

## Grendel's Mere, Beowulf's Dive, and the *Visio Sancti Pauli*

Rafael J. PASCUAL

**Author:**

Rafael J. Pascual  
University of Granada, Spain  
rjpascual@ugr.es  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5100-9572>

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**Abstract:**

According to Hrothgar's account of Grendel's mere, every night one can see there *fȳr on flōde*, a phrase often translated as 'fire on the water'. This fire, which the king describes as a *nīðwundor* (a dreadful wonder), has traditionally been seen by scholars as a supernatural phenomenon that contributes to the presentation of the place as eerie. Geoffrey Russom and Christopher Abram have taken an alternative view: they argue that the phrase means 'fire in/within the water' and interpret it in two different ways. Russom believes that Grendel's mere is an entrance to hell, and that *fȳr on flōde* refers to gleams of infernal light showing through the water. Abram, on the other hand, thinks that it is a kenning-like expression to refer to light emanated from the treasures lying within the monsters' hall. This essay agrees with them that the phrase means 'fire in the water', but it argues that the reference is to the ordinary fire burning within the hall (mentioned in 1516b). The essay proposes that the poet took the motif of the fiery river from a vernacular version of the *Visio Sancti Pauli* (long thought to be among the poet's sources) and rationalized it as an ordinary fire misconstrued by Hrothgar as a supernatural wonder, thereby playing with the audience's expectations. The piece concludes by exploring the implications of its argument for two long-standing interpretative cruxes in the poem: Hrothgar's gaze at the gigantic sword hilt and Beowulf's supposed ability to dive for hours on end.

**Keywords:** *Beowulf*, *Visio Sancti Pauli*, Old English poetry, Medieval Latin literature, Source studies

One of the most outstanding passages of *Beowulf*, and one that has naturally attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, is Hrothgar's description of Grendel's mere in ll. 1357b–76a:<sup>1</sup>

Hie dýgel lond  
 wariġeað, wulfhleoþu, windiġe næssas,  
 frēcne fengélād, ðær fyrġenstrēam  
 under næssa ġenipu niþer ġewīteð,  
 flōd under foldan. Nis þæt feor heonon  
 mīlġemearces þæs se mere standeð;  
 ofer þāem hongiað hrinde bearwas,  
 wudu wyrstum fæst wæter oferhelmað.  
 Þær mæġ nihta ġehwæm niðwundor sēon,  
 fyr on flōde. Nō þæs frōd leofað  
 gumena bearna þæt þone grund wite.  
 Ðēah þe hāðstapa hundum ġeswenced,  
 heorot hornum trum holtwudu sēce,  
 feorran ġeflýmmed, ær hē feorh seleð,  
 aldor on ofre, ær hē in wille,  
 hafelan [beorgan]; nis þæt hēoru stōw.  
 Þonon yðġeblond up āstīġeð  
 won tō wolcnum þonne wind styreþ  
 lāð ġewidru, oð þæt lyft ðrysmæþ,  
 roderas rēotað.

(They inhabit hidden country, wolf-hills, windy crags, a dangerous passage through fen, where a cascading river passes down under the gloom of cliffs, a watercourse under the earth. It is not far in miles from here that the pool stands; over it hang frost-covered groves, firmly rooted woods overshadow the water. There every night a dire portent can be seen, fire on the flood. There lives no offspring of men so well informed that he knows the bottom. Even if a heath-roamer beset by hounds, a hart of firm antlers, makes for the forest, driven far in flight, it will sooner give up the ghost, its life on the bank, than enter and save its head; that is not a pleasant place. There the tossing of waves mount up dark to the clouds when the wind stirs up gloomy storms, until they choke the air and the heavens weep.)

<sup>1</sup> *Beowulf* is cited from the fourth edition of *Klaeber's Beowulf* (Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, 2008). Translations are from Fulk (2010).

The account of the place as a *locus terribilis* is without question very accomplished and spine-chilling. Already in 1912, William Witherle Lawrence, in his classic essay on the subject, said of these lines that they are ‘hardly to be matched and certainly not to be surpassed in Anglo-Saxon for sheer poetic beauty’ (208). The description of this frightening locale is completed shortly thereafter, in ll. 1408–17a, this time in the words of the narrator:

Oferēode þā æþelinga bearn  
 stēap stānhliðo, stīge nearwe,  
 enge ānpaðas, uncūð gēlād,  
 neowle næssas, nicorhūsa fela;  
 hē fēara sum beforan gengde  
 wīsra monna wong scēawian,  
 oþ þæt hē fāringa fyrġenbēamas  
 ofer hārme stān hleonian funde,  
 wynlēasne wudu; wæter under stōd  
 drēoriġ ond ġedrēfed.

(The children of nobles moved then over steep stone-slopes, narrow defiles, straitened single-file paths, a strange passage, precipitous bluffs, many lairs of sea-monsters. He went ahead with a small group of knowledgeable men to scout the area, until all at once he encountered mountain-trees leaning over hoary stone, a joyless wood; water stood beneath, bloody and troubled.)

Scholars have long noted and discussed the close parallels between the description of the monsters’ abode in *Beowulf* and the account of hell offered by Saint Paul in the last portion of Blickling Homily XVI:<sup>2</sup>

Sanctus Paulus wæs ġesēonde on norðanweardne þisne middanġeard, þær ealle wætero niðer ġewītað, ⁊ hē þær ġeseah ofer ðæm wætere sumne hārme stān; ⁊ wæron norð of ðæm stāne āwexene swīðe hrīmiġe bearwas, ⁊ ðær wæron þystro ġenipo, ⁊ under þæm stāne wæs niccra eardung ⁊ wearga; ⁊ hē ġeseah þæt on ðæm clife hangodan on ðæm īsġean bearwum maniġe swearte sāula be heora handum ġebundne; ⁊ þā fīnd þāra on nicra onlīcnesse heora ġrīpende wæron, swā swā grāediġ wulf; ⁊ þæt wæter wæs sweart under þæm clife neoðan; ⁊ betuh þæm clife on[d] ðæm wætre wæron swylce twelf mīla;

<sup>2</sup> The text and the translation are from the fourth edition of *Klaeber's Beowulf* (Fulk, Bjork, and Niles 2008, 294). The homily was originally numbered XVII: see Morris (1874–1880).

