BEOWULF 566: WHAT EBBING WAVES WOULD LEAVE

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In about the middle of the legible part of the first line on folio 143ʳ of the Beowulf Manuscript and on line 566 of the modern editions of the poem[1] there occurs the inconspicuous word *ythlafe*. Just about halfway down through Beowulf's own version of his youthful adventure with Breca we are told that "... *manfordaedlan* .../ ... *on mergenne mecum wunde/ be ythlafe uppe laegon* ..." ("... those evil destroyers ... the next morning they lay in the sand/ along the shore, wounded by sword strokes ...".[2]). This passage is not one of the many areas of controversy scattered through the Beowulf text and long since caught in critical crossfire. It can readily be understood in most translations; it is clearly legible, having escaped the fire of 1731 and the subsequent crumbling off of the parchment, so that there is no likely prospect of its being emended. Moreover, until recently it was Beowulf and the monsters, rather than the circumstances of their clash in the Breca episode, which occupied the readers' attention[3]. Still, there appears to be some reason to suppose that the inconspicuous compound *ythlaf* adds something important to the overall atmosphere of the fight scene, and, at the same time, can be shown to be characteristic of Anglo-Saxon poetic diction and vision. The aim of the present paper is to throw some light on the probability of this assumption.

The word *ythlaf* occurs only twice in the whole corpus of Old English literature. In both instances its use is poetical: Beowulf 566 and Exodus 585. The reading *ythlaf*, found in Andreas 499, has since Krapp's edition of the poem been abandoned in favour of an emendation to *ythlad*.

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[1] All Beowulf quotations follow Klaeber (1950). All other quotations from OE poetry follow Grein-Wülker (1894, 1898, 1921). All the references to OE prose follow the index of diPaolo Healey-Venezky (1980).

[2] Cf. Crossley-Holland (1984.88).

[3] Cf. e.g. Frank (1986).

The base element of the compound goes back to CGmc. *laibho* ("remainder"), being a formation connected with the CGmc. infinitive *laibh-jan,* which has come down to us in ModE *(to) leave* (and in various forms in dialects).

The generally agreed translation of OE *laf is* "what is left, remnant, legacy, relic, remains, rest"[4]. The determinant *yth-* is used in OE with the meaning "wave, billow, sea, flood, liquid, water" and its possible ModE continuation can be found in the northern loanword *eddy* (ON, ModIcel *iđa*). The lexeme *yth* occurs in its gen.pl.form *ytha* along with expressions denoting the movement of the waves in formulations which seem to be formulaic appellations for the sea much more frequently than it does in its "unmarked" compound determinant form *yth-* (e.g. *ytha gelac/wylm/gethraec/gewinn* vs. *ythgewinn).* Therefore, it seems safe to assume that the type *ythlaf* represents a later, secondary development from the genitival phrase[5].

Like *ytha,* the lexeme *laf* is a member of many OE substantival word combinations. Beowulf's ashes are referred to as *bronda lafe,* "the remains of the fire" (Beo 3160); the swords in Brun 5 are *hamora lafan,* "what hammers leave"; in the same poem, the defeated Vikings and Scots are characterized as *daratha laf,* "the survivors of arrows" (Brun 53), etc.

Besides, *laf* occurs commonly in forms which may be taken to be compounds. Some of these are poetic only, such as *wealaf* ("survivors of a disaster"), *saelaf* ("what is left by the sea"), and *ierfelaf* ("what is left in an inheritance", "inheritor"). Some occur both in poetry and in prose, including e.g. *beodlaf* ("table leavings"), *fyrdlaf* ("remnant of an army"), and *husellaf* ("remains of the Eucharist"). Finally, *-laf* can also be identified as the base of several OE personal names (cf. *Wiglaf, Ecglaf, Heorolaf, Saelaf).*

Referring to swords (Beo 454, 2611 etc.) and to widows (ASCh 1052D, 616E etc.) as *laf*[6] seems to be more of a borderline case: such instances occur outside the set expressions of the type *hamora lafe* but in most cases they necessarily collocate with the name of the former possessor or husband. On the other hand, examples like Hom U 40 (Nap 50) 163: "... *we ... beodath, thaet aenig cristen man ... aefre ne wifige ... on his maeges lafe ...*" ("... we ... ordain that no Christian man ... ever marry ... his kinsman's widow ...") show that *laf* in this context stands nearer to its original meaning, already mentioned above.

