KING ALFRED'S TIMBERS

Abstract

This note offers a detailed discussion of the relatively understudied metaphor that King Alfred develops in the preface to his translations of Augustine's *Soliloquies*: the image of a wright gathering timber for the construction of a building. It focuses on the terminology of construction in timber and the nature of the symbol emerging in the house Alfred calls on his reader to envisage. In the light of a number of previous studies, an interpretation is offered in which Alfred's proposed building is relatively modest as befits the authorial persona adopted in the preface, and the terminology corresponds to a precise set of *termini technici*. The note is closed by a revised translation of Alfred's words.

Keywords: construction terminology, metaphors, Alfred of Wessex, Old English, Saint Augustine, *Soliloquies*.

Resumen

La presente nota discute con cierto detalle la metáfora (relativamente poco estudiada) desarrollada por el rey Alfredo en el prefacio a sus traducciones de los *Soliloquios* de San Agustín: la imagen de un artesano recogiendo madera para construir un edificio. Se centra en la terminología de la construcción en madera y en la naturaleza del símbolo de la casa tal como lo presenta Alfredo. A la luz de estudios previos, se ofrece una interpretación del edificio como relativamente modesto, apropiado para el tipo de personaje autorial del prefacio, y de la terminología como *termini technici*. Una traducción revisada del pasaje cierra la nota.

Palabras clave: léxico de la construcción, metáforas, Alfredo de Wessex, inglés antiguo, San Agustín, *Soliloquios*.

I n a recent examination Valerie Heuchan discussed the relatively understudied metaphor that King Alfred develops in the preface to his translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*.[1] The image of a wright gathering timber for the construction of a building is elaborated to represent preparations for and construction of a sound Christian life. The opening lines of the passage that she cites invite some additional observations as concerns both the terminology of construction in timber and the nature of the symbol that emerges in the house Alfred calls on his reader to envisage.

---

[1] Valerie Heuchan, "God's Co-Workers and Powerful Tools: A Study of the Sources of Alfred's Building Metaphor in his Old English Translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*," 2007. On the larger objective of Alfred's translation program, see David Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*.

> Gaderode me þonne kigclas and stuþansceaftas, and lohsceaftas and
> hylfa to ælcum þara tola þe ic mid wircan cuðe, and bohtimbru
> and bolttimbru, and, to ælcum þara weorca þe ic wyrcan cuðe, þa
> wlitegostan treowo be þam dele ðe ic aberan meihte.

Heuchan offers this translation:

> Then I gathered for myself supports and posts and tie-beams and
> handles for each of the tools which I knew how to work with, and
> building wood and beams and, for each of the structures which I knew
> how to make, the fairest wood to the extent that I could carry it.

So rendered into modern English, the text seems somewhat tautological:
a double reference to timbers roughly identified by their end purpose,
with an intervening mention of (cutting fresh) wood for the tools the
wright would work with. Why would a master wright not have tools
fully fitted with handles and shafts, especially when their cutting edges
might be thought subject to greater wear? Yet the meanings of *helfe* and
tol can be in little doubt and this question must be deferred until the
image and its allegorical components are understood in their entirety. A
further question is whether the obvious parallelism of "bohtimbru and
bolttimbru" is adequately or accurately reflected in "building wood and
beams".

Heuchan's rendering of the several timber terms reflects Herbert D.
Merritt's proposed amendments to the Modern English translation that
accompanied Thomas A. Carnicelli's edition of Alfred's Old English
translation of the *Soliloquies*.[2] Unnoted in this regard is C. P. Biggam's
valuable article on reconciling OE construction terminology with the
archaeological evidence as available and analyzed in 2002.[3] But Biggam,
in turn, seems not to have examined the OE preface to the *Soliloquies*, so
that the terms presently the object of our attention did not come within
her purview, although Alfred's translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* is
the source of one of the words reviewed. What is initially striking is that

---

[2] Thomas A. Carnicelli, *King Alfred's Version of St. Augustine's Soliloquies*; rev. Merritt,
1970.