7 ðonne ðā twigo forburston, þonne ġewitan þā sāula niðer, þā þe on ðǣm twigum hangodan, 7 him onfēngon ðā nicras.

(Thus, Saint Paul was looking toward the northern regions of the world, where all waters descend, and there over the water he saw a certain hoary stone; and north of the stone there had grown very frosty groves, and there were gloomy mists, and under the stone was the habitation of sea-monsters and vile things; and he saw that on the cliff, in the icy groves many black souls hung by their bound wrists; and their tormentors in the shape of sea-monsters were grasping at them like ravenous wolves. And the water was black below the cliff, and it was some twelve miles between [the top of] the cliff and the water; and when the branches broke, the souls that hung on them went down, and the sea-monsters took hold of them.)

The two landscapes are reminiscent of each other. In both, running waters flow into a mere overshadowed by the frosty trees that grow from the grey rock above, which is shrouded in mist, and in both the mere is said to be the habitat of aquatic monsters. In both texts, moreover, the landscapes are depicted by means of remarkably similar phrasing. It is only natural, then, that most scholars believe, I think correctly, that there must be some relationship between the two texts, though they disagree over the exact nature of that relationship.<sup>3</sup> Discussion of this issue will be postponed till later in the essay.

For now, I would like to concentrate on a conspicuous feature of the Beowulfian scenery that is notably absent from Saint Paul's vision of hell in the Blickling homily: the *fȳr on flōde* of l. 1366a. The phrase has generally been taken to mean 'fire on the water', and so it has been understood as an inexplicable supernatural phenomenon that effectively characterizes Grendel's abode as an eerie place. This traditional interpretation seems to be sanctioned by Hrothgar himself, who refers to this nocturnal *fȳr on flōde* as a *nīðwundor* (a dreadful wonder). A different and, in my view, superior interpretation has been offered by Geoffrey Russom (2007) and Christopher Abram (2010). They construe the phrase as meaning 'fire in the water', and so they see it as a reference not to an inexplicable wonder, but to the *fȳrlēoht* that Beowulf perceives within the monsters' underwater hall after his dive into the mere:

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of the different views, see Orchard (2003, 157–158).

Ðā se eorl onġeat  
 þæt hē [in] nīðsele nāthwylcum wæs,  
 þær him nāniġ wæter wihte ne sceþede,  
 nē him for hrōfsele hrīnan ne mehte  
 færgripe flōdes; fȳrlēoht ġeseah,  
 blācne lēoman beorhte scīnan. (ll. 1512b–17)

(Then the man made out that he was in some sort of oppressive hall where no water could harm them, nor could the perilous grasp of the flood touch them on account of the roofed structure; he saw fire-light, radiant illumination shining brightly.)

If this *fȳrlēoht* is the same as the *fȳr on flōde* of 1366a, then it makes sense that Hrothgar and the Danes see fire within the water only at night, as is stated in l. 1365. A light or a fire burning within the subaquatic hall would start to be seen from outside the water only at dusk and thereafter.<sup>4</sup> If, on the other hand, *fȳr on flōde* referred to fire that is supernaturally floating on the surface of the mere, it would have to be visible in daylight too.<sup>5</sup> Russom's and Abram's interpretation of *fȳr on flōde* as a reference to the *fȳrlēoht* in the underwater hall seems therefore preferable.

Russom and Abram, however, disagree over what *fȳrlēoht* in 1516b refers to. As shown above, the description of the mere in *Beowulf* closely resembles that of hell in Saint Paul's vision in Blickling Homily XVI. Grendel and his mother, moreover, are consistently characterized by the poet as infernal creatures associated with the devil. This led Russom to believe that the subaquatic hall where the hero is brought by Grendel's mother is literally hell, which would thus be accessible through the mere. The *fȳrlēoht* mentioned in l. 1516b, according to Russom, refers to light generated not by a domestic hearth, but by hellfire, and so the *fȳr on flōde* of which Hrothgar speaks would be, to put it in Russom's words, 'glimmers of infernal light showing through the water after sunset' (2007, 234). Abram, on the other hand, takes *fȳrlēoht* to mean the light that emanates from the precious, and hence probably golden, objects within the Grendels' abode (mentioned in l. 1613), which the Danes would have been able to see from the shore of the mere. Why would the poet refer to light that emanates from

4 For this point, see Russom (2007, 234) and Abram (2010, 199).

5 Of course, the *fȳr on flōde* might be a reference to the *ignis fatuus* or will-o'-the-wisp that travellers sometimes see in marshy places at night: see Lawrence (1912, 217) and Klaeber (1950, 183–184). The mention of a *fȳrlēoht* under the water only a few lines later, however, suggests that the two phenomena are connected.

gold instead of fire as *fýrlēoht* and *fýr on flōde*? The answer to this question, according to Abram, is to be found in skaldic poetry, where gold is frequently denoted by kennings of the ‘fire of the sea’ type. Abram believes that Old Norse kennings of that type originated with the legend of Sigurðr’s disposal of the gold of the Niflungar in the Rhine, and that that legend somehow underlies the *Beowulf* passages under discussion. Thus, the audience of the poem, owing to their familiarity with the legend of Sigurðr, would have immediately recognized *fýr on flōde* as a metaphorical, kenning-like periphrasis for ‘gold’.

