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# From 'Whale-Road' to 'Gannet's Bath': Images of Foreign Relations and Exchange in *Beowulf*

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Kennings play a significant role, both structurally and semantically, in Old English poetry. Whether they occur as compound words (e.g., *hronrad*, 'whale-road', *swanrad*, 'swan-road') or phrases (e.g., *ganotes bæð*, 'gannet's bath', *ȝða ful*, 'cup of waves'), these figurative terms hold for the poet possibilities for both appropriate alliteration and conceptual expression. True, in the hands of a later or less skillful poet, a kenning may appear to have lost some of its original meaning and impact, seeming not much more than a mechanically added feature of the poem, inserted primarily for the purpose of furthering the meter.<sup>1</sup> However, in the richer, more complex poems of the Old English period, context is an important factor not only in a poet's choice of kenning, but also in an audience's interpretive response to it. For, as Stanley B. Greenfield has asserted,

it is not too much to expect that in an Old English poem which by general accord is felt to be aesthetically superior, even the most frequently repeated phrases and the tritest of kennings may, through the convergence of contextual features, acquire new semantic lustre...<sup>2</sup>

Likewise the symbolic potential of a kenning should not be overlooked, especially in the case of the three *Beowulf* sea-kennings with animal elements treated in this essay.<sup>3</sup> For the *Physiologus* (along with other such interpretive texts) was a popular work of the period, and its allegorical treatment of beasts demonstrates that authors and audiences alike were not unaccustomed to looking at animal images for deeper significance.

Nevertheless, kennings are too often dismissed as merely formulaic filler – or, worse yet, are changed by translators to a simpler word or expression – without full realization of their possible contextual and extra-textual implications. Thus 'whale-road', 'swan-road', and 'gannet's bath' might all be rendered 'sea', while eclipsing entirely for the reader any further meaning

or symbolism. To maintain so simplistic a stance in viewing such images as they occur in *Beowulf*, one of the most finely crafted works in the language, does a disservice to both the reader and the poet.

Here I attempt to show how the *Beowulf*-poet indeed uses certain kennings for the sea – specifically, the *hronrad*, *swanrad* and *ganotes bæð* over which men and goods travel to and from Denmark – in a symbolic sense. My examination focuses on the contrast between Scyld and Hrothgar (both exemplary Danish kings) in respect to foreign affairs and exchange. I demonstrate how, in presenting Hrothgar's dealings with Beowulf, the poet juxtaposes 'seabird' imagery with words and actions that convey a sense of warmer, friendlier bonds than those extending over Scyld Scefing's earlier 'whale-road' empire. In fact, the seabird images – the 'gannet's bath' in particular – appear to augment the symbolism of Heorot: emblem of peace, treasure-sharing, and intertribal cooperation.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, through the succession of sea-images in the first part of the poem, a definite shift in foreign relations becomes apparent as we move from Scyld's to Hrothgar's reigns: from one marked by intimidation and forced tribute, to one rooted in friendship and free exchange.

The portrait of Hrothgar thus drawn seems quite in keeping with Christian teaching. In fact, as Hrothgar evokes the image of the 'gannet's bath' in his proclamation of reciprocal friendship and alliance between Danes and Geats, he resembles closely one notable Christian English king who is grandly depicted in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: King Edgar, whose exceptional rule of peace and good fellowship preceded by only a few years the *Beowulf* manuscript.<sup>5</sup>

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As Kinshiro Oshitari asserts, 'the sea is treacherous and makes unstable the relationship between peoples whom it separates... Though it presents an appearance of tranquility from time to time, the sea is pregnant with unknown perils, threatens mortal existence on land, and is associated with death.'<sup>6</sup> In the 'whale-road' we have indeed an appropriate image of this uncertain or terrifying aspect of the sea. For the whale represented a danger to Anglo-Saxon fishermen, as well as to 'seafarers' on both literal and symbolic levels.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, in early versions of the *Physiologus*, the whale is cast in just such a threatening and destructive role. The story is roughly the same in all accounts: men mistake the creature for an island and land on its back; then, just as they are getting settled, the whale dives to the bottom of the sea with them. In the Old English version of the work, though, the whale is characterized as a conscious performer of treachery and deceit –

endowed with malicious cunning (*facnes cræftig* 24a) – as it intentionally waits until the unsuspecting sailors feel safe and secure in their encampment before plunging to the depths:

Þonne gefeleð facnes cræftig  
 þæt him þa ferend on fæste wuniap,  
 wic weardiað wedres on luste,  
 ðonne semninga on sealtne wæg  
 mid þa noþe niþer gewiteþ  
 garseges gæst, grund geseceð,  
 ond þonne in deaðsele drence bifæsteð  
 scipu mid scealcum.

[When the ocean's spirit, skillful in treachery, perceives that those travellers dwell secure upon him, occupy their lodging in desire of fine weather, then immediately he goes down with them boldly into the salt wave, seeks the bottom, and, by drowning, secures ships with their men in his hall of death; *The Whale* 24-31a]<sup>8</sup>

This animal is then likened in custom and manner to evil spirits and devils (31b-32a) who, through secret power, deceive and persuade men to the ruin of good deeds so that they come to seek consolation from fiends and eventually choose a dwelling with the devil (35b-37). Under misty gloom, in the fashion of the whale, with his victims, the soul-slayer seeks the bottomless welling (*grundleasne wylm* 46b) of hell (41b-49a).

A second nature of the whale also finds expression in the *Physiologus*. Opening its mouth when hungry, the animal emits a pleasant odor by which it attracts fish. Betraying them into entering its mouth, the whale proceeds to snap together its jaws and thereby entrap the unsuspecting prey,<sup>9</sup> its hunger setting the stage for another treatment of the theme of hell. For, in the subsequent allegory, the animal's mouth gives way to a vision of Hell's Mouth – a turbulent pool of fire to which the great beguiler lures his followers and afterwards makes them captive (71-78a).<sup>10</sup> In the Old English *Physiologus* then, as elsewhere in the Judeo-Christian tradition, both the whale and its undersea home function as symbols of Hell itself.<sup>11</sup> Forever threatening, the sea's dark forces lie in wait for those who fare over the waves. The whale and its domain, however, do not always specifically represent evil. At times a 'whale' term may be used simply to suggest the idea of the sea's 'vast expanse', as both Oshitari and Caroline Brady agree is the case with *geond hronrade* at *Genesis* 205a.<sup>12</sup> Brady, in fact, asserts that in all occurrences *hronrad* is used in reference to 'the expanse of the ocean – the limitless, trackless, deep sea, not near the coasts'; she goes on to group

*hronrad* with *hwæles eðel* and *hwælmere*: ‘these are synonyms; and the concept they express is the deep sea where unwitting sailors moor their boats to seeming [*sic*] uncharted islands floating on the surface’.<sup>13</sup> Thus she makes the connection to the *Physiologus* lore discussed above. The ‘shallows’ and safer, more limited surfaces she reserves for the contrasting image of the *swanrad*.<sup>14</sup>

What must be said further, though, is that a threatening sense of turmoil or unrest usually accompanies the *hron* or *hwæl* as it makes its appearance. For it often signals or forebodes a storm at sea in much the same manner as the ‘beasts of battle’ portend conflict on land. In *Andreas*, for example – a poem that has been extensively examined in terms of its relationship to *Beowulf* – after repeatedly reminding us that seafaring men must be ready to undertake a risky voyage over the whale’s domain (*on hranrade* 266a; *ofer hwæles eðel* 274b), the poet refers to the surging sea at the outset of a storm as a *hwælmere* (370). Amidst darkening skies, rising winds and storm-tossed waves, the *hornfisc* of the poem comes alive, and above the seafarers the gray gull (*græga mæw*), hungry for carrion (*wælgifre*), wheels about just as its counterpart, the raven or eagle, is likely to do over a battlefield:

Ða gedrefed wearð,  
onhrered hwælmere; hornfisc plegode,  
glad geond garsecg, ond se græga mæw  
wælgifre wand. Wedercandel swearc,  
windas weoxon, wægas grundon,  
streamas styredon, strengas gurron,  
wædo gewætte; wætereḡsa stod  
þreata þryðum.