[3] C. P. Biggam, "*Grund* to *Hrof*: Aspects of the Old English Semantics of Building and
Architecture"; nor does *Dictionary of Old English* appear to have been consulted for the
terms *cigel*, *bohtimber*, and *boltimber*.

there is not a single point of correspondence between the five timber terms here under consideration and the lexical data assembled by Biggam.

Other vantage points than the simply lexical from which to address the issue of terminology are (1) the kind of building the metaphor envisages, (2) the ramifications of the allegory that give as much weight to timber felling in the forest as to construction itself, (3) early medieval timber-cutting and wood-working practices, and (4) the properties of the catalogue device as exploited in medieval letters. On the first count, a key word occurs somewhat later in Alfred's preface. He writes:

> Forþam ic lære … þæt he menige to þam ilcan wudu þar ic ðas stuðansceaftas cearf, fetige hym þar ma, and gefeðrige hys wænas mid fegrum gerdum, þat he mage windan manigne smicerne wah, and manig ænlic hus settan …

> Therefore I would instruct … that he go to the same wood where I cut these posts and fetch more there for himself, and load his wagons with fair lengths, so that he can weave many a fair wall, and set up many a splendid house …

The verb *windan* 'weave' reveals that, as befits a transient secular building, Alfred imagines a simple building with wattle-and-daub walls, the hurdles held in place by uprights that would also have supported the roof and roofing.[4] Panels of wattle are elsewhere in early English writing called *windung, hyrdel*, and *watel* (Biggam 2002: 54). The next step up toward greater permanence would have been to build continuous walls of staves (split tree-trunks with the flat side on the inside), then possibly to cover these with sheets of lead, as Bede describes the refurbishing of the

---

[4] In this respect, Alfred's metaphor rejoins the great western European tradition of seeing life as a woven product or textile. The spontaneous or more studied creation of metaphor, its origins in cognition and foundation in known reality, its lexical choices, ramification, and eventual allegorization, as practised by Alfred and his age, may be profitably considered from such modern vantage points as Lakoff and Turner, and Kövecses. At the same time, limitations in our lexical evidence, in this cases the rare instances of OE *bol* 'trunk' compared to the fuller documentation on *boc* 'bough', even when this and related vocabulary is recovered through the latest electronic searching capabilites, make it difficult to plot the connotations and affective value of words chosen to carry metaphorical value.

chapel built by Bishop Finan of Lindisfarne in his *Historia Ecclesiastica.*[5] Eventually, building in stone would be the preferred form of ecclesiastical architecture.

Before applying this insight to our OE terminology, it should be noted that early medieval wrights, shipwrights in particular, assigned future function and placement to timber before felling the trees. Curved pieces exploited the tensile and compressive strengths of crooks and forks in the trees by the judicious shaving of the upper or lower sides of each fork. This is reflected in Alfred's "… in each tree I saw something of which I had need at home". What he calls the carrying (*lad*), which subsumes tree selection and felling, is then just as important as the building (*bytling*).

Heuchan argues that the trees to which Alfred, the hewer and wright, goes are the writings of the Church fathers and, indeed, Augustine, Gregory, and Jerome are named in the preface. This would entail that these highly finished intellectual products are to be seen as raw material, to be shaped by the translator's tools into new, quintessentially English works. Yet the imagery here directly associated with the three Church fathers is that of illumination and guidance, not of exploitable natural resources. An alternative reading would be to see Alfred deploying a complementarity: God's nature and Christian nurture. Alfred's image is about the construction of a Christian life in the "borrowed dwelling place" that is this world. The forest represents life's natural diversity from which we may choose. The tools with which we exploit these resources in the forest and on the stage of Christian living —the building site— are then equally important and this dimension of the allegory explains why new handles and shafts are needed. The house that is a good Christian life will be pleasant, but little in comparison to that home in heaven, built with whatever celestial materials there available, but certainly not with the wood or stone of an earth-bound chapel.[6]

---

[5] *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* Colgrave and Mynors, eds, III, 25. Regrettably, for present purposes, this chapter is not reproduced in the Old English translation of Bede, Miller, ed.

