

BEOWULF AS MARTIAL EPIC

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the study of Beowulf, speculation leads into many domains; yet, while some areas are constantly explored, others remain uncharted or even ignored.¹ R. W. Chambers observed that scholarship of Beowulf "is one of those fields where the evidence is already known, and no student can expect to add more than a small proportion of new material. Meanwhile, many acute minds are seeking to arrive at new results."²

Many such scholarly minds have noted, but as a rule merely in passing, the Beowulf poet's intense interest in military affairs and have commented, as did Knut Stjerna on the "gusto [with which] the court-poet describes the martial procession, a spectacle which was particularly attractive in that ornament and armour-loving time."³

¹The edition cited in this study is C. L. Wrenn's Beowulf with the Finnsburg Fragment (London and Boston, 1953). Required amplifications are cited in footnotes as Wrenn.

²Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn, with a supplement by C. L. Wrenn, 3d ed. (Cambridge, Eng., 1963), p. 390.

³Essays on Questions Connected with the Old English Poem of Beowulf, trans. and ed. John R. Clark Hall (Coventry, 1912), p. 42.

Cf. Kenneth Sisam's recent observation: "there are

No one, however, has followed the obvious trail and utilized as a basis for a close examination of the poem, this preoccupation with the "martial procession" of both the poet and his audience.

Not all scholars agree with the premise that the Beowulf poet was primarily interested in aspects of war and conflict. Margaret E. Goldsmith, for one, has dissented:

The poet was concerned . . . only secondarily with wars and banquets and feats of swimming. One of the strongest reasons for this belief is the extraordinary way in which the poet has avoided writing an epic about a martial hero. . . . Our poet seems to have little interest in . . . battle poetry. He never allows Beowulf to move at the head of an army, or even to slay a human opponent, in any part of the main action. . . . For some purpose of his own, the poet has minimized all the battle scenes in which Beowulf might have displayed his prowess; though . . . he lacked neither the skill nor the temper to create battle poetry.⁴

Yet Adrien Bonjour notes "how perfectly at ease and

many admiring references to arms and armour [in Beowulf]. The fine arms and armour which Anglo-Saxons dreamed of possessing are now the concern of archaeologists; and though its causes, consequences, or setting may interest a modern reader, he is more inclined to pass over the detailed fighting with apathy or even distaste than to enjoy it. But the poet took pains to make the three fights against monsters the high points of his story. . . . He could be sure that the audience . . . would appreciate them, for war was endemic in early England, and war was the business of the heorðwerod [which made up the bulk of the audience of the poem]."The Structure of Beowulf (Oxford, 1965), pp. 12-13.

⁴"The Christian Perspectives in Beowulf," CL, XIV (1962), 72-73.

efficient the poet is whenever he deals with strictly human warfare and conflicts."⁵ D. Elizabeth Martin-Clarke points out "the delight [which the poet] takes in giving us details about the stage properties [e.g., weaponry and armor] of his characters."⁶ And Jan de Vries describes the poet as one "who has a true taste for the feats of arms of famous heroes."⁷ Bonjour also pays tribute to "the degree of the Beowulf scop's artistry, his mastery in breathing new life and significance into a highly traditional theme [that of the beasts of battle]."⁸ All this efficiency, delight, and artistry can only have stemmed from the Beowulf poet's stressing what he knew best and what interested him most: war and its accoutrements.

The all-pervasive martial interest of the poet may be demonstrated by a close analysis of the poem. Bonjour has declared that "the most valuable and final criterion for an appraisal of the poet's art in Beowulf is, and will

⁵"Monsters Crouching and Critics Rampant: or the Beowulf Dragon Debated," Twelve Beowulf Papers, 1940-1960, with Additional Comments (Neuchatel, 1962), p. 101. Hereafter cited as Bonjour, "Monsters."

⁶Culture in Early Anglo-Saxon England: A Study with Illustrations (Baltimore, 1947), p. 57.

⁷Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, trans. B. J. Timmer (London, 1963), p. 59.

⁸"Beowulf and the Beasts of Battle," Twelve Beowulf Papers, 1940-1960, with Additional Comments (Neuchatel, 1962), p. 143.

remain, internal evidence."⁹ This internal evidence is also the primary criterion for judging the temper and the tone of Beowulf; investigation will disclose not only that Beowulf is a work of art but also that, while the poem "depicts a society, it has a sense of atmosphere."¹⁰ Close study will also reveal that both the society and atmosphere are principally martial in interest and tone. All settings are those of the causes of, the preparations for, the engagements in, or celebrations following conflicts; and all the characters are cast solely in those settings, while the qualities stressed by the poet are those of martial mold. Even God is depicted as a Teutonic leader of warriors, and both He and the creatures of evil are primarily motivated by the desire for vengeance, a force that persisted in the lives of the Christian audience of Beowulf.¹¹

Whatever interpretation a reader prefers of the

⁹"Monsters," p. 198.

¹⁰Ritchie Girvan, Beowulf and the Seventh Century (London, 1935), p. 338.

¹¹"There is no period in Anglo-Saxon history when the interest taken in the carrying out of vengeance would be merely antiquarian. The tales referred to in the poem would not be regarded simply as violent, dramatic tales of the bad old days, or, in nostalgic mood, the good old days. . . . Any man in the audience might find himself suddenly forced to become an avenger by necessity, perhaps in circumstances that involved his acting counter to his inclination and affections." Dorothy Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf (Oxford, 1951), p. 17.

events recounted in Beowulf, one cannot but agree that the poet's vehicle is a tale of the adventures of a warrior endowed with those qualities which would be most admired by an audience of warriors. Uncommon strength and bravery are put to use against foes both human and supernatural. The audience is obviously expected to experience pleasure in the details and tensions of conflict as the hero goes against opponents of a magnitude--both in strength and in evil--beyond that of the enemies who might have been encountered by members of the warrior-audience. Furthermore, the warrior's rewards, treasures and fame and acknowledged leadership, are those of which many among the Anglo-Saxon listeners or readers must have dreamed of achieving through their own deeds.

Some scholars reject the idea that the audience was a secular group and contend that both the audience and the poet were of religious orders. Anglo-Saxon clerics apparently enjoyed hearing or reading tales of courageous Christians--e.g., Andreas, Saint Guthlac, and even the comitatus depiction of Satan and his followers in Genesis B--and of ancient heroes engaged in physical battle with creatures of evil.¹² It has indeed been argued that the

¹²Proof of the clerics' interest in pagan heroes is offered in the oft-quoted passage from a letter sent in 797 by Alcuin to Higbald, bishop of Lindisfarne: "'Let the word of God be read aloud at table in your refectory. The reader should be heard there, not the flute-player; the

sole literate audience available for the reading of Beowulf was to be found only in the monasteries. A. Campbell holds that Anglo-Saxon heroic epic poetry was originated in monasteries where it "was sometimes applied to secular themes. . . . [But] there is no reason to think that the monastic heroic epic ever reached secular halls."¹³

There was, however, a secular audience. In his "Preface" to his translation of Pope Gregory's Pastoral Care, Alfred laments the passing of such an audience that had once existed: "ðe kyðan hate þaet me com suide oft on gemynd, hwelce wutan gio waeron geond Angelkynn, aegðer ge godcundra hada ge woruldcundra."¹⁴ Alfred's biographer, Asser, also expressed sorrow over the decay of learning, resulting from the decline of religious life in the monasteries. Why this decline had occurred puzzled Asser, who admitted, "The reason I know not; perchance, it is the

Fathers of the Church, not the songs of the heathen. What has Ingeld to do with Christ? Our house is not wide enough to hold both." Eleanor Shipley Duckett, Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne: His World and Work (New York, 1951), p. 209.

¹³"The Old English Epic Style," English and Medieval Studies Presented to J. E. R. Tokien on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday, eds. Norman Davis and C. L. Wrenn (London, 1962), p. 26.

¹⁴King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care, with an English Translation, the Latin Text, Notes, and an Introduction, ed. Henry Sweet (London, 1871), p. 1.

result of the attacks of foreign races, which often make hostile incursions by land and sea; or, perchance, of the great abundance of riches of every kind among the people."¹⁵

Asser believed that the material wealth of the people had led to the decay of monastic life; but the invasions by Norse Vikings and by Danes may have been the primary cause. The Golden Age of Bede (d. 732) was followed by visits by Scandinavian raiders who "soon after the middle of the ninth century . . . began to pass the winter at convenient coastal bases [in England]."¹⁶ These raids and invasions resulted in the overrunning and destruction of the Christian centers of religion and education. The lamp of learning in Anglo-Saxon England was extinguished; only the successes of Alfred made possible the restoration of these centers of learning within the kingdom.

In Alfred's England, education was made available to secular as well as religious students. So, too, in earlier Anglo-Saxon England was education offered to persons other than those who were being trained for service

¹⁵ Asser's Life of King Alfred, trans. L. C. Jane (London, 1926), p. 77.

¹⁶ Peter Hunter Blair, An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England (Cambridge, Eng., 1956), p. 63.

within the Church:

The Benedictine monasteries . . . all contained a school in which masters taught the rudiments to lay monks, but in many instances other pupils, who were not intended to be monks, were also accepted. When there were enough of the latter and the organization of the monastery allowed it, these secular pupils were taught separately from the lay monks.¹⁷

These secular pupils would, of course, come only from the families of the kings and nobles.

There was clearly then a secular audience interested in martial topics; there may also have been secular poets, formally educated and equally interested in similar subjects. If the cowherd Caedmon, relatively a secular person when he had experienced his vision, could become a poet, why could not a person who was more sophisticated and who was perhaps more cognizant of the predominant customs and behavior patterns of the day also possess and develop that talent?

Gordon Hall Gerould observed that, although formal education in the eighth century was far from wide-spread, there were an "educated few in the Church and at the royal courts [who] had absorbed to a remarkable degree the learning of the ancient world as it had been transmitted

¹⁷ Jean Décarreaux, Monks and Civilization: From the Barbarian Invasions to the Reign of Charlemagne (New York, 1964), p. 331.

through Rome and the Celts in Ireland."¹⁸ One of these few evidently was the Beowulf poet; whether he was of the Church or of the court can never be proved. That the poet was a Christian is unquestioned; generally, many scholars agree with Klaeber's description of the Beowulf scop:

[He was] a man connected in some way with an Anglian court, a royal chaplain or abbot of royal birth, or it may be, a monk friend of his who possessed an actual knowledge of court life and addressed himself to an aristocratic, in fact, a royal audience. A man well versed in Germanic and Scandinavian heroic lore, familiar with secular Anglo-Saxon poems . . . and a student of the biblical poems of the Caedmonian cycle, a man of notable taste and culture and informed with a spirit of broad-minded Christianity.¹⁹

At the time of the composition of the poem, the poet may have been a cleric, as Klaeber and Malone suggest; or he may have been a warrior turned cleric. No one, however, without military experience or knowledge or without love for the color and trappings of war could have written a work so vivid in its scenes of conflict and in the emotions which the characters experience in combat.

¹⁸ Beowulf and Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight: Poems of Two Great Eras with Certain Contemporary Pieces, trans. Gordon Hall Gerould (New York, 1935), p. viii. Hereafter cited as Gerould.

¹⁹ Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, ed., with Introduction, Bibliography, Notes, Glossary and Appendices by Fr[ederick] Klaeber, 3d ed. with list and 2nd supplements (Boston, 1950), p. cxv. Hereafter cited as Klaeber.

The poet could even have been, as in Beowulf, "a warrior, covered in glory, who recites not only the old legends but even improvises a song about the heroic deeds just performed by Beowulf":²⁰

guma gilp-hlaeden se ðe eal-fela worn gemunde, sōðe gebunden. sið Beowulfes ond on sped wrecan wordum wrixlan.	hwilum cyninges þegn, gidda gemyndig, eald- gesegen word oþer fand Secg eft ongan snyttrum styrjan spel gerade,
--	---

(866b-874a)

Even Hrothgar is capable of recitation, sometimes accompanied by the harp, for Beowulf describes to Hygelac the scene at the Danish court celebrating the defeat of Grendel:

"þær waes gidd ond gleo; "feala fricgende-- "hwilum hilde-ȝeor "gomen-wudu grette, "soð ond sarlic, "rehte aeftir rihte "hwilum eft ongan "gomel guð-wiga "hilde-strengo; "þonne he wintrum frod	gomela Scilding-- feorran rehte; hearpān wynne, hwilum gyð awraec hwilum syllic spell rum-heort cyning; eldo gebunden gioguðe cwiðan, þredær inne weoll, worn gemunde.
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(2105-2114)

If Beowulf reflects the customs of Anglo-Saxon courtly life, then song could have been performed or poetry could have been recited or composed by secular poets. The poet could have been a man of noble birth, literate and

²⁰Vries, p. 169.

trained both in the church schools of his day and in the war-loving environment in which he lived; like the later poet of The Battle of Maldon, he "possibly . . . was a member of . . . [a] well-born heorðwerod, who . . . happened to be a practiced poet."²¹

Such scenes and emotions could have been easily re-experienced or vicariously enjoyed by secular listeners. The Anglo-Saxon audience of Beowulf was probably one like that described by Sisam:

We may suppose that the listeners would be the kind of people who appear in Heorot: the king, his family, counsellors and officials such as Unferth, AEschere, and Wulfgar; perhaps distinguished visitors or hostages. In Christian times the Church would almost certainly be represented, though not by monks like Cuthbert and Bede or hermits like Guthlac. Both the main audience would be the king's bodyguard, who shared his hearth and table (heorðgeneatas, beodgeneatas) and in battle formed the core of his army. They should not be thought of as learned in legendary history or theology, and quick to interpret any difficulty of expression or allusion. Bold rather than delicate effects would suit them best.²²

This "audience would doubtless [have] consist[ed] both of veterans and of young men".²³ The duguð would certainly have had military experience and performed war-

²¹E. V. Gordon, The Battle of Maldon (London, 1937), p. 22.

²²P. 9.

²³Whitelock, p. 26.

like exploits. They would relive their own adventures through listening to the deeds of Beowulf. The geoguð would have thrilled to hear of the glory and fortunes which those same deeds have won for the Geat warrior and which might some day be theirs, if they too were to exhibit the valor and the fighting qualities of a Beowulf.

The main concerns of this audience were those of all members of a King's or great nobleman's comitatus. The warriors were vitally interested in personal bravery, loyalty to their leader, capabilities in combat, in exacting vengeance for any loss of comrade or leadership, and in receiving from their lord praise and rewards. The leaders were interested not only in personal bravery and fighting abilities but also in leadership during war and peace and the holding together of the fyrd by munificence in the sharing of treasures won on the fields of battle. In Beowulf, the poet reflects all these martial interests.

The poet mirrors, also, other primary concerns of his age. The English peoples were living at what was for them the end of a Teutonic heroic period which had begun during the middle of the sixth century and which had been a time of Völkerwanderungszeit and of conversion to Christianity.²⁴ This twofold character of the recent past

²⁴H. Munroe Chadwick, The Origin of the English Nation (Cambridge, Eng., 1924), pp. 28-29.

resulted in a dual outlook:

the one which we might call the orthodox, the England of the monastery and the scribal schools writing down the books of the day, their faces turned with admiration to the classical culture of the Mediterranean; the other the England of the barbarian north, with its court bard, and verse handed down by oral tradition, and with its affections engaged in the old pagan belief in Wyrd (fate) and dom (reputation).²⁵

During this period, which extended through most of the seventh and eighth centuries, there existed what both Chambers and Klaeber have called "reciprocal trade of the Germanic nations in subjects for heroic poems." Gerould described the Anglo-Saxons as "not far removed from the tribal life out of which they had emerged."²⁶ And, in similar vein, Wrenn notes that although "Bede shows us examples of Christianity as complete in their gentleness and charity, . . . yet the old pagan heroic ideals were certainly still alive."²⁷ Toward this past looks the Beowulf poet, but although he "clearly felt the antiquity of the tales he retold . . . the fundamental conception of society and politics in Beowulf were those of Anglo-Saxon England of the seventh century."²⁸

²⁵Martin-Clarke, p. 51.

²⁶P. vii.

²⁷In Chambers, p. 488.

²⁸William Witherle Lawrence, Beowulf and Epic Tradition (Cambridge, Eng., 1930), p. 48.

The society and politics of the age of the poet were essentially martial; the age was one which could spawn a heroic epic, a genre that is "mainly concerned with conflict."²⁹ The period during which occurred the events with which Beowulf is concerned was strikingly similar to the past ages which were depicted in epic works:

The heroic type of epic exists . . . upon a foundation of historic wars of migration, in which the civilization destroyed is regarded across a period of rehabilitation, whose temporal extension enlarges the historical setting by drama enacted by a few individuals, and the wide background is made symbolic of those actions. . . . In this period of warfare and wandering, when survival depended upon loyalty, initiative and endurance, the weakening of old ties of a settled society and religion, developed individuality and the ideals of personal freedom, in which a man might challenge the gods to his undoing. This constituted a heroic age, the sort from which epic could spring.³⁰

Just as the ancient civilizations of India and Greece looked back to more remote eras for the material for their epics, so did the Anglo-Saxons search their past history. The Ramayana "was composed . . . from known myths and legends, for recitation to an audience very familiar with its very component parts."³¹ The events depicted in

²⁹G. R. Levy, The Sword and the Rock: An Investigation into the Origins of Epic Literature and the Development of the Hero (London, 1953), p. 15.

³⁰Levy, pp. 86-87.

³¹Levy, p. 211.

the Iliad were cast in "the legendary past, . . . intensely alive in the deeds of ancestral heroes."³² The events recited in the Odyssey were also from this legendary past, but the "scene . . . belongs in general to Homer's own time; the epoch of the great adventurers who were exploring the seas."³³ So was Beowulf written from the "heroic ideal, . . . [which] was developed during the centuries after the fall of Rome in North and West Europe under political and cultural conditions similar to those which created the Iliad and Odyssey."³⁴

Another similarity between the classical heroic ages and that of the Geats was in the use of lays in the development of the heroic poem. The composers of classical antiquity used as sources for their epics earlier song, just as the later Anglo-Saxons evolved their heroic epics from native lays which, from the first, were for a martial audience and originally "were the only known poetic amusement of the warriors in hall in the Greek and Germanic heroic age."³⁵ Eventually the short songs were combined into longer, more intricate works, each centered on one heroic figure, legendary or historical.

