

## SACRED GROVES, MARVELLOUS WATERS, AND GRENDEL'S ABODE

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Neither Germanic nor Latin literature provides an exact copy of Grendel's abode, though most elements of the scene in *Beowulf* can be found in one place or another. Evidence of borrowing has been detected, but there is considerable difference of opinion regarding the matter of "sources." Malone convincingly dismissed the older view that we have in *Beowulf* a folklore setting analogous to that in chapters 65 and 66 of the fourteenth-century *Grettir's Saga*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Andersson argues that the "scenic fullness" of the place is owed to Virgil and not to Germanic tradition.<sup>2</sup> Renoir is among those pointing to the Virgilian parallels, but he does so mainly to compare the techniques of the two poets, using one to illuminate the other without claiming to prove that the *Beowulf*-poet necessarily drew upon Virgil.<sup>3</sup> I would like to broaden the field of Renoir's comparison to include the relevant topoi in classical and later Latin literature. In addition, Andersson's argument can be extended to show that the nearest previous analogues to Grendel's home, if not its sources, are to be found in the Latin tradition beginning with Virgil, together with certain commonplace features of the Christian hell.

Grendel's abode is a hidden land with swamps, steep and windy bluffs, narrow paths over forbidding terrain, and bottomless, turbulent waters that are mingled with blood and gore.<sup>4</sup> Tossing waves rise up to the clouds when the wind blows, and a stream goes down beneath the mists or darkness

of the bluffs. Every night fire may be seen on the water. But the groves (bearwas, 1363) which overhang it are covered with frost; trees lean over a particular grey stone. Serpents and other beasts inhabit the area. The place is so frightful that a hart, chased by hounds, would rather die than risk going in.

This is a composite picture, and we shall see that the actual appearance depends upon the feelings of the characters. It is small wonder that some have sought a real place as the original for this dynamic scene, but, as Malone remarks, the true parallels "belong to the world of the imagination."<sup>5</sup> The poet created a nonexistent place (*topothesia*), drawing a picture not from life but from his reading. With considerable ingenuity and numerous original flourishes, he put together the conventional sacred or haunted grove (*lucus, nemus*) and marvellous stream or pool. Among those touches needed to complete the scene were explicit suggestions of hell.

Because it had become part of the standard poetic repertoire (cf. Persius, *Sat.* 1, 70), mediaeval readers encountered the classical grove frequently, but not all are places of terror. Some are even *loci amoeni*, such as those in Virgil's Elysium and Lethe Valley (*Aeneid* 6, 673 and 704).<sup>6</sup> Like many, the latter is a *seclusum nemus*, corresponding to the *dygel lond* (hidden land) in the Old English poem (1357). Christian poets often adapted Virgil's Elysian Fields for their own visions of Paradise.<sup>7</sup> The majority of the pagan groves are sacred places with an atmosphere of mystery. They are the haunts of Circe, oracles, Druids, and the dragon guarding the golden fleece.<sup>8</sup>

The Virgilian landscape has the most parallels to *Beowulf*, especially during Aeneas' *catabasis*. The Sibyl promises him "clustering forests and pitch-black Cocytus" for his descent. The golden bough he will need is sheltered by a *lucus* in the shadows of a dark valley (6, 131-39). He makes his way to a cave protected by a lake of black water and a gloomy *nemus*. The lake's poisonous fumes prevent birds from flying overhead. Where the road to Acheron begins, the water is turbulent and choked with a sludge (6, 236-42, 296). Since Grendel's mere was evidently conceived of as an inlet of the sea,<sup>9</sup> it is worthwhile also to look at the Phorcys harbor (1, 159-79).<sup>10</sup> It features towering headlands overshadowing the water on either side. Quivering leaves on a curtain of trees glisten against a dark and mysterious grove. Nymphs live in a cave at the foot of the cliffs. Also of interest is the Gorge of Ampsanctus, which has dense groves on both sides

and a swirling torrent in its midst (7, 563-71). It also has a cavern that is a vent of Hades, along with an abyss where Acheron breaks through. The place Turnus chooses for an ambush is "apt for concealment" because of steep slopes and narrow paths (11, 522-31). Elsewhere, and unrelated to this scenery, there is a simile comparing Aeneas and Turnus to a hunting dog and a stag trapped by a river or hemmed in by a snare (12, 746-55).