[6] Heuchan's observation that the image of a house on *bocland,* the home in heaven, is particularly appropriate may stand, although it is not the books of the Church fathers that are wittily being referenced, but the Great Book itself.

In his translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* Alfred uses the word *cigel*, generally understood as 'post, rod, stick',[7] to render *iacula*, which he otherwise translates as *speru*.[8] This suggests that, in the preface to the *Soliloquies*, *kigclas* is to be seen as lengths of timber with pointed ends, elsewhere generally called *staca* (Biggam 2002: 52). The traces of organic material in the post-holes for medieval English timber buildings reveal that these stakes were sharpened and pile-driven into place. Let us then call the *kigclas* 'posts' and understand these as uprights spaced at intervals along the length of each wall. They would have provided attachment points for the wattling and have supported the superstructure of the house. With this identification, the *stuþansceaftas* are best seen as more robust vertical supports, most likely corner-posts. Our third term, *lohsceaftas*, incorporates the element *loh* 'bolt, bar' and then designates a locking function.[9] I then believe, with Heuchan and earlier commentators, that these are tie-beams, more precisely the horizontal beams linking the tops of the four walls. Capping the vertical posts, they may have been mortised together or secured with a lap joint ("locked") at the corners of the building. This, then, is Alfred's basic structure, outlined in a mini-catalogue that proceeds in orderly fashion from the ground up. He does not pursue his image and allegory into a treatment of rafters, ridgepoles, or thatching (reeds, rushes, heather), perhaps seen as even more transient than the basic house structure. We may imagine the simple house that Alfred envisions as resembling the farm buildings reconstructed at Bede's World in Jarrow.[10]

---

[7] Roberts, Kay, and Grundy, *A Thesaurus of Old English in Two Volumes*.

[8] *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, Sweet, ed., 297, 1, noted by Merrit, 662.

[9] A fine early example of *loh* is found in Bede's opening chapter of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, where early Britain is characterized by its 28 fine towns and their "strongest of walls and towers, gates and locks" ("muris, turribus, portis ac seris ... firmissimis", I.1), rendered in OE as "mid weallum ꝛ torrum ꝛ geatum ꝛ þam trumestum locum getimbrade"; *OE Version of Bede*, 26.

[10] See Mills, "(Re)constructing Northumbrian Timber Buildings: The Bede's World Experience." Finan's chapel and the church in Bamburgh of his predecessor, Bishop Aidan, are discussed in Sayers.

To return to "bohtimbru and bolttimbru", the "building wood and beams" of earlier commentators and translators is, as noted, an awkward pair. *Dictionary of Old English* recognizes the parallelism in the terms but must resort to some editing to resolve the problem of identification.[11] *Bolt* is understood as 'house, building' and the compound *bolttimber* as 'building material', more specifically 'straight timber'. Concurrently *boh-* is seen as a variant spelling of *bog* 'bow, curve', with the result that Alfred's second term refers to 'curved timber'. But 'curved timber' should then be excluded from Alfred's felling in the forest, since it is straightness that qualifies timber as suitable for the construction of a *bolt* 'house'. Although this is not Heuchan's argument, curved timber also sits ill with the image of Church fathers.

I would concur that Alfred is here recalling that the parts of a tree, like the elements of human life, serve different purposes and that these must be identified early on. But the distinction is not between straight and curved nor between rough and dressed timber. Rather, Alfred has identified two kinds of primary material. Let us retain *boc* as a legitimate spelling and understand 'bough' and amend *bolt-timber* to *bol-timber*. *Bol* is a rare word in OE for the stem or stalk of a plant but has a cognate in Old Norse *bolr* 'bole, tree trunk'. The modern sense 'bole' is well attested in Middle English.[12] It makes excellent sense to see here Alfred pairing the wood of bough and of bole. The former might yield stakes, rafters, roof lathes, the latter, corner-posts and tie-beams. What appeared tautological in earlier translations in now resolved in favor of two complementary sets of terms: the first stating the end purposes to which the timber is to be put, the second the equally complementary pair of uncut timbers: branches and trunks. This interpretation also accords better with the vision of the wright in the forest searching for suitable raw materials. Later in the passage we meet the collective *ontimber* 'material' which subsumes the foregoing terminology.