[*Then the whale-mere became troubled, stirred up; the whale moved about, glided through the sea, and the gray gull circled, greedy for slaughter. The candle of the sky grew dark, winds grew stronger, waves dashed together, currents were in uproar, cordage rattled, sails were soaked. The terrible water rose up with the might of multitudes; Andreas 369b-76a.*]<sup>15</sup>

The storm penetrates to the depths of the sea: ‘Garsecg hlymmed, / geofon geotende; grund is onhrered, / deope gedrefed’ (392b-94a: ‘the ocean roars, the surging sea; the bottom is stirred up, deeply disturbed’). In this context, it should be noted, a seabird does appear to be symbolically associated with the whale. However, the gull’s ‘gray’ plumage here serves to reflect the stormy mood of the scene, standing in sharp contrast to the ‘swan-road’ and

'gannet's bath', and the sense of bright promise associated with the 'white' birds of these images (to be discussed at greater length below).

The expression 'on the whale-road' occurs twice more in *Andreas* – on *hranrade* (634a) and on *hronrade* (821a) – each time seemingly connected to the trial of faith undergone on the perilous journey, counterpointing the steadfastness in the Lord exhibited by the apostle. Over the 'tumult of waves' Andrew fares, close to the Lord and secure in the Father's keeping (818-26). Also, as Greenfield points out, while serving as a contrasting backdrop to the calm, controlled conversation of the seafarers, the turbulence of the 'whale-mere' anticipates a similar contrast between the demeanors of the patient Andrew and his raging opponents in the second part of the poem.<sup>16</sup>

The term 'whale-mere' appears elsewhere in Old English poetry, where again it refers to the sea in a state of commotion. For example, in Exeter Riddle 2:5, it 'roars, loudly rages' ('hwælmere hlimmed, hlude grimmed');<sup>17</sup> and in the *Meters of Boethius* 5:7-11 both the beautiful and sublime aspects of the sea receive expression as the 'whale-mere' (not unlike the whale of the *Physiologus*) becomes associated with a sudden turn from tranquility to ferocity:

Swa oft smylte sæ suðerne wind  
græge glashlutre grimme gedrefeð,  
þonne hie gemengað micla ysta,  
onhrerað hronmere; hrioh bið þonne  
seo þe ær gladu onsiene wæs.

[So often the southern wind fiercely stirs up the calm sea, gray and clear as glass, when great gusts mix it up, arouse the whale-mere; rough then is that which earlier had been a shining sight.]<sup>18</sup>

In these occurrences, furthermore, as in *Andreas*, attending the image of the *hronmere*/*hwælmere* are verbs that appear to be popular choices for conveying the dynamic essence of this phenomenon: *onhreran*, *hlimman*, and *gedrefan*. The waters of a 'whale-mere', wild and perilous, thus appear to reflect the disposition of the sea creatures – an observation that becomes even more apparent in an examination of the *Beowulf*-poet's treatment of the theme.

In keeping with the animal's portrayal elsewhere, the whale indeed 'exemplifies the terrors of the deep' in *Beowulf*, as Allan Metcalf has keenly observed.<sup>19</sup> Such terrors and turbulent waters are omnipresent – both out upon the sea and at Grendel's mere, which is closely associated with the sea. Similar creatures inhabit each place and exhibit similar behavior; the poet even states that certain of the mere-monsters, *nicras*, are of the same kind as

those associated with peril upon the sea: 'ða on undernmæl oft bewitigað / sorhfulne sið on segrlade' (1428-29: 'who in morning-time often perform a sorrowful journey on the sail-road').<sup>20</sup> In this regard they are like the whale of the *Physiologus*, the floater of ocean streams who threatens the well-being of seafarers. Beowulf, moreover, is regarded as a 'protector of seafarers' in accomplishing his mission at the mere (*lidmanna helm* 1623b) – a role he plays throughout the work, from his first encounter with *hronfixas* (540) and sea-dwelling *niceras* (575) in the Breca episode to his burial upon *Hronesnæsse* (2805, 3136) at the poem's end.

In the Breca episode, the poet establishes the pattern: descent into dark and turbulent waters, reversal in expectations of bottom-dwelling sea-beasts or *aglæcan*, eventual illumination of their defeat by a heavenly 'beacon' (*beorht beacen Godes* 570a), and passage consequently made safe for other seafarers: 'þæt syðþan na / ymb brontne ford brimliðende / lade ne letton' (567b-69a: 'that since then, about the high sea, they hindered not seafarers from their course'). The poet presents the battle as one between forces of darkness and forces of light, intensified through physical contrasts in nature: clear and stormy weather, day and night, surface and depth of sea. Furthermore, by using a 'whale' (*hron-*) compound here he calls to our attention the dangers that lurk in the depths:

Hæfdon swurd nacod, þa wit on sund reon,  
heard on handa; wit unc wið hronfixas  
werian pohton.

...

Ða wit ætsomne on sæ wæron  
fif nihta fyrst, oþ þæt unc flod todraf,  
wado weallende, wedera cealdost,  
nipende niht, ond norþanwind  
heaðogrim ondhwearf; hreo wæron yþa.  
Wæs merefixa mod onhrered.

[We had naked swords hard in hand when we swam upon the sea; we thought to protect ourselves against whale-fishes... Then we both together were on the sea for a space of five nights until the flood drove us asunder, waters raging, coldest of weathers, night growing dark, and the battle-grim north wind turned against us; rough were the waves. The temper of the sea-fishes was stirred up; Beowulf 539-41a, 544-49.]

As Beowulf implies by arming himself against 'whale-fishes' (*hronfixas* 540), one must be prepared for danger in any endeavor that involves a



crossing over the whale's domain, no matter how calm or stable the situation might seem. Also, as in other instances of the 'whale-mere' in Old English poetry, the *Beowulf*-poet himself uses the verb *onhreran* in his depiction of the storm at sea but goes one step further by employing the word in its emotional sense, thus extending the ferocity of the storm to the creatures of the depths themselves: 'Wæs merefixa mod onhrered' (549).

Features of the storm at sea find their counterparts at Grendel's mere. The characteristic turbulence of the 'whale-mere' is present at the 'nicker-mere' in the form of the *sundgebland* (1450) into which Beowulf plunges and the *yðgeblond* (1373, 1593, 1620), the surging waves of stormy weather: 'Ponon yðgeblond up astigeð / won to wolcnum, þonne wind styrep / lad gewidru, oð þæt lyft drusmaþ, / roderas reotað' (1373-76a: 'Thence the raging water rises up dark to the clouds when the wind stirs up hostile storms, until the air becomes gloomy, heavens weep'). As in the Breca episode, the weather here serves to reflect the mood of the mere's monstrous inhabitants. Through an interplay of light and shadow, Beowulf's approach to the mere and his dive into its murky depths stir up a hellish commotion among the aquatic monsters (nickers, sea-dragons, worms, tusked sea-beasts, and the 'sea-wolf' herself). First they become bitter and enraged as they perceive the *bearhtm* ('bright sound') of the war-horn (1430b-32a); then they harass severely the 'white-helmed' hero as he makes his way through the troubled waters to the dwelling of the *grundwyrge* (1518), the 'accursed monster of the deep' who, as a fiercely ravenous 'guardian' (*grundhyrde* 2136), has 'held for a hundred half-years the expanse of waters': 'se ðe floda begong / heorogifre beheold hund missera' (1497b-98). After Beowulf defeats the monsters of the hellish abode, a heavenly light shines forth – 'Lixte se leoma, leoht inne stod, / efne swa of hefene hadre scineð / rodores candel' (1570-72a: 'The gleam glittered, light shone forth within, even as the candle of the sky brightly shines from heaven') – exposing the bodies of the demonic opposition.

The pattern is repeated once more in the poem, where the verb *onhreran* is used again to express the arousal of active hostility, this time on the part of the dragon, yet another creature of subterranean darkness: 'Hete wæs onhrered' (2554a: 'Hate was stirred up'). Accordingly, after the dragon's defeat two more signs or 'beacons' manifest themselves in succession: the *beacna beorhtost* (2777a), the bright standard hanging high over the recovered hoard; then the *beadurofes becn* (3160a), Beowulf's own bright (*beorhtne* 2803) burial mound on *Hronesnæsse*, towering high as a beacon for those venturing out upon the sea's dark waters:

'Se scel to gemyndum minum leodum

heah hlifian on Hronesnæsse,  
 þæt hit sæliðend syððan hatan  
 Biowulfes biorh, ða ðe brentingas  
 ofer floda genipu feorran drifað'.)

[‘It shall tower high upon Whale’s Bluff as a memorial to my people, so that afterwards seafarers may call it “Beowulf’s barrow” when they drive their ships from afar over the oceans’ darkness’; *Beowulf* 2804-08.]

