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**Beowulf's Great Hall**

READERS OF BEOWULF will be familiar with the moment, early in the poem, when Hrothgar, the reigning king of Denmark in the Scylding line of kings, orders that a great hall be built. Soon, the poet says, it was completely Finished, 'the biggest of halls':

Then, as I have heard, the work of constructing a building

Was proclaimed to many a tribe throughout this middle earth.

In time ‚Äî quickly, as such things happen among men ‚Äî

It was all ready, the biggest of halls.

He whose word was law

Far and wide gave it the name 'Heorot'. (LINES 74-79)

The hall stands high, a visible sign of the wealth and stature of the Scylding kings: 'The hall towered up, high and wide gabled' (81-82). It is a bright counterpart to the dark, watery nether-regions where the demonic Grendel-creatures make their home. Between these two opposite poles, associated with human civilization at its most cultured and subhuman life at its most horrific, the action of the main part of" Beowulf takes place.

Later we are told more about the hall, its setting, and its appearance. It is located not more than a few miles inland. It literally shines with gold, as we are told when Beowulf and his men first approach it:

The men did not dally; they strode inland in a group

Until they were able to discern the timbered hall,

Splendid and ornamented with gold.

The building in which that powerful man held court

Was the foremost of halls under heaven;

Its radiance shone over many lands. (306-11)

The road leading to the hall (a street, from the Latin strata) is paved in a manner that is perhaps meant to be reminiscent of Roman roads: 'the road was cobbled' (320). As for the main door, it is 'firmly secured with iron hinges or bolts' (722), and so the ease with which Grendel later thrusts it open tells us something of that monster's strength. Indeed, the whole hall is secured both within and without 'with expertly wrought iron fastenings' (774-75) that prevent it from falling apart during the violent struggle between Beowulf and his adversary.

Inside the hall is a central hearth to which the visitors are welcomed. Here are enough benches to provide seating for both the Geatish visitors and a larger group of Danes, the poet says, than he has ever heard of gathered together peaceably (1011-12). Later, benches like these are ranged against the building's interior walls so as to serve, together with mattresses and pillows, as beds for the men (1239-46). Before lying down, the men secure their weapons on the walls so as to have them at hand in the event of a night-time attack. In keeping with the general standard of luxury at Heorot, the benches are no ordinary household items, for they too are 'decorated with gold' (777).

One is left to image how large Hrothgar's hall is, but there must be room, in addition to all else, for display of the eight horses with gold-plated head-gear that Hrothgar presents as gifts to the hero after his initial victory (1035-37).Standing separate from the mead-benches is the gif-stol 'gift throne' (168) where Hrothgar sits in the midst of his elite retinue (356-57). This probably resembles a raised stool more closely than a modern monarch's throne. The floor of the hall is described as fag (725), though whether that adjective here means 'parti-coloured' (with reference to Roman-style tessellated paving), 'shining' (with possible reference to painted wooden flooring), or 'blood-stained' is open to debate. Finally, the hall is 'adorned with ivory' (banfag, 780), whatever kind of decoration is thereby implied.

Although the hall appears to be freestanding, in its neighborhood are outlying buildings. When King Hrothgar exits Heorot as night is falling, he goes to a separate building to which his queen, Wealhtheow, seems already to have retired. When he returns next morning, he arrives 'from the women's chamber' (of

brydbure, 921). During the time of Grendel's first ravages, some Danes offer pagan sacrifice 'at heathen shrines' (√¶t h√¶rg-trafum, 175). One is left wondering whether these rites (which the narrator condemns) are undertaken in the immediate proximity of Heorot or at some distance away. A reasonable guess is that a chief shrine would be located close by the hall for use on ceremonial occasions, but no information is provided about that.