In the glossary to his very influential edition of Beowulf, Klaeber (1922.401) translates *ythlaf* as "leaving of waves, shore". However, in the 3rd edition of his Beowulf (1950:432) he makes a diplomatic change to

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[4] Cf. Ae. Gram. where "reliquiae" is defined as *"sumes thinges lafe"* (84.16), "superstes" as *"laf oththe oferlybbende"* (51.10).

[5] Cf. Gardner (1968.76ff.).

[6] Cf. e.g. ON Dainsleif of a sword in Snorra Edda.

"leaving of waves, (sand on) shore" and thus he lays down the parameters of the critical discussion about the word and line 566.

Cosijn (1892.11ff.) takes *uppe* in line 566 as meaning "auf dem Strand" and he then interprets *be ythlafe* as "bei dem, das die Wellen hinterlassen hatten". Trautmann (Bonn Beitr. 2, 157) offers the same interpretation ("beim Anwurf"). Similarly, several modern commentators take *ythlaf* to mean "what is left by the waves, i.e. sand"; according to them, the killed monsters thus lie "along the sand on/of the shore" (cf. Gardner 1968.219, Wrenn—Bolton 1973.290, Swanton 1978.61).

On the other hand, *ythlaf* is read as "shore, strand" by Hoops (1932a. 98—9)[7]. He is the first to consider the second occurrence of the word. Having compared line 566 of Beowulf with Exod 585—586a /"*Ongunnon saelafe segnum daelan/ on ythlafe ...*" ("Then the leavings of the sea upon the waves' end they did apportion to the bannered companies...")[8]/, that is, having compared the meanings of the two *laf* compounds, Hoops arrives at the conclusion that *saelaf* preserved its original meaning of "sea leavings, jetsam" (that is, the spoils of the drowned Egyptians in the context), whereas *ythlaf* was to acquire the new and different meaning of "shore". *On ythlafe* and *be ythlafe* Hoops interprets as "auf dem Strande" and, "am Strande", respectively. In his *Kommentar zum Beowulf* Hoops analyses *ythlaf* as " 'Nachlass der Wellen', das ist 'der Sand am Meer', dann 'der Strand' selbst" (1932b.81). The same stance has been adopted by other great Beowulf editors, Else von Schaubert (1940) and Martin Lehnert (1967).

The chief difficulty in interpreting *ythlaf* clearly lies in the fact that it is a figurative compound. Every line of Old English poetry confirms that its authors and their audience were familiar with figurative thought as well as figurative diction. Still, when exploring the figurative nature of *ythlaf* one should never forget that even those poets who are considered to have had excellent control of their compound diction (including, coincidentally, the Beowulf and the Exodus poets) had to incorporate their figurative compounds and circumlocutions so as to satisfy the requirements of alliterative metre.

The compound *ythlaf* has frequently been declared a kenning[9]. It is very descriptive, and yet allows of figurative colouration. Both of its elements form a partial image from which the whole image can be constructed. It functions as an intensifier of the simple concept — be it "sand" or "shore" — as it highlights a particular feature ("that which is left by the waves") and makes it into a self-contained idea. It should also be added that in accordance with the nature of the kenning, the

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[7] The same interpretation was suggested by Heyne-Schücking (1931.312).

[8] Tolkien's translation, cf. Turville-Petre (ed.) (1981.32).

[9] Cf. Hoops (1932b.81), Marcquardt (1938.131, 172, 176).

word does not occur in objective narrative or in purely descriptive portions of the poems.

The formal circumlocutional analogues of *ythlaf* in Old English can be classified into four groups.

Group (1) consists of members that have as their genitival determiners words denoting the elements of nature: OE Phoenix, when describing the resurrection of the bird, uses the following circumlocutions: *swoles laf, ades laf, fyres laf* (1.267). Noah and his family, having survived the Flood, are referred to as *waetra laf* (Gen 1543), etc.

