The landscape of *Beowulf*

MARGARET GELLING

The landscape of the epic poem *Beowulf* is a fantasy construct in which incompatible features coexist, but while it is an unprofitable exercise to attempt a reconstruction of a coherent topography in which Beowulf's exploits took place, the poet's choice of individual landscape terms is not likely to be random. Where this choice is not influenced by alliteration, each term may have been intended to convey a specific image appropriate to its immediate context. Several of the landscape terms used in the poem are otherwise unrecorded or only found rarely in other literary sources. This applies to *hlið*, *hop* and *gelad*; but by contrast with their rarity in literature these words are well evidenced in place-names, and an understanding of the place-name usage may have some relevance to the interpretation of their occurrences in the poem.

Two studies have explored the precise relationship between landscape features and the terms which are employed in Old English settlement-names,[1] and the field-work and map-study undertaken for these has revealed a remarkable degree of consistency and subtlety in the usage of landscape terms throughout the country. There are large categories of words for hills, valleys, water-sources, and every other type of landscape feature, but within these categories there are no synonyms. Each word gives a precise definition of what must have seemed to Old English speakers to be the defining feature of the physical environment of a particular settlement. That this was a country-wide vocabulary was obscured for previous students by the manner in which place-name material is published, that is in county surveys and in alphabetical dictionaries. A county survey does not bring out the significance because it seldom gives a sufficiently large sample of names containing any one landscape term. Alphabetical dictionaries are arranged according to the initial letter of the first element in a compound, and while this would be illuminating in a Celtic language it is unhelpful for English names where the main element in a compound comes second. It was necessary to unscramble the dictionaries and amalgamate the county surveys in order to obtain an overview of the usage of topographical terms. The purpose of the present article is to suggest that this overview of *hlið*, *hop* and *gelad* as place-name

---

[1] M. Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984); see also M. Gelling and A. Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000).

7

terms may have a bearing on their use by the *Beowulf*-poet. For *hop*, the poet's *fen-hopu* and *mor-hopu* are the only recorded literary instances apart from an obscure gloss, and it seems perverse not to make use of the abundant toponymic evidence when considering the significance of the term.

The word *hlið*, usually translated 'slope', is one of the *Beowulf*-poet's most frequently used topographical terms. In the two lines (1892 and 3157) where *hlið* is used without a qualifier, *h*- alliterates, but in the compounds *fen-hlið*, *mist-hlið*, *næs-hlið*, *stan-hlið*, *wulf-hlið* it does not, and it is possible that this word was chosen because a more precise meaning than the general one 'slope' made it seem particularly appropriate.

In place-names OE *hlið* is not one of the commoner hill-terms and its distribution is patchy, a characteristic which usually indicates a reference to landforms which are found in some regions more frequently than in others. The main concentration is in south Shropshire and north Herefordshire, and here it can be shown to be a specialized term for a hill with a concavity, either in one side or at the foot. Striking examples are Wapley Hill (earlier *Wappelyth*) in north Herefordshire and Pontesford Hill (earlier *Ponteslith*) in south-west Shropshire. Both these massifs have deep recesses in one side. On a smaller scale, but impressive, is Gatley Park (earlier *Gattelyth*) in north Herefordshire, where the manor house overlooks a natural amphitheatre in the hillside. At Huglith, Shropshire, the settlement-site is enclosed by a horseshoe-shaped area of high ground, and at Shirley, Herefordshire (earlier *Sherlythe*), the farm overlooks a similar hollow. The great hill called Ragleth, near Church Stretton, Shropshire, has a tree-filled cleft on its west side. A variant of this usage is seen at Lyth Hill, near Shrewsbury, and at West Leith, Hertfordshire, where there are escarpments which have a hollow at the foot. The land-form at these two widely separated places is strikingly similar.

Such formations have been observed at a sufficient number of places with *hlið* names in southern England and in the West Midlands[2] for a specialized sense 'hill with a hollow' to be postulated with some confidence. In northern England, however, the Old Norse equivalent *hlíð* is used with the more general sense 'hill-slope'.