Both of these interpretations of the *fýrlēoht* of l. 1516b are unnecessarily complex and hence fail to persuade. Hellfire in Anglo-Saxon literature is often represented as burning but dark, and so hell is normally portrayed as a hot but lightless place, not as the brightly illuminated one that Russom has in mind.<sup>6</sup> For example, in the *Versus de die iudicii* (a poem traditionally attributed to Bede, and so possibly contemporary with *Beowulf*), hell is described in the following terms:<sup>7</sup>

Nec uox ulla ualet miseris edicere poenas:  
 ignibus aeternae nigris loca plena gehennae,  
 frigora mixta simul feruentibus algida flammis;  
 nunc oculos nimio flentes ardore camini,  
 nunc iterum nimio stridentes frigore dentes.  
 His miseris uicibus miseri uoluuntur in aeuum,  
 obscuras inter picea caligine noctes. (93–9)

(Nor is any voice capable of declaring those distressing penalties: locations full of the black fires of eternal hell, biting coldness simultaneously mixed with burning flames; at one time eyes weeping on account of the extreme heat of the furnace, at another time teeth chattering again on account of the excessive cold. The unfortunate ones are perpetually cast between these alternating miseries in nights dark with pitch-black gloom.)

Hellfire is black, and so hell’s eternal torments are said to take place in pitch-black nights. What *Beowulf* finds inside the hall, moreover, is a gigantic sword, Grendel’s corpse, and a large number of precious possessions. Should he not have been expected to find the souls of the damned and their diabolical torturers instead (as in Saint Paul’s vision in the Blickling homily)? Had the hero’s dive

<sup>6</sup> On stock representations of hell, see, for example, Johnson (1993) and Tristram (1978).

<sup>7</sup> The text is from Lapidge (2019, 168–171); the translation is mine. It might well be the case that the poem is not by Bede, but even so the point remains that the Anglo-Saxons would have thought of hell as a dark place.

taken him to hell itself, the poet would probably have portrayed the place very differently, and he would have indicated it to us explicitly. Abram's analysis, though ingenious, is too conjectural to command credibility. There is no evidence whatsoever that a legendary figure equivalent to Sigurðr, and his disposal of the Niflungar's gold in the Rhine, were known to the Anglo-Saxons. It also appears implausible that an Anglo-Saxon audience would have interpreted *fyr on flōde* as a metaphor for 'gold'. Kennings in Old English poetry do not depend upon familiarity with native legends for their interpretation. That is a feature, instead, of Old Norse skaldic kennings (see, for example, Fulk 2021).<sup>8</sup> Abram says that for an audience accustomed to skaldic poetry, the expression *fyr on flōde* would have straightforwardly meant 'gold', and he is surely right, but there are very good reasons to believe that that was not the kind of audience for whom the *Beowulf* poet composed (Neidorf 2014; Neidorf and Pascual 2019).

It thus seems best to take *fýrlēoht* in 1516b for what it appears to be, a reference to light emanated from an ordinary fire burning within the monsters' lair. Ll. 1365–66a are then best construed as an indication that light from that subaquatic hearth was visible at night to Danish bystanders outside the mere, who were naturally perplexed by it. There are two additional considerations, one external to the poem, the other internal, in support of this interpretation. External corroboration is to be found in the Sandhaugar episode in *Grettis saga*, which is in all likelihood based on the same folktale that informs Beowulf's fights with Grendel and his mother. In the Norse saga, what the hero finds out after diving under the waterfall is that the giant's cave is illuminated not by hellfire or luminescent gold, but by an ordinary fire:<sup>9</sup>

Grettir kafaði undir forsinn, ok var þat torvelt, því að iða var mikil, ok varð hann allt til grunns at kafa, áðr en hann kæmisk upp undir forsinn. Þar var forberg nokkut, ok komsk hann inn þar upp á. Þar var hellir mikill undir forsinum, ok fell áin fram af berginu. Hann gekk þá inn í hellinn, ok var þar eldr mikill á bröndum.

(Grettir dived under the waterfall; this was a difficult thing to do, because the eddy was so strong that he had to dive down to the riverbed before he could get behind the waterfall. Inside, there was a ledge, and he climbed up on it. Above it, and behind the waterfall, there was a huge cave under the cliff edge where the river came crashing down. He went into the cave, where a great log-fire was burning.)

8 As Fulk shows, the kennings of Old English verse are simpler and less riddle-like than those of skaldic verse.

9 The text is from Jónsson (1936); the translation is from Fox and Pálsson (1974).

Internal support comes from ll. 1512b–17, quoted above. There the poet takes good care to emphasize that, despite the subaquatic location of the monsters' hall, it was made wholly impermeable to water by some kind of roofed structure. As Fred C. Robinson has said about that passage, 'the poet is at some pains to explain that the conflict does not take place under water but rather in a dry chamber where no water could reach the combatants' (1974, 121). The poet does not elaborate on the workings of the *hrōf*, but mention of the *fýrlēoht* precisely at that point in the narrative does not seem gratuitous. Rather, its point was to show to the audience that, contrary to expectation, the Grendels' abode was so well protected against water that a fire could be lit and maintained therein.<sup>10</sup>

Let us now turn our attention back to the relationship between *Beowulf* and Blickling Homily XVI. Several scholars have argued for direct influence of one text on the other, with some preferring to see the poem as the source, others coming down in favour of the homily.<sup>11</sup> Despite the striking similarities between the two passages, there are elements in each that are not in the other, and so Charles D. Wright has contended that both authors drew independently on a common source: a vernacular version of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*, an apocryphal work in which St Paul experiences several visions, including one of hell which is very similar to the one depicted in the Blickling homily (1993, Chapter 3). There is nothing implausible about Wright's argument. The *Visio Sancti Pauli* enjoyed a great popularity in the Middle Ages, especially in England, as attested by the large number of manuscripts of the redactions (as the numerous abbreviated versions of that work are known) that are of English origin (Wright 1993, 106–113). Its influence, moreover, can be discerned in many Old English texts, which suggests that it was widely accessible to vernacular authors, and a vernacular translation of the Long Latin text in fact survives in a mid-eleventh-century manuscript of Kentish provenance (diPaolo Healey 1978). It therefore makes sense to agree with Wright that both poet and homilist had access to a now lost redaction of the *Visio Sancti Pauli* written in Old English (a hypothesis that also has the virtue of accounting for the close verbal parallels between the description in *Beowulf* and that in the homily).