Group (2) consists of items like *sweorda laf* (Beo 2935), *daratha laf* (Brun 53), *gara laf* (Gen 2018), *waepna laf* (Gen 2005), *wrathra lafe* (Gen 1493), *wealaf* (Beo 1084, 1098), etc. The members of this group denote "the survivors of warfare" and share the semantic feature of "destruction/loss of life" with group (1)[10]. The items *wrathra lafe* and *wealaf* stand in synecdochical relationship with the others.

Group (3) comprises the circumlocutions describing swords as *hamora laf* (Brun 5), *fela laf, fyres laf* (Rd 71:2). This is apparently the only group lacking an ON counterpart[11].

As pointed out above, a special group (4) is formed by circumlocutions referring to swords (*Hraedlan laf*, Beo 454) and widows (*Eadwines laf cynges,* LS 31 /Paulinus/ 11).

Groups (3) and (4) accommodate the semantic feature of "heritage, inheritance"[12] or "continuity". All the groups represent circumlocutions that are semantically different from non-figurative collocations such as are illustrated by Mk (WSCp) 6.43: "... *and hi namon thara hlafa and fixa lafe twelf wilian fulle* ..." ("... and they gathered twelve full baskets of the bread and the fish ...").

As regards the semantic relation of *ythlaf* to groups (1) and (2), it seems safe to say that waves do not "leave" what is left after them in the sense of destruction or calamity. Marcquardt discusses these two groups in connection with the semantic feature of "Überreste". She sees this feature as having "den Sinn von etwas mehr oder weniger zufällig Zurückgebliebenem, nach dem meist das Beste verlorenging (Ausnahme ist

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[10] The same sense is attested in ON, e.g. *varga leifar* (Guthrunarkvitha II.II.4), "what the wolves have left". An example cited by Marcquardt (1938.131). Among personal names, an excellent example to be listed here would be *Wiglaf*, the name of Beowulf's young comrade in the fight against the dragon. Wiglaf not only comes out of the fight alive, he is also the last survivor, the *endelaf* ("he who will have survived the end"?) of Beowulf's kin (cf. Beo 2813ff.). However, in personal names the possibility of a poet's etymologizing creations faces the possibility of legacies from historical-legendary tradition, with meanings faded out long ago. Therefore, no matter how strong the etymologizing spirit of the Anglo-Saxons probably was (cf. Robinson 1968), personal names have not been included in the scope of the present considerations.

[11] Cf. Marcquardt (1938.131).

[12] Cf. Marcquardt (1938.130—2).

nur die Auswendung auf Noah in der Genesis)..." (1938.131). Even if this was to hold good for the leavings of swords, funeral pyres, etc., it would not apply to what the waves leave.

If *ythlaf* were to come under the circumlocutions for swords of either type (groups (3), (4)) it would have to acquire the semantic feature of inheritance and the waves would probably have to undergo a process of personification (cf. *maeges, Edwines, Hraedlan laf*). Moreover, neither "sand" nor "shore" comes to life through waves or water in the same way that swords can be forged by files, hammers, and fire, unless perhaps in an oblique, figurative world like that of the skaldic kenning.

By the same analysis a similar conclusion can also be reached for *saelaf*, the hapax legomenon of Exod 585.

Thus, the evidence of the OE formations analogical to *ythlaf* and *saelaf* seems to suggest that their position is unique and that we must therefore return to their attested occurrences in OE, already compared by Hoops.

The situation concerning Exod 585ff. is that the Israelites have reached the shore, the Egyptians have died in the waves and their spoils, washed up on the shore, are being divided *to segnum*[13]. In the closing lines of the Exodus, the poet treated his main source very freely[14] and it is quite possible that these closing lines might have been corrupted. Nevertheless, from both the semantic and stylistic point of view it seems clear that *ythlaf* in this passage has a different meaning from that of *saelaf.*

Unfortunately, the only other OE occurrence of *ythlaf* is more isolated, with much less support from the immediate grammatical and lexical context than the Exodus occurrence. *Uppe* does not look to stand in variation to *be ythlafe* here: it is rather a means of more precise localization of the dead bodies of the monsters on the shore.