³² Levy, p. 178.

³³ Levy, p. 145.

³⁴ Levy, p. 216.

³⁵ Campbell, p. 26.

The audience for the longer epic remained the same and was equally eager for the recital of heroic deeds:

What the singers and hearers delighted in was the warlike ideals of the race, the momentous situations that bring out a man's character; and the poet's imagination eagerly seized upon the facts of history to mould them in accordance with the current standards of the typical hero life.³⁶

These "warlike ideals," these "momentous situations," and these "current standards" remained unchanged from the age of Germanic tribes reported by Tacitus (A.D. 98) through the periods of Hygelac and the composition of Beowulf; and they continued to exist for centuries afterward. These same ideals and situations and standards are clearly epitomized in The Battle of Maldon which was "apparently written very soon after the battle [in 991]."³⁷

The poet of The Battle of Maldon was, like the earlier composer of Beowulf, "well versed in the old heroic and aristocratic traditions of poetry, and an aristocratic poet."³⁸ Like the Beowulf poet, the later composer took keen delight in describing the details of combat and the

³⁶Klaeber, p. xxix.

³⁷Anglo-Saxon Poetry, sel. and trans. R. K. Gordon, rev. ed. (London, 1954), p. 329.

³⁸E. V. Gordon, p. 22. The quoted passages are taken from this text. Gordon's practice of eliminating the spacing between the two half-lines is followed; however, his use of ȝ for g and p for w has been modernized.

emotions aroused by the adherence to the still existing ideals of the comitatus. The Battle of Maldon illustrates how much were these ideals alive, long after the Age of Beowulf; the poem deals with those individuals who held true to this concept and with those who did not.

Before the battle Eadric illustrates the feelings which the members of the comitatus experience before battle:

Eac him wolde Eadric his ealdre gelaestan,
frean to gefeohte; ongan þa forð beran
gar to guþe. He haefde god gebanc
þa hwile þe he mid handum healdan mihte
bord 7 brad spurd: beot he gelaeste
þa he aetforan his frean feohtan sceolde. (ll-16)

When the battle between the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes is begun, the poet describes the scene with gusto:

Waes seo tid cumen
þaet þær faege men feallan sceoldon.
þær wearð hream ahafen. Hremmas wundon,
earn aeses georn. Waes on eorþan cyrm.
Hi leton þa of folman feolhearde speru,
grimme gegrundene garas fleogan.
Bogan waeron bysige, bord ord onfeng.
Biter waes se beaduraes. Beornas feollon
on gehwaeðere hand, hyssas lagon. (104-112)

Byrhtnoth, leader of the Anglo-Saxons, is killed as are the two warriors who fight by his side:

Ða hine heowan haeðene scealas,
7 begen þa beornas þe him big stodon,
Ælfnoð 7 Wulmaer begen lagon,
Ða onemm hyra frean feorh gesealdon. (181-184)

Some warriors, led by Godric, flee, as did the followers of Beowulf, into the woods. The others, faithful to their code, advance on the Danes and desire only to avenge their lord or to die in the attempt:

'Gemunab þara maela þe we oft aet meodo spraecon,
 þonne we on bence beot ahofon,
 haeleð on healle ymbe heard gewinn:
 nu maeg cunnian hwa cene sy.
 Ic wylla mine aebelo eallum gecyþan
 þaet ic þaes on Myrcon miccles cynnes;
 waes min ealda faeder Ealhelm haten,
 wis ealdorman woruldgesaelig.
 Ne sceolon me on þaera þeode þegenas aetwitan
 þaet ic of ðisse fyrde feran wille,
 eard gesecan, nu min ealdor ligeð
 forheawen aet hilde. Me is þaet herma maest:
 he waes aegðer min maeg min hlaford.' (212-224)

The speaker dashes toward the enemy and is killed. Others among the Anglo-Saxons repeat the beot of AElfwine. Offa and Leofsunna also allude to the flights of Godric and his brothers; then the aged Dunnere challenges them,

baed þaet beorna gehwylc Byrhtnoð wrece:
 'Ne maeg na wandian se þe wrecan þenceð
 frean on folce, ne for feore murnan.' (257-259)

The warriors respond; and, as they charge the Danish forces, they call upon God to allow them to wreak vengeance on the slayers of their leader:

þa hi forð eodon, feores hi ne rohton.
 Ongunnon þa hiredman heardlice feohtan,
 grame garberend, 7 God baedon
 þaet hi moston gesprecan hyra winedrihten
 7 on hyra feondum fyl gewrycan. (260-265)

One by one, the Anglo-Saxons fall in battle:

Wigend cruncon
wundum werige. Wael feol on eorþan. (302-303)

The numbers are fewer, but they continue the battle, while the old fighter, Byrtwolf, spurs them on:

'Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe centre,
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure maegen lytiað.
Hēr lið ure ealdor eall foreheawan,
god on greote. A maeg gnornian
se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.
Ic eom frod feores. Fram ic ne wille,
ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,
be spa leofan men licgan þence.' (312-319)

The poem breaks off with a description of Godric, son of AEthelgar, fighting until he is killed. But the last sentence reminds the audience that he was not the one who has fled from battle:

Naes þaet na se Godric þe ða guðe forbeah. (325)

Praise for those who adhered to the code of the comitatus, scorn for those who did not--these were the feelings of the Germanic warriors, whether of the age of Tacitus or of that of Beowulf or of the late tenth century. These ideals were far from dead in the Christian Anglo-Saxon period which produced Beowulf. The love of combat, the delight in the telling and in the reading or the hearing the details of conflict, were not lacking either in the

secular poet or in the secular audience of the age.

The same delight can be experienced by the modern reader who can thrill to the martial tones and events which pervade all parts of the poem. One has only to look closely at Beowulf to enjoy the same elements that afforded pleasure to warrior audiences of the past. The main concern of the poet of Beowulf was with the martial aspects of the life of his age. The concern with the comitatus ideal and all its responsibilities of both warrior and leader, the intense interest in inter- and intra-family wars and in the vengeance required by the blood feud, the delight in the details of combat and in the descriptions of weapons and armor--all evidence the primary martial pre-occupation of the poet.

CHAPTER II

THE WARRIORS

During the several centuries of the Anglo-Saxon period, the "military organization was one of the most basic aspects of Old English society. It was indeed a matter of life and death for the Anglo-Saxon state."¹ Basic to that organization was, of course, the body of warriors who served the lords.

There are conflicting views concerning both the name by which this group was known and the exact composition of the group. Some scholars have attached the name fyrd to the Anglo-Saxon military force; others, like Hollister, have declared that "nobody seems quite sure what the fyrd was. Was it a body of peasants as distinct from the thegns and mercenaries? Was it the peasants and thegns together? Or was it a synthesis of all three?"²

Chadwick argued that the fyrd was "mainly freemen (ceorls) organized according to shires and hundreds."³ If Chadwick's view is valid, then the fyrd was ignored by

¹C. Warren Hollister, Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Norman Invasion (Oxford, 1962), p. 2.

²Hollister, pp. 2-3.

³Lawrence, p. 52.

the Beowulf poet, for "the freemen received no attention in Beowulf, but they were not despised. . . . [They were] tillers of the soil . . . [and] no doubt sturdy fighters in time of need . . . [but] they did not make heroism a profession."⁴ Hollister, however, defines fyrd as "a military force of any kind and from any country. . . . [The word] refers in the majority of cases to the Anglo-Saxon force."⁵

Within the larger military force, there existed a smaller group, consisting of the "personal followers of the kings, . . . a separate military class . . . [that] could be called upon on occasion when it was impossible or unnecessary to summon the fyrd."⁶ This smaller group was one which is commonly called the comitatus and which was "composed of men from far and wide. . . . [They] flock[ed] together in order to perform warlike deeds under . . . [the] guidance [of a powerful leader] and gain fame and booty from them."⁷

Tacitus thus described the composition of the comitatus:

Very noble birth or great services rendered by the father secure for lads the rank of a chief; such lads

⁵P. 58.

⁶Chadwick, p. 149.

⁷Vries, p. 190.

attach themselves to men of mature strength and of long approved valour. It is no shame to be seen among a chief's followers. Even in his escort there are gradations of rank, dependent on the choice of the man to whom they are attached. These followers vie keenly with each other as to who shall rank first with his chief, the chiefs as to who shall have the most numerous and the bravest followers. It is an honour as well as a source of strength to be thus always surrounded by a large body of picked youths; it is an ornament in peace and a defence in war. And not only in his own tribe but also in the neighbouring states it is the renown and glory of a chief to be distinguished for the number and valour of his followers, for such a man is courted by embassies, is honoured with presents, and the very prestige of his name often settles a war.⁸

It is this group with which the Beowulf poet, while still concentrating on his martial hero, is concerned. In times of war, the members of the group are known by various terms: "wil-gesibas," "mago-rinca héap," or "hand-gesteallan;" "cempan gecorene," "óret-mecgas," "hearda héap," "heard-hicgende hilde mecgas," "swið-hicenge," or "hearde hild--frecan;" or "rond-haebbende," "bord-haebbende," or "hwáte helm-berend." In times of peace, the warriors become sojourners of the hall and are known by names which denote either their place of residence or their forms of pleasures: "driht-guman," "flet-werod," "heorð-genéatas," "heal-ðegnas," or "heal-sittendra;" or "beod-genéatas" or "béor-scealca."

⁸"Germany and Its Tribes [A.D. 98]," Complete Works, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb; ed. Moses Hadas (New York, 1942), p. 715.

The most colorful passages in the poem are those which deal with warriors (including Beowulf) engaged either in combat or in celebration of victory in combat. Only a poet who had experienced or who had observed both combat and celebration could have composed a work which so manifestly delights in the portrayal of the Teutonic fighting man at work or at play.

Tacitus declared of the Germanic warriors that "whenever they are not fighting, they pass much of their time in the chase, and still more in idleness, giving themselves up to sleep and to feasts."⁹ Beowulf abounds with references to and descriptions of the feasting and entertainment. When Heorot is completed, "þáer wæs hearpan swég, / swutol sang scopes" (89b-90a); and "swá þá driht-guman dréamum lifdon, / éadiglícē" (99a-100a). Some time later when Grendel invades Heorot he finds "aepelinga gedriht / swefan aeftir symble" (118b-119a).

Although "to pass an entire day and night in drinking disgraces no one,"¹⁰ there is danger in such behavior. Hrothgar warns Beowulf that many drunken warriors have previously overestimated their own powers and have sought to win fame by meeting Grendel in combat; but all had been defeated. It is probably this type of beot made during

⁹P. 716.

¹⁰Tacitus, p. 720.

feasting that has prompted H. R. Ellis Davidson to comment: "The vows made at the ale-drinking to accomplish wild and daring deeds could bring bitter regrets when the men who made them were sober again,"¹¹ if they survived long enough to become sober. Those who, before the coming of Beowulf, have challenged Grendel did not survive.

Warriors, however, did not dwell too long on the defeats of others. When Beowulf and his men are accepted by Hrothgar, the Danish leader invites them to join in the feasting and drinking:

"Site nū tó symle, 9nd on sáel meoto
 "sige hréðsecga, swa þín sefa hwette!" (489-490)

Beowulf and his men accept; "benc gerymed" (492b); "scop hwílum sang" (496b); and joy reigned.

sé þe on handa baer hroden ealo-waege,
 scencte scir wered; scop hwilum sang
 hador on Heorote; þær waes haeleða dreām
 duguð unlytel Dena ond Wedera. (494-498)

"We always hear of the joy that rises in the hall [in response to song]. This springs from a feeling of happiness aroused in the hearts of the warriors, not only and not in the first place by the beauty of song, but by the response which it finds in their manly hearts."¹²

¹¹ Gods and Myths of Northern Europe (Baltimore, 1964), p. 170.

¹² Vries, p. 189.

Beowulf is taunted by Unferth, and the reply of the Geat warrior brings merriment to the hall:

Ðáer wæs hæleþa hleahtor, hlyn swynsode,
word waeron wynsume. (611-612a)

In honor of the visit by the Geats and in response to the impression which Beowulf has made on the Danes, Hrothgar's queen, Wealhtheow, herself, passes among those who are seated by her husband and serves them:

cwén Hróðgáres, grette gōld-hroden qnd þa freolic wif aerest East-Dena bæd hine bliðne leodum leofne; Ymb-eode þá dugubē ond geogobē sinc-fato șealde, þaet hio Beowulfe, mode gebungen	Éode Wealhþéow forð, cynna gemyndig; guman on healle, ful gesealde éþel-wearde; aet þáere beor-þege, he on lust geþeah sige-rof kyning. ides Helminga dael aeghwylcne, oppaet sael alamp, beag-hroden cwen medo-ful aetbaer.
---	--

(612b-624)

Beowulf, accepting both greeting and cup, vows to perform valorous acts within the hall. His promises are answered by joyous speech from both Wealhtheow and the others.

þá waes eft swá áer inne ȝn healle
þrýð-word sprecen, ðéod on saelum. (642-643)

Celebrations might take forms other than feasting and drinking. The celebration of Beowulf's victory over Grendel begins with the Danes riding their horses in

competition:

Hwílum heapo-rófe hléapan léton,
on geflit faran, fealwe mearas. (864-865)

Between races, a thegn of Hrothgar offers vocal praise of Beowulf's victory:

hwílum cyninges þegn,
gýma gilp-hlaeden, gidda gemyndig,
se ðe eal-fela eald-gesegena
worn gemunde, word oper fand
söðe gebunden. Secg eft ongan
sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian
ond on sped wrecan spel gerade,
wordum wrixlan. (867b-874a)

Following the song, the races continue:

Hwílum flítende fealwe stráete
mearum maeton. (916-917a)

As the day progresses, the Danes come to Heorot to gape at the trophy, Grendel's claw; and the leading warriors, thankful for their deliverance, drink to the victory:

Bugon þá þó bence bláed-ágande,
fylle gefaegon; faegere geþaegon
medo-ful manig. (1013-1015a)

Once again the drinking is accompanied by song:

Þær was sang ond swég samod aetgaedere
fore Healfdenes hilde wisan,
gomen-wudu greted, gid oft wrecen,
þonne heal-gamen Hroðgáres scop. (1063-1066)

This song recounts the story of Finnsburg. When it is

completed, the drinking is resumed:

Léoð waes ásyngēn,
gléo-mannes gyd. Gamen eft astah,
beorhtode benc-swég, byrelas sealdon
win of wunder-fatum. (ll159b-ll162a)

Again Queen Wealhtheow takes part in the festivities:
"Pá cwóm Wealhþeo forð / gán under gyldnum bēage" (ll162b-
ll163a). She bears the cup first to her husband:

"Onfóh þissum fulle, fréo-drihten mín
"sincez brytta; þu on saelum wes,
"• • • • Heorot is gefaelsod,
"béah-sele beorhta; bruc, þenden þu mote
"manigra médo." (ll169-ll178a)

The queen then turns to Beowulf:

Him waes ful boren ond fréond-lapu
wordum bewaegned. (ll192-ll193a)

She proceeds to offer Beowulf gifts which the Geat warrior accepts graciously. Wealhtheow then returns to her own seat and the festivities continue:

Éode pá tó settle. þær waes symbla cyst,
druncon win weras; wyrd ne cupon,
geosceaft grimme, swa hit agangen wearð
eorla manegum. (ll232-ll235a)

The happiness of the Danes is short-lived; it ends with the attack by Grendel's dam. Beowulf's victory over the troll, however, provides the Danish court with another cause for celebration:

þá waes eft swá áer ellen-rófum,
flet-sittendum, faegere gereorded. (1787-1788)

When Beowulf returns to the court of Hygelac,

geongne gýð-cyning góðne gefrúnon
hringas daelan. (1969-1970a)

Beowulf now greets his lord. His return is first celebrated by the serving of mead. Hygelac's queen, Hygd, as had Wealtheow at the Danish court, acts as cup-bearer:

Meodu-scencum
hwearf geond þaet [heal]-reced Haereðes dohtor,
lufodeða leode, líð-waege baer
Haeðnum to handa. (1981b-1983a)

Beowulf is urged by Hygelac to relate the story of his adventures among the Danes. The Geat warrior begins by describing the welcoming festivities within the high walls of Heorot:

"Weorod waes on wynne: ne seah ic wídan feorh
"under heofonęs hwealf heal-sittendra
"medu-dream maran. Hwílum mäeru cwen,
"friðu-sibb folca, flet eall geondhwearf,
"baedde byre geonge; oft hio beah-wriðan
"secge sealde, aér hie to setle geonge;
"hwilum for duguðe dohtor Hroðgáres
"eorlum on ende ealu-waege baer." (2014-2021)

The victory over Grendel, Beowulf tells Hygelac, had roused such joy within Danish hearts that even Hrothgar joined in the song that accompanied the celebration which lasted from morning until night:

" . . . wé tó symble geseten haefdon.
 "Daer waes gidd ond gléo; gomela Scilding--
 "fela fricgende-- feorran rehte;
 "hwilum hilde-déor hearpan wynne,
 "gomen-wudu grette, hwilum gyd awraec
 "soð ond sarlic, hwilum syllic spell
 "rehte aeftir rihte rum-heort cyning;
 "hwilum eft ongan eldo gebunden
 "gomel guð-wiga giogude cwiðan,
 "hilde-strengo; hreðer inne weoll,
 "þonne he wíntrum frod worn gemunde.
 "Swa wé þærinne andlangne dæg
 "níode naman, oððaet niht becwom. (2104-2116)

Just as joy and celebration in the hall reflect the happiness of a people, so does sadness in the hall mirror the desolate state of a community or nation. The mirth is silenced; the harp is stilled; if songs are sung, they are woeful lays.