If it could be assumed that a specialized sense 'hill with a hollow' was known to the *Beowulf*-poet, this would add something to our understanding of the -*hlið* compounds in the poem. A hill with a hollow provides dead ground, and this could be a lurking place for natural or supernatural enemies. In all the instances in *Beowulf* the -*hlið*, -*hleoðu* compounds have a menacing context. Grendel comes from the marsh under *misthleoðum*, and when fatally wounded he returns to his

---

[2] This definition of *hlið* in place-names is expounded in more detail in Gelling and Cole, *The Landscape*, pp. 182–5. The specialized application of *hlið* to concave hills had not been noted at the date of Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*.

8

joyless dwelling *under fenhleoðu*. It is, of course, impossible to relate these two compounds exactly to concave hill-slopes, but there may be a suggestion that *hleoðu* are places where monsters can lurk. When Beowulf is told of the dangers he must traverse on his way to the monsters' lair these include *wulfhleoðu*, and here land-forms of the type for which *hlið* is used in Herefordshire and Shropshire may be directly relevant, as also in the *steap stanhliðo* which the hero passes on the journey. The compound *næshleoðum*, used for a place where water monsters lie, could be envisaged as a headland with hollowed-out shelves.

The origin of OE *hop* has not been established, but its use as a place-name element has been defined in the two books cited above. Earlier discussion, particularly in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (under *hope²*) and by A. H. Smith,[3] gave confused accounts, failing to distinguish it from the Middle English reflex of Old Norse *hóp* 'a small land-locked bay or inlet'. There is no reason to suppose that the Old Norse word had any influence on the senses of Old English *hop*. There are about sixty settlement-names in which *hop* is used and most of these must be supposed to date from before the time of the Scandinavian settlements in England. Smith's discussion is seriously misleading in its suggestion that names which contain the word in its commonest sense, 'small, enclosed valley', may not have been coined before the Middle English period.

With very few exceptions, place-names of Old English origin containing the word *hop* fall easily into one of the two categories, 'enclosure in marsh or waste-land' and 'remote valley'. Names in which *hop* is used in the 'remote valley' sense are heavily concentrated in three areas: the central part of the Welsh Marches, the edges of the Pennine Chain, and the mountainous areas of Durham, Northumberland and southern Scotland. It seems likely that, when speakers of Old English were confronted by the valleys in these areas, none of the rich variety of valley terms which they had deployed in less rugged territories seemed adequate, and so another term was brought into service which commented primarily on the extreme seclusion of the features. 'Remote valley' cannot be the sense in *Beowulf* (though C. L. Wrenn offered the curious translation 'remote valley in the fens' for *fen-hop*), but a word with the basic sense 'secret place' is appropriate to the locations where Grendel and his mother live.

In the *Beowulf*ian sense 'piece of enclosed ground in marsh', *hop* is very clearly evidenced in Kent (as in Hope All Saints in Romney Marsh) and in Essex, where it is common in field-names in the coastal marshes. In Kent there is a reference at the end of a charter boundary-clause to *þa mersc hopa þe þær butan syndon*: this is in Thanet.[4] There are also a few minor names in these counties for which 'enclosure in waste' seems appropriate. The 'enclosure in marsh' sense is occasionally

---

[3] A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements, Part 1: A-IW*, EPNS 25 (1956), 259–60.
[4] W. de G. Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 3 vols. and index (London, 1885–99), no. 784 (=S489).

9

evidenced in northern counties, as in Hope Green south of Stockport, Cheshire, Mythop east of Blackpool, Lancashire, and Meathop north-east of Grange over Sands, Westmorland.[5]

The place-name evidence indicates that, whatever the ultimate etymology of *hop*, speakers of Old English understood it to mean 'remote, secret place', and this, rather than the commonly used 'lair' would be a suitable translation in the two *Beowulf* compounds. There is no basis for the rendering 'hollow' which has appeared fairly frequently in glossaries and translations.

The related words *lad* and *gelad* both occur in place-names, and they have been subject to confusion and conflation in reference books.[6] Eilert Ekwall, however, noted that *gelad* meant 'passage over a river' while *lad* meant 'water-course'.[7] Detailed consideration in 1984[8] made it possible to offer more precise definitions within these two broad categories: *gelad*, as used in place-names, means 'difficult water-crossing', and *lad* means 'artificial water-channel'. The 'water-channel' term is found, in the modern form Lode, mostly in minor names in the eastern fenlands and in the low-lying areas of Somerset, whereas the 'water-crossing' term is found in a small number of major names more widely distributed over the southern half of England. It is these last names which deserve consideration for the interpretation of the *Beowulf*-poet's *fen-gelad* and *uncuð gelad*.

