

THE GRAVE IN EARLY MIDDLE ENGLISH VERSE: METAPHOR AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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The image of the grave as a house occurs frequently in mediaeval English works. The following lines from four twelfth- and thirteenth-century poems provide the fullest expression of its various aspects:

Wen þe turf is þi tuur,
& þi put is þi bour.

("When the Turf is Thy Tower," lines 1-2)¹

Nu sal þin halle wid spade ben wrout,
.
Ðin hus is sone ibuld þer þu salt wonien inne,
Boþe þe wirst & þe rouf sal liggen uppon þin chinne.

("The Latemest Day," lines 25, 29-30)²

Nu þu hauest neowe hus, inne beþrunge;
Lowe beop [þe h]elewoves, unhelþe beop þe sidwoves;
Ðin rof liiþ on þine breoste ful [neih].

("Soul's Address to the Body," lines C29-31)³

Ne bið nu þin hus healice itinbred;
Hit bið unheh and lah þonne þu list þerinne;
Ðe helewazes beoð laþe, sidwazes unheþe,

þe rof bið ibyld þire broste ful neh.
 ("The Grave," lines 7-10)⁴

The last four lines quoted, in fact, represent only the most intense expression of the image in "The Grave." As Rosemary Woolf remarks, the entire poem "plays with the conceit of the grave as a house, exploiting with ironic wit the discords that arise from this basic metaphor. The oddity of the grave, thought of as a house, is stressed: the walls are disproportionately low, there are no doors, and the roof lies immediately above its inhabitant's chest. . . ."⁵ And Douglas D. Short, while arguing that the work succeeds aesthetically as much from "the manipulations and embellishments of the rhetorical mode in which it is cast" as from its basic metaphor,⁶ confirms, nevertheless, that its "most conspicuous rhetorical stratagem . . . is the elaborate metaphor that structures the poem, a metaphor in which the grave is consistently envisioned as a house."⁷ Short's thorough investigation of the structure of "The Grave" reveals with great detail the precise rhetorical methods through which the writer of the lyric embodied the grim humour and ironic wit perceived by Woolf, but their common view of the role enacted by the grave-house *metaphor* in both this work and others is complicated by the fact that Anglo-Saxon graves were often conceived of and built as houses.⁸

For archaeologists interested in the early history of Britain, the exhumation of graves has traditionally been one of the most fruitful of endeavours. And, though the objects interred with the dead in their graves generally receive more attention than the structure of the graves themselves, structural features have not gone entirely unnoticed. For example, the examination of the positions of skeletal remains in exhumed graves at Empingham, Rutland, leads Nicholas Reynolds to draw the following conclusion:

It seems likely that these (and other) movements of parts of the skeletons happened somewhat at random and while some ligaments were still in existence. Some of the features may be attributable to the natural decay of fatty tissues, but some are too pronounced for this to be the sole cause of movement. The disturbances also seem to be too marked to

be the work of earthworms or other burrowing creatures. Indeed, when the bones moved, they clearly had empty space around them into which they could fall. This could not have been the case if the grave had been backfilled around the body immediately after burial. Few of the graves could have accommodated a coffin, nor was there any evidence of such a structure. Had the graves remained completely open, one might have expected far greater interference with the bodies; and the excellent state of preservation of the metalwork, and indeed of the skeletal material, argues against any long exposure. The only explanation seems to be that the grave was covered with some form of timber planking, and it seems likely that the material excavated from the grave pit was then piled on top of the timber structure. As the timber decayed, presumably slightly slower than the body, the falling-in of the overlying material would cause dislocations of the kind observed here.⁹

Excavations at Mucking, Essex, also reveal evidence of graves apparently designed to receive "wood 'covers'".¹⁰ And it seems clear, from the appearance of sockets and/or ledges along the upper rims of a number of graves in a seventh-century cemetery at St Peter's, Kent, that a variety of coverings were used there:

Some sockets are deep, their plan and the slight ridge between their bases and the grave walls strongly suggesting that they were intended to hold vertical posts. Some, narrow and elongated, and much shallower, suggest rather cross-beams. One set, sub-rectangular in cross section and cut so as to point upwards and inwards at an angle of about 30 degrees from vertical, clearly indicates a pitched structure.¹¹

Certain of these Kentish graves with wide and shallow ledges appear to have been covered with lids; others, whose ledges are deeper and less well cut, were probably covered with stone or timber slabs.¹²

Even at the most famous burial site from the Anglo-Saxon period, Sutton Hoo, there is evidence that a house-like structure was built to

enclose the objects interred along with the body (if, in fact, there ever was a body):

A strongly constructed wooden cabin, with end-walls and high-pitched gabled roof, its eaves running over the tops of the gunwales, was erected amidships. The burial deposit was laid out in it and strewn with bracken. This practice has also been observed in Viking-ship burials in Norway. The sand that had been excavated to make the trench for the boat was then filled back into the space between the edges of the trench and the sides of the ship, and into the boat itself, so that the ship's timbers were imprisoned in solid sand. Finally the ground was levelled off and a mound, made from material from the surrounding heath, was built up over the ship.¹³