Beowulf’s intentions and the motif here are consistent with those of his earlier deeds. For, as in the earlier encounters with monsters of the depths, he has once more triumphed in shining glory over a dark enemy and has alleviated subsequent threat to navigation, acting in his capacity as protector of seafarers – truly a *lidmanna helm* to the last.<sup>21</sup>

One more ‘whale’ image occurs in the poem – at line 10, where the formulaic expression ‘over the whale-road’ (*ofer hronrade*) is used in connection with Scyld Scefing’s conquest and subjugation of peoples overseas. Given its immediate context, several observations can be made regarding the image’s particular function and effect in the passage. The size of the whale and its domain would likely come into play here, conveying a sense of the expanse of Scyld’s realm, as Caroline Brady has pointed out: ‘*hronrade* (l. 10) refers to the expanse of the ocean around which sit the peoples who are forced to pay tribute to Scyld; emphasizes the extent of his dominion’.<sup>22</sup> Adrien Bonjour, in turn, building upon Brady’s analysis, suggests something further about Scyld’s sovereign might:

That the whale, indeed, as ‘an animal universally associated with the ocean’ should be reminiscent of vast expanses of water is quite certain, and this alone would justify the use of the compound in the passage, as interpreted by Miss Brady. On the other hand, as the hugest of all the animals known in the world ... is it not also suggestive of strength, of sovereign might — a power all the more imposing that its realms are the infinite spaces of multitudinous seas? Such a connotation would make it especially apposite in this context; for not only would the word thus emphasize the extent of Scyld’s dominion (indirectly glancing back at his might) but it would also imaginatively, and directly, intimate how mighty he had grown (*weox under wolcnum!*).<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the image appears to be an appropriate vehicle for conveying the might of Scyld, while also underscoring the terror and fierce disposition attending the establishment of his territory: 'Oft Scyld Scefing sceapena preatum, / monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah, / egsode eorl[as]' (4-6a: 'Often Scyld Scefing deprived crowds of his enemies, many tribes, of their mead-benches, terrified their earls...').

Undoubtedly, aggressive behavior in heroic society has its immediate rewards, but not without the likelihood of later retaliatory consequences. Elsewhere in *Beowulf*, we see how aggression is ultimately repaid: offended parties bear grudges and a vengeful spirit simmers beneath the surface until the time is right to strike back. The threat of foreign invasion anticipated at the end of the poem, for example, is a direct result of Hygelac's former aggression abroad:

Wæs sio wroht scepen  
heard wið Hugas, syððan Higelac cwom  
faran flotherge on Fresna land,

...  
Us wæs a syððan  
Merewioingas milts ungyfeðe.

[*That strife was shaped hard against the Hugas when Hygelac came faring with his sea-army into the land of the Frisians...The Merovingian's kindness has been denied to us ever since; Beowulf* 2913b-21.]

Might not a similar resentment or underlying animosity be implicit in the 'whale-road' image at line 10 – the potential, perhaps, for future disruption of this forced order among nations? When viewed in the light of the whale's treacherous nature as expressed in the bestiary material and other Old English works, such an implication seems quite possible. The 'whale-road' works very well to signal the precariousness of the relationship that Scyld has established with peoples beyond his immediate reach – those who have been forced into a position of subservience to a foreign superior over the uncertain and threatening domain of the whale: 'oð þæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra / ofer hronrade hyran scolde, / gomban gyldan' (9-11a: 'until each of the neighboring nations across the whale-road had to obey him, pay him tribute'). The image's significance becomes even more apparent when seen in contrast to the poem's subsequent 'seabird' imagery, to which we now must turn.

Each of the two figurative expressions for the sea containing an avian element in *Beowulf*, 'swan-road' and 'gannet's bath', presents us with a picture of bright promise that stands in thematic opposition to the dark, ominous image and severe mood of the 'whale-road' or 'whale-mere'. However, while the 'swan-road' serves generally in *Beowulf* and elsewhere in Old English poetry as a sign of favorable passage or rescue, the 'gannet's bath' works more precisely in direct contrast to Scyld Scefing's 'whale-road' arrangement, representing an antithetical view of foreign relations as they have come to develop under the more beneficent rule of Hrothgar.

The swan is an animal of white plumage and grace – a floater or flier associated with the surface world and the heavens. Isidore of Seville comments upon these characteristic features of the swan, dissociating it from the world of darkness and depths by means of negation and contrast. For he points out the bird's all-white aspect while denying it any notoriety for blackness, and he supports his statement on the swan's auspicious significance by quoting the poet Aemilius Macer, who speaks, in turn, of how sailors welcome the sight of this creature precisely because it does *not* sink into the sea (as *does* the whale):

Olor autem dictus quod sit *totus plumis albus*: nullus enim meminit cygnum nigrum... Nautae vero sibi hunc bonam prognosim facere dicunt, sicut Aemilius ait (4):

Cygnus in auspiciis semper laetissimus ales:

hunc optant nautae, quia *se non mergit in undas*.

[*The swan, moreover, is called Olor because it is all white in plumage: indeed no one makes mention of a black swan... Sailors, in truth, say that this bird serves as a good sign for them, as Aemilius asserts: 'The swan in divinations is always the happiest omen: Sailors welcome this bird because it does not plunge itself down into the waves'.*]<sup>24</sup>

Accordingly, with the exception of *Juliana* 671b-78a (where the *synscapa* Heliseus deservedly meets death *on swonrade*), in Old English poetry the swan primarily holds a positive meaning for sailors, conveying, as Bonjour and Metcalf have suggested, a sense of speed and grace – perhaps even flight – in passage over the sea.<sup>25</sup> The idea of the swan's swiftness becomes coupled with melodious flight in the 'swan' riddle of the *Exeter Book*, where the bird is first depicted as silent in movement when there is insufficient breeze upon its feathers or 'garment' to cause any sound: 'Hrægl min swigað, þonne ic hrusan trede, / oþþe þa wic buge, oþþe wado drefe' (Riddle 7:1-2: 'My garment is quiet when I tread the earth or inhabit dwellings or ruffle

waters').<sup>26</sup> But then, when lifted high upon the wind, its feathery 'trappings' resound:

Hwilum mec ahebbað ofer hæleþa byht  
 hyrste mine, and þeos hea lyft,  
 ond mec þonne wide wolcna strengu  
 ofer folc byreð. Frætwe mine  
 swogað hlude ond swinsiað,  
 torht singað, þonne ic getenge ne beam  
 flode ond foldan, ferende gæst.

[*Sometimes my trappings and this high air raise me up above the dwellings of men, and then the strength of clouds bears me far and wide over the people. My adornments whistle loudly and make music, sing brightly, when I am not close to water and earth, a journeying spirit; Riddle 7: 3-9.*]

Craig Williamson has pointed out that, although only two other known classical or medieval references to it exist (in a Greek letter of Gregorius Nazianzenus and in the Old English *Phoenix*, to be discussed later), this idea of the bird's 'singing feathers' is possibly derived from careful natural observation:

The Whooper or Whistling Swan (*Cygnus Musicus*) does give off a kind of whistling sound in flight... It is possible that Gregory and the Old English riddler were the only meticulous bird-watchers in medieval Christendom.<sup>27</sup>

At any rate, in addition to conveying a sense of the swan's speed, if not the music of its flight, the 'swan-road' appears to be associated with the idea of rescue, its characteristic safe passage for righteous travellers (quite unlike Heliseus) attributable to divine guidance and favor from above. In *Andreas*, when the term 'swan-road' is used (as one in a series of appositives for the sea), it both follows a reference to the speed required to undertake the journey of rescue and occurs in close association with the idea of a heavenly perspective that might enable easier navigation over the sea's vast, horizontal expanse. For, in questioning his own ability to fare so quickly over the sea, Andrew suggests to the Lord that an angel, in possession of a heavenly or aerial view (like that of the bird in flight), knows better the swift and easy way – the 'swan-road' – over the waters below:

'Hu mæg ic, dryhten min, ofer deop gelad

fore gefremman on feorne weg  
 swa hrædlice, heofona scyppend,  
 wuldres waldend, swa ðu worde becwist?  
 Ðæt mæg engel þin eað geferan,  
 <halig> of heofenum; con him holma begang,  
 sealte sæstreamas ond swanrade...'