Comparing Hrothgar's famous account of where Grendel and his mother live (1357-76) with *Aeneid* 6, 237-42, Renoir points out that "both passages describe a body of black water surrounded by foreboding cliffs and darkening woods; either vapors or waves rise to the skies; and the place is so weird that no normal animal-life dares approach it. Beyond these admittedly striking resemblances, the two passages are vastly different, and I believe that the differences are much more significant than the similarities."<sup>11</sup>

He is too cautious. Andersson observes that similar borrowings by the *Waltharius*-poet would have been unrecognizable had he written in German.<sup>12</sup> The scenery has been transplanted, and only the Latin phrasing gives away the source. "If the *Beowulf* poet had written in Latin, perhaps his phrasing would have betrayed the same loan. We cannot be certain. Broader tests, such as a general comparison of scenic devices, may prove useful in deciding the issue." This he does, looking at the "overall design," which is best accounted for by the Virgilian background. The detail of *Beowulf* is not to be found in Germanic heroic poetry or the saga. Comparison with Virgil's Carolingian imitators and the *Waltharius* is more fruitful, as he shows at length.<sup>13</sup> Goldsmith too has noted the absence of the kind of naturalism that might be proper to *Grettir's Saga* but is alien to *Beowulf*: "The journey to the mere on the cheerful morning of victory is not difficult, and the place apparently not remote or inaccessible; whereas at the start of the perilous adventure the landscape itself has become frightening and inhospitable. This is the most extreme example in the poem of the symbolic treatment of natural and inanimate objects to reflect the feelings imputed to the men in the story."<sup>14</sup> She does not say so, but this is a Virgilian technique.<sup>15</sup>

A lurid grove in Lucan's account of the assault on Massilia was also available to the poet (*Pharsalia* 3, 399-425; cf. 6, 642-51). The boughs of this *lucus* made it dark and cold. Gore from savage rites was on the trees. Birds would not perch there, nor would wild beasts enter. Abundant waters fell there from dark springs. It was said that "the glare of

conflagration came from trees that were not on fire, and that serpents twined and glided round the stems." These are the points of contact with the scenery of *Beowulf*, and a mediaeval Christian would have been impressed with Lucan's distaste for the local gods worshipped with such barbarous rites (*barbara ritu*). Their graven images were crude blocks. People stayed out. An uncivilized and unchristian atmosphere attached itself to many of the *luci* the *Beowulf*-poet might have known. Places like these were appropriate for the Grendel clan, who were outcasts as Cain's kin and eternal exiles like the devil:

deaðfæge deog, siððan dreama leas  
 in fenfreoðo feorh alegde,  
 hæpene sawle; þær him hel onfeng. (850-52)  
 (Death-doomed, [Grendel] concealed himself when, devoid of joy, he  
 gave up his life, his heathen soul, in the fen-refuge; hell  
 received him there.)

In this regard it is worthwhile to look at a couple of scenes in Claudian, though he was probably not known in England at that time. His poem on the hot springs of Aponus tells of a translucent lake of great depth that plunges down beneath caverns in dark, turbulent eddies (*Carm. Min.* 26). It is covered by steam except when the wind blows, making visible on the bottom "old weapons, kings' [votive] gifts" (*veteres hastae, regia dona*). One thinks of the *ealdsweord* that *Beowulf* finds in the hall beneath the mere (1663), the hilt of which is given to Hrothgar, best of this world's kings (1684-85). Though perhaps fired by Hell, these waters are healthful and praiseworthy. Not so pleasant is the more conventional and fictional *lucus / nemus / silva* on the slopes of Etna, where Ceres goes to make a torch to aid her in the search for Proserpine (*De Raptu Proserpinae* 3, 332-56). Dense with foliage, it is filled with trophies of the gods, including the heads of giants (compare the fate of Aeschere [1420-21]). It is so awesome that even a Cyclops would not pasture his flock there or cut down the trees.