Twice, the Beowulf poet describes this situation. First, he pictures the collection of the treasures which are ultimately guarded by the dragon. The treasures were once the possessions of an honored people, but "ealle hie déað fornam / áerran maelum" (2236b-2237a). Finally only one survivor remains. He places his possessions within the mound which contains the treasures of the others who have expired before him, and he laments the passing not only of his friends and kinsmen but also of the joys which he had shared with his comrades: "gesáwon sele-dréam" (2252a). Now, silence rather than mirth reigns:

"gomen gléo-béames,
 "geond sael swinged,
 "burh-stede beated.
 "Naës hearpan wyn,
 ne god hafoc
 né se swifta mearh
 (2262b-2265a)

An atmosphere of sorrow once pervaded the court of Hrethel, whose son, Herebeald, was accidentally killed by another son, Haethcyn. The father is beset by a dilemma: he is bound to seek vengeance for the death of his son; yet he cannot exact that vengeance from the other. Beowulf recalls how sadness had filled the court:

"gomen in geardum, "nis þáer hearpan swég,
 swylce ðaer iu waeron."
 (2458b-2459)

Enjoying the pleasures of the hall was, to be sure, secondary in the life of a Teutonic warrior. His reputation could only come from exploits in combat, and fame was his goal. He was proud to be a warrior and to be recognized as one, and, if he were a member of a famed comitatus, his pride increased.

Beowulf's band has the look of warriors. When the Danish beach warden challenges the arrival of the Geats, he tells them that, from their manner and mien, he knows that they are not defeated warriors fleeing into exile but that they have come out of greatness of heart to serve Hrothgar:

"Wén' ic þaet gé for wlenco, nalles for wráec-síðum,
 "ac for hige-pryllum, Hróðgár sohton." (338-339)

This mien of warriors is also noted by the messenger who tells Hrothgar of the arrival of the Geats and who describes

them as "'ōret-mecgas'" (363b).

The pride in being a member of the comitatus caused the warrior to be ever ready for service to his lord. Even as the fighting men slept, their armor and weapons were placed within reach. So when the celebration of Beowulf's victory over Grendel ends and Hrothgar and his queen depart from Heorot, the warriors prepare their sleeping places. Even though their land is apparently rid of the ravager, Grendel, Hrothgar's men still set out their war gear:

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syþðan áefen cwóm,
 ond him Hróþgár gewát to hofe sínum,
 rice to raeste. Reced weardode
 unrim eorla, swá hie oft aer dydon;
 benc-belu beredon; hit geondbraeded wearð
 bēddum ond bolstrum Beor-sceaſca sum
 fus ond faegę flet-raeste gebeag
 Setton him to héafdon hilde-randas,
 bord-wudu beorhtan. þáer on benc waes
 ofer aebelinge ýþ-gesene
 heapo-steapa hēlm, hringed byrne,
 þrec-wudu þrymlīc. Waes þeaw hyra,
 þæt hie oft waeron an wig gearwe,
 ge aet hám gé on herge, ge gehwaeþer þára
 efne swylce maela, swylce hira man-dryhtne
 þearf gesaelde; waes seo þeod tilu. (1235b-1250)

Almost immediately, the readiness of the warriors is put to a test. Grendel's dam invades the hall and attacks Aeschere, one of Hrothgar's warriors. The others awake; and, even though they are too terrified to remember to don their armor, they grasp their weapons to repel the unknown invader:

Ða waes on healle heard-ecg togen
 sveord ofer setlum, sid-rand manig
 hafen handa faest; helm ne gemunde,
 byrnam side, þá hine se bróga angeat. (1288-1291)

In this instance, Hrothgar's men are fighting for self-preservation; but of even more importance to the Germanic warrior was his duty to fight in defence of his lord. Loyalty to his leader was the primary virtue of the Teutonic warrior:

It is an infamy and a reproach for life to have survived the chief, and returned from the field. To defend, to protect him, to ascribe one's own brave deeds to his renown, is the height of loyalty. The chief fights for victory; his vassals fight for their chief.¹³

This ideal, thus described by Tacitus, was still adhered to in Beowulfian society. Miss Whitelock notes that "the poet's demand of absolute fidelity to a lord was no mere, conventional standard."¹⁴ Sisam also describes the persistence of the comitatus code:

Another thread that runs through . . . [Beowulf] is the ideal relationship of lord and man within the comitatus, which lived on, at least in some great households, throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. . . . [It was this] personal devotion to one's lord [that] distinguishes the Teutonic from the later feudal system in which obligations tend to be limited and legally defined.¹⁵

¹³Tacitus, pp. 715-716.

¹⁴P. 87.

¹⁵P. 14.

Klaeber, too, earlier emphasized the role which loyalty played in the martial society from which Beowulf emerged:

The old Germanic military ideals are still clearly recognizable, notwithstanding the Christian retouching of the story--the prime requirement of valor, the striving for fame and the upholding of one's honor, a stern sense of duty, the obligation of blood revenge, and above all the cardinal virtue of loyalty which enables the "comitatus" relation and manifests in unflinching devotion and self-sacrifice on the part of the retainer.¹⁶

The Anglo-Saxon concept of loyalty could be expressed in several ways: loyalty to one's ideals, loyalty to kin, loyalty to the leader, and loyalty to the group. Lawrence suggests that allegiance to family "is analogous in many ways to political allegiance."¹⁷ This allegiance could sometimes come into conflict with that of the thegn to his lord; but Chadwick believed that "it would seem that the ties between lord and man equalled, if they did not exceed, those of blood-relationship."¹⁸ On the other hand, loyalty to kin and loyalty to the lord could coincide, as they do in the dual relationship between Beowulf and Hygelac.

Perhaps no one virtue of the warrior is stressed more by the Beowulf poet than that of loyalty. Throughout the poem, references are made to the sense of duty and the

¹⁶ Klaeber, p. lxii.

¹⁷ P. 55.

¹⁸ P. 149.

desire of the warrior to aid and defend his leader.

During Beowulf's fight with Grendel, the other Geat warriors hold back from joining in the fight. They know that their leader has vowed to meet Grendel, alone and unarmed except for his strength. But the sounds of battle arouse the warriors, who are stirred both by the desire to participate in the ensuing conflict and by the fear for their chief's safety:

þáer genehost braegd
 eorl Béowulfes ealde lafe,
 wylde fræ-drihtnes feorh ealgian,
 maeres þeodnes, ðær hie meahton swá.
 Hie þaet ne wiston, þa hie gewin drugon,
 heard-hicgende hilde-mecgas. (794b-799)

Hrothgar's retainers are also noted for their loyalty. Wealhtheow describes the followers of her husband as men who are true to their code:

"Hér is áeghwylc eorl óþrum getrywe,
 "modes milde, man-drihtne hold." (1228-1229)

Later, when Hrothgar mourns the death of his beloved Aeschere, the Danish leader remembers his aged counsellor and shoulder-companion as the perfect warrior:

"þonne wé on orlege
 "hafelan weredon, þonne hniton feþan,
 "eoferas cny sedan, Swy[lc] scolde eorl wesan,
 "[aeðeling] aer-god, swyldc Aeschere waes!"
 (1326b-1329)

The Geat warriors who have journeyed with Beowulf

to Hrothgar's court again show their loyalty when their leader has left them to seek out and kill Grendel's dam. As the watchers at the edge of the mere continue their vigil, they grow restless. Hrothgar's followers become disheartened; thinking that Beowulf is dead, they leave. Beowulf's men, however, continue to hope for the reappearance of their leader. When he does finally return, their joy knows no bounds:

Éodon him þá tógeanes, Gode þancodon,
 Ðryðlíc þegna heap, þéodnes gefegon. (1626-1627)

The emphasis which the Beowulf poet places on this aspect of the military organization is reinforced by his use of the concept of loyalty in some of the so-called digressions and in his depiction of Wiglaf. Most notable of the "digressions" are those which relate the stories of Finnsburg and of the aftermath of the marriage of Ingeld and Freawaru. The contrast between Wiglaf and the other members of Beowulf's comitatus epitomizes the loyalty which the warrior owes to his lord. Conflicts arose over divided or conflicting loyalties. Allusions to the dilemma of Ingeld or Hengest or Hrethel give Beowulf "more than an 'historical' background; they hint at a problem that was real to the poet's contemporaries."¹⁹

¹⁹Whitelock, p. 17.

The Finnsburg lay, sung by Hrothgar's scop during the celebration following Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, has presented many problems to scholars. But obvious enough to the listener is the dilemma of Hengest. His leader, Hnaef, is dead; his force of Half-Danes is trapped in the hall; yet neither the Half-Danes nor the Finns are powerful enough to defeat the opposing force. Hengest agrees to a truce and ultimately to a compact to end the fighting:²⁰

Ðá híe getrúwodon on twá healfa
faeste frioðu-waere. Fin Hengeste,
elne unflitme, aðum benemde. (1095-1097)

According to the agreement, the Danes are to be given a hall in which to live while they await the passing of the winter before they can return home. In the meantime, death will be the punishment for anyone who breaks the compact or who taunts someone else into retaliation.

Hengest takes up his residence at the court of Finn, but is "torn between a sincere desire to observe the truce with Finn and the duty of revenge of his fallen lord."²¹

[Hengest is] troubled by the thought that he had taken the wrong course, that he should have held fast to his obligation to his lord at all costs; . . . he could

²⁰ Cf. pp. 143-144.

²¹ Beowulf and Judith, ed. Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, The Anglo-Saxon Records, IV (New York, 1953), p. xlviii. Hereafter cited as Dobbie.

not get out of his mind the thought that he, especially as leader of the band and party to the pact, had committed the unpardonable sin of disloyalty, and, for purely personal advantage, his and their safety.²²

The dilemma of Hengest has been labeled a tragedy. His "tragic flaw. . . . [is that] he and his fellows of the wealaf, rather than throw away their lives round the dead body of Hnaef, as the code prescribed, chose to live on, and even to enter the service of their lord's slayer."²³ Yet, even though the comitatus ideal considered it "improper that . . . [a warrior] should come to terms with those who had slain [his lord,] . . . in Beowulf, for some unexplained reason, the conduct of Hengest and his comrades in coming to terms with Finn after Hnaef's death receives no censure."²⁴

The reason for the lack of censure by Beowulf and the others listening to the lay sung by Hrothgar's scop may be explained by Tacitus, who wrote that, to the Germanic tribes, "to give ground, provided you return to the attack, is considered prudence rather than cowardice."²⁵ The actions of Hengest may have been considered to have been

²²Girvan, p. 358.

²³Kemp Malone, "The Old English Period," A Literary History of England, ed. Albert C. Baugh (New York, 1948), p. 52.

²⁴Chadwick, p. 157.

²⁵P. 712.

on the order of a strategic retreat, a "giving of ground"; the "return to the attack" was the resumption of the fighting, the killing of Finn, and the returning to the land of the Half-Danes, with Finn's treasures and wife, Hildeburh.

The story of Finnsburg has certain parallels in the tale of the Ingeld-Freawaru marriage festivities: in each, marriage unites two noble families. In the Finnsburg story, Hildeburh, sister of Hnaef, is married to Finn. The reason for this marriage is not known, but Ingeld and Freawaru have been married in an attempt to still the feud between the Heathobards and the Danes. Again, the obligation to honor a contract conflicts with that of loyalty and the obligation of vengeance. Beowulf, in describing this situation to Hygelac, expresses his belief that the peace will not last:

"saecca gesette. "aeftor legd-hryre "bon-gar bugeð."	"wael-fáehða dæl, Oft seldan hwaer lýtle hwile
--	--

(2028b-2031a)

Beowulf then surmises what may occur at the nuptial celebration: Ingeld will enter with his bride, who will be attended by a noble wearing a sword; yet the other warriors in attendance will be weaponless. An old Heathobard will recognize the sword as being that which once has belonged to Wythergyld, the slain father of a youth present at the

feast and will call the attention of the young warrior to the wearing, by a former enemy, of the sword of his dead sire:

"' Meaht þú, mín wine, méce gecnáwan,
" 'pone þin faeder to gefeohte baer
" 'under here-griman hindeman síðe,
" 'dyre íren, baer hyne Dene slogan
" 'weoldon wael-stowe.' " (2047-2051a)

The old warrior will continue to incite the younger man:

"'Nú hér þára banena byre nát-hwylces
"'fraetwum hrémig on flet ga[i]ð,
"'morðres-gylþeð ond þone maðþum byreð,
"'þone þe ðu mid rihte raedan sceoldest!'"
(2053-2056)

Prompted by the older man and, like Hengest, "torn" between the two conflicting duties imposed upon him by the Teutonic martial code, the son of Wythergyld, Beowulf predicts, will break the peace and the feud will burst out anew:

"Manað swa ond myndgað
"sarum wordum, oððaet sael cymeð,
"þaet se faemnan þegn fore faeder daedum
"aefter billes bite blod-fag swefeð,
"ealdres scyldis; him se oðer þonan
"losað lifigende, con him land geare.
"Donne bioð abrocene on bá healfe
"að-sweorð eorla; syððan Ingelde
"wealla wael-niðas ond him wif-lufan
"aefter cear-waelmum colran weorðað." (2057-2067)

Matching Beowulf as an exemplar of the comitatus ideal is Wiglaf. Like Beowulf, Wiglaf is the last of his

line. He has all the traits which the Geat king had exhibited in his youth: "to the qualities of loyalty and courage which distinguished Wiglaf . . . the poet . . . adds a natural modesty which makes the last of the Waegmundingas come very close indeed to the Beowulfian ideal of the hero."²⁶

While the aged Beowulf struggles against the dragon,
all but one of his band fail him:

Wiglaf acts differently. He recalls the gifts which Beowulf had bestowed upon him:

wic-stede weligne Wægmündinga,
folc-rihta gehwylc, swa his faeder áhte. (2607-2608)

Loyalty to his lord swells within the young warrior until "ne mihte ðá forhabban" (2609a); he readies himself for battle and calls upon his companions:

"Ic ðæt mæl geman, þær wé medu þégun,
"bonnē we geheton yssum hlaforde
"in biorȝ-sele, ðe us ðas beagas geaf,
"þaet we him ȝá gúð-getawa gyldan woldon,
"gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe,

²⁶ Adrien Bonjour, "The Technique of Parallel Description in Beowulf," Twelve Beowulf Papers: 1940-1960, with Additional Comments (Neuchatel, 1962), p. 55.

"hēlmas ond heard sweord. Dé hé úsic on herge gecéas
 "to ðyssum sið-fate sylfes willum,
 "onmunde usic maerða, ond me þas máðmas geaf,
 "þe he usic gár-wigend gode tealde,
 "hwate helm-berend, þeah ðe hlaford ús
 "þis ellen-weorc ána aðohte
 "tō gefremmanne, folces hyrde,
 "fgrðam he manna māest maerða gefremede,
 "daeda dolicra. Nú is sé daeg cumen
 "þaet urð man-dryhten maegenes behofað
 "godra guð-rinca; wutun gangan to,
 "helpan hild-fruman, þenden hyt si-e
 "gled-egesa grim! God wat on mec
 "þaet me is micle léofre, þaet minne líc-haman
 "mid minne gold-gyfan gléd faeðmie.
 "Ne þynceð me gerysne, þaet we rondas beren
 "eft to erde, nemne wé aeror maegen
 "fane gefyllan, feorh ealgian
 "Wedra ȝeodnes. Ic wat geare,
 "þaet naeron eald-gewyrht, þaet hé ána scyle
 "Geata duguðe gnorn þrówian,
 "gesigan aet saecce; urum sceal sweord ond helm,
 "byrne ond beadu-scrúd bam gemaene." (2633-2660)

When the other warriors fail to respond to Wiglaf's words, the youthful warrior goes along to the aid of his lord. It is to be his martial baptism, the first time that he is to enter into combat:

þá waes forma síð
 geongan cempan, þaet hé guðe raes
 mid his freo-dryhtne fremman sceolde. (2625b-2627)

Wiglaf comes to the side of Beowulf and calls upon his lord to remember his deeds of the past and to fight as he had in days gone by. Then the younger man utters the cry of the true warrior to his lord: "'ic þe ful-laestu!" (2668b). When his wooden shield is consumed by the dragon's fiery breath, Wiglaf seeks shelter behind

the iron shield of his king, who is encouraged by the bravery and loyalty of the younger man. Although Beowulf is mortally wounded by the dragon, the two warriors destroy it:

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ond hí hyne þá bégen ábrotan haefdon,
sib-aeðlingas. Swylc sceolde secg wesan,
þegn aet ðearfe!-- (2707-2709a)

But Wiglaf's king is dying, and the loyal warrior,

wine-dryhten his þegn ungemete till,
waetera gelafede. (2721b-2728)

Beowulf asks to see some of the treasures which had been guarded by the dragon. Wiglaf complies with the wish of his lord; his last act, while his chief lives, is to carry out some valuable jewelry for Beowulf to inspect. As the king dies, Wiglaf experiences deep sorrow.

Meanwhile, the remainder of Beowulf's once-proud band have emerged from the woods where they had sought safety but had found shame:

paet ðá hild-latan Naes ðá lang tó ðon,
tydre treow-logan, holt ofgefán,
ða ne dorston aer tyne aetȝomne,
on hyra man-dryhtnes dareðum lacan
aç hy scamiende scyldas baeren,
guð-gewaedu, þáer se gomela laeg;
wlitan on Wilaf. (2845b-2852a)

Wiglaf offers no sympathy to the other Geats:

þá waes aet þám geongan grim andswaru
 éð-begete þam ðe aer his elne forleas. (2860-2861)

The warrior, saddened by the loss of his beloved chief, "seah on unléofe" (2863b), and chides the others for their failure to repay their lord for the generous munificence with which he had bestowed gifts upon them in the past. He also reminds them that, although he has had little experience in battle and has little martial skill, he has given to Beowulf what aid he could:

"Ic him líf-wraðe lýtle meahte
 "aetgifan aet guðe, , ond ongan swá þeah
 "ofer min gemet máege helpan." (2877-2879)

He warns those who had failed their king that they will, in the future, suffer for their cowardice:

"Nú sceal sinc-þego, ond swyrd-gifu,
 "eall eðel-wyn eowrum cynne,
 "lyfen alicgean; lond-rihtes móti
 "þaere maeg-burge nonna aeghwylc
 "idel hweorfan, syððan aeðelingas
 "feorrān gefricgean fleam eowerne,
 "dom-leasan daed. Dēað bið sella
 "eorla gehwylcum þonne edwit-lif!" (2884-2891)

A life of disgrace awaits those who have failed to live up to the code. But no one will be able to speak out against Wiglaf; as a true warrior, he continues to serve his lord, even after the death of the leader:

Wigláf siteð
 ofer Biowulfe, byre Wihestanes,
 eorl ofer oðrum. (2906b-2908a)

CHAPTER III

THE KINGS

The preeminent virtues of a "gód cyning" were the martial virtues: leadership in battle, bravery in battle, obligation to uphold the honor of family and friends, and munificent generosity toward the thanes who served him in war and peace. During periods of war, the king or chief was expected to lead his comitatus into battle, to "do more by example than by authority. If they are energetic, if they are conspicuous, if they fight in the front, they lead because they are admired. . . . When they go into battle, it is a disgrace for the chief to be surpassed in valour."¹ The Teutonic leader must also fulfill the obligation of vengeance by avenging any injury to any member of his family, tribe, or followers, or to himself. Furthermore, in time of peace, the chief must practice, to his followers, that "generosity which the comitatus ideal required of a noble lord and leader."²

The poem begins with an account of the Danish kings

¹Tacitus, pp. 712-713.

²Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic, tr. into alliterative verse with a critical introd. by Charles W. Kennedy (New York, 1940), p. xxvi.

who preceded Hrothgar. Their fame rested chiefly on great deeds in war and conquest and on "ellen fremedon" (3b).

Scyld, the ancestor of the Danes and the personage whom his descendants honored by taking the name, "Scyldings," had been sent over the seas as a foundling to the Danes in time of need. As a leader of his people, he conquered surrounding tribes who came to fear his power and to obey him and pay him tribute. He "egsode Eorl[e]" (6a),³

oðþaet him áeghwylc, þára ymb-sittendra
ofer hron-rade hýran scolde. (9-10)

Although he was the terror of his enemies and the subjector of other peoples, to his own followers he was "léofne þéoden" (34b), and to his warriors he was "béaga bryttan" (35a), distributor of rings. In admiration of the martial qualities of the ancestor of the Danes, the Beowulf poet offers, in accolade, what recurs almost as a refrain throughout the poem:

þaet waes góð cyning!⁴

³Wrenn suggests that Eorle should be translated "as the Eruli (the same tribe as later Latin writers spell Heruli). The original home of the Eruli was in the Danish islands; they were notorious for ferocity and cruelty from the middle of the third to that of the fifth century; and whoever first consolidated the Danish kingdom must in fact have subdued the Eruli. They were for long the terror of Europe and to have 'terrified' them would have been a most notable feat." P. 184.

⁴The phrase is used to refer to Scyld (11b) and to Hrothgar (863b) and Beowulf (2390b).

Scyld's son, Beowulf the Dane, also wins renown:

Béowulf waes bréme --bláed wide sprang--
Scyldes eafera Scede-landum in. (18-19)

Even as "geong guma," the prince learns that only a generous leader can expect unfaltering loyalty from his followers. He freely dispenses gifts to his thanes and gains the goodwill of his warriors: "góde gewyrcean / fromum feoh-giftum" (20b-21a). By his liberal bestowal of treasures he binds to him a faithful comitatus that, "þonne wíg cume," remembers his munificent generosity and serves him well in battle. After the death of his father, Beowulf the Dane is able, therefore, to rule from a position of strength. He is

léof léod-cyning, longe þráge
folcum gefraege. (54-55a)

This generosity is a preeminent trait in a successful Germanic leader and is a dominant characteristic of Hrothgar. Later in the poem, generosity is the subject of a sermon preached by Hrothgar for the benefit of Beowulf.⁵

The fame of the Scyldings continues to grow during the reigns of the descendants of Beowulf the Dane. Eventually, Healfdene comes to the throne. The "héah Healfdene" he is called; even as he advances in age, he is known for unrestrained zest for war: "gamol ond gúð-réouw" (58a).

⁵Cf. p. 70.

Of the four children of Healfdene, Hrothgar proves the most famous. To him

Their obedience is due, however, not to fear but to recognition of his ability as a leader and to gratitude for his generosity.

As a warrior, Hrothgar is renowned: "gúð-róf (608a) and "heáðo-rófe" (864a). As a leader, both in war and in peace, he is equally famed: "wígendra hléo (429b), "sige-róf kyning" (619b), "wíg-fruma" (6442), "eorla drihten" (1050a), "harum hilde-frumen" (1678a), and as "eodur Scyldinga" (663a), protector of the Scyldings. But it is his munificence that brings him his greatest renown. Hrothgar, like Scyld, is described as "béaga bryttan" (352a), as "since's brytta" (607b), as the guardian of treasures--"beah-horda weard" (912b) and "nord-weard haeleþa" (1047a). Hrothgar refers to himself as Aeschere's "sinc-gyfan" (1342a). Wealhtheow, while dispensing gifts of her own to Beowulf, echoes the poet's kennings by calling her husband "since's brytta" (1170a) and also "gold-wine gumena" (1171a).

The fame of Hrothgar as a giver of rings becomes so great that, to build a council chamber and mead hall which

will match his dispensations of gifts, he erects Heorot, "béah-sele beorhta" (ll77a), which becomes renowned not only for its great size and it magnificence but also for the generosity with which gifts are dispensed within its high walls. It is in Heorot that Hrothgar gives to Beowulf as a reward for his victory over Grendel armor and steeds and the saddle which Hrothgar himself had rode upon. It is there that, during the feasting which celebrated Beowulf's initial victory, Hrothgar's queen, Wealhtheow reminds her husband to be "geofena gemyndig." And it is there that, after Grendel's dam has killed Aeschere and has retrieved the bloody claw of her son, Hrothgar promises further rewards in return for Beowulf's continued aid:

"Ic pé þá fáehðe
"eald-gestreonum
"wundini golde,
"sec gif þú dyrre:
feo leanige,
swa ic aer dyde,
syf þu on weg cymest." (l379b-l382)

The obligation of generosity of the lord to his thanes is reaffirmed in Hrothgar's discourse after Beowulf's victory over Grendel's dam. Using the tale of the miserly Heremod as a parable, Hrothgar dwells upon Heremod's tragic flaw--his lack of generosity: "'nallas béagas geaf / Denum aeftre dōme'" (l719b-l720a). Then Hrothgar offers the following advice to Beowulf: "'þu pé láer be þon / gum-cyste ongit'". (l723b-l724a).

Hrothgar reminds Beowulf that God owns all and gives

to his thanes their rewards and that one should be on guard so that his "sawele hyrd" does not allow covetousness to mar generosity. The warning to Beowulf is developed in striking battle imagery: the guardian of the soul is asleep on duty and is attacked by a killer who sends an arrow into the breast of the warden. Hrothgar tells Beowulf that the individual's great strength and renown can, by some sort of violence, be suddenly overcome:

"... . ádl oððe ecg
"oððe fýres feng oððe flôdes wylm
"oððe gripe meces oððe gares flift
"oððe atol yldo oððe eagna bearhtm." (1763-1766)

Unlike most of the other Germanic kings, including Beowulf, who figure in the epic, Hrothgar is not wholly guided in his policies as ruler by the duty of vengeance. There is possibly some Christian and clerical influence here. Still, to negotiate or to fight was a choice given to a leader. Either decision was a martial one, for it could determine whether the relation between two tribes or nations would be one of war or peace.

Yet clearly Hrothgar would rather negotiate than engage in battle. He is successful when Ecgtheow, the

⁶The Church and State "support[ed] the practice of settling feuds by payment of wergilds" but were not too successful." Whitelock, p. 13.

father of Beowulf, has killed Heafolafe and flees from the vengeance of the Wilfings to the protection of Hrothgar. The Danish king is able to settle the quarrel by payment of wergild. Hrothgar also succeeds in bringing to a halt, although only temporarily, the fighting between the Heathobards and the Danes, a blood-feud which has already resulted in the killing of Healfdene by Froda, king of the Heathobards, and the slaying of Froda by the vengeful Danes. The fighting, at the time of Beowulf's visit to Heorot, has ceased; and the marriage of Freawaru (Hrothgar's daughter) and Ingeld (Froda's son and current king of the Heathobards) is soon to be celebrated, in hopes of ending the conflict:

"Sío geháten is
gladum suna Fródan;
wine Scylding
paet raed talad
wael-fáehða dael,
(2024b-2029a)

Hygelac is another king who exemplifies the martial virtues of a Germanic leader. He is Beowulf's lord and Beowulf is proud to be his thane. The Geat king is renowned for his actions in war and at his court.

The poet deals with two major military expeditions of Hygelac--one successful, the other disastrous. His action

⁷ Cf. pp. 39-40.

at the battle of Ravenswood is the deciding factor in the slaying of the Swedish king, Ongentheow, and the Geat victory over the Swedes.⁸ Later, he is the leader of the Geat naval force which raids the Frisian coast. The raiders are--after an initial success--outnumbered by the Hetware who defeat the invading force: Hygelac is killed; only Beowulf survives.⁹

These actions are recounted only in retrospect; but, even though Hygelac's leadership in the raid against the Franks and Frisians is apparently considered rash and reckless in view of its immediate and later consequences, memories of the renowned and beloved Hygelac spur on Beowulf to face the terrors of combat with the dragon. The recollection of the Geat-Swedish feud also serves to show cause why, after the death of Beowulf, the Swedes can be expected to resume hostilities.

Hygelac is also a generous king. When Beowulf returns from the court of Hrothgar, Hygelac is reported "hringas dælan" (1970a); and, when Beowulf turns over to his lord the treasures which were given to him by the Danes, Hygelac rewards Beowulf with "Hréðles láfe, / golde gegyrede" (2191b-2192a);

⁸Cf. pp. 148-150.

⁹Cf. pp. 76-77.

ond him gesealde seofan þúsendo,
bold ond brego-stól. (2195-2196a)

Hygelac's munificence is remembered by the aged Beowulf who recalls the treasures which his lord had given him. Beowulf is proud that he has been able to match Hygelac's generosity with devoted service:

Beowulf then vows to continue his martial behavior as he has done in the past, to fight as long as he lives:

"ond swá tó aldre sceall
"saecca fremman benden þis swéord þolað,
"þaet mec aer ond síð oft gelaeste." (2498b-2500)

Hygelac's generosity is described during the retelling, by Wiglaf's messenger to the Geat people, of the battle of Ravenswood. After the Geat victory, Hygelac rewards with treasures and lauds the warrior brothers-- Wulf, who had engaged Ongentheow in battle, and Eofor, who had given the mortal blow to the Swedish king:

"mid ofer-máðum;
"sealde hiora gehwaeðrum hund þusenda
"landes ond locenra beaga." (2993b-2995a)

As further reward and honor to Eofor, Hygelac gives in marriage to the slayer of Ongentheow his "ágan dohtor" (2998b).

In Beowulf, the Teutonic concept of the ideal leader is exemplified even in God the Father, who is depicted as a true Germanic chieftain. God is a divinity especially generous to his chosen thanes (or apostles) but who dispenses, to all whom he favors, gifts of wisdom, land, and bravery:

"hú mihtig God "Wundor is tó secganne,
 "purh sidne sefan manna cynne
 "eard ond eorlscipe." snyttru bryttað, (1724b-1727a)

God has given to Beowulf wisdom and eloquence in discourse. Hrothgar commends the Geat warrior for his prudent use of these gifts from the Almighty:

"þé þá word-cwydas wigtig Drihten
 "on sefan sende; ne hyrde ic snotorlícior
 "on swa geongum feore guman þingian.
 "Þu eart maegenes strang ond on mode fród,
 "wis word-cwida." (1841-1845a)

God had endowed Beowulf with physical strength:

gim-faeste gife, ðe him God sealde. (1271)

These are "glorious gifts" but "they are to be used . . . not proudly; or vainly to be hoarded."¹⁰ If they are

¹⁰Arthur E. Dubois, "The Unity of Beowulf," PMLA, XLIX (1934), 395.

used improperly, then man will suffer God's ire and punishment.

God is swift to punish. The Germanic concept of Him is that of the Old Testament: "'Vengeance am I,' saith the Lord." Witness the poet's account of the curse upon the race of Cain.

Grendel is described as the progeny of Cain whose descendants with their progenitor pay the price of the vengeance which God has exacted for the slaying of Abel. As punishment for his crime, Cain has been banished from men:

in Caines cynne-- bone cwealm gewraec
ece Drihten, paes þe hé Abel slog. (107-108)

Among his descendants are the giants, "þá wið Gode wunnon . . . [until] hé him ðaes léan forgeald" (113-114).

Grendel "Godes yrre baer" (711b) and it is decreed that

Ne waes þaet wyrd þá gén,
þaet hé má móste manna cynnes
ðicgean ofer þa niht. (734-736)

The monster has to pay for his ancestors' crimes against God.

God plays a part in Beowulf's victory over Grendel's dam; for, just as the Geat warrior's sword, Hunlafing, fails to serve him properly,

hálig God
 gewéold wíg-sigor, wítig Drihten
 rodera Raedend, hit on ryht gescéd
 yðelice, syþðan he eft astod. (1553-1556)

The hilt of the ancient sword which Beowulf miraculously finds and uses to defeat Grendel's dam pictures the giants who have received their just reward for the insolence which they have shown toward God:

swylice gíantæs, þá wið Gode wunnon
 lange þrage; hé him ðaes léan forgeald. (113-114)

This belief in the obligation to seek vengeance for injury to a member of one's family has brought to one earlier Geat king a predicament, for he cannot gain vengeance without slaying his own son. The story of Hrethel, recalled to memory by Beowulf as he sits overlooking the lair of the dragon, tells of that king's sadness at not being able to avenge the death of his eldest son, Herebeald, who had been--perhaps accidentally, perhaps intentionally--killed by his brother, Haethcyn, in an archery contest or while hunting:

"Waes . . . yldestan ungedéfelice
 "maeges dáedum morþor-bed stre[ge]d,
 "syððan hyne Haedcyn of horn-bogan,
 "his fréa-wine fláne geswencte,
 "miste mercelses ond his mæg ofscét,
 "broðor óderne, blodigan gare.
 "Paet waes feoh-léas gefeoht, fyrenum gesyngad,
 "hreðre hyge-mede; sceolde hwaeðre swá þeah
 "aedeling unwrecen ealdres linnan." (2435-2443)

To Beowulf, Hrethel has suffered the same despair as does the man who sees his son hanging on the gallows, in punishment for a civil crime:

"Swá bið geomorlíc gomelum ȝeorne
"tó gebídanne, baet his byre ride
"giong on galgan."¹¹ (2444-2446a)

The story of Heremod¹² is used by Hrothgar as an exemplum in his sermon on generosity. Hrothgar counsels Beowulf to learn from Heremod's failures: "Dú þé laér be þon, / gum-cyste ongit!" (1722b-1723a)

In contrast to the career of Beowulf, Heremod's early life is full of great but unrealized promise:

"ðeah þe hirë mihtig God maegenes wynnum,
"eaferþum stepte, ofer ealle men
"forð gefremede." (1716-1718a)

Despite the gifts which God had given to Heremod, the

¹¹"Among the Anglo-Saxons no wergild, no vengeance, could be exacted for an executed criminal." Wrenn, pp. 220-221.

The poet "was perhaps thinking of Randvér, who was hanged by his father Ermanric" (p. 39), who "caused . . . [his wife, Svanhild] to be trodden to death by horses because he believed wrongly, that she had committed adultery with . . . Randver" (p. 31). G. Turville-Petre, The Heroic Age of Scandinavia. (London, 1951).

¹²Heremod was a "Danish king, after whose death in exile, it would seem, Scyld Scéfing was mysteriously sent to build up the Danish state; hence he occurs just above, Scyld, in O.E. genealogies. Heremod is the foil to Hroðgar and Beowulf in two moralizing passages (901 ff. and 1709 ff), but no other facts are known clearly." Wrenn, p. 314.

Danish leader abused his powers and lacked the munificence so necessary to a successful Teutonic king:

"bréost-hord blód-réow;
"Denum aeftre dome." "Hwaepere h̄jm on ferhþe gréow
 nallas beagas geaf
 (1718b-1720a)

The poet's use of kingly figures--as characters in both the action of the poem and the episodes recited in lays--concentrates on illustrating the martial virtues (or the lack of them). From the beginning of Beowulf, at which point "the emphasis [is] upon the power and magnificence of the dynasty of the Scyldings,"¹³ to the final scene, the funeral of Beowulf, ruler of the Geats, the kings are major figures. In their relationship to their thanes, e.g., Hygelac-Beowulf or Beowulf-Wiglaf, they would appeal to the audience as examples of the "gúð-cyning" and "beág-gyfa," who would "do more by example than authority."¹⁴

¹³Lawrence, p. 72.

¹⁴Tacitus, p. 712.

CHAPTER IV

BEOWULF AS WARRIOR

The primary interest in a heroic poem is, of course, in the figure and in the deeds of the protagonist; it is his character which inevitably sets the tone of the poem. To hold the attention of an audience like that for which Beowulf was intended, the hero must epitomize those qualities which were most admired by the Teutonic fighting man. Klaeber noted, "There is hardly a trait assigned to him [Beowulf] that is not more or less typical"¹ of the Germanic warrior; yet the epic hero also has to be "the uncommon soldier who possesses multitudinous military virtues."²

Beowulf is cast in such a role--typical in quality, but untypical in degree; he "personified the virtues as they were understood at the time; physical and moral courage, loyalty to rulers and equal loyalty to followers, generosity of spirit and lavishness with possession, scorn of what is mean."³ The preoccupation of the Beowulf poet with the

¹P. xxvii.

²Charles Thomas Bruce, "Major Literary Concepts of the Soldier as Illustrated in Certain American War Novels" (unpubl. diss., Texas Technological College, 1960), p. 10. Cf. DA XXI (July, 1960), 614-615.

³Gerould, p. 8.

martial character of his hero results in the pervasive martial tone of the work. Beowulf always moves in settings in which the warrior quality is spotlighted.

Desire for fame, pride in family and in reputation, fulfillment of any obligation to kin or leader, joy in physical combat--these motivate the actions of the Teutonic warrior. Beowulf is no exception. It is his performance, however, that is exceptional.