Specialists of Beowulf have naturally wondered if archaeology can help us visualize how the poet and his lute Anglo-Saxon audience might have imagined Heorot to be, when those people were contemplating the roots of their own culture in a much earlier period across the North Sea (c. AD 500). Halls such as

were built in the late tenth-century Viking military camp at Trelleborg, in southwest Zealand, the largest Danish island, are sometimes brought to bear on that connection, despite the anachronism involved. But what of that earlier pre-Viking era? Is the Beowulf poet's conception of Heorot merely a fantasy

relating to a vanished world of the heroic imagination, or did a great hall corresponding to the poet's imagined one actually exist?

Scholars have long known that, if there ever was such a hall, it must have been at or near the village of Gammel Lejre, about five miles southwest of the modern city of Roskilde, in north Zealand. Today ammel Lejre is a small village that time has largely passed by. During the Middle Ages, however, Lejre (Latin

Lethra, Old Norse Hlei‚àÇragar‚àÇr) was famed as the chief seat of power of the Skj√∂ldung line of Danish kings (the equivalents to the Scylding kings of Beowulf). The late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century chroniclers Sven Aggesen and Saxo Grammaticus are in agreement on that point, as are the

thirteenth-century Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson and the late Old Icelandic Saga of King Hrolf Kraki. Writing in 1013-18, the chronicler Thietmar of Merseburg speaks of Lejre as 'the centre of the kingdom', and early maps of Denmark, such as the one published in J.L. Gottfriedt's Vermehrte Archontologia

Cosmica (1695), show that, well into the modern period, Lejre was located very near to what was conceived to be the centre of the realm.

Some impressive artefacts from the late Iron Age (which for Denmark encompasses into the post-Roman migration period) or Viking Age have been recovered in the neighbourhood, such as the 'Lejre hoard', a set of wares pertaining to the uppermost ranks of society. And Lejre was clearly a centre of power going far back into prehistory, for it is ringed with ancient monuments of a variety of kinds. These include an exceptionally large cremation mound, Grydeh√∏j, built in honour of an unknown seventh-century chieftain or king, and, right by it, a Viking Age ship-shaped stone setting that is the largest of its kind in southern Scandinavia, and one of a cluster of such stone settings that once stood here.

Elsewhere in the vicinity of Lejre are close to a hundred tumuli (some of them now levelled) dating chiefly from the Bronze Age though some are from the Neolithic and others from the Iron Age. So Lejre can be regarded as an archaeological site of extraordinary interest ‚Äî but no remains of a great hall

could be found there. Until recently, therefore, the question of the real-world basis of the narrative of Beowulf had generally ceased to be asked.

This status quo ought to have been ruffled by excavations undertaken in 1986-88 under the direction of the archaeologist Tom Christensen of Roskilde Museum. Just southwest of Gammel Lejre were found the postholes of a great hall 48.5 metres long by 11.5 metres wide at its midpoint. Nearby were traces of

outbuildings including a smithy, an apparent kitchen, an apparent barn or stables, and a separate longhouse that may have served as living quarters for members of the Lejre elite. This hall, about half the length of a football pitch, was twice the size of the houses at Trelleborg and almost twice the size

of Yeavering, the early seventh-century Northumbrian palace that is the largest building known from early Anglo-Saxon England.

Remains of wood from its foundations have been radiocarbon-dated to about AD 880. The hall is therefore of Viking Age date, very close to the time when King Alfred of Wessex and the Danish chieftain Guthrum consented to the Treaty of Wedmore (AD 886-90), the agreement that confirmed peace between their warring armies while also recognizing the autonomy of the Danelaw in England. From then

to the time when the unique Beowulf manuscript was written in about AD 1000, the story of Danish-English interactions in Britain is one of the gradual assimilation of people of Scandinavian descent into an integrated nation headed by the West Saxon royal line.