In order to reconstruct the contents of that source, Wright compared Blickling Homily XVI with all the surviving redactions of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*. He showed that most of the essential features that make up the portrayal of hell in the homily can also be found in two different scenes in the redactions, known

10 As Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson have put it, 'Beowulf's fight with the ogress takes place in a dry interior where no water can penetrate and there is ample air to sustain both animal life and fire' (1998, 98).

11 See footnote 3 above.





as the Hanging Sinners and the Bridge of Hell interpolations. This is how the Hanging Sinners scene appears, for example, in Redaction II:<sup>12</sup>

Et postea Paulus ductus ad portas inferni. Et uidit ibi arbores igneas, in quarum ramis peccatoris cruciate pendebant: quidam per capillos, alii per pedes, alii per manus, alii per lingwas, alii per colla, alii per brachia, alii per membra diuersa.

(And after this Paul was brought to the gates of hell. And there he saw fiery trees, in whose branches were hanging tortured sinners: some by the hair, others by the feet, others by the hands, others by the tongue, others the neck, others by diverse members.)

And here is how the Bridge of Hell interpolation is presented in Redaction IV:<sup>13</sup>

Postea uidit flumen orribile, in quo multe bestie dyabolice erant quasi pisces in medio maris, que animas peccatrices devorant sine ulla misericordia quasi lupi devorant oves. Et desuper illud flumen est pons, per quem transeunt anime iuste sine ulla dubitatione, et multe peccatrices anime merguntur unaqueque secundum meritum suum.

(After this, he saw a dreadful river, in which there were many diabolical beasts like fish in the middle of the sea, which devour the sinful souls mercilessly as wolves devour sheep. And above that river there is a bridge, over which righteous souls pass without wavering, and many sinful souls sink, each according to what it deserves.)

As can be seen, the remarkable motif of the souls of sinners hanging from trees found in the Blickling homily is an integral component of the Hanging Sinners scene in the redactions. The homilist's notion that diabolical monsters as greedy as wolves lurk in the water awaiting the fall of the souls, on the other hand, very closely parallels the Bridge of Hell interpolation. It seems likely that these two scenes from the redactions were combined in the homilist's source, with the bridge from which the souls of the damned fall into the water replaced by the trees from the Hanging Sinners scene.<sup>14</sup>

12 The text is from Silverstein (1935). All translations of the *Visio Sancti Pauli* are mine.

13 The text is from Brandes (1885).

14 The trees in the redactions of the *Visio Sancti Pauli* are fiery, whereas those in Blickling Homily XVI and *Beowulf* are frosty. This is probably an innovation introduced either by

Independent corroboration for the combination of those two separate scenes is in fact offered by Redaction XI. In it, part of St Paul's vision is described in the following terms: 'Uidit multos arbores igneos in circuitu fluminis ignis. Uidi bestias in medio aque maris quasi pisces in medio maris' (He saw many fiery trees surrounding a river of fire. I saw beasts in the middle of the water of the sea like fish in the middle of the sea).<sup>15</sup> The trees and the river filled with aquatic monsters appear here combined, but the description is so spare that this redaction is unlikely to have been the homilist's source. The evidence that it affords, however, is of considerable significance. Though Redaction XI survives in a ninth-century manuscript, its advanced state of transmission suggests that it was composed at a considerably earlier time (Wright 1993, 132). This redaction thus shows that the combination of the Hanging Sinners and the Bridge of Hell interpolations is a primitive feature of the tradition of the *Visio Sancti Pauli* (and so both the *Beowulf* poet and the Blickling homilist might well have inherited it). Moreover, although the homily's location of hell in the North, þær ealle wætero niðer ġewītað, is traditional, the homilist probably also drew that motif from the same source (Wright 1993, 128–129). In Redaction VIII, for example, St Paul sees that the threshold of hell is located at the confluence of the world-encircling Oceanus, Cochiton, and three other rivers:

Et interrogauit Paulus quis esset fluuius. Et dixit angelus, 'Hic est Oceanus, super quem girant sydera celi, et circuit orbem terrarum.' Et uidit ibi locum terribilem, et non erat lumen in illo, sed tenebre, mesticie et suspiria. Et erat flumen igneum et feruens; fluctus autem eius exaltat se super usque ad nubes et ad celum. Et nomen illius Cochiton. Et alia tria que confluunt sicut in eum et grauiora erant stillicidio super peccatores, et ut mons magnus igneus.

(And Paul asked what river it was. And the angel said: 'This is Ocean, above which revolve the constellations of the sky, and it encircles the world.' And he saw there a dreadful place, and there was no light in it, but darkness, sadness, and sighs. And there was a fiery and boiling river; its surge, moreover, rises to

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the author of the vernacular version used by both homilist and poet or by someone else at an earlier point in the tradition (see Wright 1993, 131). For scholarship on the frosty trees, see Bintley (2020), and the references therein. A feature common to both homily and poem, and with no parallel in the surviving Latin redactions, is the grey rock or cliff. As Wright has pointed out, however, the presence of a great rock in a thirteenth-century French translation of Redaction IV suggests that the cliff was a feature of some lost versions of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*, possibly derived from the Apocalypse of Peter (1993, 130); see also Griffith (1997, 124–125) and Fry (1987).