Given the disparity between the vocabulary of construction assembled by Biggam and Alfred's terminology, one must question just how current the latter was. The *Dictionary of Old English* corpus offers no

---

[11] *Dictionary of Old English A-F*, s. vv. *bog-timber, bolt-timber.*

[12] *Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. *bole.*

other instances of four of our five terms.[13] Perhaps Alfred's clerical co-workers were improvising at this point. But, once we have a vision of the kind of provisional secular building that Alfred imagines in this life —relatively modest as befits the authorial persona the king adopts in his preface— before righteous living earns him a permanent mansion in the *bocland* of heaven, the terminology is readily understood. As importantly, we recognize that Alfred has employed a precise set of *termini technici*, however idiosyncratic, and not simply some general and some specific terms for beams.[14] In this he respects the medieval catalogue device, with its sequence of discrete items. In conclusion, a revised translation of Alfred's prefatory remarks:

> Then I gathered wall-posts and corner-posts and tie-beams, and handles for each of the tools that I knew how to work —the timber of bough and bole— and, for each of the structures that I knew how to build, the finest wood in the quantities that I could bear away.

<div align="right">

William Sayers
Cornell University

</div>

REFERENCES

Alfred, King of Wessex. *King Alfred's Version of St. Augustine's Soliloquies*. T. A. Carnicelli, ed. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1969.

———. *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*. H. Sweet, ed. London: Trübner, 1871–72.

Bede. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds. Oxford & New York: Oxford U P, 1992.

———. *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. T. Miller, ed. and trans. 4 vols. London: Trübner, 1890–98.

---

[13] *Dictionary of Old English, Old English Corpus.*

[14] The relative rarity of modern scholarly inquiry into the language of medieval technology is illustrated by the isolated status of Margaret Hallissy's study, "Writing a Building: Chaucer's Knowledge of the Construction Industry and the Language of the Knight's Tale."

Biggam, C. P. 2002: *Grund* to *Hrof*: Aspects of the Old English Semantics of Building and Architecture. *Architectural History* 45: 49–65.

Dictionary of Old English A-F [computer resource]. A. di Paolo Healey, ed. Toronto, U Toronto P, 2003.

Dictionary of Old English, Old English Corpus [computer file]. A. di Paolo Healey, ed. Ann Arbor, Michigan, U of Michigan P, 1998.

Hallissy, M. 1998: Writing a Building: Chaucer's Knowledge of the Construction Industry and the Language of the Knight's Tale. *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 32: 239–59.

Heuchan, V. 2007: God's Co-Workers and Powerful Tools: A Study of the Sources of Alfred's Building Metaphor in his Old English Translation of Augustine's Soliloquies. *Notes and Queries* 54.1: 1–11.

Kövecses, Z. 2005: *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation*. Cambridge & New York, Cambridge University Press.

Lakoff, G. & M. Turner 1989: *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Merritt, H. D. rev. 1970: *King Alfred's Version of St. Augustine's Soliloquies*. *Speculum* 45: 661–63.

Middle English Dictionary 1952–2002: H. Kurath *et al.* eds. Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press.

Mills, S. 1999: (Re)constructing Northumbrian Timber Buildings: The Bede's World Experience. In J. Hawkes and S. Mills eds. *Northumbria's Golden Age*. Stroud, Sutton: 66–72.

Pratt, D. 2007: *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*. Cambridge & New York, Cambridge University Press.

Roberts, J. & C. Kay with L. Grundy 1995: *A Thesaurus of Old English in Two Volumes*. Amsterdam & Atlanta, Rodopi.

Sayers, W. forthcoming: Celtic Kingship Motifs Associated with Bishop Aidan of Lindisfarne in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

৵৶