The Viking Age hall-complex at Lejre ought therefore to be of considerable interest to Anglo-Saxonists and Beowulf enthusiasts, even though it is of too late a date to be enlisted into 'the search for the historical Heorot'. This great hall was not the first one to be built at Lejre, however. Posthole

evidence now confirms that an earlier hall of the same dimensions had stood on almost exactly the same spot. The foundations of this earlier hall have been radiocarbon-dated to c. AD 680, close to the time when the great mound of Grydeh√∏j was erected. But even this is not the end of the story, for in a new

round of excavations undertaken by Christensen during the summers of 2004-05, the remains of a third hall have been discovered on a small hill about 500 metres north of the first site. This hall, equal to the other two in length though somewhat less in width, appears to have been built during the mid-sixth

century. It therefore pertains to the very time when the Beowulf poet imagines Hrothgar to have ruled from Heorot.

This sixth-century hall at Lejre was built on a prominence that put it in direct line of sight with some of the more ancient mounds of this area. Taken as an ensemble, these structures must have been suggestive of the glory of the past and present rulers of Zealand. As a remarkable gesture affirming a connection to

an earlier era, the north side of the sixth-century hall was built directly against the base of a Bronze Age tumulus. These dramatic discoveries confirm that the Beowulf poet's Fictions about a hall named 'Heorot' are based upon a core of historical fact. During a period of almost five hundred years, one or another of these halls did tower high at Lejre. Then, at the end of the first millennium AD, King Harald Gormsson (nicknamed 'Bluetooth'), a new convert to Christianity and ruler of a kingdom that he had only recently united by force of arms, established his capital a few miles away where the coastal city of Roskilde now stands. The kings and queens of Denmark have been buried here ever since; while Lejre became a cultural backwater of no particular significance apart from its archaeological remains.

There is yet more, however, that ought to draw the attention of Beowulf scholars to Gammel Lejre and its immediate environs. Looking west from either of the two hall sites at Lejre, one faces a curious

hummocky region, where no traces of ancient monuments are to be found. This area seems always to have been a hinterland. At the end of the last Ice Age, retreating sheets of ice deposited vast quantities of rubble here in a kind of devil's garden. The resulting area, known to geologists as a dead-ice landscape,

consists of nothing but lakes or tarns (or kettle holes) interspersed among hillocks. In ancient times, much of this land is likely to have been wooded. It would have been a hunter's paradise though a farmer's nightmare; and indeed, in the eighteenth century, nearby Ledreborg Palace was owned by the king's master of the hunt, Count C.F. Holstein (1735-99). The first sharply-defined hills in this pockmarked area are no more than a fifteen-minute walk from either of the two hall sites. The area remains practically devoid of human habitations, though a modern centre for the study of 'living history and archaeology', the Lejre Historisk-Ark√¶ologisk Fors√∏gscenter (Lejre Experimental Centre), is now located

there.

Imagine yourself taking a walk here. Setting out west from the site of the earliest hall, you first cross a flat field typical of the agrarian landscape of Zealand. A straight roadway here would be well suited to racing horses, if you happened to have them. Before long you approach the dead-ice zone. Here your

path may lead under great, contorted oak trees interspersed among ponds and slopes, or you may approach hillocks crowned by beech groves of the kind that, in pagan days, served Germanic tribesmen as places of worship. Here and there are patches of sunlight, and in autumn you may find a variety of haws and berries. Now and again, though, you may be caught up short by half-lit pools infiltrated by alders, whose weird reflections shimmer in the water. You may recall with a shiver the images you have seen of the notorious bog people of Denmark, the apparent victims of sacrificial rites practised during the early

Iron Age. The practice seems to have been discontinued only around AD 500, though pagan sacrifice surely continued in other forms.

Here, in the immediate neighborhood of Lejre, can be found all the essential visual ingredients of the Beowulf story. There is the hall, with its marvellously crafted tokens of civilization. There are enough ancient barrows in this region to satisfy any treasure-seeker. Indeed, one of them, √òm Jaettestue,

a well-preserved megalithic tomb 2 kilometres from Gammel Lejre, even has a spacious enough interior to accommodate any fifty-foot-long dragon. There are also some prominent stone ship-settings at Lejre (or there once were ‚Äî only one remains), if one wishes to connect (hut fact to the scene of the ship burial of Scyld Scefing with which the narrative action of Beowulf begins. Most important, at Lejre there has long existed a bipolar topography suggestive of an 'axis of good and evil', for directly facing the hall, almost like its natural adversary, is the hinterland, with the potentially horrid secrets of its bogs. For a long time, what appear to have been the greatest halls of their era in southern Scandinavia faced a wasteland that could have seemed haunted by the kind of weird creatures that peopled that medieval book of bad dreams, the Marvels of the East.

