

## Under Wolcnum (Beowulf 8a and 1770a)

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### 0 Introduction

The phrase *under wolcnum* (8a and 1770a) in *Beowulf* has four possible options in sense: 1) 'under the clouds' which always hints at some terror, weirdness, darkness, etc, 2) 'in the vast land which is under the rule of the king'; 3) 'thanks to the good will and patronage of the heavens (gods)' and 4) zero sense. It seems that the *Beowulf*-poet used the phrase *under wolcnum* in all these varying senses and distinguished especially between 1) and 2), 3) and 4). But before further argument we need to discuss how those interpretations have been obtained. Especially, there is some difficulty in distinguishing the subtle difference among the last three. This paper aims to make it clear how and on what occasion the reader or the audience should interpret the phrase in question ---from three viewpoints.

### 1 'Under the clouds'

*Wolcnu* (nom.pl.masc.) of *wolcen* has two senses, 'skies' and 'clouds.' Here we deal with the phrase *under wolcnum* which is verbatim modernized into 'under the clouds.' The *Beowulf*-poet used this phrase when he suggested some negative implication. There are three examples in *Beowulf* which have the meaning 'under the clouds':

(1) Scaduhelma gesceaþu scrið an cwoman,  
wan under wolcnum. (Werod eall aras.)<sup>1</sup>  
(651) 'The shadowy shapes of dusk should

stride forth, black under the clouds.'

(2) Wod under wolcnum to þæs þe he  
winreced,

goldsele gumena, gearwost wisse  
(715) 'He strode beneath the clouds until he  
could most clearly make out the wine-hall,

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the treasure-house of men.' The pronoun he (714b) indicates the monster Grendel which Hrothgar and his people feared most and which appeared at night. Thus, the modernization 'beneath the clouds' can be said to be a proper translation.

(3) Lagu drusade,  
wæter under wolcnum, wældreore fag  
(1631)

'The lake grew still, the waters beneath the clouds, stained with the gore of slaughter' As is true of the other two examples above, in the line *wæter under wolcnum, wældreore fag*, three words *wæter* (1st half line), *wolcnum* (1st half-line) and *wældreore* (2nd half-line) which are alliterative in *w-<sup>2</sup>*, therefore, help intensify the uncanny atmosphere at the lake where Beowulf himself plunged and beheaded Grendel in the bottom cave.

*Under wolcnum* in all these examples above is semantically literal in that the phrase is translated word for word into 'under the clouds', which implies that something weird, fearful or ill-omened is happening close at hand or /and which helps describe the ghostliness of the scene more effectively.

### 2 'Under the skies, heavens'

The preceding section treated *under wolcnum* under the literal but negative sense heading, while this section is concerned with the opposite of it, that is, the positive, if literal, sense. The phrase in this instance is used to suggest or imply that something favorable or desirable happens or happened. Here are two examples:

(4) he þæs frofre gebad,  
weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah  
(8) '(he received the consolation for that) he  
flourished under the skies, prospered in

honours'

The first half-line *weox under wolcnum* (8a) is not so different in sense from the 2nd half-line *weorðmyndum þah*. The definition of the infinitive *weaxan* is to 'grow in honor, grow great, flourish, prosper'<sup>3</sup> and that of the infinitive *þeorn* (of *þah*) to 'thrive, grow, flourish, prosper.'<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that *þah* is a variation of *weox*. Then the phrase *under wolcnum* (8a) can be said to be not so different in sense from the adverbial *weorðmyndum* (8b) 'gloriously, in honours, etc.'

(5) Swa ic Hring-Dena hund missera  
weold under wolcnum ond hig wigge  
beleac (1770)  
'Thus for a hundred seasons I ruled the Ring-  
Danes beneath the skies and secured them  
from the war.'

These two lines above are also examples wherein something favorable or auspicious, not ominous, is described.