<sup>15</sup> For the text, see Dwyer (1988, 126).



the clouds and to the sky. And its name is Cochiton. And three others that flow into it and were heavier than falling rain over the sinners, and like a towering mountain of fire.)

Unlike in the homily, the North is not explicitly mentioned in this redaction, but the implication that the confluence of rivers that gives entrance to hell lies in the northern or north-western region of the world is made in numerous versions of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*.<sup>16</sup> Wright's comparative analysis thus allows us to conclude that the Old English source from which both the *Beowulf* poet and the Blickling homilist drew relied on an amalgamation of the Hanging Sinners and the Bridge of Hell scenes of the redactions for its description of hell, and that this composite scene was placed in hell's traditional location in the North, at the confluence of all waters.

It also becomes clear that the Blickling homilist followed his source much more literally than the *Beowulf* poet. In Blickling Homily XVI, as in the redactions, we find damned souls hanging from trees, devils in the likeness of monsters awaiting their fall in the water below, and a portentous scene of rivers flowing together at a point in the extreme North of the world. None of these elements appear as such in the description of Grendel's mere in the poem, and this, of course, makes sense. Both the Blickling homily and the *Visio Sancti Pauli* contain descriptions of hell itself, but the poet's intention was to describe something different. J. R. R. Tolkien, in his famous lecture on *Beowulf*, memorably said the following about its monsters: 'Most important is it to consider how and why the monsters became "adversaries of God", and so begin to symbolize (and ultimately to become identified with) the powers of evil, even while they remain, as they do still remain in *Beowulf*, mortal denizens of the material world, in it and of it' (1936, 262). Grendel and his mother are closely associated with the devil and are therefore inimical to God, but there is a physical dimension to them in the poem that is absent from the purely otherworldly devils of much medieval literature. As mortal denizens of the material world, the monsters of *Beowulf* are in need of a physical habitat where they can live. That they inhabit a natural rather than a supernatural location is in fact made clear by the poet right after his first mention of Grendel:

mære mearcstapa, sē þe mōras hēold,  
 fen ond fæsten; fifȝcynnnes eard  
 wonsǣli wer weardode hwīle,  
 siþðan him scyppen forscrifen hæfde  
 in Cāines cynne (103–107a)

<sup>16</sup> On this point, see Wright (1993, 129).

(a well-known wanderer in the wastes, who ruled the heath, fen and fastnesses; the ill-starred man had occupied for some time the habitat of monstrosities, after the Creator had cursed him among the race of Cain)

It is perhaps no coincidence that this passage, with its references to the natural places inhabited by Grendel, its description of the troll as a *wer*, and its mention of Grendel's kinship with Cain, immediately follows a reference to the devil (*fēond on helle*, l. 101b). Because of the Grendels' diabolical associations, there was a real danger that members of the audience would think of them as spiritual demons come out of hell. Passages like this show that, even though the poet characterized the monsters as demonic entities, he simultaneously endeavoured to portray them as material humanoids inhabiting a natural location. Their habitat was an essential component of their materiality, and so the poet adopted a much more creative approach than that of the Blickling homilist, in order to transform the otherworldly scenery found in his source into the earthly habitat of such creatures.

The strategy that the poet followed to achieve this purpose was, as Wright pointed out, to subject the supernatural elements in the source's portrayal of hell to a process of rationalization. The confluence of hellish rivers, for example, has been replaced by a *fyrġenstrēam* (a mountain stream or a waterfall) that flows into the mere. The souls of the damned, which were in the source found hanging from the branches of trees, have been removed, and what remains instead is the trees themselves hanging over the water. As in the source, the waves surge up to the sky, but only in the poem this is more naturalistically explained as a consequence of the action of the wind. The spot is still situated in a northern location, since that is where the Danes live, but it is no longer the extreme North of the world. The waters of Grendel's mere are also infested with monsters, but these are mortal creatures, not devils in disguise. Upon arrival at the mere in pursuit of Grendel's mother, Beowulf's company sounds a horn; they then see numerous beasts swimming in the water, one of which is shot down by a Geat:

Ġesāwon ðā æfter wætere wýrmcynnes fela,  
 selliċe sǣdracan sund cunnian,  
 swylċe on næshleoðum nicras licgean,  
 ðā on undernmǣl oft bewitiġað  
 sorhfulne sīð on seġlraðe,  
 wýrmas ond wildēor. Hīe on weġ hruron,  
 bitere ond ġebolgne; bearhtm onġēaton,  
 ġūðhorn galan. Sumne Ġēata lēod  
 of flānbogan fēores ġetwǣfde,

ȳðġewinnes, þæt him on aldre stōd  
 herestræl hearda; hē on holme wæs  
 sundes þē sǣnra ðē hyne swylt fornam.  
 Hræþe wearð on ȳðum mid eofersprēotum  
 heorohōcyhtum hearde ġenearwod,  
 nīða ġenǣġed, ond on næs togen,  
 wundorlic wæġbora; weras scēawedon  
 gryrelicne ġist. (1425–41a)

(Then they observed throughout the water many species of serpents, strange sea-dragons testing the waters, likewise water-monsters lying on cliff-ledges, such as often in the forenoon scrutinize a lamentable voyage on the sail-road, serpents and wild beasts. They rushed away, bitter and enraged; they perceived the clamor, the war-horn sounding. With an arrow from a bow a man of the Geats sundered a certain one from its life, from its struggling in the water, so that the hard war-missile stood in its vitals; it was the more sluggish at swimming in the water for death's bearing it off. Quickly, on the waves it was firmly constrained with barbed boar-javelins, assailed violently, and dragged onto the cliff, that amazing wave-roamer; the men examined the grisly guest.)

