

OLD ENGLISH “SUND” IN *BEOWULF*

BY ALAN BINNS

I believe for philological and palaeographic reasons which would overburden this brief note that the present manuscript of *Beowulf* dating from about 1000 AD is a direct copy of an original of the early eighth century. As I have discussed elsewhere in detail¹, I also believe that the language in places reflects an intimate and lively contact with the experience of sailing in ships such as that used by *Beowulf* in the poem. That was a warship with a flexible hull of planking tied to the frames with a crew of only sixteen using sail as the normal means of propulsion, however surprising it may seem that such vessels had developed in the North Sea region already in the seventh century.

One consequence of this view of the poem (other views are of course possible, and perhaps more usual) is that one may wonder whether some features of its language reflect usages earlier than those regular in other Old English literature. From this point of view it is interesting to observe that of the seven occurrences of *sund* (a poetic word for sea or water) the first four (lines 213, 223, 512, 539)² refer to that passage between the Baltic and the Kattegat historically known as The Sound. The other three to water which, though editors traditionally call it “the haunted mere”, the author evidently thought of as having some connection with it. It is possible and perhaps even probable that this is no more than a coincidence; there are many instances in other Old English poems, later as I believe, in which *sund* is a general word for sea, even on occasion the Red Sea, but the coincidence seems worth pointing out as the first recorded instance otherwise in English for “The Sound” as the name for this stretch of water is not until 1633 when it was presumably borrowed from Scandinavian as I believe modern German *sund* to have been.

The English place-names involving *sound* for a stretch of water are with few exceptions restricted to Scandinavian areas of Britain. The exceptions are relatively recent and appear to be based on the idea of “coming into soundings, water whose depth can be measured by a cast of the lead”. The word is not recorded from prose writing in Old English in the sense of stretch of water so it is not surprising that it was not used to form place-names, and the Middle English texts in which it is used for sea are all distinctly Northern.

It would be inappropriate to pursue further the evident appropriateness in *Beowulf* of a word whose primitive associations are with swimming, or to note that in Old English movement across water does not always clearly distinguish that involving use of a boat from that without. But one should remember the geographical location of the events narrated in *Beowulf* when allocating meanings to such items as *sund* or *be sam tweonum*, and their meaning for an audience in the eighth century was not necessarily that which they had when the first Angles brought them from Angeln to England.

Notes:

1 Alan Binns: *Viking Voyagers*. London 1980.

2 212/213: *streamas wundon, / sund wið sande*; 223/224: *þa wæs sund liden / eoletes æt ende*; 512: *þa git on sund reon*; 539: *þa wit on sund reon*. The other occurrences: lines 1426, 1444, 1510. – Text after: *Beowulf and Judith*. Ed. by E. van Kirk Dobbie. (= *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records IV*). New York 1953.