OLD ENGLISH SELE

Most glossators of Old English poems assume that sele means (aristocratic) "hall", and that therefore it is a word which belongs to heroic diction. Here are examples from the glossaries to three standard editions of Beowulf:

"Hall; of the dragon's lair, 3128" (Wyatt-Chambers)
"Hall" (Klaeber)
"Saal, Halle. on sele (in dem Höhlensaal des Drachen) 3128" (von Schaubert)

The glosses of Wyatt-Chambers and of von Schaubert for line 3128 lead to an interesting incongruity: each assumes that the basic meaning of sele is "hall", but that at this point in the text the reference is to something which is not a hall but a cave in the earth. The question which arises from the gloss is this: if sele means (aristocratic) "hall", should we therefore see the use of the word in line 3128 as somehow metaphorical, conferring heroic status on the dragon through the deliberate reference to its lair as a hall? We may ask the same kind of question in connection with Grendel and his mother when we come to account for the use of the compounds nidsele in line 1513 and hrofsele in line 1515 to refer to their underwater abode.

The question concerning the use of sele in line 3128 may be answered in any of three ways: 1) yes, its use is metaphorical, because the word means "hall" lexically, and contextually only in a transferred sense; 2) no, it is not metaphorical, because sele in this line provides evidence of a semantic widening from "hall" to include the sense "abode"; or 3) no it is not, because sele does not mean "hall" in the first place, but "abode", which is both its lexical meaning and its contextual reference here. If we insist on the first alternative, believing with the glossators that "hall" is the root meaning of the word, we very much widen the possibilities of symbolic meaning which we may wish to see in the dragon. We also encounter distinct curiosities elsewhere. For example, what do we make of the word's use in Andreas 714, where it refers to a temple, or 1311, where it refers to a prison? What do we make of its reference to Guthlac's waste-land dwelling in Guthlac 742? There are other instances, especially in compounds, where, if we insist on the root meaning of sele as "hall", we are going to have to assume either metaphor which is audacious, as in ban-sele in Judgement Day I, line 102, or loss of semantic specificity.

Let us look at some facts and ask some questions about the word, by comparing it to heall, a word which is generally assumed to mean the same thing. First, sele forms various compounds in which it appears to be either metaphorical or generalized semantically to mean "abode" in a very wide sense. With one possible exception, heall appears in no such
compounds or contexts, but refers only to the aristocratic hall. Second, in the poetry *sele* combines to form thirty-three different compounds, compared to a mere eight for *heall* (which, outside the poetry, forms only one more in the *hapax*, *heall-halgung*). In all except two of its compounds, *heall* is the first element, combining with the lexically congruous words, -ærn, -gamen, -reced, -sittende, *begn*, -wudu – none of which argues *heall* as meaning anything other than “hall”. The same is true of the type of compound in which *heall* is the second element, a type in which it has the potential of meaning anything its modifying element might make it mean: *gif-heall* and *me(o)du-heall*. The difference is arresting when we compare the compounds in which *sele* is the second element, and in which we see the variety of meaning it achieves: *ban-, beah-, beor-, win-, burg-, burn-, deaô-, dreor-, dryht-, eorð-, gesi-, gold-, guð-, heah-, horn-, hring-, hrof-, nið-, will-, winc-, wind-,* and *wyrm-sele*. The question presents itself: are these words then truly synonymous? May not such a difference in their formation of compounds indicate that *sele* was more flexible than *heall* because more generic in meaning?

Turning to the glosses we see that, while *aula, atrium, coeniculum*, and *triclinium* are glossed by *heall,*³ they are never glossed by *sele*. The significance of this fact is hard to assess, since *sele* appears to have been a term belonging more to traditional poetic language than to prose. If the fact means anything, however, it is again that *heall* and *sele* do not seem to have been looked on by the Anglo-Saxons as synonyms.

The etymologies of the two words further support the notion of a distinction. Cognate with *heall* are the Latin *celare* and *cella*, and the Old English *helan* and *helm*. These terms argue for a meaning to do with a private “concealed” area within a larger structure, or a structure which as a whole has the nature of exclusive or protected activity. Also, *höll* in Old Icelandic is used only of the residence of an earl or a king, but not of an Icelandic chieftain.⁴ Such a limitation of reference, the same kind as in Old English usage, lends support to the belief that *heall* was restricted in meaning to aristocratic structures. Old Icelandic *salr*, on the other hand, is used in many contexts to mean simply “abode”, “habitat”. Besides being cognate with *salr*, *sele* is cognate with the Gothic *saljan* “dwell”, which would also indicate a general sense of “dwelling” for the root of the Old English word.⁵ Old English *sal, sel* has the same problem attendant on it as *sele*. There are contexts in Old English in which the universal glossing “hall” is incorrect. See, for example *Andreas* 762, where the term refers to a temple, or *Riddle* 52.2, where the gloss “hall” is very much to be doubted, considering the use of the word as a variation of the generic *reced* in an apparently non-aristocratic context. None of this information can act as conclusive proof for any meaning of *sele*, but it certainly points strongly away from the root meaning of the word as “hall” and toward “abode” or “dwelling”, enough so that it seems to me that the burden of proof shifts to the other side.