[*'How may I, my Lord, Creator of the heavens, Ruler of glory, undertake a journey over the deep sea, upon a remote road, as quickly as you command? Your holy angel may more easily accomplish that from the heavens; he knows the oceans' expanse, the salt sea-streams and the swan-road...'*; *Andreas* 190-96.]<sup>28</sup>

Andrew's mission furthermore is one of rescue, and his conveyance over the waves is later described in terms appropriate to the 'swan-road': As the boat 'fares foamy-necked like a bird' ('færeð famigheals, fugole gelicost' 497) and 'glides upon the ocean' ('glideð on geofone' 498a), emphasis is upon the craft's speed (496b; 504b-05a) and the exceptional skill of the helmsman (498b-500; and earlier, at 493-95a). The ship seems impervious to the threats of the sea, quite steady and seemingly standing still as if on solid ground (501-04a). Indeed, the swift and steady passage of this swanlike craft is due to the divine guidance at the helm; thus a true heavenly perspective actually has come into play in charting the best path over the sea. From the very outset, moreover, the heaven-blessed nature of the mission has been apparent; for a heavenly sign – the same token of victory that we have already observed in *Beowulf*, the 'brightest of beacons' (*beacna beorhtost* 242a) – shone forth in holiness over the sea (241b-44a). The steadfastness involved in the rescue then becomes appropriately conveyed through the swan imagery, which stands in sharp contrast to the storminess and unsteadiness associated with the whale, as noted earlier.

In *Elene* the 'mission of rescue or recovery' again occurs as a dominant theme. As in *Andreas*, from the very outset of *Elene* an auspicious sign – upon its first revelation to Constantine – serves to illuminate the action of the poem: the cross of Christ, another bright *beacen* shining 'above the roof of clouds', inscribed with a promise of victory in the perilous expedition against the foe (88b-96a).<sup>29</sup> Appropriately, bearers of 'God's beacon' (*beacen godes* 109) receive heavenly protection and achieve success in their undertakings; and as might well be expected, the familiar image of the bright beacon shining in the east comes to mark yet another mission of 'rescue' over the 'swan-road' in *Elene*. For, as Constantine receives the news from the east of his mother's success – that the true cross, the 'best of victory-beacons' (*selest sigebeacna* 974; *sigorbeacen* 984), has been recovered from the realm of

subterranean darkness (a motif that we have already witnessed in the 'redeemed treasure' scene of *Beowulf*) – the image of the 'swan-road' is juxtaposed once again with the idea of safe passage over the sea: 'hu gesundne sið ofer swonrade / secgas mid sigecwen aseted hæfdon / on Creca land' (*Elene* 996-98a: 'how men with the victorious queen had made a sound journey over the swan-road into the land of the Greeks'). As Oshitari comments, in this successful journey *swonrad* 'may be said to agree with the exuberant jubilation over the discovery of the true cross'.<sup>30</sup>

In *The Phoenix*, finally, the images of exulting bird and bright beacon receive explicit association, expressed in a way that brings together certain elements of the rising-sun motif that occur in *Beowulf* (but there in a more widely spread manner):

Se sceal þære sunnan sið behealdan  
 ond ongean cuman godes condelle,  
 glædum gimme, georne bewitigan,  
 hwonne up cyme æpelast tungla  
 ofer yðmere estan lixan,  
 fæder fyrngeweorc freætsum blican,  
 torht tacen godes.

[It shall there behold the course of the sun and eagerly observe the return of God's candle, the bright jewel, when the most noble of heavenly bodies comes up shining from the east over the wavy sea, the Father's ancient work, God's radiant sign, glittering in its adornments; *The Phoenix* 90-96a.]<sup>31</sup>

For not only are we presented here with the familiar bright sign that shines forth from the east, gleaming (*lixan*<sup>32</sup>) over the waves, but with an avian emblem of Christ's victory displaying attributes of the birds of light in *Beowulf* – a bird who 'bathes' in anticipation of the 'beacon', 'heaven's candle' ('bibapað ... ær þæs beacnes cyme, / sweglcondelle' 107-08a); who, like the shining<sup>33</sup> blithe-hearted raven announcing heaven's joy and the sun's radiance at *Beowulf* 1801-03a, flies aloft here to convey its own bright cheer to heaven as the sun shines over the sea below:

Sona swa seo sunne sealte streamas  
 hea oferhlifað, swa se haswa fugel  
 beorht of þæs bearwes beame gewiteð,  
 fareð feþrum snell flyhte on lyfte,  
 swinsað ond singeð swegle togeanes.

[As soon as the sun rises high above the salt streams, the gray bird departs – bright, swift in its feathers – from that grove’s tree it fares in flight through the air, makes a pleasing sound and sings towards heaven; 120-24.]

In fact, as noted earlier, Williamson states that ‘the firebird’s sweet song [at this particular point in the poem] is compared to the most delightful melodies known to man – among them the song of the swan’s feathers [*swanes feðre* 137]’.<sup>34</sup>

\* \* \*

Like the swan, the gannet is an aquatic bird of white plumage, a true ocean species that lives much of the year out upon the sea, far from any coasts. Noted for its gliding and diving abilities, and possessing binocular vision that enables it to accurately judge distances, the gannet indeed has a full, ‘heavenly’ view of the sea. And like other heaven- and light-associated images of Old English poetry, the gannet seems to function as a symbol of friendship and peace.

Margaret Goldsmith, in her article on the birds in *The Seafarer*, points to the possibility that *ganetes hleoþor* (20) was intended as a variation of *ylfete song* (19) in that poem, suggesting thereby a general similarity between the gannet and the wild swan (whose song, as we have just observed, is likewise comparable to that of the phoenix):

One gloss offers us *ganet* for *cygnus*, which is not surprising if *ganet* had become a general name for sea-bird, though the writer might have been more exact had he known *ylfetu* for the swan. Thus there seems to me nothing against the poet’s varying the *ylfetu* of line 19 of *The Seafarer* with the more general word *ganet* of the succeeding line, as there is ample evidence that OE. *ganet* covered birds other than the modern gannet.<sup>35</sup>

Although in a footnote she later alters her stance to translate *ganetes hleoþor* ‘the cry of the gannet’ in response to new evidence regarding actual gannet behavior,<sup>36</sup> Goldsmith’s point remains a valid one for our discussion. For either bird – swan or gannet – could serve generally to convey the basic idea and symbolism of the white seabird of surface and sky.

As Goldsmith also explains, the gannet is found in glosses for other birds besides the swan (*cygnus*) – notably the Latin *fulix* (‘coot’, but likely a more general term for waterfowl).<sup>37</sup> Of possibly greater significance, however, is



the unique appearance of the gannet in place of the more traditional quail (Latin *coturnix*, usually glossed *edischen*) in the Paris Psalter – an image of the seabirds in flight occupying a full line of additional alliterative verse: ‘Flæsces hi bædon, fuglas coman, / of garsegge ganetas fleogan, / and hi heofonhlafe halige gefylde’ (Psalm 104.35: ‘They asked for flesh, birds came – *gannets flying off the ocean* – and He satisfied them with holy bread from heaven’).<sup>38</sup> Here, along with the manna, the gannets function as a sign of God’s covenant with the Israelites in a scene of munificence that reinforces the psalm’s overall theme of the Lord’s fidelity to His promise – a pledge of support and alliance, moreover, that the Lord in a fatherly fashion had given to Abraham, regarded in verse 37 as ‘His own boy [or young man]’: ‘his agenum hysse’ (Latin *puerum suum*).

The particular image of the ‘gannet’s bath’, although it occurs elsewhere in Old English poetry,<sup>39</sup> is perhaps best examined in its occurrence in MSS. D and E of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, upon the death of Edgar in the year 975, where, as in *Beowulf*, it appears in connection with a king and his relations with peoples overseas:

Cuð wæs þæt wide geond feola þeoda,  
 þæt afaren Eadmundes ofer ganetes beð [MS. *gatenes*]  
 cynegas hyne wide wurðodon swiðe,\* [\*E. *side*]  
 bugon to þam cyninge, swa him wæs gecynde.  
 Næs [se] flota swa rang, ne se here swa strang,  
 þæt on Angelcynne æs him gefætte,  
 þa hwile þe se æpela cyning cynestol gerehte.

[Throughout many nations it was widely known that, over the gannet’s bath, kings on all sides honored Edmund’s son exceedingly, bowed to that king, as was natural. There was neither the fleet so proud nor the army so strong that it got prey for itself from the English race while that noble king held the royal throne.]<sup>40</sup>

This image of the good Christian English king being honored in earnest ‘over the gannet’s bath’ stands in contrast to the opening image in *Beowulf* of the good pagan king receiving forced obedience and tribute from conquered peoples ‘over the whale-road’ – especially when viewed in the light of the *Chronicle* entry for the year 959, in which Edgar succeeded to the kingdom:

On his dagum hit godode georne,  
 and God him geuðe þæt he wunode on sibbe,  
 þa hwile þe he leofode.