The certain identification of *gelad* in place-names depends on the availability of Old English spellings, like *Crecca gelad* for Cricklade, Wiltshire, *Euuangelad* for Evenlode, Worcestershire, *Hlincgelad* for Linslade, Buckinghamshire, or on Middle English or modern spellings in which *ge-* is represented by *-i-*, as in Framilode, Gloucestershire. On the river Severn, also in Gloucestershire, there are two minor names, for one of which, Abloads Court, there is a diagnostic spelling *Abbilade* 1210.[9] The other, Wainlode, has no spellings earlier than 1378,[10] so a *gelad* etymology is a hypothesis based on topography. For Lechlade, Gloucestershire, Portslade, Sussex, and Shiplate, Somerset, the spellings are not conclusive, but *gelad* seems more appropriate topographically than *lad*. There are three occurrences of *gelad* in Old English charter boundaries: *dyrnan gelad* and *eanflæde gelad* on the south bank of the middle Thames by Appleford and Wytham, and *hafoc gelad* in Haseley, Oxfordshire.[11]

[5] There is a detailed account of place-names containing *hop* in the two books cited above, n. 1.

[6] They are totally conflated (and it might be fair to say confused) by A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements, Part 2: Jafn-Ytri*, EPNS 26 (1956), 8–9.

[7] E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th ed. (Oxford, 1960), p. 284.

[8] Gelling, *Place-Names*, pp. 23–5 and 73–6.

[9] A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of Gloucestershire, Part 2*, EPNS 39 (1964), 152.

[10] *Ibid.* p. 51.

[11] M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Berkshire, Part 3*, EPNS 51 (1976), 754 (*dyrnan gelad*) and 731 (*eanflæde gelad*); and M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire, Part 1*, EPNS 23 (1953), 131 (*hafoc gelad*).

This is a small corpus, and since the distribution precludes obsolescence, the term is likely to have had a highly specialized meaning and to have been used only when particular circumstances demanded it. The word *ford* (the second commonest topographical term in English place-names) was felt to give an adequate description of most crossing-places over water or marsh. The precise sense of *gelad* may have been 'water-crossing liable to be rendered impassable by flooding'. Investigations by Ann Cole in the winters of 1989, 1990 and 1992 produced photographs of dramatic flooding at Cricklade, Lechlade, Abloads Court and Wainlode. In several instances, notably at Abloads Court, Wainlode and Framilode, the crossing referred to is likely to have been not over the main river, but over streams crossed by roads running alongside it.

The 1984 discussion of *gelad* suggested that the place-name occurrences could be used to throw light on the two *Beowulf* compounds. These have been, and still are, generally translated by such terms as 'fen path' or 'swamp track' for *fengelad*, and 'unknown course/road' or 'unfamiliar way' for *uncuð gelad*. The latest translation, by Seamus Heaney, renders *frecne fengelad* as 'treacherous keshes', using an Irish place-name term for a wicker road across a bog.

A paper published in 1987[12] advocated 'passage across water' as the meaning of *gelad* in *Beowulf* and in other Old English poetic contexts, but this was written without knowledge of the 1984 discussion. This article calls the place-name occurrences as evidence using the information set out in Ekwall and Smith.[13] Cronan was aware of the special sense of danger which the 'water-crossing' meaning brings to the *Beowulf* passages, and he supported this by reference to another occurrence of *uncuð gelad* in *Exodus* for the crossing between the rolled-back waters of the Red Sea. He did not, however, have access to the topographical evidence for a more specialized place-name usage for particularly hazardous water-crossings, which strengthens the case considerably.

English place-names have been subjected to intensive study since the early years of the last century, and the vast quantity of material which has been amassed contains many items which contribute significantly to knowledge and understanding of the Old English language. There are many words which are clearly evidenced in place-names but not recorded in literary sources, and there are many instances of words which, though recorded elsewhere, can be more precisely defined by study of their toponymic usage.

---

[12] D. Cronan, 'Old English *gelād* "Passage across Water"', *Neophilologus* 71 (1987), 316–19.
[13] As cited above, nn. 6–7.

11