see the two bodies (3031).
• The poet says that the dragon would go “nyðer” [downward] into his den (3044).
• When the men look down on the dragon, they are able to say that it is fifty feet long, but that “him biġ stōdan bunan ond orcas” [cups and bowls stood beside him] (3047).
• The men then push the dragon “ofer weallclif” [over the wall-cliff] into the ocean (3132).

This basic outline of movement is, for the most part, consistent. Beowulf seems to go down to the lair, as evidenced by him commanding his men to wait “on” the barrow and by the presence of an “enclosure” and more men on the ness. The presence of the ness and the proximity to water are also consistent throughout. The dragon seems to come out of his lair to some extent to meet Beowulf in battle, at least his flame does. The details of the motion, like the details of the structure, become problematic.
There are three major discrepancies in the locations of this passage: the location of the barrow, the location of the bodies, and the use of the preposition “under.” The location of a barrow (if we follow this interpretation of the lair) on top of a ness is in line with the tendency to locate elite burials in visible areas as discussed by Semple. The retainers, previously told to wait on the barrow, flee to a forest – also logical. After Wiglaf chastises the retainers at the place of Beowulf’s death, however, a messenger goes to meet the men on top of the ness. Earlier descriptions seem to suggest that the lair itself was located on top of the ness, but if this were the case, the men waiting on the ness would have witnessed the battle between Beowulf and the dragon, just as the cowardly retainers did. The locations of the dragon and Beowulf after the fight should also be close to the entrance of the lair. Beowulf had gone to the entrance of the lair, near enough to see the stone arches supporting it, and this seems to be where the battle was ultimately fought. After Beowulf and the dragon have died, Wiglaf sends the messenger to the top of the cliff. When the men come to see the body of their fallen lord, however, they push the dragon off the cliff. The lair is described as being both on top of a cliff as well as under it.

“Under” is used to describe motion three times: when Beowulf goes “under” the stone-cliffs, when Beowulf goes “under” the barrow to meet the dragon, and when Wiglaf goes “under” the roof of the barrow. Much like the ModE preposition under, OE under can refer to many spatial relationships. In these uses, we are faced with two likely meanings—either Beowulf went underneath the stone-cliffs (i.e., inside of them), or he was at the base of the stone-cliffs. Niles believes that the fight takes place outside of the barrow, which would suggest a meaning of “at the base of” for “under” (32). This seems to follow the logic of the fight scenes—neither Beowulf nor the dragon explicitly enters or exits the lair, but the dragon does make moves to attack Beowulf in their second and third confrontations, suggesting that he is actively seeking
Beowulf out and thus leaving the barrow. That the men on the ness can look down from above and see the dragon also suggests that the fight took place outside of the lair, but the description of the dragon’s corpse surrounded by treasure suggests the opposite.

Like the words discussed in this chapter, the prepositions describing the dragon’s lair are ambiguous and inconsistent. Although it is tempting to dismiss contradictory evidence in favor of a clear story, this does a disservice to our Anglo-Saxon scop. He presents us with a space that is made of both earth and stone, formed into a traditional hall and animal’s den, and imbued with ancient relics and supernatural associations. In order to address these contradictions, we must set aside our modern expectations for a single, physical space and welcome the possibility of a more nuanced (and thus richer) experience of space. Analyzing this space with the Anglo-Saxon appositive style in mind, which will be discussed in the next chapter, we can understand the lair not only from the viewpoint of an Anglo-Saxon poet, but also as a more thematically integral element of the poem.
CHAPTER II

A New Reading of the Dragon’s Lair

As demonstrated by the words discussed in Chapter 1, the *Beowulf*-poet alludes to numerous structures in his descriptions of the dragon’s lair, including prehistoric burial mounds, Roman structures, Anglo-Saxon burial mounds, natural landscapes, and Anglo-Saxon halls. The objects within the lair also have various pagan, Roman, and Christian associations that complicate our reading of the lair. Interpreting the spaces indicated by many of these words, however, must depend heavily on context. The term *stānboga*, for example, could easily refer to a Roman arch, but it has been traditionally understood by *Beowulf*-scholars as the corbelled vault of a megalithic tomb due to the prevalence of such terms as *hlǣw* and *beorg* in descriptions of the dragon’s lair. The *eord* compounds discussed in Chapter 1 combine man-made halls and natural spaces, creating complex and elusive meanings. Rather than attempting to define the dragon’s lair as a specific type of monument or feature, we need to widen our interpretation. What appear to be contradictions may in fact be the result of deliberate choices. The poet selects his descriptive terms based on the scene’s context and manipulates architectural elements to narrate the underlying emotions of and perceptions of the space by the characters. The poet accomplishes this through his use of apposition: the positioning of two or more phrases or terms such that they share a referent. By reading the descriptions of the lair as apposed, and not contradictory, we can understand the space as a literary device that emphasizes the themes of kingship and memory present in the final battle of *Beowulf*.