And he dyde, swa him þearf wæs, earnode þæs georne.  
 He arærde Godes lof wide,  
 and Godes lage lufode, and folces frið bette,  
 swyþost þara cyninga, þe ær him gewurde,  
 be manna gemynde.

And God him eac fylste, þæt cyningas and eorlas  
 georne him to bugan,  
 and wurdon underþeodde to þam ðe he wolde;  
 and butan gefeohte eall he gewilde,  
 þæt he sylf wolde.

[*In his days things improved gladly, and God granted to him that he should dwell in peace while he lived. And he did; as was necessary for him, he worked earnestly for that. He exalted God's praise widely and loved God's law, and he bettered the peace of the people more than any of the kings who were before him in the memory of men. And God also supported him so that kings and earls eagerly bowed down to him and became subject to that which he willed; and without a fight he brought under control all that he himself wished.*]<sup>41</sup>

In this portrait of a king and those subjected to him, there is no hint of animosity or terror, only admiration. Edgar's work is accomplished 'without a fight' (*butan gefeohte*). Here we come close to the ideal of a king in Christian society, where order and peace among nations derive from the love of God, and from upholding and praising His divine law. Furthermore, a possibility exists that the chronicler might well have been aware of the two contrasting images in *Beowulf* – of Scyld's dealings with foreigners *ofer hronrade* (10a), and of Hrothgar's *ofer ganotes bæð* (1861b, to be discussed at greater length below) – of power or command from the first and the image of mutual friendship and exchange from the second to create a composite of the two in fashioning this portrait of the powerful, yet peaceful and widely popular, King Edgar. This possibility seems quite reasonable in the light of recent scholarship that suggests *Beowulf* was composed sometime after the first quarter of the tenth century, at a time when relations between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians had become marked with an air of peace and mutual respect.<sup>42</sup> Such an atmosphere was especially apparent in Edgar's dealings with the Danelaw, as John D. Niles points out:

Anglo-Danish relations were at their most friendly during the reign of Edgar (959-975), surnamed 'the Peaceful' by those who appreciated the spirit of cooperation that characterized his rule. The

fourth of his law codes, adopted in 962-963, gives the Danes the right to choose their own laws 'because of your loyalty, which you have always shown me'. To conclude the code Edgar, addressing the leading men of the Danelaw, adds, 'I am very well pleased with you all, because you are so zealous about the maintenance of the peace'.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, Edgar's policy was seen in sharp contrast to that of the unpopular Æthelred, who, as Niels Lund asserts, 'attempted a policy in the Danelaw that can only have been regarded as oppression, and there can be no doubt that his legislation possessed every qualification needed to earn him the enmity of that region.'<sup>44</sup> Indeed the choice of the 'gannet's bath' image to highlight Edgar's difference – to distinguish clearly his peace and international popularity – would seem especially appropriate to anyone familiar with the antithetical presentation of 'whale' and 'seabird' images in *Beowulf*.

\* \* \*

Seabird imagery in *Beowulf*, as in the other works discussed above, seems to have a deliberate, artistically planned significance beyond the merely mechanical, formulaic level. An association of the swan with favorable sailing conditions is certainly apparent. Immediately after Beowulf's noble announcement to extend aid to Hrothgar *ofer swanrade* (198b-201), reference is made to an omen – most likely an indication of a good voyage to come: 'hwetton hige(r)ofne, hæl sceawedon' (204: 'They urged the valiant one on, beheld an omen'). A few lines later, the ship itself (as in *Andreas*) assumes the shape and grace of a swan as it rushes 'foamy-necked like a bird' ('flota famiheals fugle gelicost' 218) on its mission of rescue. Acknowledgement of heavenly guidance and protection upon the 'swan-road' becomes apparent in the actions of the seafaring Geats as they moor their swanlike craft and step out upon the land of the Danes, for the first thing they think to do is thank God for the ease with which they have accomplished their journey: 'Gode þancedon / þæs þe him yplade eaðe wurdon' (227b-28: 'They gave thanks to God because for them the way across the waves had been easy').

The bird imagery resumes as Beowulf and Hrothgar make tight their bond of alliance and friendship – a union between two nations characterized by mutual gift-giving 'over the gannet's bath':

'Hafast þu gefered, þæt þam folcum sceal,

Geata leodum ond Gar-Denum  
 sib gemæne, ond sacu restan,  
 inwitniþas, þe hie ær drugon,  
 wesan, þenden ic wealde widan rices,  
 maþmas gemæne, manig oþerne  
 godum gegrettan ofer ganotes bæð;  
 sceal hringnaca ofer heafu bringan  
 lac ond luftacen. Ic þa leode wat  
 ge wið feond ge wið freond fæste geworhte,  
 æghwæs untæle ealde wisan’.

[‘You have brought it about that for the folk, the people of the Geats and the Spear-Danes, there shall be mutual friendship; and strife shall rest, hostile acts, which previously they engaged in; as long as I rule the wide realm, there shall be shared treasures; many shall greet the other with goods over the gannet’s bath; the ring-prowed ship shall bring over the seas gifts and love-tokens. I know these people, blameless in every respect, firmly disposed after the old fashion toward both friend and foe’; *Beowulf* 1855-65.]

In this passage, both of the sea references – *ofer ganotes bæð* (1861b) and *ofer heafu* (1862; MS. *hea þu*) – are associated with, and might well be suggestive of, peaceful overseas relations. Of interest here is an observation that Oshitari makes simply ‘in passing’; regarding the appearance of *hæf* for ‘sea’ at line 1862 and later in the poem (2477), Oshitari remarks that ‘it is noteworthy that such a rare word occurs both in Parts I and II, and besides in reference to peaceful or strained relationships between two nations’.<sup>45</sup> What must be pointed out further, however, is that in *both* occurrences the term is strongly linked to the concept of reciprocal *friendship*. For in the latter occurrence the idea of ‘friendship over the seas’ is placed in deliberate contrast to its opposite – a contrast emphatically signalled by the ‘*ne...ac*’ construction of the sentence: ‘*freode ne woldon / ofer heafo healdan, ac ymb Hreosnabeorh / eatolne inwitscear oft gefremedon*’ (2476b-78: ‘They would not keep friendship over the seas, but often performed horrid, malicious slaughter about Hreosnabeorh’). ‘Friendship over the seas’ – the complete concept – is what the sons of Ongentheow are rejecting here.

On the use of *ganotes bæð* at line 1861, Brady comments that, rather than the ‘*expanse* of water between the two peoples’, Hrothgar’s intention is to emphasize that ‘across the peaceful surface of the sea men may exchange gifts’.<sup>46</sup> As I have noted elsewhere, Bonjour goes further to suggest that the gannet serves very possibly as a symbol of peace, while the joyous vision of Hrothgar here approximates that of the ideal peacemaker-king.<sup>47</sup> Moreover,

the idea of exchange 'over the gannet's bath' – especially of such items as *luftacen* (literally 'tokens of love') – contrasts with the more one-sided payment of tribute occurring in Scyld's relationship with nations 'over the whale-road'. The sea images evoked thus serve to distinguish respectively the two kings' attitudes and approaches toward foreigners.