The narrative context of line 566, the challenge of Unferth and the response of Beowulf, is a digression dripping with irony and well-controlled anger. It has emerged as a set piece related to ON flyting[15]. It teems with verbal wit and artful ambiguities, where words are exploited for their literal and figurative meanings[16]. Technically speaking, the purpose of the digression is a chance to present Beowulf as a man of prowess, able to face Grendel. Also, this is when the monsters of the poem appear for the first time *en masse.*

In this context and as a true kenning, the word *ythlaf* constitutes the

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[13] Which is another sore word: Bosworth-Toller (1980) and Hoops (1932a.99) take it for *segne:* "a seine, sean, drag-net"; Tolkien (Turville-Petre, 1981.32), however, identifies it with *segn* and translates the passage as "to the bannered companies".

[14] The gathering and distribution of booty is deduced from the statement in Exodus XIV.31, that the Israelites saw the Egyptians dead on the shore, cf. Turville-Petre (1981.79).

[15] Cf. C. J. Clover, The Germanic Context of the Unferth Episode, *Speculum* 55 (1980).444—68.

[16] Cf. Frank (1986).

highpoint of the sentence in which it occurs. The monsters were slain by Beowulf *on ythum* (Beo 422) and now it is the *ythe,* the waves, their natural habitat, that desert them, give them up, and wash them ashore. The idea of the "washing up" is contained in the marked, descriptive sense of *ythlaf.* At the same time, figuratively, *ythlaf* is the place where the monsters have been left by the waves.

It is only natural that OE poetic diction perceives "shore" and "sea/ waters/waves" as contiguous images. That the sea and the shore in a sense exist for each other is reflected in words like *merehwearf* (Exod 516) in which the idea of "shore" is circumscribed as a place/ point where sea rears[17]. This seems to lend further support to *ythlaf* as "shore" (and not "sand", "sea leavings"). Some of those who see *ythlaf* as a metonymic compound[18] base their argument on the contiguity of "sea" and "sea leavings". Perhaps a contiguity could rather be seen in the relationship of the shore as "pebbles, sand", etc. as left by ebbing waves and the shore as an opposition to the meaning "sea, water"[19].

Having examined the immediate narrative context of Beo 566, we should perhaps check the idea behind *ythlaf* against the background of Anglo-Saxon life.

Living amidst almost incessant warfare, a hostile natural environment and other hardships, the Anglo-Saxons had every reason to perceive life as transient and fleeting. This attitude to life was common to both the pagan and Christian worlds of Anglo-Saxon England, as, after all, the Beowulf text itself marvellously suggests[20]. The overriding fact of the mutability of the world and a sense of loss hanging over the life in Anglo-Saxon England have found their clear expression in the elegiac strain of much of Old English poetry and are also reflected in the Old English vocabulary.

Life lasts but a while, *ane hwile,* and one day the warriors, like birds[21], shall leave their mead-hall forever, the hall shall fall victim to the mighty grip of the earth, all this earthly structure shall come to nought.

Under these circumstances it would have been quite remarkable if swords had not crumbled and could still be handed down and for men to survive battles and floods. It may be this remarkable fact, hand in

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[17] Cf. *saecir* of Exod 289; for the idea of "washing up", cf. *warotha geweorp* of And 306.

[18] Cf. Gardner (1968.118ff., 359).

[19] Cf. the rendering of the passage by Garmonsway-Simpson (1980.17) and that of Bosworth-Toller (1980). Cf. also ModIcel *fjara,* "a strip of the shore that gets dry when the sea ebbs". For an associative process similar to that in *ythlaf,* cf. *sand* of Exod 291.

[20] Cf. Robinson (1985).

[21] For one of the most powerful OE similes, cf. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica,* II.13.

hand with the relentless everyday reality, that has come down to us reflected in the *laf* circumlocutions[22].

In Old English poetic diction, the sea is distance (cf. e.g. Beo 463ff.), the sea is loneliness (cf. e.g. The Wife's Lament), the sea is danger[23]: in The Wanderer, "the composite of concrete instances of mutability"[24], *"cearo bith geniwad/ tham the sendan sceal swithe geneahhe/ ofer wathema gebind werigne sefan ..."* (1. 55b—57b; in Richard Hamer's translation, 1970.177: "care is renewed/ for him who must continually send/ his weary spirit over icy waters ..."). On the other hand, as The Seafarer (12bff.) shows: *"thaet se mon ne wat/ the him on foldan faegrost gelimpeth/ hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sae/ winter wunade ..."* (Hamer, 1970. 187: "He knows not,/ who lives most easily on land, how I/ have spent my winter on the ice-cold sea ..."), the shore, the *ythlaf* or other, may have been a space/line dividing the safe from the risky, the temporarily stable from the ever changing. Is the firm ground being left behind to be lived on?