The generous use of apposition in *Beowulf* has been increasingly recognized as one of the poem’s most recognizable features, even “the very soul of the Old English poetical style,” as
Friedrich Klaeber described it.\textsuperscript{335} Foremost among the studies of this literary device is Fred Robinson’s Beowulf and the Appositive Style.\textsuperscript{336} Early in his first chapter, Robinson notes that the “distinguishing feature” of apposition is parataxis.\textsuperscript{337} When the relationship between phrases is unclear, the reader is forced to draw his or her own conclusions about the implied connection between them. Robinson uses the cowardly retainers to demonstrate this process. He translates the scene thus: “The comrades, the sons of noblemen, did not stand by him together at all.”\textsuperscript{338} On the surface, it seems clear that the “comrades” should not have abandoned their lord, but the implicit logic is that as the “sons of noblemen,” they are “especially obligated” to stand with their lord.\textsuperscript{339} Although loyalty to a lord is reason enough to stand with Beowulf, the apposition of sons of noblemen enforces the necessity for loyalty by referring to cultural tradition. Robinson goes on to discuss how apposition and similarly ambiguous devices support the development of pagan as well as Christian themes in Beowulf.\textsuperscript{340} To invoke both “heroes’ damnation while insisting on their dignity” required “a style more suggestive than assertive, more oblique than direct.”\textsuperscript{341} The poet, regardless of his personal feelings toward the pagan past, could not applaud the pagan religious tradition of his heroes. Nevertheless, through ambiguous references to pagan cultural values, he could indirectly praise such aspects as loyalty and bravery.

\textsuperscript{336} Fred C. Robinson, Beowulf and the Appositive Style (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), vii.
\textsuperscript{337} Robinson, 3.
\textsuperscript{338} Robinson, 4. In Beowulf, the scene reads “Nealles him on hēape handġesteallan, /ēðelinga bearn ymbe ġestōdon” [Not at all did the sons of noblemen, the comrades in the troop stand around him (Beowulf) at all] (2596-97). “Handġesteallan” and “bearn” are in grammatical apposition – both words are in the nominative plural and thus function as the subject(s) of “ġestōdon.”
\textsuperscript{339} Robinson, 4.
\textsuperscript{340} Robinson, 11.
\textsuperscript{341} Robinson, 13.
In order to achieve such a balance, Robinson argues, the *Beowulf*-poet’s use of apposition extended beyond the grammatical apposition demonstrated above. Robinson finds that appositive patterns can appear in relationships between clauses, statements, passages, and digressions:

- **Clausal appositions:** “entire independent clauses stand in the same relation to each other as do individual words in simple appositions.”\(^\text{342}\)

- **Parallel statements:** Two statements relating to the same event are juxtaposed without a “connecting element.”\(^\text{343}\)

- **Apposed passages, used especially often in characterization:** “drawing of parallel portraits so that the juxtaposed descriptions imply through similarity or contrast the essential qualities of a character.”\(^\text{344}\)

- **Retellings:** there are multiple instances of retellings in *Beowulf*, from the poet’s initial statement of “we have heard…” at the beginning, to Unferth’s retelling of the swimming match, to the Fight at Finnsburgh. All this suggests external stories already familiar to the audience and asks them to reflect on what they know of the stories versus what the poet is now telling them.\(^\text{345}\)

By applying these various techniques of the appositive style, the *Beowulf*-poet invites the audience “to read reflectively, pausing to consider an object or action from more than one perspective as the poet supplies alternate phrasings for the same general referent.”\(^\text{346}\) I propose that unraveling the mystery of the dragon’s lair requires such an attention to appositive style.

Although Lori Ann Garner’s work on vernacular architecture and memory (discussed in Chapter 1) acknowledges the difficulties in interpreting the lair as a “real” space because of its materials

\(^{342}\) Robinson, 19.  
\(^{343}\) Robinson, 21.  
\(^{344}\) Robinson, 22.  
\(^{345}\) Robinson, 25.  
\(^{346}\) Robinson, 60.
of construction, her interpretation must be pushed farther. I argue that, in descriptions of the
dragon’s lair, apposition of physical spaces is at work, layering multiple meanings onto a single
space and constructing an imagined space reflective of the events of the poem.

The foundation of this examination relies on Robinson’s “apposed passages,” the combining
of moments and descriptions used to characterize a person or place.\(^{347}\) In defining this concept,
Robinson explains that apposed passages “imply… essential qualities of a character.”\(^{348}\)
Although my study focuses on a place and not a character, the method remains the same. We
must seek the “essential qualities” of the dragon’s lair, not a visualization of its physical form. In
order to group the apposed passages, I will be organizing the descriptions of the dragon’s lair
into a series of scenes.