Unlike Scyld and Hygelac, great pagan kings generous toward their own peoples but fierce toward foreign nations, Hrothgar manages to curb his aggressive spirit, preferring to face foreigners in a more friendly, fatherly fashion. Although Hrothgar did enjoy prior success in warfare (64-67a), in his inspiration to build the hall he turns from the work of destruction to that of construction, from war to peace. The building of the hall becomes a cooperative task symbolic of this transition in temperament, and afterwards Hrothgar is seen no more as an aggressor but as a peacemaker among men. In striving to settle feuds and encourage alliances and peaceful exchanges between different peoples, thereby exerting his influence overseas without fighting, he comes close to Edgar, that exemplar of Christian kingship renowned for his reign of peace 'over the gannet's bath'. Here also, as in Edgar's case, Hrothgar's foreign policy yields positive results. His own rescue from the clutches of Grendel can be attributed to his peace-making activities; for he had managed at an earlier time to exact oaths of support from Ecgtheow, Beowulf's father, in return for having settled a feud for him: 'Siððan þa fæhðe feo þingode; / sende ic Wylfingum ofer wæteres hrycg / ealde madmas; he me apas swor' (470-72: 'Afterwards I settled that feud with riches; I sent old treasures to the Wylfings over the water's ridge; he swore oaths to me'). Hence, Beowulf's voyage of rescue 'over the swan-road' to Heorot is in part a reciprocation for this assistance rendered to his father so many years before; Hrothgar is well aware of Beowulf's indebtedness to him: 'For [g]ewy[r]htum þu, wine min Beowulf, / ond for arstafum usic sohtest' (457-58: 'For deeds done – and for favors – you, my friend Beowulf, have sought us'). Furthermore, in his shipping practices Hrothgar exhibits the same philosophy of international cooperation and personal generosity that he earlier displayed in the building of Heorot (67b-81a), when people of many nations were brought together (74-76) to create a center wherein the king could distribute his God-given wealth (71-73). The hall's construction and decoration, in fact, reflect thematically God's Creation in the poem, and upon completion Heorot stands as a monument to justice, a bright beacon shining over many lands: 'lixte se leoma ofer landa fela' (311: 'The light glittered over many lands').<sup>48</sup> Like the Lord of Psalm 104, Hrothgar honors his promises, dealing out treasure at the feast (80-81a); and true to form, much later in the poem, after calling up the image of the 'gannet's bath', he again distributes gifts at Heorot (1866

ff.) – this time to his parting young friend from abroad, with whom he has established a father-son relationship (946b-49a), their compact of peace and alliance now strengthened and renewed.

Laden with gifts of gratitude and friendship, Beowulf's boat presses forward 'foamy-necked' once again over the swan-road, unhindered by the wind (1907-09). On board, Hrothgar's 'gift' (*gifu Hroðgares* 1884b) becomes regarded as his former 'hoard-riches', placed for travel under a towering mast ('mæst hlifade / ofer Hroðgares hordgestreonum' 1898b-99) in an image suggestive of a previous outbound shipment from Denmark aboard another 'ring-prowed ship' (*hringedstefna* 32b, 1897b): the funeral ship of Scyld, the 'whale-road' ruler riding with his wealth, 'glorious beside the mast' ('mærne be mæste' 36a). But Scyld's was a ship of death and, from a Christian point of view, useless treasure; for a body faring with treasure in his departure from life merits no special treatment in the afterlife.<sup>49</sup> Nor does such a sendoff serve to benefit the society to any great degree – just as later in the poem the treasure that Beowulf has won specifically for his people's benefit and practical use (2794 ff.) becomes ironically, in the narrator's words, 'useless to men' as it is placed according to pagan custom inside the hero's barrow: 'þær hit nu gen lifað / eldum swa unnyt, swa hi(t æro)r wæs' (3167b-68: 'where it now still dwells, as useless to men as it was before'). In contrast, Hrothgar's treasure fares without him, but with *living friends* to a land across the sea, where it will be usefully employed. By extending his wealth to a neighboring nation and not limiting his ring-giving to his own people, Hrothgar solidifies the peace and contributes toward the establishment of a living network of overseas exchange. Included in his shipment, furthermore, is a functional item notably absent among the goods in the earlier king's cargo: the gift of horses ('mearum ond maðmum' 1898a: 'with horses and treasure') – the mark of a thriving society and a truly animated symbol of extended good will.

In conclusion, *Beowulf* should be understood from the point of view of its immediate audience – a Christian one, looking back upon events that occurred in days of yore. The *Beowulf*-poet alludes both to scriptural accounts and to the story of Christian salvation in the telling of his tale. Moreover, he is a poet who stresses the values of peace. It is from this perspective that he presents his picture of the world of his pagan forebears: one of violent times and of men ever struggling to subdue dark, hostile forces (which he associates with the Christian hell, as his milieu naturally dictates). He praises attempts to bring order and peace to the world. More specifically, he traces the development of a nation and its international relationships from its founding under Scyld, through subsequent years of war, to the eventual blossoming of peace and good will under Hrothgar at Heorot.

Correspondingly, in moving from the ominous image of the 'whale-road' to the joyful display of mutual gift-giving over the 'gannet's bath', the poet intimates through his selection of sea-images a change in foreign relations: a movement from an old order based on aggression to a new one grounded in friendship and sharing among men, beckoning perhaps toward ultimate fulfillment in a more stable Christian future.

Furthermore, for those who, with Kevin Kiernan, would date the poem even as late as the reign of Cnut the Great (1016-1035),<sup>50</sup> this look back at Hrothgar, whose great hall of peace was later subjected to hostile flames, corresponds nicely with the retrospective attitude of the people who have witnessed the negative results of Æthelred's oppressive approach to governing and have come to long for a return to the more peaceful, cooperative ways of Edgar. Such a stance is evident in the resolve made at an Oxford assembly of English and Danes in 1018 to 'zealously observe Edgar's laws', as revealed in the preface to the D version of Cnut's laws contained in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS. 201:

Ponne is þæt ærest þæt witan geræddan . þæt hi ofer ealle oðre  
þingc ænne god æfre worðodon . ond ænne cristendom anrædlice  
healdan . ond cnut cyngc . lufian . mid rihtan . ond mid trywðan .  
ond eadgares lagan . geornlice folgian.

[In the first place, the councillors decreed that, above all other things, they would always honour one God and singlemindedly hold one Christian faith, and love King Cnut with due loyalty, and *zealously observe the laws of Edgar.*]<sup>51</sup>

The authorship of this passage, moreover, has been attributed to Wulfstan, archbishop of York, who looked back upon the reign of Edgar as a golden age and, as Cnut's chief legal adviser, worked hard to re-establish the laws of Edgar and the West Saxon kings.<sup>52</sup> In fact, there appears to be a close connection between the D version of Cnut's laws and MS. D of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in which the praises of Edgar's popularity 'over the gannet's bath' are sung. For, as Dorothy Whitelock points out, not only are the words 'to Eadgares lage' ('to Edgar's law') added to the account of the 1018 Oxford agreement in the D version of the *Chronicle*, but the poetic passages at 959 and 975 in D also have been linked to Wulfstan on stylistic grounds.<sup>53</sup> Thus, through the probable influence of Wulfstan, Cnut links himself to Edgar and thereby establishes a connection to a royal English line that traces itself back to Scyld and has also a special relationship to Mercia and (by extension) both Offa of Angel, a recipient of great praise in *Beowulf*, and his descendant, Offa of Mercia, whose just laws Alfred (Edgar's great-

grandfather) specifically incorporated into his own.<sup>54</sup> As Alexander Callander Murray asserts, 'By the late ninth and tenth centuries a poem which opened by flattering the house of Alfred [with reference to *Scef* and *Scyld*] could, without difficulty, also allude to Offa, the great ancestor of the Mercian royal house, because Alfred's successors were themselves descendants of Offa of Angle and had succeeded to the rule of the self-conscious kingdom of Mercia'.<sup>55</sup> Indeed in 957 Edgar succeeded to the kingdom of the Mercians – a likely homeland for the *Beowulf*-poet according to proponents of both early and late dates for the poem<sup>56</sup> – two years before becoming king over all England. His magnificent rule and peaceful relations 'over the gannet's bath' would be fondly remembered, serving as a source of hope and inspiration in the years to come.

All questions of influence aside, at the very least we have in this shining portrait of Edgar a confirmation of the Anglo-Saxon poet's skill for choosing a proper image to suit a particular context. Moreover, the image of the 'gannet's bath' appears to function symbolically in both *Beowulf* and the *Chronicle* entry, effectively underscoring the idea of peace and good will being expressed in the text.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Douglas C. Collins, 'Kenning in Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *Essays and Studies* 12 (1959): 1-17, especially the concluding paragraph; and Stanley B. Greenfield, *The Interpretation of Old English Poems*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Greenfield, pp. 38-39.

<sup>3</sup> Although my primary concern here is the appearance of animals in the *Beowulf* kennings *hronrad*, *swanrad*, and *ganotes bæð*, I shall be examining the animals themselves contained in the kennings, looking at their particular traits and significance, as well as the related image of the 'whale-mere' (*hwæl-/hronmere*) used elsewhere in Old English poetry in reference to the rough sea and suggested in the description of the storm that blows up in the Breca episode. I must also mention that sea-related animal imagery extends to the kennings for ships as 'sea-horses', analyzed as a formulaic theme in Earl R. Anderson's '*Sæmearh* and Like Compounds: A Theme in Old English Poetry', *Comitatus* 3 (1972): 3-10.

