

***HEAHGETIMBRU: A REASSESSMENT OF CHRIST III ll. 972–6.***

A misunderstanding of the referent of the compound *heahgetimbru* in l. 973b of *Christ III* has resulted in confusion over the denotation of the sentence in which it appears and also obscured the artistry in the structure of the larger passage in which it appears. The full sentence, as punctuated by the ASPR, reads (ll. 972–6):

Swa se gifra gæst grundas geondseceð;  
hiþende leg heahgetimbro  
fyllað on foldwong fyres egsan,  
widmære blæst woruld mid ealle,  
hat, heorogifre.<sup>1</sup>

Charles Kennedy's translation renders these lines as:

So shall the greedy spirit run through earth, the destroying flame through high-built halls. The wide-known blast of fire, hot and devouring, shall fill the plain of earth, the very world with the terror of its flame.<sup>2</sup>

S.A.J. Bradley's translation is:

Thus the ravening visitant will scour earth's plains; the ravaging flame will raze tall buildings to the ground by the terror of fire, and the holocaust, notorious afar, hot and ravening for gore will raze the world withal.<sup>3</sup>

Mary Clayton's translation is:

So the devouring spirit will scour the earth; the ravaging flame, the hot blaze, greedy for slaughter, infamous, will fill the tall buildings on earth, the entire world, with the terror of fire.<sup>4</sup>

Britt Mize also translates this line in *Traditional Subjectivities*:

Thus the insatiable spirit will search throughout lands; the ravaging flame will fell high-built things to the plain in the terror of fire, the widely known blaze (will bring down) the world entirely, hot, battle-ravenous.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> George Philip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie (eds.), *The Exeter Book*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III (London: 1936). This article is the product of an intersection between my work for Andy Orchard on the Consolidated Library of Anglo-Saxon Poetry and my work on the interdisciplinary research network Architectural Representation in Early Medieval England funded by the Balliol Interdisciplinary Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Kennedy (trans.), *The Poems of Cynewulf Translated into English Prose* (New York: 1949), 182.

<sup>3</sup> S.A.J. Bradley (trans.), *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: An Anthology* (London: 1982), 232.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Clayton (trans.), *Old English Poems of Christ and His Saints* (Cambridge MA: 2013), 41.

There is disagreement about whether *fylleð* means ‘will fell’ or ‘will fill’ which is reflected in the differences among these translations and also in the differences in the punctuation of these lines in different editions.<sup>6</sup> What the translators are in agreement about—apart from Mize, who allows for ambiguity with ‘high-built things’—is that *heahgetimbru* refers to buildings.

The translators are supported in this by the lexicographers. Bosworth and Toller define *heáh-getimbru* as ‘A lofty building, a place built on high’.<sup>7</sup> The as yet unreleased entry in the Toronto *Dictionary of Old English (DOE)* similarly defines *hēah-ge-timbru* as ‘lofty buildings’.<sup>8</sup> The *DOE* entry for the cognate adjective *hēah-ge-timbrad*, which appears once in *Christ and Satan*, notes that its referent is heaven, but the *DOE* does not offer this reading in the entry for the noun, even though the passage in which *heahgetimbru* appears in *Guthlac A* is almost identical to the passage in which *heahgetimbrad* appears in *Christ and Satan*. ‘Lofty-buildings’ is reasonable as a calque for *heahgetimbru*; *getimbru* on its own means ‘a building’, and frequently glosses *aedificium*. However, it is only a calque. The actual referent is heaven, not only in *Guthlac A* but in every instance where the word is attested.

There are five occurrences of *heahgetimbru/ad* in the corpus: *Genesis B* l. 739b, *Christ and Satan* l. 29b, *Guthlac A* l. 584b, and *Christ III* ll. 973b and 1181b. There is also a noun, *heahtimber*, that occurs only in *The Gifts of Men* l. 45; although it resembles *heahgetimbru*, it is a separate word that does not carry the same connotations.<sup>9</sup>

The occurrences of *heahgetimbru/ad* in *Christ and Satan* and *Guthlac A* are the most obviously related to one another. *Christ and Satan* narrates the fall of the angels and says that they have lost heaven’s light (ll. 28b–29):

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<sup>5</sup> Britt Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities: The Old English Poetics of Mentality* (Toronto, 2013), 120.

<sup>6</sup> See Albert S. Cook (ed.), *The Christ of Cynewulf* (Boston: 1909), 37 and his note at 186.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Bosworth, ‘An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online’, ed. Thomas Northcote Toller and Others, comp. Sean Christ and Ondřej Tichý. (Prague: 2010). Web. 25 Nov. 2015.

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Andy Orchard for allowing me to view the entry ahead of its publication.

<sup>9</sup> Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*.