First, we begin with an overview of the occurrences of the words discussed in the
previous chapter. In Table 2, the instances of each word are noted, and words that occur within
the same scene are grouped together. Each scene is numbered in the far left column and
separated from another scene by horizontal dividing lines. For ease of discourse, I will refer to
scenes by their number throughout the chapter. The Old English, translation, and context are
provided for each word and scene in the middle and far right column respectively. The table
below is comprehensive, but some scenes and words will not be included in the subsequent
analysis due to repetition or problematic terms.\(^{349}\)

\(^{347}\) Robinson, 22.
\(^{348}\) Robinson, 22.
\(^{349}\) Beorg and hlǣw, as discussed in Chapter 1, occur with great frequency in Beowulf. Although the use of
the term is interesting for its allusions to burial and the supernatural, each instance need not be examined.
In scenes 11 and 13, we only know that the barrow is present. Any significance in these uses is found in
the prepositions, which have already been addressed. Beorg is also used in the phrases “beorges weard”
and “biorges weard” [barrow’s guardian], which describe the dragon, not the space in which he lives in
(2524, 3066). Instances of weall will not be discussed unless the context provides a clear meaning.
Because this term is so vague, it is impossible to glean knowledge from it without a significant context for
comparison. Scene 1 is also problematic due to the debate over transcription of hof. If the term is hof, as
Table 2
A Summary of Scenes Describing the Dragon’s Lair

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene Number</th>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Old English Text, Translation, and Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2212 hof</td>
<td>“sē ðe on hēa(um) h(of)e hord beweotode, / stānbeorh stēar(c)ne; stīg under læg / eldum uncūð” [He who in the high court (or, on the high plateau) watched over the hoard, the strong stone-barrow; the path below lay unknown to men] After fifty years of rule, a dragon begins to terrorize Beowulf’s kingdom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2213 stānbeorh, stīg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2232 eorðsele</td>
<td>“Þær wæs swylcra fela / in dām eorðse(le) ærgestēona” [There was much of such ancient treasure in that earth-hall] The thief enters the dragon’s lair and steals a cup.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>2241 beorg</td>
<td>“Beorh eall ġearo / wunode on wonge wætērŷðum nēah, / nīwe be nāsse” [An all-prepared barrow stood on the plain near the ocean, new by the ness] The poet describes the history of the dragon’s lair and the day when the Lone Survivor buried his people’s treasure within it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2243 næss</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the editors of Klaeber’s Beowulf believe, then the scene describes the space in two different ways. The hof refers to constructed, human residences, while stānbeorh appears to indicate either a natural formation or a structure created by prehistoric peoples.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2272 beorg</th>
<th>“sē ðe byrnende biorgas sēċeð” [he who burning seeks barrows]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2276 hearh</td>
<td>“Hē gesēcean sceal / (he)a(r)h on) hrūsan” [He shall seek a heathen place in the earth]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Following the death of the Lone Survivor, a dragon arrives in the land and claims the barrow and treasure for his own.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|   | 2296 hlǣw | “Hāt ond hrēohmōd hlǣw oft ymbheawearf / ealne ētanweardne; nē ðār ēnġ mon / on þ(ām) wēstenne – hwæðer wīġes ēgefēh, / bea(dwe) weorces; hwīlum on beorh æþwearf” [Hot and fierce he often moved all around the outside of barrow; no man there in that wilderness – yet (the dragon) rejoiced in war, in the work of battle; at times he went to his barrow] |
|   | 2298 westen |   |
|   | 2299 beorg | When the dragon realizes a piece of the treasure is missing, he begins his search for the thief. |
| 6.  | 2320 dryhtsele | “hord eft ġescēat, / dryhtsele dyrnne, ēr dæges hwīle” [He hurried back to his hoard, the hidden hall, before the time of day] |
|     | 2322 beorg   | “Hæfde landwara līğe befangen, / bǣle ond bronde; beorges ġetrūwode / wīğes ond wealles” [He had enveloped the people of the land with flame, fire and burning; he trusted in his barrow, his valor and wall.] |
|     | 2323 weall   | After attacking the Geats and burning their halls, the dragon returns to his lair. |

| 7.  | 2410 eorðsele | “Hē ofer willan ġiōng / tō ēaes ē hē eorðsele ānne wise, / hlǣw under hrūsan holmwylme nēh, / ųōġewinne” [He (the thief) went against his will to where he knew of an earth-hall, the barrow under the earth near the sea by the water] |
|     | 2411 holmwylm, | Unwillingly, the thief leads Beowulf and his men to the dragon’s lair. |
|     | hlǣw       | |
|     | 2412 ųōġewin | |
|     | 2417 næss   | “Ġesæt ēa on næsse” [He (Beowulf) sat on the ness] |
|     |             | Upon arriving at the location of the dragon’s lair, Beowulf begins to speak to his retainers. |
### Table 2—Continued

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 8. | 2515 eorðsele | “góf méc se mānsceaða / of eorðsele ūt ţesēċēd” [if that guilty ravager will meet me from out of the earth-hall]  
Beowulf speaks his final boast to the retainers. |
| 9. | 2524 beorg | “Nelle iċ beorges weard / oferflēon fōtes trem, ac unc [feofte] sceal / weordan æt wealle” [I will not flee from the barrow’s guardian the space of a foot, but it will be a battle at the wall for us.]  
“Ċebīde ġē on beorge byrnum werede” [Wait on the barrow, protected in your mail-shirts]  
Beowulf concludes his boast and goes to meet the dragon. |
|   | 2526 weall |   |
|   | 2529 beorg |   |
| 10. | 2540 stānclīf | “hioroscerċean bār / under stānceofu” [(Beowulf) wore (his) battle-shirt under the stone cliffs]  
“Ĝeseah ķā be wealle…sto[n]dan stānbogan, strēam ūt ḣonan / brecan of beorge” [He saw then by the wall… stone arches standing, a stream broke out from them out of the barrow]  
Beowulf first sets eyes on the dragon’s lair. |
<p>|   | 2542 weall |   |
|   | 2545 strēam, stānboga |   |
|   | 2546 beorg |   |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 11. | 2259 beorg | “Biorn under beorge bordrand onswāf” [The warrior below the barrow turned (his) shield]
Beowulf shields himself from the dragon’s onslaught. |
| 12. | 2716 weall | “Ðā se æðeling ġōng, / þæt hē bī wealle wīshycgende / ġesæt on sesse; seah on enta ġeweorc, / hū ðā stānbogan stapulum fæste / ēce eorðreċed innan healde” [Then the hero went, wise in thought, so that he sat on the seat by the wall; he saw the work of giants, how the strong stone arches on columns supported the enduring earth-hall within] Beowulf, having defeated the dragon but now wounded, sits down and gazes upon the dragon’s lair for the second time. |
Table 2—Continued