Before we discuss it further, we had better see how the translators below modernized the phrases *under wolcnum* (8a and 1770a):

Bothwarth & Toller (1898)	
(8a)	(1770a)
'under heaven, on earth'	'under heaven, on earth'
Kennedy(1968)	
'under heaven'	'neath heaven's expanse'
Alexander (1973)	
'under the heavens'	'here'
Donaldson (1975)	
'under the skies'	'under the skies'
Swanton (1978)	
'under the skies'	'beneath the skies'
Suzuki(1978)	
'amenoshita (=under the skies)'	/
Hiatt(1983)	
'under the heavens'	'under the heavens'
Ooba(1984)	

'amegashita(= under the skies)' 'tenkani(=  
'under the  
heavens'

Oshitari(1990)

'amegashita(= under the skies)'  
'amegashita(=  
under the skies)'

Those translators modernized the phrase in two similar situations into 'under the heavens' and /or something like that except in one case where it is translated simply as 'here.' Thus, it is fair to say that those translators did a mechanical job of rendering without taking much heed of the real sense of the phrase.<sup>5</sup> While neglecting prosodical effects, the modernized, faithful to the real sense, translation 'here' by Alexander is most instrumental in the reader's understanding what the *Beowulf*-poet meant to mention. This translation leads us to consider exactly what the phrase *under wolcnum* was intended to mean from three perspectives of semantics, prosody and syntax.

## 2.1 Semantical Viewpoint

It simply cannot be denied at all that the phrase *under wolcnum* is translatable into 'under the skies, under the heavens.' The problem is, however, what that modernization means in a real sense.

There are three possible interpretations of our phrase: 1) 'in the vast land which is under the rule (of the king)'<sup>6</sup>; 2) 'thanks to the good will and influence or patronage of the heavens (gods)'<sup>7</sup> and 3) zero meaning. Of the three the first interpretation is rather literal but more specific than the verbatim translation 'under the skies.' The interpretation 'in the vast land which is under the rule of the king' results from the facts that firstly *wolcen* (pl. *wolcnu*) 'sky' implies the vast expanses of area and secondly the concerned characters in both the lines are kings (Scyld and Hrothgar).<sup>7</sup>

The second interpretation has been

generated by the previous analysis in 2 that *under wolcnum* can denote 'gloriously' or 'in honors.' However, this adverb (and adverbial phrase) seems to go to extremes, if we apply it mechanically, with the result that it turns out to be too free a translation. On the other hand, 2)'thanks to the good will and influence or patronage of the heavens (gods)' is not at all implausible when considered based on the word *wolcnum* 'the heavens.' The reason for this is that the heaven itself has the sense 'the shelter of the heaven.'<sup>8</sup>

The third is zero interpretation. That is, there is no sense to interpret out of the phrase. This assumption comes from the fact that the *Beowulf*-poet could convey the story well and completely without our phrase. But we cannot reason solely from the semantical viewpoint any further. Before we proceed to the next section, we have the summary table of three interpretations along with the translations, all three of which turned out to be the same, added.

	interpretation(free translation)	translation
1)	'in the vast land under the rule of the king'	'under the heavens'
2)	'thanks to the good will of the heavens'	'under the heavens'
3)	zero	'under the heavens'

Free translation of (4) and (5) in Chapter 2 according to the semantical viewpoint:  
 (4)'(he received the consolation for that) he flourished thanks to the good will of the heavens / in the vast land under the rule of the king or zero, prospered in honors.' (7b-8b)  
 (5)'Thus for a hundred seasons I ruled the Ring-Danes in the vast land (under my rule) / or zero<sup>9</sup> and secured them from the

war.' (1769a-1770b)

## 2.2 Prosodical Viewpoint

*Weox* alliterates with *wolcnum* and *weorðmyndum* in *Beowulf* 8 and likewise *weold* does so with *wolcnum* and *wigge* in *Beowulf* 1770. Since alliteration usually lies at the 1st arsis (here *w*eox) and 2nd arsis (here *w*olcnum) of the first half-line and never fails to lie at the 1st arsis (here *w*eorðmyndum) of the second half-line, our phrase *under wolcnum* is of great use in order to conform to the rule of alliteration. However, we cannot say that the phrase in question is necessary among other reasons, to meet other prosodical rules. Especially regarding metrical considerations, there are several rhythmical patterns available to choose from, more precisely five (A,B,C,D and E) and their variants<sup>10</sup>, though the half-lines (8a and 1770a) have the rhythmical type of A1.<sup>11</sup>

As a result of the analysis above, the conclusion is that *under wolcnum* is necessary to meet the need of alliteration, but that the other rules of prosody do not necessarily demand this phrase. Thus, we have no satisfactory answer from this viewpoint as to whether our phrase is the only one to occupy the place in those half-lines.