It should be clear from these examples that, in the pre-Christian period, the Anglo-Saxons often built graves that were covered chambers suggestive of houses, particularly if those covers were pitched in shape. And, though the practice of burying objects of value with the dead was gradually eliminated during the Christian period, there is no evidence that the actual structure of the grave changed significantly. Sutton Hoo, for example, is generally dated in the Christian era, though Rædwald, the king in whose honour that cenotaph was probably constructed, apparently lapsed after conversion.¹⁴ Indisputable evidence of the survival of the house-like structure of graves in the Christian period is found in a passage quoted by Reynolds, Bede's description of the grave site of St Chad: "Is ofer his byrgenne stówe treowgeweorc on gelicnesse medmicles huses geworht mid hrægle gegyrwed."¹⁵

The relevance of the archaeological findings about the structure of Anglo-Saxon graves to many of the details in the passages quoted at the beginning of this article should be readily apparent. The conception of the grave as a house or, by imaginative extension, a hall or bower, would follow naturally from this structure. Lines referring to low walls and low, timbered roofs would not have struck their original readers as quite so odd or witty as they strike us. Even the reference to the "wirst," with the meaning "ridgepole," in "The Latemest Day,"

line 30, would follow, if what was being referred to was a pitched covering such as apparently occurred at St Peter's, Kent, and at Sutton Hoo. Further, if Reynolds' suspicion, that excavated material from the grave pit was piled back in a mound on top of a covering structure, is correct, then the turf would, quite literally, be a tower as it is described in the lyric of that title.

The purpose in bringing to light this resemblance between literary image and archaeological fact is certainly not to invalidate the intelligent and sensitive perceptions of critics such as Woolf or Short. Nor is it to argue for strict verisimilitude in early mediaeval English poetry: we have, for example, what is apparently the Latin source of "When the Turf is Thy Tower,"¹⁶ and there is clearly some literary relation between the "Soul's Address" and both "The Grave" and "The Latest Day." The purpose, rather, is to return to one particular image, the grave as a house, a resonance that it lost in its transformation into conventionality, a transformation of which we must constantly be aware if we are to achieve a clearer understanding of tone and meaning in literary artifacts, and of the imaginations that created them.

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NOTES

¹ *English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Carleton Brown (Oxford 1932; rpt. 1962) 54.

² *English Lyrics* (at n. 1) 47. Brown prints two of the four versions that remain of this poem. "Wirst," i.e., "ridgepole" or, perhaps, "ceiling."

³ *Die Fragmente der Reden der Seele an den Leichnam in zwei Handschriften zu Worcester und Oxford*, ed. Richard Buchholz (Erlangen 1890; rpt. Amsterdam 1970) 4. "[H]elewewes," i.e., "endwalls," MS. "elewewes." An alternative reconstruction to "neih," line 31, is

"loh," which provides the line with alliteration; however, see line 10 of "The Grave" below.

⁴ "The Grave" has been edited a number of times. Among these editions are ones by Buchholz (at n. 3) 11 and Arnold Schroerer, "The Grave," *Anglia* 5 (1882) 289-90. Douglas D. Short, in "Aesthetics and Unpleasantness: Classical Rhetoric in the Medieval English Lyric 'The Grave'," *SN* 48 (1976) 291-99, also prints the complete poem. There is obviously some relation between the "Soul's Address" and "The Grave," but what it precisely is has not been determined. The two poems share another reference to the grave as a house: "Dureleas is þet hus," ("The Grave," line 13) and "on durelease huse," ("Soul's Address," lines B40 and E8).

⁵ Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford 1968) 83.

⁶ Short (at n. 4) 299.

⁷ Short (at n. 4) 293.

⁸ Among the other works in which the image of the grave as a house occurs are: "Proprietates Mortis," line 21 (*English Lyrics* [at n.1] 130); "Erthe upon Erthe," ed. Hilda Murray, EETS, O.S. 141, MS. Harleian 913 (p. 2, line 17) and MS. Cambridge Univ. Libr. Ii 4.9. (p. 32, line 26); *The Towneley Plays*, XXXI ("Lazarus"), ed. George England and Alfred W. Pollard, EETS, E.S. 71, p. 391 (lines 135-36); "þe Desputisoun biþwen þe Bodí and þe Soule," ed. Wilhelm Linow, *Erlanger Beiträge zur englischen Philologie*, I, p. 27 (lines 47-48); "Die Boten des Todes," ed. Max Kaluza, *Englischen Studien* 14 (1890) 186 (lines 153-56).

⁹ Nicholas Reynolds, "The Structure of Anglo-Saxon Graves," *Antiquity* 50 (1976) 142.

¹⁰ M.U. and W.T. Jones, "The Crop-mark Sites at Mucking, Essex, England," in *Recent Archaeological Excavations in Europe*, ed. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (London 1975) 175-76.

¹¹ A.C. Hogarth, "Structural Features in Anglo-Saxon Graves," *The Archaeological Journal* 130 (1973) 111.

¹² Hogarth (at n. 11) 111.

¹³ Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial: A Handbook* (London 1968; 3rd ed., 1979) 73.

¹⁴ Bruce-Mitford (at n. 13) 93-97. The term "cenotaph" is his.

¹⁵ *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the*

English People, ed. Thomas Miller, Pt. I, 2, EETS, O.S. 96 (London 1891; rpt. 1959) 272 (lines 4-6). Another reference to the grave as a house occurs in the ninth Vercelli homily in a passage listing the five images of hell: "Donne is ðære feorðan helle onlicnes byrgen/nemened, forþan þæs huses hrof bið <gehneged> þe him onufan ðam breostum siteð . . .," *Vercelli Homilies IX-XXIII*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Toronto 1981) 5, lines 79-81.

¹⁶ See *English Lyrics* (at n. 1) 191.