.....nales swegles leoht  
habban in heofnum heahgetimbrad.<sup>10</sup>

[...not at all have the sky's light in high-built heaven.]

In *Guthlac A*, the devils threaten Guthlac, and tell him he must dive down to hell and no longer possess the Lord's light (ll. 582b–585a):

.....nales dryhtnes leoht  
habban in heofonum, heahgetimbru,  
seld on swegle.<sup>11</sup>

[not at all have the Lord's light in heaven, high-built, seat in the sky.]

The first three three half-lines are almost identical to these in *Christ and Satan* except that the light is *dryhtnes* instead of *swegles*, and the last half-line incorporates the word *swegel* in a different position.

In *Genesis B*, the word *heahgetimbru* appears when the Tempter is apostrophizing Satan after Adam and Eve have fallen (ll. 738–739):

And þurh þin micle mod monig forleton  
on heofonrice heahgetimbro.<sup>12</sup>

[And through your pride we lost many high-built places in heaven.]

The situation described here is exactly the same one that is described in *Christ and Satan*. All three of these poems explicitly contrast the height of heaven's architectural space with a downward movement towards hell.

There are two occurrences of *heahgetimbru* in *Christ III*. The second occurrence comes in a *fitt* in which nature's perception of Christ's divinity is contrasted with the Jews' failure to perceive Christ's divinity through an examination of the many ways in which mute creation (*dumban gesceaft*, l. 127b) responded to Christ. As I discuss in more detail elsewhere, the purpose of the use of *heahgetimbru* in this passage is to clarify that it is a

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<sup>10</sup> George Philip Krapp (ed.) *The Junius Manuscript*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records I (London: 1931). Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>11</sup> Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*.

<sup>12</sup> Krapp, *The Junius Manuscript*.

reference to physical spaces or celestial bodies, and not a metonym for a community of sentient beings (ll. 1180–1183a):<sup>13</sup>

Pa þe æþelast sind eorðan gecynda,  
ond heofones eac heahgetimbro,  
eall fore þam anum unrot gewearð,  
forhtafongen.

[Those which are the noblest of nature of earth, and of heaven also, high-built, all became sorrowful, gripped by fear, before that one alone.]

As in the three poems already discussed, *heahgetimbru* once again determines the alliteration of the line in which it appears, and it once again collocates with *heofon* ('heaven'). Although this passage lacks the explicit up-down motion expressed in *Christ and Satan*, *Guthlac A*, and *Genesis B*, it is like these other three passages in that *heahgetimbru* is once again used in a context that contrasts those who are allied with heaven and those who are barred from it.

The only place where *heahgetimbru* does not collocate with *heofon* is in *Christ III*, l. 973. This sentence in which *heahgetimbru* appears comes immediately after a fitt division, so critics tend to treat it separately to what precedes it. However, it is necessary to take this sentence in context:

ðonne eall þreo	on efen nimeð	
won fyres wælm	wide tosomne,	965
se swearta lig,	sæs mid hyra fiscum,	
eorþan mid hire beorgum,	ond upheofon	
torhtne mid his tunglum.	Teonleg somod	
þryþum bærneð	þreo eal on an	
grimme togædre.	Gronað gesargad	970
eal middangeard	on þa mæran tid.	
[Fitt Division]		
Swa se gifra gæst	grundas geondseceð;	
hiþende leg	heahgetimbro	
fylleð on foldwong	fyres egsan,	
widmære blæst	woruld mid ealle,	975
hat, heorogifre.	Hreosað geneahhe	
tobrocene burgweallas.	Beorgas gemeltað	
ond heahcleofu,	þa wið holme ær	
fæste wið flodum	foldan sceldun,	
stið ond stæðfæst,	stapelas wið wæge,	980
wætre windendum.	Þonne wihta gehwylce,	
deora ond fugla,	deaðleg nimeð,	
færeð æfter foldan	fyrsweara leg,	
weallende wiga.	Swa ær wæter fleowan,	
flodas afysde,	þonne on fyrbaðe	985

<sup>13</sup> 'Architecture as Authoritative Reader'; forthcoming.

swelað sæfiscas;      sundes getwæfde  
wægdeora gehwylc      werig swelteð,  
byrneþ wæter swa weax.

Frederick M. Biggs has remarked on the multiple precedents and analogues for the theme of the burning of sea, earth, and air in lines 964–970a, but does not suggest that the theme continues beyond the fitt division.<sup>14</sup> On lines 972–977a, where *heahgetimbru* appears, he suggests Revelation 16:19, the ‘Fifteen Signs of Judgement’ in the *Collectanea Bedae*, and the *Apocalypse of Thomas* as interpreted in Vercelli Homily 15 as sources or analogues.<sup>15</sup> The likeness is not very strong; these three texts refer to the collapse of buildings, but the cause of their collapse (where one is given) is an earthquake, not fire. T.D. Hill suggests that the ultimate source of the imagery from l. 976 to the end of the section quoted is Isaiah 40:4, on the valleys being exalted and the mountains made low.<sup>16</sup> This is persuasive, but there is no mention in Isaiah of fire being involved in this levelling, so that aspect of the imagery of lines 972–988a must be a continuation of the motif from the previous fitt.