## 2.3 Syntactical Viewpoint

This sub-section considers the validity of arguments regarding the phrase *under wolcnum* from the point of view of syntax. This phrase agrees with the oral-formulaic theory in that we find five citations (8a, 651a, 714a, 1631a and 1770a) in *Beowulf*<sup>12</sup> as well as other prepositional phrases such as *in (on) burgum, geardum: under heofenum, roderum, swegle* and *mid yldum*.<sup>13</sup> Thus, this phrase is a well-established formula.<sup>14</sup> Now a formula is defined as 'a word or group of words regularly employed under certain strictly determined metrical conditions to

express a given idea.<sup>15</sup>

We agree on this definition if we adopt the interpretations 'thanks to the good will of the heavens' and/or 'in the vast land under the rule of the king.' However, when we adopt the zero interpretation, the part of the definition 'to express a given idea' must be ruled out. According to the theory of zero interpretation, this formula turns out to have been used only to meet 'metrical conditions.'

Here it is necessary to refer to an expletive, which is a word or phrase either rhetorically or metrically used to fill a sentence in verse and, which itself has very little or no meaning whatever to convey.<sup>16</sup> Ichikawa et al. states modern, not Old, English has several kinds of expletives: 1) pronominal 'preparatory' *it*, 2) adverbial 'preparatory' *there*, 3) auxiliary-verbal 'periphrastic' *do*, 4) noun (*Marry* <=indeed>, *Gosh*), 5) adjective (*damned*, *bloody*), 6) adverb (*verily*, *truly*, *well*), and 7) ethical dative. Our Old English phrase is applicable to 6) mentioned above. If our adverbial phrase is expletive, the free translation (4') in 2.1 excludes 'thanks to the good will of the heavens' and 'in the vast land under the rule of the king' and yet (5') in 2.1 does not exclude 'in the vast land (under my rule)' because it has two variations following itself, which we have already discussed.

Thus this phrase in (5') cannot be considered to be an expletive, but one of the variations, that is, different syntactical usage, which was used to be effective in stressing the vastness of land by dilating two times. The exclusion of zero interpretation is further confirmed with regard to (4') too, if we agree on F. C. Robinson's view.<sup>17</sup>

Putting aside a viewpoint of rhetorical emphasis through variation, our attention is called to a pure syntax of emphasis. Modern English also uses for emphasis phrases such as 'in heaven,' 'in the world,' 'on earth,' 'in hell,' etc. Those phrases are not used by

themselves, but with some other syntactical marks such as a superlative, a comparative, an interrogative pronoun, or words like 'all,' 'no,' 'not a,' 'everything,' 'nothing,' etc.<sup>18</sup> This applies to the OE syntax too. Except for (6) below, the other examples after that are those in which there appear instead *under heofenum*, *roderum*, *swegle*, etc., all of which are synonymous with *under wolcnum*.

(6) with a superlative

Þæt wæs under wolcnum weallfæstenna  
ærest ealra þara þe æðelingas,  
sweordberende, settan heton.

(Genesis 1060)

(That was the first and foremost of all the wall fortresses which the kings ordered soldiers to construct.)

(7) with a negative

Men ne cunnon  
secgan to soðe, selerædende,  
hæleð under heofenum, hwa þæm hlæste  
onfeng. (Beo.52)

'Men cannot say for certain, neither councillors in the hall nor warriors beneath the skies, who received that cago.'

According to my assertion, Swanton's translation above, that is, 'beneath the skies,' should be changed into 'in the world.' Another similar example *under swegle* is in *Beo.*1197, and *under swegles begong* is in *Beo.*860.