Why does the poet have an anonymous Geat kill one of the monsters from a distance, when it poses no imminent threat to his life?<sup>17</sup> And why is the creature's death reported with such a profusion of detail? At this point in the poem, the mere had already been described, and so, despite the poet's rationalizing efforts, members of the audience who were familiar with representations of hell like the one in the *Visio Sancti Pauli* might still be inclined to take these monsters as devils. The main point of this passage seems to be to ensure that these creatures were correctly construed by the audience as closer to animals than to evil spirits—and that the mere was therefore seen, in spite of all the sinister imagery and terrifying atmosphere, as a natural environment.

As seen above, Cochiton, one of the rivers of hell, is portrayed in Redaction VIII as a *flumen igneum* whose waves mount up above the clouds, and a burning river or lake is very often found in representations of hell in Christian tradition (think, for example, of the lake of fire and brimstone in the Book of Revelation). Blickling Homily XVI makes no reference to a fiery river, but the *fȳr on flōde* of l. 1366a and the fact that the waters of Grendel's mere are said to rise up to the sky suggest that the description of hell in the *Beowulf* poet's source was close

17 The point remains if the Geat who shoots the monster is supposed to be Beowulf himself. The phrase *Ġeata lēod* in 1432b is ambiguous.

to that in Redaction VIII (and so it is reasonable to assume that it contained a reference to a fiery body of water). Wright did not include the *fȳr on flōde* among the elements in the source that the poet rationalized, but I think that it can be straightforwardly explained as a special instance of the same process of rationalization discussed above. Members of the audience would have first thought with Hrothgar that this fire burning within the water was a *nīðwundor*, a supernatural phenomenon without rational explanation. The sense of mystery and suspense thus created about the inside of the mere is considerably increased when immediately afterwards the poet reminds us through Hrothgar's mouth that there is no one among the living who knows its bottom (1366b–67). Members of the audience are kept in suspense until after the hero's unprecedented dive into the water, when we are given privileged information that is inaccessible to Hrothgar or any other human character except Beowulf (ll. 1512b–17). The poet then reveals to us not only that the subaquatic subsistence of the monsters was enabled through some sort of roof that made their *nīðsele* impermeable to water, but also that the mysterious *fȳr on flōde* that puzzled the Danes was just *fȳrlēoht*, light emanating from an ordinary fire burning inside the monsters' secret abode. What Hrothgar thought a *nīðwundor* is thus shown to have a natural cause, and this, in turn, effectively characterizes the monsters in the eyes of the audience as 'denizens of the material world'.

Hrothgar's and the Danes' failure to make sense of the fire within the water is compatible with their characterization elsewhere in the poem. It is often pointed out by scholars that there are two different frames of reference or levels of knowledge in *Beowulf*, especially obvious in connection with the monsters. The narrator refers to them with spiritually marked expressions such as *Godes andsacan*, *hæþen*, and *helrūnan*. Characters within the story, on the other hand, speak of them using terms such as *eoten* and *þȳrs*, which do not imply a Christian understanding of the cosmic confrontation of good and evil.<sup>18</sup> Beowulf in fact admits ignorance of Grendel's background by referring to him as *sceaðona nāthwylc* 'some sort of ravager' (274b) and *dēogol dēdhata* 'mysterious persecutor' (275a). Hrothgar also expresses his lack of firm knowledge about the monsters' whereabouts and parentage when he says to Beowulf:

Ic þæt londbūend, lēode mīne,  
 selerædende secgan hȳrde  
 þæt hīe ġesāwon swylce twēgen

18 On the so-called two levels of knowledge in the poem, see, for example, Tolkien (1936, 284–7); Osborn (1978, 973–81); Robinson (1991, 149); and Pascual (2014, 202–218; 2019, 5–8).

micle mearcstapan mōras healdan,  
 ellorgæstas. Ðæra oðer wæs,  
 þæs þe hīe ġewislicost ġewitan meahton,  
 idese onlīcnæs; oðer earmsceapen  
 on weres wæstmum wræclāstas træd,  
 næfne hē wæs māra þonne æniġ man oðer;  
 þone on ġeārdagum Grendel nemdo(n)  
 foldbūende; nō hīe fæder cunnon,  
 hwæþer him æniġ wæs ær ācenned  
 dymra ġāsta. (1345–57a)

(I have heard countrymen say, my people, hall-councilors, that they have seen two similar large heath-roamers ruling the moors, alien spirits. One of them was, as plainly as they could tell, the likeness of a lady; the other misshapen thing trod paths of exile in the form of a man, except that he was larger than any other human, whom mortals in days of old named Grendel; they know of no father, whether any mysterious creatures had been born before him.)

Hrothgar's knowledge is here shown to be insecure and second-hand, limited to what his people have been able to tell him. The Danes can speak exclusively of what they have seen for themselves, and even the fact that one of the monsters has the likeness of a woman appears to have been reported to the king only with reservations. Whether other monsters of the same kind have existed before Grendel, Hrothgar says, is likewise unknown to his confidants. This is in stark contrast to the omniscience of the narrator, who is aware that all kinds of monsters originated in the pre-Abrahamic past with Cain's fratricidal murder of Abel (see ll. 104b–14 and 1258b–68). As Marijane Osborn has put it, 'The poet distinguishes between the heroic and the cosmic frames of reference primarily by assigning to the monsters who attack Heorot a scriptural history recognizable only to his audience' (1978, 973).