This is not the only point of continuity. In fact, the entirety of the first 17 lines of fitt 12 reverses, reiterates, and expands on an image expressed at the end of the previous fitt (ll. 966b–968a):

.....sæs mid hyra fiscum,  
eorþan mid hire beorgum,      ond upheofon  
torhtne mid his tunglum

[Seas with their fish, earth with its hills, and the sky bright with its stars.]

*Heahgetimbru* may not collocate with *heofon* in l. 973, but it does look back to *upheofon* in l. 967, as well as *heofonas* in l. 932b. *Hipeþende leg heahgetimbro / fylleð on foldwong* (‘the ravaging flame will fell high-built things to the plain’, as Mize translates it) is in fact a restatement of an image expressed earlier in the previous fitt (ll. 932–933):

Hlemmað hata leg,      heofonas berstað,  
trume ond torhte      tungol ofhreosað.

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick M. Biggs, ‘The Sources of *Christ III*: A Revision of Cook’s Notes’, *Old English Newsletter* xii (1986), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Biggs, ‘Sources of *Christ III*’, 13-14.

<sup>16</sup> T.D. Hill ‘The Old World, the Levelling of the Earth, and the Burning of the Sea: Three Eschatological Images in the Old English “Christ III”’ *N&Q* ccxvii (1972), 323-325, at 323.

[The hot flame will roar, the heavens burst, the steadfast and bright stars fall down.]

So in fact, the first lines of the new fitt expand upon the destruction of the sky. (The word *blæst* can mean a ‘blaze’ but it can also mean a ‘gust of wind’, and it in that ambiguity it contributes to the air and sky imagery of the sentence.) The lines that follow (976b–984a) expand upon the destruction of the earth, including the breaking of city walls and the melting of the cliffs that formerly delineated the boundary between earth and sea. And finally, lines 984b–987a detail the destruction of the seas and the animals that dwell therein—the burning of the ‘sea-fish’ and ‘wave-animals’ and finally of the water itself.

When we understand *heahgetimbru* in l. 973 as a reference to celestial bodies that are falling to earth, and view it within the context of the fire’s progression from sky to earth to sea, it is clear that the word participates in the same up-down movement that attends its use in *Genesis B*, *Christ and Satan*, and *Guthlac A*, as well as being employed in the context of a differentiation between those who will or will not be allowed into heaven. It not only has the same referent in all four texts in which it appears, it participates in the same conceptual cluster.

This may have consequences for how we read the following sentence. *Burgweall* is nearly always used of literal city walls, so *hreosað geneahhe / tobrocene burgweallas* (ll. 976b–977a) could perfectly plausibly refer to the collapse of literal buildings along the lines of Revelation 16:19, as Biggs suggests. However, *burgweall* is used of heaven once in *Christ and Satan* (l. 294a), and ambiguity about what is or isn’t part of the air and sky is entirely appropriate in a passage about how the boundaries between the three realms of sea, earth, and sky are destroyed, so it is also possible to read this sentence as part of the section about the sky, with *burgweall* functioning as variation on *heahgetimbru*. Either way, it marks the transition of attention from air to land.

Reading *heahgetimbru* in l. 973 as ‘celestial bodies’ has firmer consequences for how we read the clause that precedes it: *swa se gifra gæst grundas geondseceð* (l. 972). If the

structure of the passage is a movement from sky to earth to sea, it no longer makes sense to assume that this line its head is about a fire moving laterally across the surface of the earth. There are only three attestations of *geondsecan*, and only one in verse. For prose, the *DOE* gives the definition ‘to inquire into, investigate, probe’, but for this occurrence in *Christ III* the *DOE* offers ‘figurative; of fire: to search through, scour (a place)’.<sup>17</sup> As with *heohgetimbru*, once we look at the wider context for the line it makes more sense if the word *geondsecan* has the same meaning here that it does elsewhere.

The word *grund* appears twice in the preceding lines. First, the poem says that when Christ appears to judge mankind (ll. 930–931):

Dyneð deop gesceaft,      ond fore dryhtne færeð  
wælmfyrā mæst      ofer widne grund.

[Deep creation will din, and before the Lord the greatest whelming of fire will travel over the wide earth.]