(8) with a comparative

forþon þe he ne ufe, þæt ænig oðer man  
æfre mæraða þon ma middangeardes  
gehede under heofenum þonne he sylfa

(Beo.505)

'For he did not wish that any other man in the world should ever achieve more glorious deeds beneath the heavens <should be indeed> than himself.'

(9) with a superlative

Þæt wæs foremærost foldbuendum  
receda under roderum, on þæm se rica  
bad (Beo.310)

'Of all buildings beneath the skies, this in which the great ruler dwelt was the most famous to those who inhabit the earth.' <This

was the most stately of structures under the sun to those who inhabit the earth, in which the great ruler dwelt.>

The following are the examples of various emphatic phrases which are not seen in *Beowulf* but in other OE texts.

(10) *on, o, in world* with 'all'

Eal þæt heo on worulde hæfde (Bæda's Hist. IV. X X iii)<sup>19</sup> 'All that she had in this world'<sup>20</sup>

(11) *under sunnan* with 'ever, in any case'

Aras þa togenes, gode þancade  
þæs ðe hie onsunde æfre moston  
geseon under sunnan. (Andreas 1013)

'He rose to meet him and thanked God, because they could without injury meet in any case under the sun.'

(12) *under lyfte* with 'how'

Gif þu þegn sie þrymsittendes,  
wuldorcyniges, swa þu worde becwist,  
rece þa gerynu, hu he reordberend  
lærde under lyfte

(Andreas 420)

'If you be the servant of the Glorious Being, God, as you say in word, tell the miracle, how in heaven he taught man.'

(13) *under heofonhwealfe* ('vault of heaven') with 'no one'

Nænig manna is  
under heofonhwealfe, hæleða cynnes,  
ðætte areccan mæg ððe rim wite  
hu ðrymlice, þeoda baldor,  
gasta geocend, þine gife dælest. (Andreas 548)

'There is no man whatsoever of the human race who can express in words or count the number of, how gloriously, the Ruler of people, Saviour of souls, distributes grace to you.'

### 3 Conclusion

The interpretation of *Under wolcnum* (8a and 1770a) has been examined through the three sieving devices of semantics, prosody and syntax. As for that of 1770a, 'thanks to the good will of the heavens' and zero interpretation has been ruled out from the syntactical viewpoint of variation. For the

phrase has two other variations following it:

*geond þysne middangeard* (1771b)  
'throughout the world' and *under swegles begong* (1773a) 'beneath the expanse of heaven.' Thus, it is interpreted only as 'in the vast land which is under the rule of the king.'

As for the interpretation of 8a, 'in the vast land under the rule of the king' can be a possible option in sense but it has no consolidating proof, except for the semantical support, while 'thanks to the good will of the heavens' has a strong succor from two viewpoints of semantics and syntax, precisely, variation. Thus, *under wolcnum* is, in conclusion, interpreted to be 'thanks to the good will of the heavens (gods).'

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The citations are from *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, edited by Fr. Klaeber, third edition with First and Second Supplements (Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1950) and the translation is Swanton's, Michael. See *Beowulf* (1978; rpt. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> According to Ono, S and Nakao, T, *Outline of English Linguistics*, Vol. 8, *History of English I* (1980; rpt. Taishukan, 1991) p. 537, the frequency of *w-* in alliteration is between ten and twelve percent.

<sup>3</sup> Bosworth, J. and Toller, T.N., *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1898; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), *weaxan*, IV.a. *OED* defines it as 'to advance in power, importance, prosperity, etc.'

<sup>4</sup> *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *þeon*.

<sup>5</sup> *OED* also acknowledges the existence of the phrase *under wolcnum* in *Welkin*, 1.A, modernizing it as "under the sky or heaven," adding 'esp. in poetry,' but it does not say what implication it has in itself. See p. lxvi also in Klaeber, FR. in *Beowulf and*

*the Fight at Finnsburg* (Boston, 1922; rpt. Boston: D.H.Heath and Comapny, 1950).