Individual elements in the Anglo-Saxon scene are paralleled elsewhere. The "grove" of *Beowulf* differs from most of its predecessors in that, instead of being a tight cluster with perhaps the tallest tree in the centre, it has been opened, so to speak, to admit the mere. This accounts for its windiness, something explicitly absent from the densely-packed *luci*

of the Romans.<sup>16</sup> An interesting exception is the grove in Seneca's *Oedipus* (530-47). One of its trees must "front the winds," but in the centre is a sunless, cold spring surrounded by a swamp.<sup>17</sup>

Usually the entire place is black; the English poet stresses that Grendel's abode is dark, and the trees overshadow the water. In most Latin counterparts the trees are so close that they keep out the sun and stars.<sup>18</sup> More than a convention, it came to be a recognition of the well-known etymology *ex contrariis*: the *lucus* is so-called because it has little *lux*.<sup>19</sup>

Silius describes a grove that harbored a huge serpent (drawn from Livy); the place emitted foul fumes into the air (*Punica* 6, 146-54). More importantly, at the groves and temple of Jupiter Ammon in the Garamantes, there is a spring that is lukewarm at morning and evening but cold at midday and boiling at night (3, 669-72). This natural wonder is just mentioned by Ovid and was passed on to the Middle Ages in greater detail and with variations by Pliny, Augustine, and Isidore.<sup>20</sup> Cook adduces a number of similarities between the waters of *Beowulf* and those of the classical underworld.<sup>21</sup> And in Statius (*Thebaid* 2, 519-23) animals will not feed in the pastures neighboring the former abode of the Sphinx; even obscene birds stay away from the grove (*nemus*).

To destroy a sacred tree was to risk divine retribution, as when the Trojans removed the stump of Faunus' wild olive tree (*Aen.* 12, 766-73). The barbarous grove at Massilia caused hesitation in the men ordered to destroy it, so Caesar himself struck the first blow (*Phars.* 3, 426-39). These profanations remind one of similar actions by missionaries to Germanic tribes, and the *Beowulf*-poet must have been conscious that the groves dotting the Latin landscape had the same basis as those revered by his ancestors. Tacitus records a number of them as places of worship and sacrifice in Germania. With the arrival of Christian missionaries, Pope Gregory III warned against such heathen practices as "prophecies in groves [*lucorum*] or by fountains."<sup>22</sup> The Hessians were among those sacrificing to trees and springs, which led to St. Boniface's dramatic felling of the Donar Oak at Geismar.<sup>23</sup> Charlemagne repeated this action by destroying the Irminsul, the tree-trunk supporting the heavenly vault, when he attacked the Saxons in 772.<sup>24</sup> Alcuin reports St. Willibrord's similar violation of an island (Heligoland) sacred to the natives: its animals were untouchable and its spring was not to be used except in complete silence.<sup>25</sup> Boniface established monasteries where monks cleared the forests. This attracted peasants,

who engaged in cultivation and "lost what remained of their primitive awe of the forest depths in which the tribal gods had lived undisturbed."<sup>26</sup>

A Christian with a monastic education would have greater delight in the "moral" content of these sites than in their picturesqueness.<sup>27</sup> Since they had been made into gardens of spiritual delights they would recall Paradise and be described in Biblical terms (no doubt also with recollections of the Elysian Fields). But nature, when unembellished by the work of man, would inspire the learned with horror. A wilderness unhallowed by any evidence of prayer or the spiritual life suggested the state of original sin.<sup>28</sup> So the haunted grove and mere in *Beowulf*, rich in literary, historical, and religious overtones, would have had hellish associations even without the clues written into them.