Did King Hrothgar and the other kings mentioned in Beowulf once distribute rings to their retainers in one of these halls? Is it at one of these two excavated sites that the hall named Heorot once stood? This is a pretty thought, but only that, for still no evidence exists that the Scylding/Skj√∂ldung kings of English and Scandinavian tradition are anything other than the products of a mythopoeic imagination. Rather than seeking for historical proto-types for these kings, it may be wiser to relate them to Danish

aspirations for a distinguished point of ethnic origins. Perhaps some actual rulers of Zealand, occupying the later of these hall sites during the last three centuries of the first millennium, wished to shore up their prestige through stories of predecessors whom they imagined to have lived at or near that earlier hall site during a fabled Age of Gold. The methodical rebuilding of the later Lejre halls in a place associated with so many other ancient monuments ‚Äî including Grydeh√∏j, where a spectacular cremation funeral must long have been kept in mind ‚Äî fuels such speculations, though they must remain no more than that.

Whatever the reasons for the prominence of this place may have been (and some of those reasons are sure to have been practical ones to do with trade, manufacture, the control of crucial sea routes, and the management of a successful agrarian economy), three great halls did stand high at Lejre, one after another, for roughly half a millennium. Lejre may then have been the chief 'central place' in this part of southern Scandinavia, having apparently supplanted the third- and fourth-century hall-complex at Gudme, on the island of Funen, in that regard. To claim that Lejre was the centre from which the kings

of a land that can fairly be called 'Denmark' exercised their power would perhaps involve some exaggeration; but there is no reason to assume that these rulers had merely local authority.

Why did Lejre come to occupy so large a place in the pages of medieval chroniclers and saga-writers, as well as of modern antiquarians, poets, and Danish patriots, while other 'central places' known to have existed during this same epoch (such as Gudme in Funen, Himling√∏je or Tiss√∏ in Zealand, and Uppr√•ka in Scania) had no such fame? Since this question involves many gaps in the historical record, it cannot easily be answered. A reasonable short answer, however, might be that Lejre was not only a centre of material power, it also had the stories of the Skj√∂ldung kings, while none of the others did.

The upshot of these remarks is that there are now two fixed points between which the making of the poem that we call Beowulf must be understood. One is the unique manuscript text of that poem as written down in about AD 1000. The other is the physical ground at Lejre where the legendary Skj√∂ldung kings are said to have had their hall, and where some unknown rulers of Zealand actually did.

MAP: Denmark in 1585. Lejre is a few miles southwest of Roskilde, close to the

centre of the large island of Zealand.

PHOTO (COLOR): The Viking Age hall at Lejre, Zealand, following excavations in

the mid-1980s.

PHOTO (COLOR): A Scandinavian helmet of c. 600 AD, the period in which Beowulf

is set. Left: The opening lines of the only extant Beowulf manuscript, c. 1000.

PHOTO (COLOR): A Grendel-like giant, from an eleventh-century copy of Marvels of

the East.

PHOTO (COLOR): An ancient oak tree by Langs√∏, near Lejre.

PHOTO (COLOR): Part of the Viking Age Lejre hoard of luxury objects, discovered

in 1850.

PHOTO (COLOR): Still from Beowulf and Grendel, released in North America in

2006.

PHOTO (COLOR): The reconstructed Viking longhouse at Trelleborg, Zealand.

PHOTO (COLOR): The reconstructed Iron-Age village at Lejre, located in the

middle of the Dead Ice zone.

FOR FURTHER READING

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