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>2755 beorg, hrōf</td>
<td>“Under beorges hrōf” [under the barrow’s roof]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2756 sesse</td>
<td>“þā hē bī sesse ġēong” [When he (Wiglaf) went by the seat]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2759 denn, weall</td>
<td>“Ǧeseah ṃā sigehrēðīg… wundur on wealle, / ond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2760 orc</td>
<td>þæs wyrmes dennes, / ealdes ühtflogan, orcas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>stondan [Then the young retainer saw a wonder on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>the wall, and the worm’s den, the old night-flier,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>cups standing there]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2767 segn</td>
<td>“Swylē hē siomian ġeseah segn eall gylden / hēah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ofer horde” [Likewise he saw a standard, all golden,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hanging, high over the hoard]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wiglaf enters the dragon’s lair to bring treasure to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Beowulf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>2773 hlǣw</td>
<td>“Dā iċ on hlǣwe ġefrǣgn hord rēafian, / eald enta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2774 enta geweorc ānne mannan, / him on bearm hladon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>geweorc bunan ond discas / sylfes dōme; segn ēac ġenōm, /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2775 bune, disc bēacna beorhtost” [Then I heard the hoard in the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2776 segn barrow was plundered, the old work of giants, that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>one man loaded cups and plates into his arms, his</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>own choice; he also took the standard, the brightest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>of banners]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The poet retells the story of Wiglaf’s treasure raid.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Line Numbers</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>2840 hringsele hrondum styreded, / ţif hē wæcčgende weard onfundu / būon on beorge”</td>
<td>disturb the ring-hall with hands, if he should discover the guardian, awake in the barrow</td>
<td>The poet recounts the dangers of the dragon’s lair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>2893 ecgclif næss</td>
<td>“Heht dā ḥæt headoweorc tō hagan bīadan / up ofer ecgclif”</td>
<td>Then he ordered someone to announce the battle at the enclosure up over the cliff’s edge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2898 næss</td>
<td>“Lŷt swīgode / nīwra spella sē õe næs ġerād”</td>
<td>He who rode to the ness was not at all silent with new stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>3031 næss</td>
<td>The scene takes place at “Earna Næs” [the Cape of Eagles].</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 18.  | 3045 denn | “nyðer eft ꞉gewāt / dennes niosjan; wæs dā dēaðe | (The dragon) went down to seek his den, then he was 
|      | 3046 eorðscraef | fæst, / hæfde eorðscrafa ende ꞉ġenytod. / Him biğ | fixed in death, had used the last of the earth-caves. 
|      | 3047 bune, orc | stōdan bunan ond orcas, / discas lágon” [(The dragon) went down to seek his den, then he was 
|      | 3048 disc | dragon) went down to seek his den, then he was fixed in death, had used the last of the earth-caves. 
|      | 3053 hringsele | By him stood cups and bowls, lay plates] | “þæt dām hringsele hrīnan ne möste / gumena 
|      |            | ænīg” [so that no one of men might be permitted to touch the ring-hall] | 
|      |            | After the dragon’s death, the poet recounts his actions in life and enumerates his treasures. | |
| 19.  | 3060 weall | The poet says that the dragon did not benefit from the “wrǣte under wealle” [treasures under the wall]. | |
| 20.  | 3066 beorg | “Swā wæs Bīowulf, þā hē biorges weard / sōhte” [So it was for Beowulf, when he sought the barrow’s guardian] | |
|      |            | The poet tells the story of Beowulf’s battle with the dragon. | |
Table 2—Continued

| 21. | 3072 hearh | One who disturbs the lair will be  
|      |            | “hergum ġeheaderod, hellbendum fæst” [confined to  
|      |            | heathen places, fast with strong hell-bonds]  
|      |            | The poet describes the origins of the treasure, this  
|      |            | time as the story of the princes or chieftains who  
|      |            | doomed anyone who touched the treasure to  
|      |            | torment.  

| 22. | 3103 weall | Again, the poet refers to the dragon’s treasure as  
|      |            | “wundur under wealle” [a wonder under the wall].  

| 23. | 3123 inwithrōf | “ĕode eahta sum under inwithrōf” [the best one of  
|      |            | eight, under the evil roof]  
|      |            | The retainers enter the dragon’s lair to view the  
| 3128 sele |            | treasure.  
|      |            | “syðdan orwearde āniȝne dæl / secgas āgēgon on  
|      |            | sele wunian” [as soon as the men saw piece  
|      |            | remaining without a guardian]  
|      |            | The retainers see that the treasure is no longer  
|      |            | guarded and bring it out from the lair.  