The desire for recognition and renown is a prime incentive for Beowulf. "It is the heroic ideal of the warrior to be strong and courageous, to conquer all opponents, and so to win fame with posterity. . . . This thirst for glorious remembrance . . . is innate in man."⁴ Thus, to the epic protagonist "honor and fame were the pivots of man's life--of the hero's life first and foremost."⁵ Lawrence suggests that Beowulf not only wants to repay Hrothgar for his aid given to Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, but also is "moved to help Hrothgar by desire for glory in troll-killing."⁶

Beowulf's aspirations for fame can be appealed to to send him into action. When he relates to Hygelac the adventures which he had experienced in the land of the Danes,

⁴Vries, p. 180.

⁵Vries, p. 186.

⁶P. 47.

he recounts how Hrothgar has prompted him to seek out and destroy Grendel's dam:

"þá sé ðeoden̄ mec,
"healsode hreoh-mód þaet ic ḡn holma-gepring
"eorlscipe efnde, ealdre geneðde,
"maerðo fremede." (2131-2134a)

The desire for renown in the present and in the future is derived partially from Beowulf's consciousness of the past. He is proud of his forebears and of his kin, as well as of his growing reputation as a warrior. When he and his men arrive at the Danish coast and are accosted by the coast warden, the Geat warrior immediately declares his pedigree:

"waes min faeder folcum gecýped,
"aeþele ord-fruma Ecgþeow haten." (262-263)

When he is brought into the presence of Hrothgar, Beowulf describes his relationship to the ruling house of the Geats: "Ic eom Higeláces / máeg ond mago-þegn" (407b-408a).

Beowulf is also proud of his developing renown. He has "that arrogant self-confidence which is the special trait of the supremely noble and courageous fighter."⁷ He knows what is his immediate purpose and he is not hesitant in describing it. To the coast warden of the Danish shores, Beowulf discloses the motive which initiated his voyage to

⁷Goldsmit, p. 73.

the land of the Danes:

"þurh rúmne sefan, "Ig þaes Hróðgár maeg
 "hu hē frod ond góð raed gelaeran,
 feond oferswýðeþ. (277b-279)

He also tells Hrothgar of his purpose for journeying to the Danish court: he wants to meet in combat the monster Grendel. According to Beowulf, his own people have thought so highly of his prowess that they have suggested that he travel to the aid of Hrothgar:

"þá mé þaet gelaérdon léode mine
 "þa selestan, snotere ceorlas,
 "beoden Hróðgár, þaet ic þe sohte,
 "forþan hie maegenes craeft mine cúpon." (415-418)

Beowulf then tells Hrothgar of his many youthful feats: "haebbe of máerða fela / ongunnen on geogope" (408b-409a). He describes his adventures in combat against such foes as "eotena," "niceras," and "Wedera." Now he wants to battle Grendel. Since the monster from the fen attacked alone and used no weapons, Beowulf desires to fight him without aid from others and without weapons:

"Haebbe ic éac géahsod , þaet sé áegláeca
 "for his won-hydum wáepna ne recceð.
 "Ic þaet þonne forhicge, . . .
 "þaet ic sweord þere óþe sidne sçyld,
 "gæolo-rand to guþe; ac ic mid grape sceal
 "fon wið feonde ond ymb feorh sacan,
 "lað wið labum." (433-440a)

In answer to Beowulf's request, Hrothgar warns him

of past attempts by others to rid the area of the depredations of Grendel:

"Ful oft gebéotedon béore druncne
 "ofer ealo-waege óret-mecgas,
 "þaet hie in beor-sele bidan woldon
 "Grendles guþe mid gryrum ecga.
 "Ðonne waes þeos medo-heal on morgen-tid,
 "driht-sele dreor-fah, þonne daeg líxte,
 "eal benc-þelu blode bestymed,
 "heall heoru-dréore; ahte ic holdra þý láes
 "deorre dugude, þe þá deað fornam." (480-488)

Beowulf is undaunted by Hrothgar's account of the former champions who, over cups of mead, had vowed to vanquish Grendel but who, the following morning, had disappeared and had left behind only bloody traces of their former presence. Instead, Beowulf joins in the warriors' pleasures: drink and song.

The Unferth episode--Unferth's taunt and Beowulf's reply--offers another opportunity for Beowulf to recount further his youthful exploits. He denies that his swimming contest with Breca has been, as Unferth suggests, "for dol-gilpe" (509a). Beowulf, proud of his strength, offers his view of the adventure:

"Sóð ic talige
 "þaet ic mere-strengo maran ahte,
 "earfeþo on yþum, Ðonne aenig óber man." (532b-534)

He goes on to recount his "trial of endurance,"⁸ the

⁸Lawrence, p. 155.

completion of which was reached only after battles with sea-monsters and nicors. Despite the obstacles which he encounters, Beowulf knows that Fate favors the brave man:

"Wyrd oft nereð
"unfáegne eorl, þonne his ellen déah." (572b-573)

Beowulf then scornfully reminds Unferth that he has failed as a member of the comitatus of Hrothgar: that he has allowed the attacks of Grendel on the people of his lord to go unavenged:

"Secge ic þe to sóðe, sunu Ecglafes,
"paet naefre Grendel swá fela gryra gefremede
"atol aeglaeca ealdre þinum,
"hyndō on Heorote, gif þin hige wáere,
"sefa swa searo-grim, swa þu self talast." (590-594)

Beowulf chides the other warriors for allowing the ravages of Grendel to go unavenged, but none of these other Danes appear angered by the censure from one so newly-arrived in their midst, one also so youthful and unproven. Instead, Hrothgar rejoices at Beowulf's words--others have already tried their strength against that of Grendel and have failed; and just a moment before, the Danish leader has recalled their failures. Nor do the other warriors present seem to be offended by Beowulf's speech which has begun as an indictment of Unferth but ends as an accusation directed against the entire retinue of Hrothgar:

Ðáer wæs hæleþa hleator hyln swynsode,
word waeron synsume. (611-612a)

Perhaps the Danish warriors are expressing their joy that, as long as Beowulf is undertaking their task of fighting a superhuman enemy of their lord, their responsibility has, at least temporarily, ceased to exist.

Beowulf is not alone in his estimation of his own qualities. Others are able to discern in him signs of martial greatness. Both the poet and the other characters in the poem constantly refer to the virtues of the hero.

Throughout the poem, kennings and other descriptive passages are used by the poet to keep foremost in the minds of the audience the warrior character of Beowulf. The poet refers to his hero in varying terms: "ellen-róf" (340a), "heard under helme" (342a), "heapo-róf" (381a), "wael-réow wiga" (629a), "súþe gefýsed" (630b), "wid cùðne man" (1489b), "hilde rince" (1495a, 1576a), "répe cempa" (1585a), "dáed-céne mon" (1645a), "máera cempa" (1761a), "rófne rand-wigan" (1793a), and "haele hilde-déor (1816a).

The poet also comments on Beowulf's unusual physical powers. When the Geat warrior is introduced into the poem, the poet describes him as "Higeláces þegn,"

sé wæs mon-cynnes maegenes strengest
on þaem daege þysses lifes
aþeale ond eacen. (196-198a)

This estimate is repeated in almost identical lines (789-790) when Beowulf defeats Grendel. During the lengthy description of that combat, the physical strength of Beowulf is constantly emphasized. At one point the poet predicts that, against the power of Beowulf, that of Grendel "láesten nolde" (812b).

The poet continues to emphasize the special martial character of Beowulf by contrasting him with Unferth. During the episode that deals with Beowulf's fight with Grendel's dam, the poet refers to Unferth as one who

under ýða gewin aldre genéþan,
drihtscype dreogan; þær he dome forléas,
ellen maerðum. (1468b-1471a)

"Ne waes þáem óðrum swá" (147lb), the poet writes of Beowulf. Some verses later, the poet sums up the martial traits of Beowulf and describes him as "ðeġn betstan" (187lb).

Characters in the poem also see these same qualities in Beowulf. Hrothgar's beach warden comments as he challenges Beowulf and his fellow Geats:

"Naefre ic māran geseah
þonne is eower sum,
nis þaet seld-guma
naefne him his wlite léoge,
(247b-251a)

Hrothgar's herald, Wulfgar, also recognizes Beowulf and his men as "'óret mecgas'" (363b); he thus describes the visitors to his leader:

"hý on wíg-getáwum wyrðe þincaeð
"eorla geahtlan; huru sé aldor déah." (368-369)

In answer to the announcement of the arrival of visitors, Hrothgar says that he has heard of Beowulf and of the Geat warrior's great strength:

"manna mægen-craeft
"heapo-rof haebba." "þaet hé þrítiges
on his mund-gripe
(379b-381a)

Hrothgar experiences hope for some relief from the attacks by Grendel, for he tells Wulfgar that he will offer treasures to Beowulf in return for his aid:

"for his mód-þraece" "Ic þáem góðan sceal
madmas beodan." (384b-385)

There comes a time, however, when the promises and the laudatory speeches have to end; then Beowulf and the others have to distinguish between speech and action. Earlier, when the Danish coast-warden greets Beowulf, the Dane answers Beowulf's bold statement that he had come to rid Heorot of Grendel:

Now, as night falls and Grendel roams the vicinity, Hrothgar, his hopes raised by the presence of Beowulf, leaves the Geat warrior in charge of the hall, the action an honor and a recognition of Beowulf's abilities:

"Náefre ic áenegum men áer ályfde
 "sibðan ic hond ond rönd hebban mihte,
 "ðryþ-aern Dena button þé nu, þá.
 "Hafa nu qnd geheald husa selest:
 "gemyne maerþo, maegen-ellen cyð,
 "waca wið wraþum! Ne bið þe wilna gád
 "gif þu baet ellen-weorc aldre gedigest." (655-659)

:

Beowulf again promises to meet Grendel unarmed, to fight "wig ofer wæpen" (685a).

This desire of Beowulf to meet superhuman foes and to fight them without the aid of weapons, plus his obvious joy in physical, hand-to-hand combat is evidence of the poet's delight in depicting scenes of combat. The same delight would have been felt by the warrior audience as the members shared, vicariously, the hero's emotions aroused in battle.

Beowulf experiences ecstasy as he fights like "a wild animal, not killing his enemies by sword or spear, but squeezing them in a fierce embrace--thus more like a bear than any other animal."⁹ During the battle with Grendel, "Béowulfe wearð / gúð-kreð gyfeþe" (818b-819a) and afterward

⁹M. G. Clarke, Sidelights on Teutonic History During the Migration Period, Being Studies from Beowulf and Other Old English Poems (Cambridge, Eng., 1911), p. 49.

Beowulf "niht-weorce gefeh" (827b). In the fight with Grendel's dam, he first attacks her with Unferth's sword, Hrunting; but when it fails him, he tries to use his strength to defeat the troll. This time, however, his powers fail to overcome his opponent. Fortunately he sees an ancient sword; as he grasps the weapon, he is "hréoh ond heoro-grim" (1564a), and "sweord waes swátig, secg weorc gefeh" (1569).

Years later, when he seeks out the dragon, he re-experiences his former youthful enthusiasm in combat. Before the worm's lair, the old warrior cries out in challenge:

Lét ðá of bréostum ðá hé gebolgen waes,
 Weder-Geata leod word ut faran,
 stearc-heort styrmde; stefn in becóm
 heoðo-torht hlynnan under hárne stan. (2550-2553)

The dragon appears; again Beowulf is "hréð aet hilde" (2575a). During the ensuing fight, Beowulf is mortally wounded; but, "impervious" to the pain of the wound which he suffers, he manages to use a short sword to stab at the dragon. The Geat warrior fights to the end:

þá gén sylf cyning,
 geweold his gewitte, waeill-seaxe gebráed
 biter ond beadu-scearp, þaet he on byrnan waeg;
 forwrát Wedra helm wyrm on middan. (2702-2706)

For all his joy in combat, Beowulf knows that he is not invincible. Hrothgar, in his story of Heremod and in

his parable of the "sawele hyrd" and subsequent advice that Beowulf always be aware of the necessity of generosity, warns the Geat of dangers which might overcome him.¹⁰ But Beowulf also recognizes the possibility of defeat and even of death. When, at the celebration following his arrival at Heorot, Wealhtheow offers him the drinking cup, Beowulf, "gúþe gefýsed," tells the queen,

"Ic þaet hogode þá ic on holm gestáh
 "þaet ic ánunga éowra leóda
 "willan geworhte, obðe on wael crunge,
 " Ic gefremman sceal
 "eorlíc ellen obðe ende-daeg,
 "on þisse meodu-healle minne gebídan." (632-638)

This outlook is expressed again by Beowulf when he declares to Hrothgar,

"Dryhtnes dóme "ðáer gelyfan sceal
 sé þe hine deað nimeð." (440b-441)

The Christian point of view of the Christian poet is intermingled with the pagan attitude of his ancestors: "Gáeð á wyrd swá hío sceal!" (455b).

Later when the Geat champion is ready to dive into the pool to seek out the lair of Grendel's dam, he asks Hrothgar to care for his thanes "gif mec hild nime" (1481b) and to send the treasures won by Beowulf to Hygelac.

¹⁰ Cf. pp. 49-50.

Beowulf also promises to use Hrunting to work fame "oþðe
mec dað nimeð" (1491b). Death almost calls for Beowulf
when, in the fight with the troll, the sword fails him and
he places his faith in his own strength:

strnge getruwode
mund-gripe maegenes. Swa sceal man do[a]n,
ponne h e aet guðe gegar benc
longsumne lof; n ymb his life cearað. (1533b-1536)

But Grendel's dam overthrows Beowulf and it appears "þaet
h on fylle wearð" (1544b). God, however, directs his gaze
to the ancient sword which Beowulf is able to obtain and
use to defeat the troll.¹¹

The first part of Beowulf--the stories of the hero's
adventures at the court of Hrothgar--stresses the fighting
ability and the courage which he displays against great
odds; the second part--the return of Beowulf to the court
of Hygelac, the accession of Beowulf to the leadership of
the Geats, and the fight with the dragon, with Beowulf's
subsequent death and funeral--continues this concentration
on the warrior's physical powers. The second part
continues also the development of the martial character of
the hero and adds, to his portrait as a warrior with
exceptional strength and bravery, a picture of one who lives
by the code of the comitatus. This trait of Beowulf is

¹¹Cf. pp. 113-116.

best shown in his relationship to Hygelac.

When the Danish warden challenges the landing of the Geats and asks for identification, Beowulf answers:

"Wé synt gum-cynnes Géata léode
"ond Higelaces heorð-geneatas;" (260-261)

When the Geat warrior introduces himself to Hrothgar, he repeats that he is not only kinsman of the great Geat leader but also "mago-pegn," a member of Hygelac's company of young warriors, "mago-rinc héap" (730a). The membership in this "geoguð" is evidently a source of some pride to Beowulf, as it would be to any young noble who desires to serve at the court of a famous war-king like Hygelac.

Beowulf's transition from the "geoguð, the younger and less experienced warriors . . . [to that group of] tried retainers, the duguð"¹² apparently comes on his return from the Danish venture. After he relates his adventures to Hygelac, Beowulf gives to his lord the treasures which the Danes have given him in gratitude for his ridding their land of Grendel and his dam. In return, Hygelac gives to Beowulf Hrethel's sword,

ond him gesealde , seofan þúsendo
bold ond brego-stól. (2195-2196a)

If this gift of land and of an area over which the

¹²Lawrence, p. 51.

young warrior would have jurisdiction is the initial such presentation, it would be extremely important to the youth. Dorothy Whitelock observes that according to an Anglo-Saxon legal treatise, "to have a helmet, a coat-of-mail, and a gold-plated sword is not enough to entitle a man to the status of a thegn. If he has not five hides of land, he remains a ceorl."¹³ If land were so important to the status of a freeman, it would be even more so to that of a warrior. The veterans were "given establishments of their own. . . . The young men . . . would be brought up at their lord's court until such time as he saw fit to reward them with land on which they could settle."¹⁴

The action of Beowulf in giving to Hygelac the rewards which Hrothgar and Wealhtheow have presented to him has been a minor source of controversy. One point of view, expressed most lucidly by Maurice B. McNamee, insists that Beowulf's action is proof of his magnanimity, that the magnanimous nature of Beowulf is what separates him from earlier, classical heroes and is direct evidence of his Christian nature, thus proving the dominant Christian element of the poem. McNamee declares that Beowulf "continues to show his unselfishness upon arriving home by immediately turning over all the rich treasures he had

¹³P. 92.

¹⁴Whitelock, p. 89.

received from Hrothgar to his lord Hygelac, and the jewels he received from Queen Wealhtheow to his own Queen Hygd."¹⁵

Other scholars view Beowulf's action in a different light; they have regarded it as one which was expected of a Teutonic warrior, Christian or pagan. Chadwick, in listing and describing the duties of a warrior to his lord, noted that one of those duties was to relinquish to his leader any treasures gained by the warrior's ventures.¹⁶ Tacitus reported that members of the Germanic comitatus would not have individual wealth but would have to "look to the liberality of their chief for their war-horse[s] and their blood-stained and victorious lance[s]."¹⁷

In more detail, R. A. Williams supports this concept as one that motivates the generosity of Beowulf. In his study of the Finnsburg lay, Williams attempts to reconstruct the situation and to establish the primary reason for the presence of Hnaef and his company of warriors at the court of Finn. He proposes that Hnaef has accepted Finn as his overlord and is in attendance at the court to transfer the treasure of the Half-Danes to the keeping of Finn:

¹⁵ Honor and the Epic Hero: A Study of the Shifting Concept of Magnanimity in Philosophy and Epic Poetry (New York), p. 102.

¹⁶ P. 159.

¹⁷ P. 716.

The relationship between the Teutonic "ringspender" and the followers of high rank who . . . enjoyed his protection and fought his battles for him was a singularly intimate one, based on an extreme conception of loyalty. The retainer was expected to devote his whole personality to the service of his protector (in Beowulf, hleo), and in those days the idea of personality included everything that belonged to a man, not only what we call nowadays personal qualities but also personal effects. It was a common thing for the retainer to present to his lord his most valued possessions. Of course such devotion could only be preserved in the rough and tumble of human affairs on a basis of mutuality. The chief was supposed to be generous and return with interest the attentions of his vassal.¹⁸

Loyalty was perhaps the prime quality expected of a member of the comitatus. It is surely the trait in which Beowulf as thane excels. It was the duty of the warrior to fight, without question, for his lord and, if need arose, to seek vengeance for the loss of his chief.