The epistemological gap between Hrothgar and his Danes, on the one hand, and the narrator and his audience, on the other, is artfully exploited in the poem. For example, in Hrothgar's so-called sermon to the hero, the Danish king refers to Grendel as an *ealdġewinna*, 'old adversary' (l. 1776a). Though the compound appears only in *Beowulf*, it is clearly related to expressions such as *ealdfēond*, *se ealda fēond*, and *se ealda*, all of which are frequently used in Old English poetry and prose to denote the devil (Battles 1996; Abbetmeyer 1903, 33). In this, Old English authors show the influence of patristic literature. In the writings of Gregory the Great (which were very

popular in Anglo-Saxon England), the devil is often described as *antiquus hostis*, ‘ancient enemy’, an expression also found in Felix of Crowland’s *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, a work nearly contemporary with *Beowulf* (Colgrave 1956, Chapter XXIX). Use of *ealdġewinna* in connection with Grendel, therefore, invited the audience to think of him as a member of the race of Cainite monsters who had waged war on God since time immemorial. That, however, is surely not the meaning intended by Hrothgar, to whom the cosmic background of the monsters is unknown. For him, Grendel is an *ealdġewinna* only because the troll has harassed Heorot for twelve long years (Orchard 2003, 157). The poet used the right word at the right time. Put in Hrothgar’s mouth, a nonce compound with patristic overtones reminded the audience not only that there was a scriptural dimension to Grendel’s attacks, but also that that dimension was incomprehensible to the Danish king.<sup>19</sup>

Like Grendel’s diabolical background, the existence of a subaquatic hall that is impermeable to water is unknown to Hrothgar and his counsellors, and so it is natural for them to misconstrue the fire burning within as an inexplicable wonder. This analysis receives additional support from the arguments put forward by Alexandra Bolinteanu in her essay on ‘Declarations of Unknowing in *Beowulf*’ (2016). Affirmations of unknowing and inexpressibility are pervasive in Old English literature, especially in homiletic writings, where they are normally used in connection with eschatological realities such as heaven and hell. The *Beowulf* poet, Bolinteanu has argued, took that *topos*, divested it of its eschatological associations, and repurposed it to characterize the monsters on three different occasions as mysterious creatures that are beyond the grasp of human understanding (see ll. 163–164, 1355b–57, and 1366–67). I think that the poet handled the traditional motif of the fiery river of hell in a like manner: he adopted it from his source, then adapted it to portray the monsters and their habitation as incomprehensible to Hrothgar and his Danes. In handling this feature, however, the poet evinced exceptional ingenuity and originality. The main eschatological motifs found in the source (the souls of the damned, the devils awaiting to punish them, and the spectacular confluence of rivers in the extreme North of the world) are all gone, but the fiery river remains, if only as a misconception on the part of Hrothgar’s people. The poet thus accomplished two important narrative goals at once: he managed to rationalize an otherworldly feature that was unsuitable for the portrayal of a natural location

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19 It could of course be that *eald ġewinna* is a phrase rather than a compound (*ġewinna* is used as simplex elsewhere in Old English, and is specifically applied to the devil in *Juliana*, l. 243). If so, the parallel with the patristic expression *antiquus hostis* would be closer.



while simultaneously reinforcing the status of the Danes as uninformed about the monsters and their background.<sup>20</sup>

The analysis here presented has a bearing on two long-standing interpretive cruces in the poem. After killing Grendel's mother, Beowulf returns to Heorot with the monster's head and the hilt of the gigantic sword used to decapitate him. This sword hilt, the poet tells us, contains an engraving about the origin of the cosmic struggle between God and the forces of evil (ll. 1687–93).<sup>21</sup> Scholars have often wondered whether the contents of that engraving, which is said to be looked at by the Danish king, were comprehensible to him. Edward B. Irving, Jr., for example, thinks that it is Hrothgar's understanding of its contents that prompts him to deliver an admonitory address to the hero on the dangers of overweening pride (1968, 146–147). As Richard J. Schrader has argued, however, there are good textual and archaeological reasons to believe that the engraving was wholly written rather than drawn or painted, and so it had to be read in order to be understood (143).<sup>22</sup> Moreover, great emphasis is laid on the antiquity of the sword, whose making appears to have predated the Deluge. This means that the poet arguably intended his audience to understand that the inscription was in Hebrew (the language commonly believed to have been spoken throughout the earth until the construction of the Tower of Babel).<sup>23</sup> This might look far-fetched, but one should not lose sight of what has been described as the poet's 'curiously unmedieval concern

20 A few words are in order about the light that shines within the underwater hall after Beowulf's beheading of Grendel's mother (ll. 1570–2). Abram believes that the source of that light is the golden treasure lying within the hall (2010, 209). Russom thinks that the language used to describe that light 'would be absurdly overblown as a description of a hearth fire', and that it must therefore refer to the intense light that emanates from hellfire (2007, 235). Other scholars believe that the light is emitted by the gigantic sword, which would thus be luminescent: Puhvel (1972), Orchard (1995, 84). I think that ll. 1570–2 ought to be read in connection with ll. 1550–3: the fire within the hall is made to shine with exceptional brightness by God as a sign that Beowulf's victory is divinely sanctioned, even though the hero is unaware of it. The *fȳr on flōde* of 1366a, the *fȳrlēoht* of 1516a, and the *lēoma* of 1570a are all identified as the same by Sedgfield (1935): see his note on l. 1516 in the commentary (he does not elaborate on the identification).

21 For discussion of what the precise contents of the engraving are, see Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (2008, 212); Cronan (1997).

22 On the engraving as a textual inscription, see, for example, Davidson (1962, 137–138); and Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (2008, 212). For the view that the engraving is pictorial, see, for instance, Cramp (1957, 66).