<sup>4</sup> See my article 'Heorot and Dragon-Slaying in *Beowulf*', *Proceedings of the PMR Conference* 11 (1986): 159-175.

<sup>5</sup> Edgar reigned from 959 until 975; Neil R. Ker dates the *Beowulf* MS 's. X/XI' (i.e., roughly 975-1025) in his *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1957, no. 216. David N. Dumville, in 'Beowulf Come Lately: Some Notes on the Palaeography of the Nowell Codex', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 225 (1988): 49-63, attempts to narrow the range of possibilities even further, arguing for an early eleventh-century



date for the manuscript, but not likely later than 1016. Kevin S. Kiernan, however, preferring not to stop so short, makes a case for an even later date, while staying still within Ker's limits: sometime during the reign of Cnut the Great, who ruled from 1016 until 1035. See Kiernan's response to Dumville's article in his revised edition of *'Beowulf' and the 'Beowulf' Manuscript*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996, 'Re-Visions', pp. xv-xxviii.

<sup>6</sup> Kinshiro Oshitari, 'The Sea in *Beowulf*', *Studies in English Literature* 50 English Number (1973): 3-18; 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Old English Physiologus*, ed. Ann Squires, Durham, Durham Medieval Texts, 1988, pp. 27-30 and 69-70, n. 3b.

<sup>8</sup> *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, New York, Columbia Univ. Press, 1936 (Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3). Differing from the early Latin accounts, where the creature dives primarily in response to the heat of the fire being kindled on its back by the men who have mistaken it for an island, the whale in the Old English version does not dive in direct response to the heat but allows the men time to become comfortable, even joyful, before bringing about their shocking and unexpected *edwenden* (ll. 21-23). Squires comments on the difference here between the Old English and Latin versions: 'Whereas in the Latin the whale-island is shown as an almost accidental natural hazard for ignorant sailors, the English poet, by varying 5b-6a *fareðlacendum* with *nipþa gehwylcum*, from the beginning indicates the universality of the danger; and since the whale, *facnes cræftig* 24b, dives not because it feels the heat of the fire but because it is aware that its prey is safely caught, the whole episode demonstrates a deliberate attack by the devil on the human will through the deception of a sense (sight) and the creation of an illusion of comfort and security' (p. 25). Translations of Old English and Latin passages in this essay are my own unless noted otherwise.

<sup>9</sup> As in his previous unique attribution of diabolical traits to the whale even before proceeding to the first allegorical explanation, here the Old English poet again presents a more proud (*wæterþisa wlonc*, 50a) and calculating portrayal of this fiendish creature (*aglæcan*, 52a) than do the Latin accounts at the same juncture. The Latin versions also differ from the Old English version in that they proceed to further distinguish between small and large fish, representative respectively of 'men of little faith who are destroyed by the lures of the devil' and 'those of great faith [who] know his tricks and avoid him'; see Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1960 (Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures 33), p. 91. In contrast, while making no real distinction between small and large fish, the Old English poet simply explains that the swallowed fish represent men who, often heedless of their lives in this fleeting time, fall prey to temptations of the flesh (62b-67a). Squires comments on this point, indicating how the whale's two natures in the Old English version strongly parallel each other: 'By omitting the distinction between great and small fish and its explanation, the poet produces the same general danger for mankind as in the first episode and he marks this clearly for the reader by terming the fish *fareðlacende* 80b as he did the sailors at 5b and 20a' (pp. 25-26). What follows then

is a description of hell and damnation (67b-81) that has no parallel in the Latin accounts, and a final exhortation to fight the devil with words and deeds, and to seek from the Lord salvation in this life (82-88).

<sup>10</sup> On the image of the hell-mouth in this poem and medieval depictions of the subject elsewhere, see Squires, p. 30 and n. 16. For examples of hell-mouths occurring in Anglo-Saxon illuminated manuscripts, see Thomas H. Ohlgren's iconographic catalogue, *Insular and Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> The Old Testament Book of Jonah provides ready inspiration for such association. Thus Isidore of Seville, in his account of the whale, speaks of its likeness to hell, making reference to Jonah's prayer to the Lord 'from the belly of hell' after having been swallowed: 'Sunt enim ingentia genera beluarum et aequalia montium corpora; qualis cetus exceptit Ionam, cuius alvus tantae magnitudinis fuit ut instar obtineret inferni, dicente Propheta (2,3): "Exaudivit me de ventre inferni"' (Isidore, *Etymologiae* 12. 6. 8, ed. W: M. Lindsay, Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1911, repr. 1957, vol. 2). In the New Testament and exegetical accounts, the story of Jonah and the whale becomes viewed as a prefigurement of Christ's death and resurrection, suggesting further the popular apocryphal theme of the 'harrowing of hell' – the triumph of Christ's light over the darkness of sin and the devil. See Matthew 12:40 and 16:4; Luke 11:30; 1 Corinthians 15:4. See also Squires, p. 70, n. 3b, for more on the exegetical link between the whale and hell.

<sup>12</sup> Oshitari, pp. 6-7; Caroline Brady, 'The Old English Nominal Compounds in -*rād*', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 67 (1952): 538-571; p. 559.

<sup>13</sup> Brady, 'Old English Nominal Compounds', pp. 556-557.

<sup>14</sup> Brady, 'Old English Nominal Compounds', p. 568.

<sup>15</sup> *Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles*, ed. Kenneth R. Brooks, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961. Cf. *The Seafarer* 58-64a, where the *anfloga* comes back *gifre ond grædig*, yelling and whetting *onwæl weg* (emended to either *on hwælweg* or, in keeping with the MS spelling, *on wælweg*) just after the speaker has regarded his *hyge/modsefa* as turning widely *ofer hwæles epel*. The similar association in both poems of the 'whale's home'/'whale-mere' with a circling '(carriage-)hungry and greedy' flier would seem to lend weight to the arguments of those favoring retention of the MS form *wælweg* at *Seafarer* 63a. For a summary of their arguments and further reference, see Anne L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992, p. 139, n. 63a.

<sup>16</sup> See Greenfield, *A Critical History of Old English Literature*, New York, New York University Press, 1965, p. 107; in the revised edition by Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder (1986), see p. 163.

<sup>17</sup> *The Exeter Book*, ed. Krapp and Dobbie; Craig Williamson, however, in his edition, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1977, numbers these as lines 16-20 of Riddle 1.

<sup>18</sup> *The Paris Psalter and The Meters of Boethius*, ed. Krapp, New York, Columbia University Press, 1932 (ASPR 5).

<sup>19</sup> See Allan Metcalf, 'Ten Natural Animals in *Beowulf*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 64 (1963): 378-389; pp. 387-389.

<sup>20</sup> All quotations of *Beowulf* are from *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Fr. Klaeber, Boston, D. C. Heath, 1950 (3rd ed. with Supplements). The translations are mine.

<sup>21</sup> Although the general meaning of *beacen* is 'sign', I prefer to translate the word in *Beowulf* as 'beacon' because it occurs in each case as a bright sign of victory over the forces of darkness: a guiding light to seafarers on both literal and allegorical levels. For more on the significance of the 'beacon' image and seafaring in *Beowulf*, see my article 'As Whiteness Fades to Fallow: Riding into Time in *Beowulf*', *In Geardagum* 14 (1993): 13-25 (esp. pp. 18-19; nn. 8-9). On the 'beacon'/'redeemed treasure' association, see 'Heorot and Dragon-Slaying', pp. 171-172. See also Elisabeth Okasha's "'Beacen" in Old English Poetry', *Notes and Queries* n.s. 23 (1976): 200-207.

<sup>22</sup> Brady, 'The Synonyms for "Sea" in *Beowulf*', in *Studies in Honor of Albert Morey Sturtevant*, Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1952 (Humanistic Studies 29); p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Adrien Bonjour, 'On Sea Images in *Beowulf*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 54 (1955): 111-115; p. 112.

<sup>24</sup> Isidore, *Etymologiae* 12. 7. 18-19. The italics are mine.

<sup>25</sup> Metcalf, p. 387; Bonjour, pp. 112-113.

<sup>26</sup> *The Exeter Book*, ed. Krapp and Dobbie; numbered 5:1-2 in Williamson.

<sup>27</sup> Williamson, ed., pp. 151-152.