This is immediately followed by the passage on the celestial bodies falling to earth. A few lines later, a description of how Christ will ‘seek’ among the nations of the earth is followed by a description of the sound of trumpets being heard throughout the earth. At that point, all three elements of the half-line *grundas geondseceð* appear in one line, though in a different order (ll. 945b–948, emphasis added):

..... þonne folca weard  
purh egsan þrea      eorðan mægðe  
sylfa geseceð.      Weorþeð **geond** sidne **grund**  
hlud gehyred      heofonbyman stefn.

[‘...when the guardian of the peoples, through the threat of terror, will himself seek out the nations of the earth. The voice of heaven-trumpets will be heard loud throughout the wide earth’]

In both these instances *grund* is used to mean something more inclusive than ‘the ground’—it is a metonym for ‘the world’. When we encounter *grund* in l. 972, we should still expect it to be used in a way that encompasses more than the literal surface of the earth. There is one significant change, however, which is that in l. 972 *grund* appears in the plural.

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<sup>17</sup> *Dictionary of Old English: A to G* online, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey *et al.* (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project 2007).

This is reasonably common when *grund* is used in the sense of ‘the world’, in contrast with heaven.<sup>18</sup> However, it is even more common when *grund* is used to refer to depths: the abyss, the depths of hell, the depths of the earth, the depths of the sea, and also figurative depths.<sup>19</sup> The transformation from *geseceð [...] grund* in l. 947 to *grund geondgeseceð* in l. 972b indicated a progression from arriving at the world to seeking out the depths of it. If we understand *grundas* in this way, the line participates in the downward movement seen in the rest of the opening of the fitt, and that we expect to appear in conjunction with the word *heahgetimbru*.

*Geondsecan* must be read in the context of the previous fitt’s expression that Christ *geseceð* (‘will seek’, l. 947) the nations in order to judge them, and also the function of the fire as expressed later in fitt twelve: it *georne aseceð* (‘will eagerly search’, l. 1003b) inside and outside all the regions of the earth in order to find out the damned. The fire, when it initially appears, moves before Christ, who has come to seek out sinners and judge mankind. By l. 1003b, the fire clearly embodies Christ’s seeking and judgement. The half-line *grundas geondseceð* is the turning point at which the fire seeking out the deep places of the earth and Christ’s judgement seeking out the deep places in the souls of men begin to be conflated in to a single image. Britt Mize has written persuasively about the hellish connotations of *gifra gæst*.<sup>20</sup> The fact that this fire embodies both hellfire and Christ means that it expresses that which is unstoppable, insatiable, unreasonable, and therefore terrifying about God’s judgement.

The most immediate consequence of reassessing the meaning of *heahgetimbru* and *geondsecan* in *Christ III* is of course, that we should reconsider how we translate the opening of fitt 12. ‘So the insatiable spirit will probe the world’s depths; the ravaging flame will fell the high-built-heavenly-bodies to the earth-plain’ would capture something more like the true denotation of the lines, though at the cost of elegance and aesthetic considerations. What’s

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<sup>18</sup> See sense F in the *DOE* entry for ‘grund’.

<sup>19</sup> See senses C and D in the *DOE* entry for ‘grund’.

<sup>20</sup> Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities*, 120.

more important is that we recognize the artistry in the structure of the opening 17 lines of *fitt* 12, which are more carefully wrought than has been previously acknowledged.

The notion that *geondsecan* consistently means ‘to inquire into, probe’ has wider consequences. There may be other instances where modern critics, translators, and lexicographers have been too quick to invent an alternative meaning for a word when we have not understood how it is being used in a given context. Likewise, the idea that *heahgetimbru/ad* always refers to the built-space of heaven is a caution against assuming that calques constitute adequate translations of Old English poetic compounds.

The fact that *heahgetimbru* always refers to heaven, that it always appears the context of someone’s exclusion from heaven, and that all four poems use it in the context of a downward motion, has wider consequences still. The four poems in which *heahgetimbru* appears are not an obviously tightly related cluster. The closest relationship is between *Christ and Satan* and *Guthlac A*; the overlap in their phrasing is sufficient to suggest borrowing. *Christ III* and *Guthlac A* do appear in succession in The Exeter Book, but *Genesis B* and *Christ and Satan* are—each in their own way—the odd ones out in the *Junius Manuscript*; *Christ and Satan* is a late addition to the manuscript, which seems to have originally contained only Old Testament poems, while *Genesis B* is known to be taken from an Old Saxon poem composed not in England but on the continent.<sup>21</sup> The consistency of the word’s circumstances and connotations in the four poems in which it appears is evidence of the continuity of tradition in the literary culture that produced these four texts.

HANNAH MCKENDRICK BAILEY

Balliol College, University of Oxford

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<sup>21</sup> See Krapp, *The Junius Manuscript*, xi-xii.