These scenes engage in a form of apposition as described by Robinson. Some scenes  
demonstrate internal apposition, in which a single place or feature in one scene is described such  
that two different kinds of structures seem to occupy the same space. Other scenes demonstrate
internal consistency by describing a feature using terms that do not contradict each other. These internally consistent scenes, moreover, are often apposed to other internally consistent scenes. By reading these scenes with Robinson’s definition of the appositive style in mind, we see that the scenes function in multiple ways, both as individual examples of apposed spaces and in groups of contradictory descriptions. Finally, several of these scenes demonstrate the poet’s deliberate use of apposition; the spaces evoked in each scene, whether consistent or apposed, function with relation to the action of the story. As characters’ perceptions and intentions shift, so too do their perspectives and interpretations of the lair.

Scenes 3, 5, 16, and 4 are internally consistent and present the dragon’s lair as a barrow situated atop a ness. In scene 3, we find two words – *beorh* and *næss*. As discussed in Chapter 1, a burial mound located atop a headland would provide the visibility desired for reinforcing power of ruling families.\(^{350}\) Likewise, in scene 5, *beorg* and *hlæw* represent two variations on essentially the same space, with *hlæw* being used more often for structures that were known to have been constructed for burial (and thus bore the names of the individuals buried inside) and *beorg* being used to describe both constructed burials and natural hills (see pages 47-48). Describing the lair’s location as a *westen* is also consistent with understanding the lair as a burial mound located on a ness. In scene 16, the poet describes the *ecgclif* and *næss* when Beowulf’s death is announced to the camp. These landscape features continue to emphasize the physical location of the lair. These three scenes consistently describe the location of the dragon’s lair as a barrow atop a headland, next to the sea, and in an unpopulated area.

The fourth instance of internal consistency in scene 4 is somewhat consistent with the three scenes discussed above, but the use of the term *hearth* shifts the focus away from describing

the lair’s surrounding and to a consideration of the function of the lair. In this scene, *beorg* and *hearth* are the objects of the dragon’s search. The dragon “*biorgas sēceð*” [seeks barrows] and, a few lines later, the poet says that the dragon “*gēsēcean scall / (he)a(r)n on) hrūsan*” [shall seek a heathen place in the earth] (2272, 2275-6). Although “*biorgas*” and “*hearth*” are not technically in grammatical apposition, because they are in separate sentences, they are both the objects of the dragon’s search as well as objects of the verb *secan*, suggesting that they are one and the same space. *Hearth*, as discussed in Chapter 1 (see pages 64-67), can have a wide range of meanings, and it is conceivable that a barrow could act as veneration site for pagan worshippers, effectively functioning both as a *beorg* and *hearth*.

In addition to these internally consistent descriptions, two more scenes could be read as internally consistent, depending on the interpretations of the words within them. In scene 14, the poet describes Wiglaf’s looting of the lair. The terms *enta geweorc*, *bune*, and *segn* all suggest the treasure of an ancient civilization, but *hlæw* and *disc* do not fit this pattern. *Enta geweorc* and *segn* both have Roman connotations, and *bune* is most likely associated with pagan rituals (see pages 78-79). The Latin origins and Christian associations of *disc* may not fit this pattern, but *disc* also has a wide semantic range and could indicate a dish without any further connotations (see pages 79-81). *Hlæw*, if taken to mean a general burial mound, could be associated with prehistoric peoples. The term, however, may be more closely associated with Anglo-Saxon burials due to its high incidence with personal names. Likewise, the frequency with which *hlæw* and *beorg* are used to describe the lair suggests that both terms may be more often used to refer to the lair in a general sense rather than to refer to a specific kind of structure. In this passage, with its emphasis on constructed space and man-made treasure items, *hlæw* seems to be an outlier, used as a general term for the lair and not a specific indication of its construction.
Finally, the terms *eorðsele, holmwyrm, hlæw, yðgewin, and næss* in scene 7 are used in rapid succession to describe the lair and its location when the thief leads Beowulf and his men to it. As in the previous scene, the classification of the scene as internally consistent or internally appositive hinges on one word, in this case, *eorðsele* [earth-hall]. If we understand this term to refer more to a hall-like space than an earthen space, the scene becomes internally appositional, eliciting both a natural feature and man-made construction in the same space. Unfortunately, the terms do not provide a conclusive picture. The use of *hlæw* may cause us to read *eorðsele* as a cave-like structure whose vastness is reminiscent of a hall, rather than a hall whose associations with the dragon connote death and decay. Likewise, because the scene is from the thief’s perspective, it may be that he is viewing the structure more as a hall because for him it is a source of treasure with which to redeem himself in the eyes of his lord. The subsequent descriptive terms highlight the dangers of wilderness and the fear of supernatural creatures haunting the earth. Because he is attempting to regain favor with his lord and avoid the perils of exile, the thief must also be concerned with spaces on the edges or outside of society.