The figurative shore *ythlaf,* therefore, becomes part of the Anglo-Saxon poetic space, a space no longer existing outside of words: on one side, *endesaetan,* "those stationed at the end of land", guard the coast, on the other, *mearcstapas,* "wanderers in the waste borderland", stalk in the fens. In the middle, noble queens mourn and mead fills the cups. And *lif is laene,* life is transitory.

The complex figurative nature of the shore *ythlaf* fits well what Gillian Overing (1986.5—6) has said about OE compounds: "... (they) mix, indeed fuse the visual with the more abstract: they collocate the functional, literal, emotional and spatial attributes of the image. The compound is an event, a split second of illumination, of 'imaginative seeing'."

Time and circumstance have shaped Beowulf — as, indeed they have much of Old English literature — into a text remote and in many ways inaccessible, but filled with poignant beauty. It was written in a language now dead; the world it describes and the world it addresses stood centuries apart and our knowledge of both has come down to us incomplete; it became part of a poetic corpus whose chronological and geographical bearings are almost entirely lacking. Almost every word presents a challenge and their contexts are often uncertain. We must deal with a very subtle and learned aesthetic tradition whose syntactic subtleties, lexical amphibolies and elusive stylistic overtones are such that they cannot readily be apprehended by our modern sensibilities. After

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[22] A possible counterpart to them could be seen in what may be termed *"fon-imagery"*. In El 1278 *tionleg nimeth* ("the destroying flame of the Doomsday takes, seizes"). In Beo 124, Grendel speeds home *huthe hremig* ("gloating over his plunder"); in Beo 688—9 *hleorbolster onfeng eorles andwlitan* ("the cushion takes hold of the hero's face").

[23] Cf. Mathesius (1910.55).

[24] Cf. Stanley (1987.263).

all, it was for no small reason that the outstanding master of the northern imagination, J. R. R. Tolkien, rendered *on ythlafe* of Exod 585—6 as "upon waves' end"[25], and long before him people thought that "kennings increase no man's virtue but darken joy"[26].

But, should this lead us to let the ancient beauty lie waste? After all, it is only through uniting the unclear and the irrecoverable that what we know takes shape. It is the same silvery light in which Hrothgar's brilliant Heorot shines and Grendel's misty moorlands roll.

ABBREVIATIONS

OE — Old English, ModE — Modern English, CGmc. — Common Germanic, ON — Old Norse, Mod Icel — Modern Icelandic.

Ae Gram. — *Aelfrics Grammatik* (Zupitza 1880), And — *Andreas* (Grein-Wülker), ASCh — *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Plummer 1892), Beo — *Beowulf* (Klaeber 1950), Brun — *Brunanburh* (Grein-Wülker), El — *Elene* (Grein-Wülker), Exod — *Exodus* (Grein-Wülker), Gen — *Genesis* (Grein-Wülker), Hom U 40 — *Homilies for Unspecified Occasions* (no. 50, Napier 1883), LS 31 (Paulinus) — *Lives of Saints: Saint Paulinus* (Sisam 1953), Mk (WSCp) — *Mark* (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS. 140, ed. Skeat), Phoen — *Phoenix* (Grein-Wülker), Rd — *Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Williamson).

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[25] Cf. Turville-Petre (1981.32). The same stance has been adopted by Mathesius in his Czech rendering of the passage (1910.96): "...počali mořský lup sítěmi loviti/ na místě bez vln, starobylé bohatství,/ štíty a brnění...".

[26] Árni Jónsson's Gudmundardrápa in "Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning", IIB, 461, 78, 7—8; cited by Frank (1986.163).

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BEOWULF 566

Článek je příspěvkem k beowulfovské textové kritice a ke studiu anglosaské básnické dikce. Poukazuje se na nutnost číst a zkoumat staroanglické básnické texty ve vzájemných souvislostech kontextů verbálních, literárních i obecně kulturních.