<sup>6</sup> Alexander's modernization 'here' can belong to this one. Two examples in *Genesis* which seem to belong to this are:

þu scealt fiersna sætan  
tohtan niwre; tuddor bið gemæne  
incrum orlegnið a þenden standeð  
woruld under wolcnum.

(Gen.916)

'You must lie in wait for her heels; your offspring are hostile to each other as long as the world continues in the vast land under my rule.'

forþon his lof secgað  
wide under wolcnum wera cneorisse,  
foldwonga bearn.

(Gen.1951)

'because the generations of people, children of the earth-plain, far and wide under the vast land under the rule, praise him.'

<sup>7</sup> See also *amenoshita* 'under the heavens' in Shinmura, Izuru, *Kojien* (1955; rpt.Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> I owe this interpretation to Dr. Richard C. Reiter who commented through private communication and see *under swegles hleo* 'under the shelter of the heaven'(Andreas 832b).

<sup>9</sup> In translation the reason why 'thanks to the good will and influence or patronage of the heavens (gods)' is excluded as improper is that *under wolcnum*(1770b) has two variations (*geond þysne middangeard* and *under swegles begong*) following it.

<sup>10</sup> Klaeber, FR., p.281 inserts a list of Sievers's rhythmical types with his slight modification of the numbering:

A  $\underline{\quad} \times \mid \underline{\quad} \times$  and its variants  
A1,A2, and A3

B  $\times \underline{\quad} \mid \times \underline{\quad}$  and its variants B1  
and B2

C  $\times \underline{\quad} \mid \underline{\quad} \times$  and its variants C1  
and C2

D a.  $\underline{\quad} \mid \underline{\quad} \times$  and Da's variants and  
Db's variants

b.  $\underline{\quad} \mid \underline{\quad} \times \underline{\quad}$   
E  $\underline{\quad} \times \mid \underline{\quad}$  and its variants E1  
and E2

<sup>11</sup> Kendall,C.B..categorizes 8a and 1770a into A3 in *The Metrical Grammar of 'Beowulf'* (Cambridge Univ.Press, 1991), pp. 237-277.

<sup>12</sup> Besides these five examples, it also appears in *Genesis* 916a, 1058a, 1950a; *Christ* 226a; *Elene* 1273a; *Andreas* 93a, 837a, etc. All the examples are only in poetry. We have no examples of our phrase in prose, for example, in *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*. See also 5 in endnotes.

<sup>13</sup> *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, p. lxvi.

<sup>14</sup> Magoun (1953) maintains that instead of the phrase *under wolcnum* the whole half-line *weox under wolcnum* is formulaic in "Stylistics," *Outline of English Linguistics*, Vol.8, p. 573.

<sup>15</sup> Creed, R. P., "The Making of an Anglo-Saxon Poem," *ELH*, xxvi, pp. 445-54.

<sup>16</sup> See Ichikawa, S. ed., "Expletive," in the *Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Philology* (Tokyo,Kenkyusha, 1974), p. 374 and Ohtsuka, T. and Nakashima, F. ed., "Expletive," in the *Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Linguistics and Philology* (Tokyo, Kenkyusha, 1987), pp. 418-19. Ono, S. in *Outline of English Linguistics*, p.367 just introduces the view of Quirk(1951) that þær in *Beo*.1063 is either expletive or existential.

<sup>17</sup> In his doctoral dissertation *Variation: A Study in the Diction of Beowulf* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International,1961), pp.140-41 he says that "the stylistic function of variation has been explained in a variety of ways (especially metrical and alliterative) in the past, but now it is generally agreed that the figure is a device of rhetorical emphasis and logical development."

<sup>18</sup> See *world*, 20.a. in *OED* and *Emphasis* in Ohtsuka,T. and Nakashima,F. ed.,*Emphasis*, 4 .(e). in the *Kenkyusha Dictionary of English*

*Linguistics and Philology .*

<sup>19</sup> See *world*, sb. 1.1.c.†.(a) in OED.

<sup>20</sup> This translation and the rest (11-13)  
are the present author's.

(平成9年9月24日受理)