In these internally consistent scenes, the evidence for the lair as a barrow becomes clear – the majority of these scenes describe a burial mound located on a hilltop with high visibility. The only instance of a significant inconsistency thus far is the use of the phrase *enta geweorc*. Even this, however, could be explained if we understand the *enta* as referring to ancient races in general and set aside the phrase’s association with Roman construction. In the remaining scenes, however, terms with strong associations to Roman construction and civilization cannot be explained away. Likewise, words describing the lair in terms of an Anglo-Saxon hall also complicate the interpretation of the lair as a burial mound.
The remaining scenes demonstrate internal apposition, often with a clear shift mid-scene. Two scenes with internal apposition occur with references to hall-like features alongside earthen features. In scene 2, the poet describes the dragon’s lair as an *eordosele* full of “ārğestrēona” [ancient wealth]. This scene emphasizes the hall-like qualities of the structure with its use of a - *sele* compound alongside the term for ancient treasure. The emphasis on *eord* as a construction material, however, points toward either a natural, cave-like structure or a grave. The fact that the treasure is ancient may also support this: the combination of contemporary associations between treasure and halls juxtaposed with images of earth and ancientness allude to the passage of time.

Whereas allusions to contemporary halls and treasure would elicit familiar images of treasure distribution, treasure in the context of earth may have suggested grave goods buried with high-ranking members of society. This connection is emphasized by the Geats’ actions with the treasure following Beowulf’s death. An unnamed person (or persons) decides that the treasure will not be given as gifts in a hall, but will instead be placed on Beowulf’s pyre and in his barrow. As this unknown person watches the passing of a great ruler and fears for a war-torn future, he decides that the treasure, representative of success and power, should also pass into the earth.

Scene 13, in which Wiglaf first enters the dragon’s lair, also juxtaposes hall attributes and cave-like qualities. *Beorg* and *denn* suggest the dark lairs of supernatural spirits, while *orc* and *segn* suggest ancient civilizations. At the same time, we see Wiglaf moving through an animal’s lair, the earth of a burial mound, and a chamber large enough to hold treasure, a fifty foot dragon, and a standard hanging high above anyone standing in the space. The connection between these images can be found in the dominant themes of the poem’s third part, specifically the decay of civilization. In the stories of the Lone Survivor and the powerful chiefs, the treasure hidden
within the barrow belonged to an ancient race and was deposited into the earth. As noted by Semple, Anglo-Saxons drew close connections between landscape and civilization. While early Anglo-Saxons associated barrows with past civilizations and their ancestors, later Anglo-Saxons linked them to supernatural creatures (see pages 16-21). Due to the close relationships between civilization and landscape, the combination of these elements does not seem so unlikely. The dragon’s lair, as a place of danger but also wealth, would naturally lead to both kinds of associations.

Such shifts in description can also be accompanied by shifts in perspective. As the poet narrates the dragon’s death in scene 18, he uses the terms denn and eordæscæf to invoke an underground dwelling and uses bune, orc, and disc to describe the treasure therein. The poet goes on to describe the dragon surrounded by treasure. Here, the poet shifts perspective by blurring the events of the past and present – recalling the life of the dragon as it lies dead before its lair. The location of the dragon also complicates our understanding of this scene. This description follows the retainers’ seeing the dragon lying “on wonge” [on the land] suggesting that the dragon lies dead on the land at the base of the cliff, or at least is visible from the top of the cliff (3039). It is unclear if this description refers to the dragon’s corpse or living body. If the first, the dragon seems to lie in two places: outside the lair (on the “wonge”) where he is easily visible and also inside the lair among his treasure. In this scene, perhaps the poet is actually describing the dragon in life and death simultaneously. While alive, the dragon guarded his hoard closely, staying within the lair among his treasure. In death, he is physically separated from the treasures within but remains closely associated with gold and hoards.

In the remaining scenes, the apposed spaces follow a shift in perspective. The first instance of this occurs in scene 6 when the poet describes the dragon’s first attack on the Geats.
In this passage, the words *dryhtsele* and *beorg* are in close proximity, but there is a significant time shift between the two. When the dragon goes to his *dryhtsele*, he is returning from terrorizing the Geatish people. After his return, the poet describes the dragon in his lair, and labels it a *beorg*. The two terms demonstrate internal apposition, but the significance is lessened by the shift in perspective. When the dragon is attacking other halls, it may be prudent to describe its own home as a hall to reflect a prevalence of threats from other societies. The last third of *Beowulf* seems to have a more intense focus upon invasion and destruction by other groups than in the previous two thirds, and labeling the dragon’s lair as a hall connects the threat of the dragon with the threat of invasion. The poet then describes the lair as a barrow after the action of the story has shifted back to the barrow.