These are the traditions within which the poet was working. Malone has done away with the old claim that "Grendel's abode in the poet's hypothetical source (a folk-tale) did not differ in its essential features from the abode described in the Icelandic saga [*Grettir's Saga*], and that these features were distorted and obscured in the English poem by the introduction of 'conceptions of the Christian hell'."<sup>29</sup> In the desire to see Grendel as a waterfall troll, the stream flowing down into the earth was viewed as a waterfall instead of the ocean. Grendel is clearly described as "a devil in thought and deed," but since he is of human stock his dwelling place is fittingly a "hell on earth."<sup>30</sup> The Christian-Latin tradition is behind the *Beowulf*-poet's juxtaposition of fire and ice in this hell, though, as we have seen, an analogous motif is present in the groves and marvellous waters of classical literature.<sup>31</sup> And this hell has affinities with St. Paul's vision in the seventeenth Blickling homily. The parallels include waters that go underground, a grey stone, frosty groves overhanging the area, mists, darkness, and water-monsters, in language often identical with that of *Beowulf*.<sup>32</sup> Together with the great likelihood that the homily is the later of the two, its differences from the *Visio Pauli* here would seem to indicate that the author had an eye on *Beowulf*, rather than that the poet borrowed from the homily.<sup>33</sup>

The imaginary scene in *Beowulf* is not hell itself but a place meant to suggest the familiar locale of "devil-worship," as Bede commonly calls pagan rites (e.g., *HE* 1, 7). It brings to mind the customs of the poet's ancestors and the more immediate *luci* and *nemora* of his Latin reading, including the Bible, where the false gods of the Old Testament are sometimes

worshipped in them.<sup>34</sup> Their association with pagan religion was so intimate that Isidore mentioned it in his etymologies of the words for "grove."<sup>35</sup> The "heathen soul" of Grendel fittingly departs from there to the place of which the grove and mere are only earthly images.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kemp Malone, "Grendel and his Abode," in *Studia Philologica et Litteraria in Honorem L. Spitzer*, ed. A.G. Hatcher and K.L. Selig (Bern 1958) 297-308.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, *Early Epic Scenery: Homer, Virgil, and the Medieval Legacy* (Ithaca/London 1976) 145-59. His n. 1 provides a bibliography of scholarship on *Beowulf* and Virgil. Cf. Tom B. Haber, *A Comparative Study of the Beowulf and the Aeneid* (Princeton 1931) 92-96. Roberta D. Cornelius, "Palus Inamabilis," *Speculum* 2 (1927) 321-25, lists classical parallels to the *mistige moras* (162).

<sup>3</sup> Alain Renoir, "The Terror of the Dark Waters: A Note on Virgilian and Beowulfian Techniques," in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, Mass. 1974) 147-60.

<sup>4</sup> Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg* (3rd edn., Boston 1950) esp. lines 837-56, 1345-76, 1408-36.

<sup>5</sup> Malone (at n. 1) 298.

<sup>6</sup> Virgil, *Opera*, ed. R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford 1969); *The Aeneid*, trans. W.F. Jackson Knight (Harmondsworth 1956). All other classical authors and Claudian are cited from the Loeb Classical Library editions. Cf. Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York/Evanston 1963) 200.

<sup>7</sup> Examples include the *nemus* of Sedulius, *Carmen Paschale* 1, 54 (PL 19.558). Compare the *lucus inaccessa . . . arce* of Avitus, *Carmina de Spiritu-  
tualis Historiae Gestis* 1; 213 (PI. 59.328B) with *Aen.* 7, 11. Cf. Curtius

(at n. 6) 200. Bernard F. Huppé's discussion of *De Die Iudicii* and the Old English *Re Domes Dæge* shows how such groves inevitably took on overtones of Eden (*Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry* [Albany 1959] 80-93).

<sup>8</sup> Aen. 7, 11, 82; Lucan, *Pharsalia* 1, 453-54; Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* 5, 237.

<sup>9</sup> Malone (at n. 1) 298, 301, 305.

<sup>10</sup> Andersson (at n.2), 149-50, finds in Beowulf's arrival in Denmark (221-28) a suggestion of this scene.

<sup>11</sup> Renoir (at n. 3) 150.

<sup>12</sup> Andersson (at n. 2) 151.

<sup>13</sup> Andersson, *op. cit.* 156-59.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret E. Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf* (London 1970) 113-14.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Andersson (at n. 2) 157.

<sup>16</sup> Lucan, *Phars.* 3, 408; Silius Italicus, *Punica* 6, 146; Statius, *Thebaid* 4, 421-22.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Albert S. Cook, "Various Notes," *MLN* 22 (1907) 146-47.