The obligation of avenging a slain lord or kinsman is emphasized by the Beowulf poet, especially in his hero, in whom this desire is always present. In reciting his earlier deeds to Hrothgar, Beowulf tells the Danish king of having "wraec Wedera nið" (423a); and when Hrothgar laments the loss of his beloved counselor, Aeschere, to the attack of Grendel's dam, Beowulf's consolation is presented in a passage which can serve as the key to the philosophy of the Geat warrior:

¹⁸ The Finn Episode in Beowulf: An Essay in Interpretation (Cambridge, Eng., 1924), pp. 116-117.

Béowulf mæpelode, bearñ Ecgþéowęs:
 "Ne sorga, snotor guma! Selre bið ȝeghwae
 "þaet he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne.
 "Ure aeghwyle sceal endę gebiden,
 "woroldę lifę; wyrce se þe mote
 "domes aer daeþe; þaet bið driht-guman
 "unlifgendum aeftir selest." (1383-1389)

Later, when Beowulf recounts to Hygelac the details of his combat with Grendel and the troll, he begins with a brief account of the distresses suffered by the Danes. Then he asserts, "'Ic þaet eall gewraec'" (2005b).

His adherence to the obligation of vengeance continues throughout his career as a warrior and throughout that as a warrior-king. His faithfulness to the code of the comitatus, however, goes beyond that which was expected of the usual Teutonic warrior.

Beowulf's last act as a member of the comitatus of Hygelac comes immediately following the death of his lord in the raid against the Franks and Frisians. Recalling the action, the poet writes that, before Beowulf uses his unusual swimming ability to escape the slayers of Hygelac,

Néalles Hetware hrémge þorfton
 feðe-wiges, þe him foran ongean
 linde baeron; lyt eft þecwom
 fram þam hild-frecan hames niosan. (2363-2366)

This Frankish venture is also remembered by Beowulf who recalls how he avenged his lord by killing Daeghrefn, "very

likely the slayer of Hygelac."¹⁹

"Dæghrefne wearð
"tō hand-bonan, Huga cempan.
"Nallas he ðā fraetwe Fres-gynning[e],
"breost-weorðunge bringan moste,
"ac in campe gecrong cumbles hyrde
"aþeling on elne; ne waes ecg bona,
"ban-hus gebraec." (2501b-2508a)

His duty to Hygelac is completed when the death of the Geat leader is avenged; yet Beowulf continues to be loyal to the memory of his chief. When the Geat warrior returns home, the only survivor of the fateful expedition, Hygelac's queen, Hygd, wants him to become king. But Beowulf's loyalty persists as he serves Hygelac's son, Heardred; Beowulf aids and counsels the young king until he is slain. Only after the death of Heardred, does Beowulf become king of the Geats.²⁰

¹⁹Klaeber, p. 215 n.

²⁰Cf. pp. 79-81.

CHAPTER V

BEOWULF AS KING

The picture which the poet offers of Beowulf, king of the Geats, is a martial one. He is the war-king, the protector of his people against both human and superhuman foes.

Beowulf's unusual capabilities for leadership are first recognized by Hrothgar. After the youthful Geat warrior has completed his mission in the land of the Danes and is ready to sail with his companions for home, he promises aid in the future, if it should ever be required by Hrothgar and his people. The king answers with complimentary words; never has he heard a man so young speak so wisely:

"ne hýrde ic snotorlícor
"on swá geongum feore guman þingian.
"þu eart maegenes strang ond on mode fród,
"wis word-cwida." (1842b-1845)

Hrothgar goes on to observe that, if war or disease should claim the lives of Hrethel's sons, the Geat nation can make no better choice for their leader than Beowulf:

"Wén ic þalige,
 "gif þaet gegangeð, þaet þe gar nimeð,
 "hild heoru-grimme Hreþles eaferan,
 "adl obðe íren ealdor ðinne

"folces hyrde, ond þú þín feorh hafast,
 "þaet þe Sae-Géatas selran naebben
 "to geceosenne cyning aenigne,
 "hord-weard haeleþa, gif þu healdan wylt
 "maga rice." (1845-1853a)

Hrothgar concludes by telling Beowulf that his deeds have united the Danes and Geats in friendship. As long as Hrothgar rules, there will be peace between the two nations.

The Geat warriors return to their ship and sail back to the court of their lord, Hygelac, to whom Beowulf recounts his adventures and exchanges gifts with Hygelac. At the end of the festivities, the poet turns to exposition and summarizes the next half century, or more, of the career of his hero:

Eft þaet geíode ufaran dōgrum
 hilde-hlaemnum syððan Hygelac laeg
 ond Hear [dr]ede hilde-meceas
 under bord-hreodan to bonan wurdon,
 ða hyne gesohtan on sige-beode
 hearde hild-frecan, Heado-Scilfingas
 nipa genægdan nefan Hererices:
 syððan Beowulfe brade rice
 on hand gehwearf. He geheold tela
 fiftig wintra-- waes þa frod cyning,
 eald eþel-weard-- (2200-2210a)

Before Beowulf assumes actual leadership of his people he is offered the throne. When he returns, the only survivor from the ill-fated expedition that has resulted in the death of Hygelac, the queen, Hygd, proposes that Beowulf become king:

... him Hygd gebéag hord on rice,
béagas ond brego-stol.¹ (2369-2370a)

Hygd believes that the boy Heardred is not capable of repulsing any possible future attacks by neighbors of the Geat nation:

þaet hé wið aelfylcum bearne ne truwode,
healdan cuðe, þá waes Hygelac dead. (2370b-2372)

Despite the added pleas of the Geat people for him to occupy the empty throne in place of the young son of Hygelac, Beowulf refuses:

Nó ðý áer fíreasceafte findan meahton
aet ðán aeðelinge áenige ðinga
þaet he Heardrede hlaford waere,
oððe þone cynedom ciosan wolde. (2373-2376)

Instead, Beowulf affectionately and honorably counsels the young successor to Hygelac and his people:

Hwaeðre hé hine on folce fréond-lárum héold,
estum mid are. (2377-2378a)

Lawrence suggests that "it is tempting to regard this [action of Beowulf] as a special invention of the Beowulf poet, emphasizing his hero's generosity in not interfering

¹"Such an offer would have meant her own hand as well. Possibly tradition told of her marriage to Beowulf, and she may be the widow who laments him (3150)." Lawrence, pp. 95-96.

with the legitimate succession, and contrasting him with the Danish and Swedish princes who caused great trouble by so doing."²

Beowulf supports Heardred when the Swedish king, Onela, invades the land of the Geats to punish them for harboring his rebellious nephews, Eanmund and Eadgils, who have fled into exile at the Geat court. In the fighting between the Geats and Swedes, Heardred and Eanmund are killed:

hē þáer for feorme feorh-wunde hléat,
sweordes swengum, sunu Hygelaces. (2385-2386)

Onela then withdraws his forces to Sweden. Beowulf becomes the ruler of the Geats:

lét ðone brego-stól syððan Heardréd laeg,
Geatum wealdan; Biowulf healdan,
 þaet waes góð cyning. (2388b-2390)

Some years later, Beowulf is able to avenge the death of Heardred. He joins forces with Eadgils and invades Sweden. There Onela is slain, and Eadgils takes the Swedish throne:

Sé ðaęs léod-hryres lén-gemunde
uferan dogrum, Eadgilse wearð,
feasceaftum fréond; folce gestépte
ofer sae side sunu Óhteres,
wigum ond waepnum; hē gewraec syððan
cealdum cear-síðum, cyning ealdre bineat.
 (2391-2396)

²P. 96.

The action of the rest of the poem is concerned mainly with the fighting ability and courage of the aged king. It is Beowulf the war-king who talks to his men before going to face the dragon and who vows to meet the dragon alone:

"Ic mid elne sceall
 "gold gegangan, oððe guð nimeð,
 "feorh-bealu frécne, frean eowerne!" (2535b-2537)

The poet constantly repeats kenning such as "góð gúð-cyning," "Wedra helm," and "Wedra þeoden." Wiglaf refers to his king as "folces hyrd" (2644b); Beowulf describes himself as "fród folces weard" (2513a).

The aged king is proud of his accomplishments, including his last, killing the dragon which had given him a mortal wound. He realizes that his wound is serious and that death is imminent:

wisse hé gearwe,
 þaet hé daeg-hwíla gedrogen haefde,
 eorðan wynne; ðá waes eall sceacan
 dogor-gerimes, déad ungemete neah:-- (2725b-2728)

Now, as Wiglaf attends him, Beowulf tells the younger warrior that, during his rule of fifty years, no king had dared attack the Geats:

"Ic ðás léode héold
 "fiftig wintra; naes se folc-cyning,
 "ymbe-sittendra aenig, ðara,
 "þe mec guð-winum gretan dorste,
 "egesan ðeo[wa]n." (2732b-2736a)

The king also rejoices that, even though the deed will cost him his life, he is able to win for his people such treasures as those in the dragon's hoard:

"Ic ðára fraetwa Fréan ealles ðanc,
"yuldur-cyninge, wordum secge,
"ecum Dryhtne, þe ic her on starie,
"baes ðe ic moste minum leodum
"aer swylt-daega swylce gestrynan.
"Nu ic on maðma hord mine beþohte
"frode feorh-lege, fremmað gena
"leoda þearfe!" (2794-2801a)

Beowulf then asks Wiglaf to have the Geats build, on a cliff overlooking the sea, a mound which will serve as a memorial to him and as a beacon to seafarers:

"Ne maeg ic hér leng wesan.
"Hátað heaðo-máere, hlaew gewyrcean
"beorhtne æfter bæle aet brimes nosan;
"sé scel to gemyndum mínum leodum
"heah hlífiān on Hrones-naesse,
"þæt hit sae-líðend syððan hatan
"Biowulfes biorh, ðá ðe brentingas,
"ofer floda genipu feorran drifað."³ (280lb-2808)

3 "Chambers and other editors cite the very remarkable and almost literal parallel between this account and Homer's picture of the funeral pile of Achilles and Patroklos at the end of the Odyssey (xxiv, 80ff.): 'Then around them [the bones of Achilles] did we, the holy host of Argive warriors, pile a great and glorious tomb, on a jutting headland above the broad Hellespont, that it might be seen afar from off the sea by men, both by those who now are, and by those who shall be hereafter.' . . . There are plenty of other parallels, both Classical and Germanic, but not quite so curiously alike in choice of words. It seems that both the ship-burial and the funeral barrow were developed in the early centuries of the Christian era; for Tacitus (Germania, xxvii) mentions only the simplest cremations for chiefs, with the arms, and sometimes the horse, of the deceased, with a turf-mound for the barrow. The essentials are there, from which the later practice developed; but as yet 'funerum nulla ambition.' " Wrenn, p. 224.

As king, Beowulf followed closely the advice offered to him by Hrothgar. Throughout the fifty years of his reign, the Geat king becomes known for his generosity in the dispensing of gifts.

This generosity is recalled by Wiglaf when, during the dragon fight, the young warrior attempts to shame his companions into joining him in going to the aid of their lord. The young follower of Beowulf reminds the others of the munificence of their king in his dispensing to them gifts of armor, weapons, and other treasures:

"in bior-sele, "ússum hláforde
þe us þas beagas geaf" (2634b-2635)

Later, after the dragon has been slain, Beowulf dispenses gifts for the last time. The dying king tells Wiglaf that, if he had had a son, he would now leave his weapons and armor to him:

"Nú ic suna mínum syllan wolde
 "guð-gewaedu, þáer me gifeðe swá
 "aenig yrfe-weard aefter wurde,
 "lice gelenge." (2729-2732a)

But the old king is childless, and his last act is to give his war-gear and neck-ring to Wiglaf:

Dyde him of healse hring gyldenne
þíoden þrist-hydig, begne gesealde,
geongum gar-wigan, gold-fahne helm,
beah ond byrnan, héth hyne brucan well."
(2809-2812)

Beowulf's final words are those with which he tells Wiglaf that all Beowulf's kin are gone and that he must now join them:

"þú eart ende-láf ússes cynnes,
 "Waegmundinga; ealle wyrd forspéon
 "mine magas tó metodsceafte,
 "eorlas on elnæ; ic him aeftter sceal."
 þaet waes þam gomejan ginggaesta word
 b्रeost-gehygdum, aer hé bael cure,
 hate heaðo-wylmas; him of hraeðre gewát
 sawol secean sóð-faestra dom. (2813-2820)

In the Germanic age, "the greatest of misfortunes [was] for a people to lack a sovereign."⁴ To lose such a ruler as Beowulf is catastrophic, for the security of the entire Geat nation has depended upon the strength and leadership of the king. Now, he is gone, and "the national organization . . . [is] liable to perish altogether."⁵ Beowulf had been able to secure the peace; but "'nú ys léodum wén / orleg-hwile'" (2910b-2911a).

The pattern of the heroic epic demands, of course, that the tale of Beowulf "be rounded out by noble death in battle,"⁶ for "traditions about a hero always end with the

⁴Lawrence, p. 50.

⁵Chadwick, p. 162.

⁶Charles W. Kennedy, The Earliest English Poetry (New York, 1943), p. 77.

death of the hero.⁷ Tradition also requires funeral ceremonies that will match in pomp the stature which the dead man has reached during his lifetime.

As Wiglaf gazes at his dead lord, he commands the Geats to prepare for Beowulf's funeral:

"Síe sío báer gearo,
 "áedre geaefned,
 "ond þonne geferian . . . fréan úserne,
 "leofne mannan, báer he longe sceal
 "on ðaes Waldendes waere gebolian." (3105b-3109)

While the king's bier is being constructed, Wiglaf leads a party into the cave of the dragon. They bring out the treasures and load them onto a wagon. The dragon is pushed into the sea. Then Beowulf is carried to his funeral site:

hár hilde-rinc æþelingc boren,
 to Hrones-naesse. (3135b-3136)

The Geats build a huge wooden bier, adorn it with weapons and armor, and lay their king amid the pile:

Him ðá gegiredan Géata léode
 ád on eorðan unwáclícne,
 helm[um] behongen, hilde-bordum,
 beorhtum byrnum, swa he bena waes.
 alegdon ða tomiddes maerne þéoden
 haled híofende, hláford léofne. (3137-3142)

The Geats set aflame the wooden bier; the smoke rises to signal the passing of Beowulf:

⁷Stjerna, p. 40.

When the fire has completed its work, the Geats construct a mound, the beacon that Beowulf had asked Wiglaf to have built as a memorial to him:

Geworhton, ðá Wędra léode
hleo on hoe, se waes heah ond brád,
weg-liðendum wide gesyne
ond betimbredon on tyn dagum
beadu-rofes becn. (3156-3159a)

Within the mound are placed treasures: "bég ond siglu, / eall swylce hyrsta" (3163b-3164a). Around the mound ride twelve warriors, bewailing the death of their war-chieftain and reciting lays memorializing his deeds:

pá ymbe hláew riodan hilde-déore,
aepelinga bearn, ealra twelfe,
woldon ceare cwiðan, kyning maénan,
word-gyd wrecan ond ymb wer sprecan
eahtodan eorlscipe ond his ellen-weorc.
(3169-3173)

So mourn the Geat people the death of their king.
To them he was the best of rulers and of all men:

Swá begnornodon Géata léode
hlafordes hryre, heorð-geneatas;
cwaedon þaet he wáere wyſuld-cyninga,
manna mildust ond mon-þwaerust,
leodum liðost ond lof-geornost. (3178-3182)

þaet waes góð cyning!

CHAPTER VI

BEOWULF AS ARCHETYPAL AND FOLK HERO

In any study of Beowulf as martial epic it is illuminating to consider the traits which the protagonist has in common with the archetypal hero. These traits are universal, exemplified to a greater or less degree in the heroes of all peoples and all ages. The particular environment within which a people lives determines, of course, the development of a hero and his specific traits and values. If the environments of different peoples are alike, the myths, folk-tales and legends concerning the heroes tend to be similar; if the environments differ, so will the heroes. It is from the inheritance, cultural and psychological, that certain types develop; from a martial context such as that in which the Teutonic tribal groups had lived rose inevitably the archetypal warrior hero of Beowulf or a Sigemund.

Maud Bodkin defined the term archetype as "a persistent or recurrent mode of apprehension"¹ and explained the "concept of racial experience" as consisting of two related ideas:

¹Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination (London, 1934), p. 233.

- (1) All those systems or tendencies which appear to be in the constitution of mind and brain . . . [and which are] due to racial experience in the past . . . [and]
- (2) . . . [That] which we may "enjoy" in responding to that social inheritance" of meanings stored in language which also comes to us from our ancestors, and wakens into activity the potentialities of our inherited nature.²

Maud Bodkin described the archetypal hero "as a projection of man's spirit and ideals"³ and as a "projection of man's underlying sense of his own active nature."⁴

Otto Rank pointed out that to find the sources of the hero, one must search for the "elemental ideas" or the "universals." He suggested, "How much more natural and probable it would be to seek the reason . . . [in] the general unanimity of these myths in the very general traits of the human psyche, rather than in primary community or migration."⁵

These traits constitute, of course, integral sources of the folk culture. In tales and myths and legends, they become recurring motifs which, in turn, are transmitted from generation to generation and from group to group. At any undetermined point in time, the traits,

²Pp. 24-25.

³P. 217.

⁴P. 241.

⁵The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and Other Writings, ed. Philip Freund (New York, 1959), p. 8.

unconsciously or consciously carried and transmitted, are attached to or exemplified by an individual within a group, and the stories told about him are "altered to make them conform to a ritual pattern."⁶

Some scholars, like Levy, have been cautious about establishing an absolute relationship between archetypal patterns or motifs and a specific historical person:

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the epics of search might⁷ become associated with the deeds of a historic king . . . or with a historic event. . . . Such epics were in no way based upon historic events, the core of the narrative being the mythic wanderings of a single individual on a self-chosen quest which involved a struggle against monsters and female enchantments, and always included some experience in the world of the dead.⁸

Other students have been somewhat more emphatic. Klaeber observed that "in the course of time . . . [stories in oral circulation] were attached to various persons."⁹ Vries describes the epic hero as "a sublimation of a man who actually lived at some time."¹⁰

This shifting of the hero from the historical world into one different from the actual has been noted by

⁶Lord Raglan, The Hero: A Study in Traditions, Myth, and Drama (London, 1936), p. 190.