A similar shift in perspectives occurs when the retainers enter the dragon’s lair in scene 23. When Wiglaf leads the men into the lair, they view the space as an *inwithrōf*. As discussed previously, this term likely indicates the “roof” of an “evil one.” At first, this term seems to enforce what we could easily infer, that the dragon is “evil” in the eyes of the Geats. The significance of this term becomes clear five lines later when the retainers look upon the treasure in the *sele* [hall] (3128). The way the retainers perceive the hall shifts based on their perspective. Before entering the hall, these men had passed by the corpses of Beowulf and the dragon, a sight which must have reinforced their perception of the dragon as a cruel, deadly creature. The retainers then passed into the lair to view the hoard under the “evil one’s roof.” After examining the treasure, the retainers may have been reminded of the treasures distributed in their own hall, causing the poet to shift the description’s emphasis from the habitation of an evil creature to a space reminiscent of an Anglo-Saxon hall. Finally, this allusion to hall casts a shadow of despair
on the scene, reminding the retainers that their own experiences of treasure-giving in halls will not be repeated as a result of the dragon’s deeds.

The remaining four scenes describe the changes in description of the dragon’s lair as Beowulf approaches, battles, and slays the dragon. Throughout the course of the battle, Beowulf views the lair in many ways, beginning with natural and hall-like attributes and concluding with images of fallen civilizations. While speaking with his retainers in scene 8, Beowulf hopes that the dragon will come out of the “eorðsele” [earth-hall] to meet him in battle. As we have seen, pinpointing the nature of an eorðsele is difficult, making any conclusions regarding this scene questionable if unsubstantiated by further evidence. Perhaps Beowulf foresees his own death, recognizing that he goes to what might be his own burial within a similar eorðsele. On the other hand, an interpretation of eorðsele with an emphasis on hall-like attributes might come about as a result of Beowulf’s previous fighting experiences with Grendel in Heorot and Grendel’s mother in the mere. Beowulf may view the lair as a hall-like space because his battles have always been closely tied to the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethos and hall culture.

Beowulf approaches the dragon’s lair and views its structure in person for the first time in scene 10. In this scene, the interpretation hinges on the stānboga [stone arch]. As discussed previously, the term out of context would seem more likely to suggest a Roman-style arch than the opening of a cave. The stream seems to support this, as it may allude to the hot springs associated with Roman baths. Both elements, however, could be interpreted as part of a natural cave with a natural spring (see pages 39-42). Nevertheless, the interpretation of stānboga becomes more firmly cemented in Roman architecture after Beowulf kills the dragon and he again looks on the architecture in scene 12. The second time Beowulf looks on the dragon’s lair, the structure he observes appears to be entirely man-made. Read separately from the other
descriptions, the use of _enta geweorc_, _stānboğa_, and _stapol_ to describe the space seem to strongly suggest a form of Roman architecture. _Enta geweorc_ and _stapol_ are used to describe the spaces in _Andreas_ and _enta geweorc_ is used to describe the bathhouse in _The Ruin_. _Eorðreced_, however, casts uncertainty on this reading. As discussed previously, _reced_ is used multiple times to describe Heorot and seems to be firm in its meaning of a hall-like structure or residence. As in _eordsele_, the _eord_- part of the compound complicates the matter – should the _eorðreced_ be understood as a hall made of earth or an opening within the earth? Here, the order of description is necessary to understand the passage. If Beowulf’s impression of the lair as he gazes on it with dying eyes is to view it as a ruin, possibly even specifically Roman, then the use of _eorðreced_ might be read as a shift in Beowulf’s perception as he reflects on his death. The image of the grave as an earth-hall appears throughout Anglo-Saxon poetry, as well as in the late Old English / early Middle English poem _The Grave_. Just as Beowulf’s life fades away, so the significance of the lair shifts from the memory of a thriving civilization to a ruin or grave.

Finally, the poet himself describes Beowulf’s actions and death in scene 15. In this passage, the poet describes the fate of a hypothetical man whom he says cannot enter the barrow, meet the dragon, and still leave with treasure. Although the poet only uses two words to describe the barrow, the juxtaposition between _hringsele_, used twice to describe the dragon’s lair and once to describe Heorot, and _beorg_, used to describe hills and burial mounds, highlights both Beowulf’s nobility and mortality. Just as Beowulf describes the lair in hall-like terms when he first encounters it, so too does the poet in his account of the hypothetical man. First, the lair is a _hringsele_, evoking traditional models of heroism. After the discovery of the dragon, the lair becomes a _beorg_ as the intruder faces his fiery demise.
To claim that the dragon’s lair can be classified as a single type of physical space or monument does not do justice to the literary power of the Beowulf-poet. Throughout the descriptions of this space, the poet weaves together images and associations from numerous spaces in Anglo-Saxon England. He manipulates his vocabulary to highlight shifts in perspective and to demonstrate how changing experiences shape our view of the world around us. The lair represents not only the hellish abode of a supernatural monster or the dark finality of the grave, but also the memories of past civilizations and the warmth of present camaraderie. Those who enter this space experience memories of their past, nostalgia for old civilizations, and the ache of passing time.
CONCLUSION