<sup>28</sup> Brady, in 'Old English Nominal Compounds', regards *swanrad* as it appears here in 'an enumeration of those things which must be known to him who would make a successful and fast voyage across the ocean to Marmedonia' as 'a part or characteristic of the ocean, not identical with it'. She goes on to say, 'In terms of *swan-*, the reference here could be to the *calm surface* on which the swan "rides"; if to waves, to "*ripples*", not "*billows*", which belong to the realm of the whale' (568; emphasis mine). Oshitari, while noting Brady's assertion, comments that in this particular occurrence the term seems 'incongruous with the context', having 'no definite association, unless we regard it as contrasted with the agitated sea' (8). Such a position, however, does not take into account the juxtaposed ideas here of the angel's aerial view and knowledge of the easy way across the sea.

<sup>29</sup> *The Vercelli Book*, ed. Krapp, New York, Columbia Univ. Press, 1932 (ASPR 2).

<sup>30</sup> Oshitari, 8. Brady groups this passage with *Beowulf* 198b-201, stating that in both places '*swanrad* does designate an expanse of water, a sea, but not the vastness, the limitless uncharted reaches of the ocean that are emphasized in *hronrad*'; neither is there suggestion of dangers or hazards, of sea-beasts or storms. The sea is thought of simply as an area, a surface, which can be and is crossed with a minimum of difficulty' ('Old English Nominal Compounds', 568).

<sup>31</sup> *The Exeter Book*, ed. Krapp and Dobbie.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. the use of *lixan* in *Beowulf*, where the expression *lixe se leoma* appears twice: first in reference to the light which shines forth *ofer landa fela* from Hrothgar's hall (311), and then in connection with Beowulf's bright victory over Grendel's mother (1570-72a, quoted above). On the significance of this repetition in *Beowulf*, see 'Heorot and Dragon-Slaying', 164ff.

<sup>33</sup> On the possibility of *blaca* meaning or suggesting 'shining' at *Beowulf* 1801a, see 'As Whiteness Fades to Fallow', 20-22. See also Sylvia Huntley Horowitz, 'The Ravens in *Beowulf*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 80 (1981): 502-511; p. 506.

<sup>34</sup> Williamson, ed., p. 151.

<sup>35</sup> Margaret E. Goldsmith, 'The Seafarer and the Birds', *Review of English Studies* n.s. 5 (1954): 225-235; p. 228. For more on the etymology of 'gannet', Germanic cognates, and semantic development from 'gander' to "'goose" in the generic sense', see W. B. Lockwood, 'More English Etymologies', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 21 (1973): 414-423; pp. 416-418.

<sup>36</sup> The new evidence comes as an authoritative note from bird-watcher James Fisher: 'Their "loud hoarse urra" is used very frequently when gannets get excited over the competition for a dense concentration of food at sea. The Seafarer would certainly have heard it in winter if he had come across gannets diving after a concentration of fish' (Goldsmith, p. 28, n. 3).

<sup>37</sup> Goldsmith, pp. 227-28. Lockwood, p. 416, lists and discusses briefly the occurrences of *ganot* in Old English and directs readers to p. 172 of Charles H. Whitman's 'The Birds of Old English Literature', *Journal of Germanic Philology* 2 (1899): 149-198, for 'detailed references'. However, neither Lockwood nor Whitman mentions that the image of the 'gannet's bath' occurs in a different context in MSS. D and E of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* from that which appears in MSS. A, B, and C; for *Chron.* 975, Whitman quotes only the latter version.

<sup>38</sup> *The Paris Psalter*, ed. Krapp. Translation and emphasis mine. See my discussion of thematic similarities in 'Glæd Man at Heorot: *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon Psalter', *Leeds Studies in English* 27 (1996): 49-68 (esp. pp. 52-53 and 58, on the effect of the gannet image in both Psalm 104 and *Beowulf*).

<sup>39</sup> The image occurs at line 79 of the *Rune Poem*, where it serves as a scenic backdrop to oaken ships proving their seaworthiness upon the waves, and at line 26 of the *Death of Edgar* (the version of the 975 *Chronicle* poem appearing in MSS. A, B, and C) where Oslac, earl of Northumbria, a grey-haired man wise with words, is exiled from the land: 'And þa wearð eac adræfed deormod hæleð, / Oslac, of earde ofer yða gewearc, / ofer ganotes bæð, gamolfeax hæleð, / wis and wordsnotor, ofer wætera geðring, / ofer hwæles eðel, hama bereafod' (*Death of Edgar* 24-28). This passage, it must be noted, has been regarded as a 'mechanical piling up' or 'overaccumulation' of older poetic formulas (see Greenfield and Calder, p. 248): the 'gannet's bath' in particular here amounting to little more than a hackneyed expression that has 'nothing to do with "peace"', paling thus in comparison to the more meaningfully employed kennings in *Beowulf* (see Oshitari, 10). However,

Greenfield and Calder point out that line 28 of this passage 'is effective in its contrast of home with homelessness' (emphasis mine). Likewise, the juxtaposition of the idea of wisdom with the image of the 'gannet's bath' in lines 26-27 should not be ignored, nor should the variation of expressions for the sea be too readily dismissed as a static 'pile-up' without taking into account the dynamic nature of the journey and the symbolism of the images evoked. For, in the progression of images from the rolling waves and the 'gannet's bath' to the more threatening throng of waters and the 'realm of the whale', ever outward, we can sense the mounting peril of exile.

<sup>40</sup> *An Anglo-Saxon Chronicle from British Museum, Cotton MS., Tiberius B.IV*, ed. E. Classen and F. E. Harmer, Manchester, Manchester Univ. Press, 1926, yr. 975, p. 50. Italics mine.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, yr. 959, pp. 48-49.

<sup>42</sup> See John D. Niles' chapter 'The Danes and the Date' in *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition*, Cambridge MA, Harvard Univ. Press, 1983. For other recent speculation on the date of *Beowulf*, including, as Niles notes, nine (of thirteen) studies 'leav[ing] open the possibility of a ninth- or tenth-century date ... four argu[ing] positively for the tenth century and one author (Kiernan) favor[ing] the early eleventh' (p. 281, n. 9), see *The Dating of 'Beowulf'*, ed. Colin Chase, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981.

<sup>43</sup> Niles, p. 106. For more on Edgar and his relationship with the Danes, see esp. Niels Lund, 'King Edgar and the Danelaw', *Medieval Scandinavia* 9 (1976): 181-195.

<sup>44</sup> Lund, p. 194.

<sup>45</sup> Oshitari, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Brady, 'Synonyms for "Sea"', p. 27.

<sup>47</sup> See *'Glæd Man'*, p. 53; and Bonjour, p. 113.

<sup>48</sup> Hrothgar's *hornreced* actually assumes the same significance as the hall of the just man in Psalm 111 (illustrated in the Utrecht, Harley, and Eadwine Psalters as a true *Heorot* surmounted by a hart's head), which likewise dawns in darkness as a beacon of justice and generosity for all to see. For a more detailed discussion of the hall's construction, adornment, and symbolism, see 'Heorot and Dragon-Slaying', pp. 164-169; and *'Glæd Man'*, pp. 50-52 and 57-60.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. the attitude towards earthly riches faring with the dead in *The Seafarer* 97ff.

<sup>50</sup> See Kiernan, 'The Eleventh-Century Origin of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* Manuscript', in *The Dating of 'Beowulf'*, ed. Chase, pp. 9-21; and *'Beowulf' and the 'Beowulf' Manuscript*, New Brunswick NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1981, esp. the first chapter, 'The Poem's Eleventh-Century Provenance'.

<sup>51</sup> The OE text and translation are from A. G. Kennedy, 'Cnut's Law Code of 1018', *Anglo-Saxon England* 11 (1983): 57-81; p. 72; emphasis mine. See also *English Historical Documents I: c. 500-1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, New York, Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 414, n. 47; Whitelock, 'Wulfstan and the Laws of Cnut', *English Historical Review* 63 (1948): 433-452 (p. 440); and the discussion of this resolve's implications in Lund, 188ff.

<sup>52</sup> See Greenfield and Calder, pp. 110-111.

<sup>53</sup> See Whitelock, 'Wulfstan and the Laws of Cnut', pp. 442-443; and Kennedy, pp. 58 and 62.

<sup>54</sup> See Greenfield and Calder, p. 109; *English Historical Documents I*, ed. Whitelock, p. 373, Int. 49.9.

<sup>55</sup> Alexander Callander Murray, 'Beowulf, the Danish Invasions, and Royal Genealogy', in *The Dating of 'Beowulf'*, ed. Chase, p. 109.

<sup>56</sup> See Whitelock, *The Audience of 'Beowulf'*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1951, pp. 63-64; and Kiernan, 'Beowulf' and the 'Beowulf' Manuscript, pp. 49-63.