⁷Italics mine.

⁸Levy, p. 85.

⁹P. xx.

¹⁰P. 208.

various students of the genre. Maud Bodkin declared that "the poet in presenting a supernatural hero deserts the actual, or intellectual, truth of life only to express more powerfully its reality for feeling."¹¹ Levy agrees, although with certain qualifications: "In the heroic . . . the characters lived their own, not their historic, lives, if such ever existed. . . . The hero creates his own world within the conditions of an actual community recognized and depicted by the poets."¹² Dixon also describes heroic poetry as a work which "invests its hero in the flowing robes of fable, [and] is eminently of a dream-like texture."¹³

These changes in the hero do not effect alterations in the archetypal patterns. They remain the same; the changes come in the immediacy of their application and especially in the historical figure: "One might call it a mutation when one considers the transition of a historical person into a hero. He is placed in an entirely different sphere--a sphere much higher and more important than that of the world from which he has emerged."¹⁴ This "mutation" has taken place in the development of any heroic figure, whether it be a twentieth-century Texan folk hero like

¹¹p. 239.

¹²p. 89.

¹³p. 24.

¹⁴Vries, p. 209.

Gregorio Cortez, a nineteenth-century American hero like Jesse James or Abraham Lincoln, a thirteenth-century prototype of an English hero like Robin Hood, or a sixth-century Geat hero like Beowulf.

There is close affinity between the archetypal and the folk hero. The conformity and attachment of certain archetypal patterns of behavior to the life pattern of a figure, real or fictional, may culminate in the development of a folk hero who then becomes a "popular symbol."¹⁵ The manner of development and transmission of tales about such a hero is a matter of often bitter debate between folklorists among whom "the terminology in use . . . has not yet been standardized."¹⁶ There seems to be agreement, however, on the existence of archetypes or urforms of folk tales. The urforms often become variants or "oikotypes . . . [that are] variants which belong to certain areas defined by geographical and cultural boundaries. Thus the variant of a certain tale in one such area may be fundamentally the same story as that in another area and yet differ greatly from it in episodes, composition, and style."¹⁷

¹⁵ Levette J. Davidson, A Guide to American Folklore (Denver, 1951), p. 26.

¹⁶ Emma Emily Kiefer, Albert Wesselski and Recent Folklore Theories, Indiana University Folklore Series, No. 3 (Bloomington, 1947), p. 5.

¹⁷ Kiefer, p. 26.

Albert Wesselski distinguishes between various types of folk tales. If "one [merely] tells of a happening, the telling is a story . . . [or] Geschichte. . . . The Novella . . . is an artistically prepared variant. . . . [The Sage is] a story of something that really exists or has existed and which is therefore credible."¹⁸ Marchen is a more disputable term. Wesselski claims that it is "a tale with realistic and wonder motifs, not believed and not meant to be believed; . . . the Finnish School [includes] the wonder tale, [and] such types as legends, hero-tale," etc.¹⁹

The sources from which the story and personages of Beowulf were drawn would not be Marchen according to Wesselski's definition, for, to the Beowulf audience, there were no unbelieved wonder elements in the poem.²⁰ The Finnish School's definition, however, is more inclusive, and would accept the sources of Beowulf as Marchen in which "the hero's own power and cleverness bring him

¹⁸Kiefer, pp. 38-40.

¹⁹Kiefer, p. 77.

²⁰The audience could not have distinguished between the historical and fabulous. "Perhaps the strongest evidence of all for belief in monsters is that it was found necessary to fit them into a Christian universe. If poet and audience had thought of Grendel and his kind as figments of the imagination, the poet would not have gone to such trouble to explain their descent." Whitelock, p. 75.

success; but he is aided by outside forces, usually supernatural or magical."²¹

The stories about Beowulf originated among the Scandinavian tribes, were passed along, probably as lays, within the Germanic cultural area, and finally carried by "tradition-bearers" to England. There the tales were particularlized to conform to the patterns of Anglo-Saxon belief and custom. The poet then took the stories and molded them, along with psychological patterns, into Beowulf, whose hero could, as can the archetypal hero, "symbolize to the reader [or the listener] the sense of his own existence."²²

During the transmission of the original tales, during which perhaps Geschichte slowly evolved into Sage, the figure of Beowulf was also evolving. His character traits and the tales of his adventures were being added to and/or altered until the facts surrounding the original individual had become obscure or indistinguishable from the fictional.

Although this blending of the fictional and the real is true of the character of the hero, there are folk

²¹Kiefer, p. 64.

²²Bodkin, p. 246. Cf. also Lawrence, pp. 20-23, 171 ff.; Klaeber, pp. xii-xxix; Chambers, pp. 62-68; and Wrenn in Chambers, pp. 546-548.

elements in Beowulf which are recognizable and easily distinguished from the historic. The earliest study of the folk influence was that of the parallels between Beowulf and the folk Bear's Son tale. The likenesses between the two, however, are "general rather than precise."²³

Klaeber believes that Beowulf "is entirely of Scandinavian origin. . . . His deeds are plainly of the folk-tale order adjusted in the epic to the level of Germanic hero-life."²⁴ But he does not think that any likenesses between extant Scandinavian tales and Beowulf proved any relationship other than "the use of the same or similar Scandinavian sources."²⁵ These sources could have been the lays which traveled from court to court and, which, in their transmission, "present distorted memories of history."²⁶

Lawrence also sees Beowulf evolving from the folk: "Beowulf constantly betrays his origin as a folk-tale hero. A certain unreality surrounds him as a king; he is more at ease as a slayer of monsters."²⁷ To Lawrence the

²³Kennedy, p. 70.

²⁴Pp. xxvi-xxvii.

²⁵P. xx.

²⁶G. Turville-Petre, The Heroic Life of Scandinavia (London, 1951), p. 38.

²⁷P. 87.

folk elements pervade the poem: "Many traces survive of the hero's primitive character, after he has been made over into a Germanic prince. Supernatural strength in wrestling and swimming, and supernatural ability to exist under-water, are still his own."²⁸

Levy views Beowulf as a Teutonic expression of the archetypal warrior engaged in a quest:

Beowulf follows the long tradition of the voyage to free a land of monsters which began with the Epic of Gilgamesh. It has something of the fulness of Odyssean narrative, showing its hero in youth undertaking the deliverance of a neighbouring king and his retinue from the deprivations of a giant, which includes his wonderous fight beneath the waters of a mere, with the giant's formless dam, a Northern Tiamat of chaos and darkness whom he splits in two. Beowulf's long life of prowess and magnanimous rule is rounded off with a later fight . . . [with] a fire-breathing dragon, to their mutual destruction, like the battles which terminated an age in the epics of warfare.²⁹

Dixon also sees Beowulf as an exemplar of universal patterns and offers martial parallels with classical Greek epic poems:

[Beowulf's career] was a life in many respects like that described by Homer. . . . Homer's heroes belong to an age of bronze, Beowulf to the age of iron. Homer had the courtlier air, though the Christian poet had also somewhat softened and humanized the spirit of the times. Homer speaks of Fate much as does Beowulf, he has the same delight in weapons and armour, the

²⁸P. 21. Cf. also Chambers, pp. 47-48.

²⁹P. 217.

arrow sings, the mail rattles with him as in the Anglo-Saxon epic, his heroes boast in the same strain; the dead Homeric hero, like Beowulf, is placed upon a funeral pyre and the ashes when the body is consumed placed in a like burial mound or barrow. For both a dirge is sung, and like ceremonies take place around the tomb.³⁰

The specific folk elements in Beowulf are heroic in quality. Lord Raglan writes that "the incidents [of a heroic life] fall definitely into three groups--those connected with the hero's birth, those connected with his accession to the throne, and those connected with his death. They thus correspond to the three principal rites de passage, that is to say, the rites at birth, at initiation, and at death."³¹

The parentage of Beowulf is clearly stated:

"wæs h̄is eald-faeder	Ecgþeo h̄áten
"gæm to ham forgeaf	Hrēpel Geata
"angan dohtor."	(373-375a)

But there are no unusual incidents attendant to the birth of Beowulf. The period of the hero's childhood and youth is an integral part of the poem and follows the pattern of a heroic career. That pattern can develop in one of two ways: "The hero reveals his strength, courage, or other particular features at a very early age. . . . On the

³⁰Pp. 51-52.

³¹P. 190.

other hand the child is often very slow in his development."³²

The latter course was that which Beowulf took in his youth.

Kemp Malone views this pattern as an attempt by the poet to illustrate a Christian awakening to an awareness of responsibility to one's fellowman:

The poet distinguished three stages in the development of young Beowulf. First, we have the hero as a boy, reckless enough, full of the spirit of adventure, unaware of the moral purpose inherent in God's gift of great strength; . . . he seemed to the Geats a youth of great promise. Secondly, the hero becomes aware of his obligations to God and refuses to use his strength for anything trivial; he awaits God's call to high service in a great cause. . . . He falls out of favor at home. . . . Thirdly, the hero hears of Grendel and realizes that his call has come. . . . His fellow-Geats . . . are delighted to see the mighty man come out of his lethargy.³³

Bonjour considers the story of Beowulf's youth "as a device,"³⁴ one used for "the glorification of the hero . . . [by] contrast[ing] his life] with Heremod's career. . . . Thus we have indeed a poor beginning followed by a prodigious ascent contrasted with a brilliant promise ending in a miserable downfall."³⁵ Although the poet uses the story as a "device," its source is a folk motif: "the

³²Vries, p. 214.

³³"Young Beowulf," JEGP, xxxvi (1937), 23.

³⁴Digressions, p. 25.

³⁵"Young Beowulf's Inglorious Period," Anglia, LXX (1951), 339-340. Hereafter cited as Bonjour, "Inglorious Period."

reference to Beowulf's inglorious period . . . is allusive.

. . . The audience of Beowulf was conversant with the motive of the sluggish youth, deeply rooted in folklore as it was.

. . . They certainly knew of the current motive with reference to other epic, or folklore, heroes.³⁶ The motif, is of course, on which recurs in many heroic tales: it is that of the male Cinderella.

Three heroes with whom the Beowulf audience was most certain to be familiar are Heremod, Offa the Dane, and Holger. The two latter figures are examples of the male Cinderella motif; in the Heremod story, the motif is reversed: Heremod does not rise from obscure beginnings to fame; his career is a glorious or at least a promising one during his youth but he fails to fulfill the inherent promise in such a noted beginning.³⁷

The motif is exemplified affirmatively in the tales of the two other Teutonic heroes. In his youth, Offa is "tall beyond the measure of his age, but dull and speechless."³⁸ Yet in defense of Denmark against the invading forces of Saxony, Offa shrugs off his lethargy and offers

³⁶Bonjour, "Inglorious Period," p. 344.

³⁷Cf. Bonjour, Digressions, p. 48.

³⁸Chambers, p. 32. A detailed synopsis of the Offa I story and his connection to Offa II, king of Mercia, is offered on pp. 31-40.

to settle the quarrel by fighting "not only the Saxon prince but any chosen champion the prince might bring with him."³⁹ Holgar the Dane never does overcome his youthful sluggishness. "To this day . . . [he] is remembered in Denmark . . . , pictured as a boy of twelve asleep through the ages, leaning over a table with a vast beard, too slothful to use his great strength until a time shall come when Denmark shall be in its utmost need; then he will arise and save his country."⁴⁰

The fights with Grendel and his dam are also obvious folklore elements which reappear in the adventures of heroic personages who "encounter the monsters and witches of unknown worlds."⁴¹ Even the incident in which Beowulf watched while one of his followers was killed by Grendel follows the archetypal pattern. Chambers noted that "Beowulf has to look on whilst his companion is killed. . . . In the folk-tale . . . the turn of the hero comes last, after all his companions have been put to shame."⁴² The incident has its parallel most noticeably in the Odyssey when Odysseus watches one of his companions

³⁹ Chambers, p. 32.

⁴⁰ Wrenn, p. 59.

⁴¹ Levy, p. 95.

⁴² P. 64.

being devoured by the Cyclops.

The dragon episode also has as its source the folk-tale. Vries notes, "One of the most common heroic deeds is the fight with a dragon."⁴³ Klaeber suggests that a parallel to Beowulf's encounter with the dragon exists in "Frotho's dragon fight in Saxo's History (ii 38f., 07) as indicating a probable Danish origin of the story."⁴⁴ This parallel, however, may be but one more example of the poet's intentional or unintentional use of the archetypal, for, if the story of the dragon fight was in fact transferred from Frotho to Beowulf, the poet was merely following a set pattern in using "transference of mythical motifs from the life of an older hero to a younger one (a universal process in myth formation)."⁴⁵

⁴³P. 215.

⁴⁴P. xxi.

⁴⁵Rank, p. 63.

CHAPTER VII

WEAPONS AND ARMOR

The Teutonic male's interest in weapons and armor began early in life. For a youth to receive arms meant investiture into the tribe. Tacitus thus described the ceremony by which the Germanic people recognized the attainment of adulthood:

In the presence of the council one of the chiefs, or the young man's father, or some kinsman, equips him with a shield and a spear. These arms are what the "toga" is with us, the first honour with which youth is invested. Up to this time he is regarded as a member of the household, afterwards as a member of the commonwealth.¹

The youth must have swelled with pride at this ceremony.

Now he was a man; the symbols of his manhood were his weapons and armor. Now he was equipped to engage in warfare, "the chief business of life."²

Fortunately for the modern scholar, much war-gear was buried with fallen warriors. "War has left us its remains in the archaeological record, in the form of innumerable weapons buried in the graves of warriors and peasants. It is fitting that when we deal with a heroic

¹P. 715.

²Lawrence, p. 47.

age [or with a martial epic] we should consider these . . .
 [accoutrements of war] at some length."³

The Beowulf poet's intense interest in the trappings and pageantry of martial life has been noted and analyzed by many scholars. Most commentators have been concerned, however, with the archaeological connotations of the poet's descriptions of the tools of war. Discoveries at the excavations at Uppsala and Sutton Hoo have shown how faithful the Beowulf poet is in his descriptions of weapons and armor. His use of kennings to equate war-gear and men and his extended depictions of warriors in battle array and of specific weapons and defensive equipment offer further proof of the poet's primary interest in the martial aspects of his society.

Man has always been attracted to the warrior and to the garb and tools which set him off from the other members of the community.

"'Arms and the man I sing,' said Virgil at the start of his Aeneid, and, indeed, men have often glorified the arms of a hero as well as the hero himself. . . . Men--poets, princes, and the warriors themselves-- felt the grandeur and power that clung to the arms that made a man a hero."⁴

³D. M. Wilson, The Anglo-Saxons, Peoples and Places, XVI (London, 1960), p. 104.

⁴Stephen V. Grancsay, Arms and Armor (New York, 1964), p. 7.

The Beowulf poet must have experienced this same attraction; surely, his work passes along the delight which he took in his pictures of armed warriors.

The Germanic warrior was equipped for both offense and defense. His weapons consisted of the sword, the spear, the bow, and the short sword, or seax. His defensive gear consisted of the helmet, the byrnies or corselet, and the shield. To carry him into battle, he used the ship, the war-horse, or his own feet. To sound the attack, he used the war-horn; to identify himself and his comitatus, he flew high the ensign. All these martial accoutrements are described in Beowulf.

Ships, used either for funereal journeys of dead heroes or for travel by warriors seeking adventures, were adorned and laden with the equipment of war. Weapons and armor of all sorts were included in honor of the dead or in anticipation of future use.

In Beowulf, the funeral ship of Scyld is adorned with a collection of war-gear which surpasses any of which the poet has ever heard:

Ne hýrde ic cýmlicor céol gegyrwan
hilde-wæpnum ond heado-waedum. (38-39)

Similar equipment is taken aboard the ship which is being prepared for the journey of Beowulf and his companions to the court of Hrothgar:

secgas báeron
on bearm nacan beorhte fraetwa,
guð-searo geatolic. (213b-215a)

When the Geat warriors complete their stay among the Danes and ready their ship for the return voyage home, the vessel is "hladen here-wáedum" (1897a); the ship is laden with even more war-gear than that which it had carried on the outward journey. Now the equipment includes not only their own weapons and armor but also the treasures which have been won by the deeds of Beowulf and the gifts which each of Beowulf's companions has received from Hrothgar.

Although Teutonic forces did not use cavalry, the kings and great nobles used the war-horse for transportation to and from battle. In times of peace, these steeds could also be used for competition in racing.⁵

In Beowulf, one of the prized rewards conferred upon Beowulf in honor of his victory over Grendel is Hrothgar's gift of eight steeds. One of these bears the very war-seat (i.e., saddle) which Hrothgar has used during the battles that have gained him wide-spread renown:

Héht **ðá** eorla hléo eahta méaras
faeted-hleore on flet téo[ha]n,
in under eoderaç; þara anum stód
sadol searwum fah since gewurþad.
þaet waes hilde-setl heah-cyninges,
donne sweorda gelac sunu Healfdenes

5cf. pp. 26-27.

efnan wolde; náefre on óre laeg
wid-cúþes wig ðonne walu féollon.
Ond þa Beowulfe bega gehwæþres
eodor Ingwiña onweald geteah,
wicga ond waepna; het hine wél brúcan. (1038-1041)

Hrothgar rides upon another of his horses on his journey with Beowulf to the edge of the pool at the bottom of which is the dwelling of Grendel's dam:

þá waes Hróðgáre hors gebaeted,
wicg wunden-feax; wisa fengel
geatolic gende; gum-féþa stop
lind-haebbendra. (1399-1402a)

Later, when the Geat hero returns to his homeland,
he gives to Hygelac four of the steeds which he has re-
ceived from Hrothgar:

Hýrde ic, þaet þám fraetwum feower mearas,
lungre, gelice lást weardode,
aëppel-fealywe; he him est geteah
maera ond maðma. (2163-2166a)

The Teutonic warriors were heavily equipped for war. ✓
Their readiness for combat is stressed by the Beowulf poet,
especially in his descriptions of Beowulf and his companions who journey to rid Heorot of the ravages of Grendel.
The Geat warriors are always depicted as bearing arms and wearing armor.