Current scholarship on the dragon’s lair in *Beowulf* understands the space as a description of a megalithic burial mound. This idea was formulated in the early twentieth century and persists to this day. In this thesis, I have demonstrated that there are significant gaps in this interpretation of the dragon’s lair. Although the past several decades have made great strides in reading the poem as a literary text, problems still remain with respect to interpreting this particular space. By continuing to interpret the lair as a historical space, we forfeit a deeper understanding of the *Beowulf*-poet’s art and Anglo-Saxon poetry as a whole. Despite the prevalence of rare terms used to describe the lair, a more nuanced reading of the poem is possible by understanding the contradictory descriptions as symptomatic of the poet’s appositive style and not indicative of the poet’s inattention to detail and consistency. Moreover, what have until now been understood as contradictions actually deepen our understanding of the lair and, thus, the poem. By juxtaposing different spaces familiar to an Anglo-Saxon audience, the *Beowulf*-poet connects spaces of life with spaces of death. Each combination of contradictory descriptions paints a slightly different picture. For example, the *beorg* contains a *disc*, connecting the Christian Eucharist with burial practice. What, then, would it mean to bury an object that brings about spiritual life? The allusions to Roman architecture exist in the same physical space as the concept of the Anglo-Saxon hall. Here, a deceased society perhaps prefigures the demise of that which is current. The space is simultaneously a ring-hall and earth-cave. The poet alludes to a buried hall—a familiar space dislocated from its natural place and transplanted into cold, dark ground. The combination of these descriptions that play on themes of death, ruin, and the passing of society highlights their commonalities. The *Beowulf*-poet intentionally manipulates his
descriptions of the dragon’s lair to emphasize the shifts in Beowulf’s perceptions of the lair. As Beowulf progresses through both the space and the narrative, his perception of the dragon’s lair shifts in a way that highlights the poem’s shifting themes. As Beowulf transitions from a living hero to a fallen warrior, the spaces around him shift from spaces associated with Anglo-Saxon daily life to spaces of ruin and death.

In this thesis, I have limited my scope to the dragon’s lair. Future studies might consider how the poet manipulates descriptions of Heorot and the Grendel-mere. These spaces have been more thoroughly studied than the dragon’s lair, but a close reading of the terms used to describe the spaces would be beneficial. Likewise, a consideration of how the poet narrates these spaces could also prove fruitful, particularly with regard to the Grendel-mere. Like the fight at the dragon’s lair, Beowulf’s experience at the Grendel-mere shows him passing through many spaces, from the path leading to the mere, through the water, and into the subterranean cave. In this thesis, I have suggested that a shift in perspective takes places as Beowulf experiences his final battle and death. Does a similar pattern exist in the descriptions of the Grendel-mere? If the narration of space during this battle reflects a shift in Beowulf’s perception of the events of the poem, analyzing this scene could shed light on the themes of revenge and feud.

It would also be beneficial to focus on issues such as style, meter, and audience in future studies of the dragon’s lair. In this thesis, I have not given consideration to the placement of the terms in alliterative lines. By examining these terms in their metrical context, we might see a clearer picture of the poet’s process for choosing terms. In particular, this approach might shed light on how the poet chose between using terms such as hlǣw and beorg, the two terms most common in describing the lair. In some instances, however, alliteration would not influence word
choices. The compounds *eordele*, *eordreced*, and *eoroscræf* all begin with *eor-*, suggesting that in these particular instances, meter would not be a factor in the poet’s word choice.

Philological studies of space such as the one presented in this thesis could be productively applied to other Anglo-Saxon poems. Studies of such poems as *The Ruin*, *The Wife’s Lament*, *Andreas*, and *Guthlac A and B*, which share many of the same problematic terms for architecture that appear in *Beowulf*, note their attention to architectural detail as well as their propensity toward ambiguity. To undertake a study similar to this thesis for any of these poems would prove valuable. *Andreas* and *Beowulf* share many similarities in diction, and a comparison between the terms used to describe spaces in these poems could be fruitful. *The Ruin*, like *Beowulf*, contains many terms to describe spaces, including *wealstan*, *burgstede*, *enta geweorc*, *hrof*, and many others. In addition, *The Ruin* also contains many adjectives and verbs related to structures, while *Beowulf’s* terms are primarily nouns. *The Wife’s Lament* and the *Guthlac* poems might produce results most similar to those found in this thesis because these poems focus on individuals living and moving within structures.

A consideration of the texts found alongside *Beowulf* in the Nowell Codex – *Saint Christopher*, *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, *The Wonders of the East*, and *Judith* would also prove fruitful. Each of these texts deals with some form of monstrosity, from the dog-headed Saint Christopher to the revelry and gruesome death of Holofernes. The *Letter* and the *Wonders* texts both detail the fantastical races found in far-off lands. Just as the *Beowulf*-poet asks us to create an imagined space within our mind, so too is the audience of the *Wonders* asked to imagine lands and creatures such as have never before been seen.

By reading the dragon’s lair in *Beowulf* as an imagined, literary space, we gain access to the vast array of associations that swirl just below its surface. To extend this approach into other
avenues of study would vastly enhance our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon worldview and deepen our understanding of their literary culture. No longer would our discussions of the spaces in poems hinge solely on the presence of archaeological evidence to corroborate written evidence and vice versa. By understanding these spaces as literary inventions controlled and manipulated by the poet, we can combine archaeological information with literary approaches to understand the complexities and nuances of the Anglo-Saxon poetic style.


Dictionary of Old English Corpus. University of Toronto.

http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca.ezp1.lib.umn.edu/doecorpus/.