23 On this interpretation, *rūnstaƿas* in l. 1695a would literally mean 'mysterious letters', not runes, and it would have made the audience think of an antediluvian alphabet used for the writing of Hebrew (Schrader 1993, 146).

with anachronism' (Osborn 1978, 979). It appears unlikely that he expected his audience to imagine an illiterate sixth-century Dane as capable of reading such an ancient and alien text.<sup>24</sup>

To Schrader's argumentation one might add that Hrothgar's inability to understand the inscription at that point in the narrative is of a piece with his characterization elsewhere. Are we supposed to believe that the character who a few lines earlier was shown (quite understandably, to be fair) as incapable of ascertaining the source of the *fȳr on flōde* is now presented as so well-informed that he can decipher the inscription on a sword hilt made by giants in the antediluvian past? I think it far likelier that we are instead supposed to imagine Hrothgar's attitude towards the hilt to be the same attitude of amazement and bafflement as the one that he showed towards the fire in the water. It is remarkable that the verb that is used of the king's gaze at the hilt is *scēawian* (l. 1687b), which is often found describing the action of looking at something in wonder and amazement. In fact, the direct object of *scēawian* in ll. 840 and 3031 is *wundor* (and remember that *nīðwundor* was the expression used by Hrothgar to describe the fire within the mere). The Christian resonances of Hrothgar's speech are then to be interpreted not as an indication that he was able to read and understand the hilt's inscription, but as a sign that the Danish king had intuitive access to the universal wisdom that is attainable by pagans, and that his worldview was not therefore as distant from that of Christianity as some might have supposed. As Robinson and others have argued, one of the poet's chief concerns was to show to his audience that it was possible for the pagan characters within the story to think and behave not much unlike Christians purely on instinct. This, I believe, was most effectively achieved if they had no access whatsoever to scriptural revelation.

My argument is also relevant to the issue of whether Beowulf has the supernatural ability of breathing or holding his breath underwater for hours on end. After the hero's last speech to Hrothgar before plunging into the mere, the poet tells us:

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24 Even if the engraving was pictorial, I do not think that we are to imagine Hrothgar as gaining scriptural knowledge by looking at it. Proper understanding of the biblical account of the origin of evil would have necessitated more than an extended gaze at a pictorial engraving on a sword hilt. I believe, with Robinson, that 'his gaze is a blind gaze' (1985, 33). It might well be that, as Dennis Cronan has argued (2017), by gazing at the hilt Hrothgar is beginning to reach towards a new understanding of the monsters, but he is not supposed to be or become knowledgeable about Cain and Abel or the Flood.

Æfter þāem wordum Weder-Ġēata lēod  
 efste mid elne, ñalas andsware  
 bīdan wolde; brimwylm onfēng  
 hilderinċe. Ðā wæs hwīl dægēs  
 ær hē þone grundwong onġytan mehte. (1492–96)

(After these words the man of the Weder-Geats moved briskly, would hardly wait for an answer; the surging water took possession of the war-maker. It was then a good part of the day before he could make out the level bottom.)

The phrase *hwīl dægēs* is normally translated as a ‘the space of a day’ or ‘a good part of the day’ (as above). These are perfectly grammatical translations, but they necessitate a superhuman characterization of Beowulf. Nowhere in the poem, however, does the author mention that the hero has such an astonishing talent, and it would in fact appear that he expects us to imagine Beowulf as an exceptionally strong but nonetheless naturalistic character. Furthermore, when Beowulf cuts off Grendel’s head, his companions watching at the edge of the mere are said to see the monster’s blood in the water *sōna* (l. 1591), that is, ‘straight away’ or ‘immediately’. This seems to indicate, as Mark Griffith has explained, that the underwater hall was at a short distance from the mere’s surface, and that Beowulf therefore did not have to dive for an unbelievably long time in order to reach it (Griffith 1994). But what does *hwīl dægēs* then mean? Griffith has found evidence that *hwīl* can be used definitely to indicate a short period of time (the word translates Latin *momentum* in the gloss to Luke 4:5 in the Lindisfarne and Rushworth Gospels), and that *dæg* can be used indefinitely to signify an amount of time (in *Beowulf* 2894a, for example, *morgenlongne dæg* is to be translated as ‘time lasting as long as a morning’). The phrase *hwīl dægēs* can therefore be construed as denoting a brief space of time, and so Beowulf need not be thought of as a character endowed with magical or supernatural powers.<sup>25</sup>

If, as has been argued here, the *fȳr on flōde* which Hrothgar describes as a *nīðwundor* is the *fȳrlēoht* mentioned in 1516b, then the subaquatic hall must have been at a relatively short distance below the surface, since otherwise the fire burning within would not have been visible to onlookers from outside the mere. This seems to receive further corroboration from ll. 1497–1500, in which the adverb *sōna* is used of the monster’s detection of the hero in the water. Though this passage is often taken to mean that Grendel’s mother saw Beowulf immediately after the bottom began to be discernible to him, it is arguably likelier

25 For the alternative view that Beowulf is a superhuman character, see Greenfield (1982).

to indicate that she became aware of Beowulf's presence as soon as he plunged into the water precisely because the monsters' abode was not far from the surface. Wright has said that ll. 1365b–66, in which Hrothgar states that there is no man alive wise enough to know the mere's bottom, were suggested to the poet by the angel's response to Paul's question in the *Visio Sancti Pauli*: 'Et dixit Paulus, "Profunditas loci istius que est?" Et dixit angelus, "Abyssus mensuram non habet."' (And Paul said: 'What is the depth of that place?' And the angel said, 'The abyss is fathomless.')26 This might very well be the case, and if so, we would have here another original instance of the process of rationalization discussed above. Unlike the otherworldly abyss of St Paul's vision of hell, a real-world mere ought to have a bottom, and this would have to be within the reach of human beings if the hero was to dive to it. It is conceivable that Hrothgar's comment in ll. 1365b–66 left members of the audience with the impression that the mere's bottom lay very deep below the surface, and so they would have naturally wondered how the hero would be able to reach it. Right after Beowulf plunges into the water, the mystery is solved: to the surprise of both audience and hero, the poet reveals that the bottom was only a short dive from the shore (ll. 1495b–96). If Wright's assumption is right (which I think it is), then the *Beowulf* poet decided not to exclude the fathomless abyss in his source from his depiction of the mere, but to transform it instead into what looked like a misconception on Hrothgar's part in order to play with the audience's expectations.

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<sup>26</sup> From Redaction I; see Silverstein (1935, 154).



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