

Hearg and weoh in Beowulf, ll. 175-8a

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Although David Wilson in his *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* remarks that *Beowulf* “has very little to add to our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon paganism”,¹ I should like to say that his studies have something to add to our understanding of the poem. His topographical description regarding the words *hearg* and *weoh* goes as follows:

... what we have (= *hearg* in England) is a special type of religious site, one that occupied a prominent position on high land and was a communal place of worship for a specific group of people, a tribe or folk group, perhaps at particular times of the year.²

..., in contrast to the hill-top, tribal association of the *hearg*, the *weoh* was a small, wayside shrine, accessible to the traveller.³

These two pagan words are to be found in the so-called “Christian excursus” in *Beowulf*:

Hwylum hie geheton æt hærgtrafum
wigweorþunga, wordum bædon,
þæt him gastbona geoce gefremede
wið þeodþream. (*Beowulf*, ll. 175-8a)⁴

¹ David Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 2.

² Wilson, p. 8.

³ Wilson, p. 10.

⁴ Quoted from Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf*, third edition (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1950).

Hearg occurs in a variant form in the first part of the compound “*hærgtrafum*” (l. 175b), while *weoh* is employed also in a variant form, and again in the first part of the compound “*wigweorpunga*” (l. 176a). The passage in which these compounds occur is translated by Hall as follows:

Sometimes they vowed sacrifices at the tabernacles of idols, —prayed aloud that the destroyer of souls would provide them help against the distress of the people.⁵

The problem with this translation is (apart from another problem with the possibility that “*wigweorpunga*” could mean ‘sacrifices’, for which I rather prefer the literal translation, “idol-worshipping”) that it could easily mislead us to assume that the “tabernacles” where they “vowed sacrifices”, or, if I may use my rendering, “the tabernacles where they vowed idol-worshipping” and the place(s) where they practiced what they vowed are located in one and the same place. Probably, most *Beowulf*-scholars must have understood the passage that way. However, according to Wilson’s description based upon the study of place-names in England, they are topographically distributed in such a different way as was quoted above. The implication of his description of the words is that the Danes hoped for help from some pagan god at a prominent site (= *hearg*) on high land by vowing on a communal scale their idol-worshipping, and then, going back home, they actually paid homage privately to their idols (= *weoh*) at a small, wayside shrine. In other words, their idol-worshipping above portrayed was not just privately done, but it was also a tribally organized one, which certainly deserves the poet’s “pointed Christian comment”⁶ that follows in ll. 181-8, in which Tolkien detected a “ring and measure unlike their context, and indeed unlike that of the poem as a whole”.⁷

⁵ Quoted from John R. Clark Hall, *Beowulf: A Translation into Modern English Prose*, new edition (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950), p. 29.

⁶ Klaeber, p. 135.

⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*”, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936), 245-95. Repr. in: Lewis E. Nicholson, *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1963), p. 102.

The unique “ring and measure” detected by Tolkien could be now accounted for by the fact that, because in the poem as a whole a communal idolatry, so to speak, is realistically portrayed only in these lines, it has to be condemned so very severely even by the poet, whose portrayal of the Danes is open to question as to whether they are pagan or Christian.