<sup>18</sup> Silius, *Punica* 6, 147; Statius, *Thebaid* 4, 420-21; 10, 85.

<sup>19</sup> St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 3, 29, 41 (PL 34.81); Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* 1, 37, 24 (PL 82.115). Cf. Curtius (at n.6) 44 and 497.

<sup>20</sup> *Metamorphoses* 15, 309-10; *Naturalis Historia* 5, 5, 37; *De Civitate Dei* 21, 7, 1 (PL 41.718); *Etymologiae* 13, 13, 10 (PL 82.483). Cf. Curtius, *op. cit.* 202, n.37.

<sup>21</sup> Cook (at n. 13) 147.

<sup>22</sup> *Germania* 7, 9, 10, 39, 40, 43; Reinhold Rau, ed., *Briefe des Bonifatius* (Darmstadt 1968) no. 43 (ca. 738); *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, trans. Ephraim Emerton (1940; rpt. 1976) 70. For earlier attacks upon and legislation against these and other pagan practices see J.N. Hillgarth, ed., *The Conversion of Western Europe, 350-750* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1969) 51-63 and 92-111.

<sup>23</sup> Willibald's life of St. Boniface, 6, in Wilhelm Levison, ed., *Vitae Sancti Bonifatii Archiepiscopi Moguntini*, *MGH, Script. Rer. Merov.* 7 (Hanover 1905).

<sup>24</sup> J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Barbarian West: The Early Middle Ages A.D. 400-1000* (New York 1962) 102.

<sup>25</sup> *Vita Willibrordi* 10.



<sup>26</sup> Wallace-Hadrill (at n. 24) 87. Cf. Rau (at n. 22) no. 86.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York 1961) 164-65.

<sup>28</sup> For Grendel's mere as a garden *in malo* see D.W. Robertson, Jr., "The Doctrine of Charity in Mediaeval Literary Gardens: A Topical Approach Through Symbolism and Allegory," *Speculum* 26 (1951) 24-49. The "symbolic topography" of this "Enemy territory" is discussed by Goldsmith (at n. 14) 116-17.

<sup>29</sup> Malone (at n. 1) 297.

<sup>30</sup> Malone, art. cit. 299.

<sup>31</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford 1969) 5, 12; Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. Peter Godman (Oxford 1982) 910-14, 988-90; Felix, *Life of St. Guthlac*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge 1956) 105. See also the references in Hildegard L.C. Tristram, "Stock Descriptions of Heaven and Hell in Old English Prose and Poetry," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 79 (1978) 111 n. 37.

<sup>32</sup> The original and a translation of the relevant passage are in Malone (at n. 1) 304-5. Klaeber's edition (at n. 4), like most, provides the verbal parallels in the notes.

<sup>33</sup> Carleton Brown wrote, "the descriptions in the *Visio* and in *Beowulf* are wholly independent except that trees occur in both -- while the description in the Homily presents a fusion of elements in the other two" ("*Beowulf* and the *Blickling Homilies*, and Some Textual Notes," *PMLA* 53 [1938] 908). Cf. Antonette D. Healey, ed., *The Old English Vision of St. Paul*, *Speculum Anniversary Monographs* 2 (Cambridge, Mass. 1978) 52.

<sup>34</sup> Ex. 34:13; Judges 6:30; 4 Kings 13:6, 18:4; Micheas 5:13.

<sup>35</sup> *Etymologiae* 14, 8, 30; 17, 6, 6-7 (PL 82.524, 606-7). The usual Old English gloss of *nemus* is *bearu*, and vice versa (H.D. Meritt, *Old English Glosses [A Collection]* [New York 1945] 12; Henry Sweet, ed., *The Oldest English Texts*, EETS, O.S. 83 [London 1885] 142). In the *Letter from Alexander to Aristotle*, *bearo* translates *nemus* and similar words and expressions during Alexander's encounter with the talking tree (Stanley Rypins, ed., *Three Old English Prose Texts in MS. Cotton Vitellius A xv*, EETS, O.S. 161 [London 1924] 40 ff.).