When the Geats reach the Danish shore, they step, fully armed, onto land:

The Geat warriors are not sure of the manner of their reception by the inhabitants of the land, and their initial advance is taken "fyrd-searu fúslicu" (231b).

They are sighted immediately by the Danish coast
watchers, the leader of whom challenges the landing party
and asks the strangers to identify themselves:

"Hwaet syndon gé searo-haebbendra
"byrnum werede?" (237-238a)

Satisfied by Beowulf's identification of his party, the Danish coast warden offers to guide the Geats on to Heorot: "ic éow wísige" (292b). The Dane assigns his warriors the task of guarding the newly arrived vessel; then he leads the Geats inland. As the party marches on its path, gold-adorned boar-helmets gleam in the sun:

The guide directs Beowulf and his men within sight of the buildings that make up the seat of Hrothgar's court. At this point, the Danish officer leaves the Geats and returns to his post on the beach.

The Geats continue on towards Heorot. As they enter

the cluster of buildings, they close formation, proudly aware of their warrior mien. They stage a show of marching order as they "tó sele furðum" (323b); "Gúð-byrne scán" (321b); the linked rings of the armor, "hring-íren scír," make martial melody in rhythm with the synchronic, double-time pace. The warriors' steps clatter on the stone-paved street leading to Heorot; any Danes present must have stopped and stared at the martial display as the Geats march, garbed in full and terror-inspiring armor:

in hyra gryre-geatwum gangan cwómon. (324)

When the warriors reach Heorot, they halt and divest themselves of their weapons and armor. Their shields are set against the towering wall:

setton . . . side scyldas,
rondas regn-hearde wið þaes recedes weal. (325-326)

Their spears are stacked upright in good standard military order, ready to be seized if circumstances call for immediate action:

s  e-manna searo, G  ras st  don,
samod aetgaedere. (328b-329)

The "s  -m  pe" Geats take off their byrnies and place them nearby; they sink to the bench, "bugon p   t   bence" (327a), in a weariness finally realized after their swift sea journey and strenuous march from the coast.

Once more, they are challenged, this time by Wulfgar, a prince of the Wendels and as herald a high-ranking member of the comitatus of Hrothgar who is then within the hall:

"Hwanon ferigeað gé fáette scyldas,
"græge syrcan ond grím-helmas,
"here-sceafta héap?" (333-335a)

Beowulf identifies himself and his men and the purpose of their coming to the land of the Danes. Wulfgar enters Heorot and reports Beowulf's coming to Hrothgar, then returns to welcome the Geats and to extend Hrothgar's invitation to join him within the hall. Wulfgar informs the Geats that they may wear their armor into the hall:

"Nu gé móton gangan inéowrum guð-getawum,
"under here-griman, Hroðgar geseon. (395-396)

Their weapons, however, must be left outside: ✓

"láetað hilde-bord her onbidan
"wudu, wael-sceaftas worda geþinges." (397-398)

The Geats enter Heorot and are greeted by the king. There begins a celebration of their arrival and mission.

Later that evening, after the festivities are concluded, Beowulf, having vowed to meet Grendel without using weapons and armor in the combat, is aided in divesting himself of his gear:

Ðá hē him ofdyde isern-byrnán
 helm of hafelan sealde his hyrsted sweord,
 irena cyst gmbiht-pēgne,
 ond gehealdan het hilde-geatwe. (671-674)

Although in the coming fight with Grendel, Beowulf disdains the use of weapons, other warriors place their war-gear by their sleeping places. "Waes pēaw hyra" (1246b)⁶ to be ready even when retiring, to meet any emergency which may arise.

Of the weapons used for offense, the sword was most valued, both as an actual instrument for use in war and as a symbol. The importance of and regard for this weapon are shown in Beowulf, in which there is "so much feeling shown for the unique personalities of swords."⁷

The first detailed description of the uses of the sword is in Beowulf's narration of his swimming match with Breca. Both youths carry their swords unsheathed to ward off the attacks of sea monsters:

"Haefdon swurd nacod, pā wit on sund rēo[wo]n,
 "heard on handa; wit unc wið hron-fixas
 "werian pōhton." (539-541a)

Beowulf is proud of the performance of his sword against the sea-monsters: "ic him pēnod / dēoran sweorde" (560b-

⁶Cf. p. 32.

⁷A. T. Hatto, "Snake-swords and Boar-Helms in Beowulf," ES, XXXVIII (1957), 145.

561a); he is able to slay nine of the attackers:

"Hwaepere mé gesáelde, þaet ic mid sweord ofslóh
"niceras nigene." (574-575a)

One of the gifts which Beowulf receives as reward for defeating Grendel is a sword:

"máere máðþum-sweord manige gesáwon
"beforan beorn beran. (1023-1024a)

The poet fails to comment further on this treasure.

The companions who have accompanied Beowulf to Heorot also receive gifts; each is given an ancient relic, probably a sword:

Ðá gýt áeghwylcum
þáraþe mid Beowulfe
on þaegre medu-bence
yrfe-lafe. eorla drihten
brim-láde teah,
maþðum geséalde,
(1050-1053a)

In the lay sung about Finnsburg, a sword plays an important role. Only when Hengest is presented with Hunlafing, "hilde-léoman / billa sélest" (ll43b-ll44a), does he finally decide to break the contract made between himself and Finn⁸ and reopen the feud which has earlier resulted in the death of Hnaef, Hengest's leader. Girvan suggests that "the solemn giving and girding of a sword was symbolic of the conferring of a position of independent

⁸Cf. p. 37.

or semi-independent rule."⁹ Girvan also notes that the acceptance of the sword by Hengest can only result in violence, for "the wearing of the sword was an outrageous breach of the agreement . . . and Finn was bound to deal with it in the manner which his oath required."¹⁰ Anyone who, even merely by a taunt, causes the fighting to resume will be put to death.

Another sword, Hrunting, accompanies Beowulf in his underwater journey to the lair of Grendel's dam. Hrunting has been loaned to Beowulf by Unferth and has won fame before:

2021.1700
1455-1464

Naes þaet þonne māetost	maegen-fultuma,
þaet hīm on ðearfē lah	ðyle Hróðgares;
waes þaem haeft-mece	Hrunting ȳama;
þaet waes an foran.	ealde-gestreona;
ecg waes íren	áter-tanum fah,
ahrydeç heapo-swáte;	naefre hit aet hilde ne swác
manna aengum,	pára þe hit mid mundum bewand,
sé ðe gryre-šíðas	gegan dorste,
folc-stede fara.	Naes þaet forma sið
þaet hit ellen-weorc	aefnan scolde.

The poet observes that Unferth, "þá hé þaes wáepnes onláh / sélran sweord-frecan" (1467b-1468a), does not remember that he has taunted Beowulf at the festivities welcoming the arrival of the Geats.

Beowulf calls Hrunting "'ealde láfe, / wráetlic

⁹"Finnsburuh," Proc. Brit. Acad., XXVI (1940), 349.

¹⁰P. 350.

wig-sweord'" (1488b-1489a), and he vows,

"dóm gewyrce, "ic mé mid Hrunitinge
opðe mec deað nimeð." (1490b-1491)

Hruniting, when put to use against the troll, fails to aid Beowulf:

Ongeat þá sé góda grund-wyrgenne
mere-wif mihtig; maegen-raes forgeaf
hilde-bille, hond sweng ne ofteah,
þaet hire on hafelan hring-mael agol
graedig gúð-leoð. Ðá se gist onfand,
þaet se beado-leoma bitan noldę
aldrē sceþan, ac seo ecg geswaç
ðeodne aet þearfe; Ðolode aer fela
hond-geomota, helm oft gescaer,
fæges fyrd-hraegl; Ða wæs forma síð
deorum madme, þaet his dóm álaeg. (1518-1528)

The famous sword having proved useless against Grendel's dam, Beowulf casts it aside:

Wearp, Ðá wunden-máel wráettum gebunden
yrre óretta, þaet hit on eorðan laeg,
stið ond styl-ecg. (1531-1533a)

The Geat warrior tries to vanquish the troll as he had defeated her son, by his own strength; but his powers also fail. In danger of losing his life, Beowulf glimpses an ancient sword, one fashioned before Noah's flood, perhaps by Tubal-Cain, "the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron" (Gen. iv.22): ← *

Geseah Ðá on searwum sige-eadig bil,
eald-sweord eotenisc egcum þytig,
wigena weorð-mynd; þaet [waes] waepna cyst,

búton hit waes máre Ðonne aénig mon óðer
 tō beadu-lace aetberan meahte,
 god ond geatolic giganta geweorc. (1557-1562)

Beowulf secures the weapon and uses it to defeat his opponent:

Hé geféng þá fetel-hilt, freca Scyldinga,
 Hreoh ond heoro-grim, hring-mael gebraegdl
 aldres orwéna, yrringa sloh,
 þaet hire wið halse heard grápode,
 báñ-hringes braec; bil gal Ðurhwod
 faegne flaesc-þoman; heo on flet gecrong,
 sweord waes swatig, secg weorc gefeh. (1563-1569)

Grendel's dam finally vanquished, Beowulf stands over the corpse. Then, "wáepen hafenade / heard be hiltum" (1573b-1574a), he prudently surveys his surroundings. He sees the body of Grendel, moves to it, and strikes at it with the ancient sword:

sýðan hé aeftér déaðe Hrá wide spróng,
 heoro-sweng heardne, drepe þrówade,
 ond hine þa heafde becearf.
 (1588-1590)

ll "The ornament of swords which is most often mentioned . . . and which was regarded as characteristic of the sword of a chief, was the hilt ring . . . which was certainly fixed to the hilt (not the scabbard). . . . The ring was of gold . . . and considered as a treasure. . . . The oldest of the [swords extant in Scandinavia, Germany, and England] are without the ring, and belong to the fifth century. During the following century a small loose ring appears. . . . About the close of the sixth century the ring is fixed, increases in size and is (in some examples) ornamented. These peculiarities persist during the greater part of the seventh century, and then disappear. Thus the swords described in Beowulf belong to the sixth or seventh centuries, or approximately to the period between A.D. 500 and 650." Stjerna, pp. 25-27.

Almost immediately the blade of the sword begins to melt away:

aefter heapo-swáte **pá** paet sweord ongan
 wig-bil wanian. hilde-gicelum,
(1605b-1607a)

Many treasures lie about the lair of Grendel's dam; but, as he leaves to return to land, Beowulf takes with him only the head of Grendel and the hilt of the sword, the blade of which has been completely melted away:

forbarn bróden-máel áer gemealt,
 aettren ellor-gaest, waes paet blód tó paes hát,
se paer inne swealt.
 (1615b-1618)

Later in Heorot, Beowulf describes the failure of Hrunting and confesses that, only through the help of God, is he alive and able to relate the story of his adventure:

"Ne meahte ic aet hilde mid Hruntinge
 "wiht gewyrca, þeah paet wæpen duge;
 "ac mé geude ylde Waldend.
 "paet ic on wáge geseah wlitig hangian
 "eald-sweord eacen --oftost wiðode
 "winigea leasum-- paet ic ðý wæpne gebræd.
 "Ofslöh ða aet þaere saecce, þa me sael ageald,
 "huses hyrdas. þá paet hilde-bil
 "forbarn, brogden-máel, swa paet blód gesprang,
 "hatost heapo-swata. Ic paet hilt þanan
 "feondum aetferede. fyren-daeda wraec,
 "deað-cwealm Denigea, swa hit gedefe waes.
(1658-1670)

Beowulf presents to Hrothgar the hilt of the weapon which has saved his life:

Ðá waes gylden hilt gamelum rince,
 harum hild-fruman on hand gyfen. (1677-1678)

It had been the property of the giants who had warred
against God. After their defeat, the sword was handed down
until it came into the possession of two of the giants'
descendants, Grendel and his dam. Now, it is held by
Hrothgar, who

ealde láfe. hylt scéawóde
 fyrn-geyinnes, On ðaem waes or writen
 gifen geotende, syðban flód ofslöh,¹²
 frecne geferdon; gigantas cyn;
 ecean Dryhtne; þaet waes fremde þeod
 þurh waeteres wylm him þaes ende-lean
 Swa waes on ðaem scennum Waldend sealde.
 þurh run-stafas, sciran goldes
 geseted ond gesáed, rihte gemearcod,
 Irena cyst hwam þaet sweord geworht,
 wreopen-hilt ond wyrn-fah.¹³ 1687b-1698a)

The next morning, the Geats prepare to depart and return to their homeland. Beowulf gives Hrunting back to

¹² Obviously, the engraving on the hilt had been added after Noah's flood.

¹³ Wrenn, p. 213 n., suggests that "there was a serpentine or spiral design on the hilt." Stjerna, pp. 28-29, described the hilts of swords found by Scandinavian archaeologists: "The animal-designs on the sword-hilts. . . . [bear] likenesses to serpents." The serpent design was also carried onto the blade. "Sprinkling with poison or snake's blood was supposed to make the blade specially hard." Stjerna, p. 21. These "snake-swords, compounded with venom, snake-swords which bite to kill and whose wielders feed or blood them on their enemies, take us back to a world of magic realism." Hatto, p. 155.

Unferth and thanks the son of Ecglaf for his loan of the famed weapon. Beowulf does not speak harshly of the failure of Hrunting in the battle with Grendel's dam:

Heht þá sé hearda Hrunting beran
 sunu Ecglafes, heht his sweord niman,
 leoflic íren; saegde him þaes laenes þanc,
 cwaed, he þone gúð-wine godne tealde,
 wig-craeftigne, nales wordum log
 meces ecge. (1807-1812a)

For this exemplary behavior of Beowulf, the poet offers lofty praise: "þaet waes módig secg" (1812b).

The Geats then walk to the beach where their ship awaits them. The vessel has been well-guarded by the coast warden, and Beowulf rewards the Danish warrior by giving him a sword:

Hé þáem bát-wearde bunden golde
 swurd gesealde. (1900-1901a)

A sword could be utilized as a means of punishment.

This use is illustrated in the Thryth digression, which not only serves to provide "a foil to the young queen, Hygd. . .[but also] stresses the problem of the 'use of power.'¹⁴ In the episode, everyone, except Thryth's father, is forbidden to look upon her beauty. Any man who is guilty of gazing at the princess is put to death:

¹⁴Bonjour, Digressions, pp. 54-55.

ac him wael-bende weotode tealde,
 hand-gewipene; hrabę seopðan waes
 aefter mund-gripe mece-geþinged,
 þaet hit sceaden-máel scyran moste
 cwealm-bealu cyðan. (1936-1940a)

In the Heathobard episode,¹⁵ related by Beowulf to Hygelac and his court, a sword plays the same type of role as does the sword Hunlafing in the Finnsburg lay. Both swords cause the resumption of feuds. In the Heathobard story, the mere sight of a sword worn by a former enemy causes an old Heathobard warrior to point out to a younger man that the weapon of his dead father, Wythergyld, is now a Danish trophy:

"heard ond hring-máel "gomebra láfe
 Heaðabear[d]na gestréon.
 (2036b-2037)

After completing the story of his adventures in the land of the Danes, Beowulf gives to Hygelac the treasures won by his deeds. Among the rewards is "guð-sweord geatolic" (2154a).

In return, Hygelac presents to Beowulf the gold-ornamented sword which has once belonged to Hrethel:

Hét ȳá eorla hléo in gefetian,
 heaðo-rof cyning, Hréðles lafe,
 golde gegyrede; naes mid Geatum ȳá

¹⁵Cf. pp. 39-40.

sinc-máðpum sélra on sweordes hád;
 þaet he on Biowulfes bearm alegde. (2190-2194)

This weapon plays an important though calamitous role in the dragon fight; like the sword, Hrunting, in the combat with Grendel's dam, Naegling, the legacy of Hrethel, fails Beowulf.

When Beowulf faces the dragon, he does so, at his own wish, alone but fully armed:

gód gúð-cyning, Sweord áer gebráed
 ecgum ungleaw. gomele láfe, (2562b-2564a)

Beowulf boldly attacks the dragon and cuts at the worm, but Naegling cannot penetrate the scaly hide of the monster:

Géata dryhten, Hond up ábraed
 ingge-lafé, gyre-fahne slóh
 brun on bane, þaet sio eor gewac,
 þonne his ðjod-cyning bat unswiðor
 bysigum gebaeded. þearfe haefde, (2575b-2589a)

The dragon is angered at the onslaught of the Geat king and retaliates with flames; again Beowulf's sword fails to perform as it should in combat:

gold-wine Géata; gúð-bill geswác,
 nacod æt niðe, swa hyt nó sceolde, (2584-2586a)
 iren aer-god.

Beowulf's companions have fled to nearby woods. Among the warriors is Wiglaf who, seeing his chief in dire

straits, "ne mihte **ðá** forhabban" (2609a):

þaet waes mid eldum gomel swyrd geteah
suna Ohtere[s]. Eanmundes laf,
(2610b-2612a)

Wiglaf's father, Weohstan has killed Eanmund during the war between Onela and Ohthere, and Onela has given to Weohstan, Eanmund's sword and armor. Weohstan has kept this war gear for Wiglaf "oððaet his byre mihte / eorlscipe efnan" (2621b-2622a). Although this will be Wiglaf's initial use of the weapon, he rushes fearlessly to the aid of Beowulf and calls upon him to fight with the ability and courage of his youth.

Urged on by Wiglaf, Beowulf strikes a blow so powerful that the sword blade snaps:

Naegling forbaerst,
geswac aet saecce, sweord Biowulfes
gomol and graeg-mael. Him **þaet** gifeðe ne waes,
þaet him írenna ecge mihton
helpan æt hilde; waes sio hond tó strong,
se ðe meca gehwane, mine gefraege,
swenge ofersohte, þonne he to saecce baer
waepen wundum heard; naes him wihte ðe sel.
(2680b-2687)

The sword is useless. Beowulf is wounded by the dragon but, with the aid of his faithful companion, is able to defeat the worm.

The last descriptions of swords concern two unnamed weapons, one which has originally been among the treasures guarded by the dragon and one which has once

belonged to Ongentheow. The first sword has, the poet confesses hearing, been among the treasures that, long ago, have been stolen and that once have belonged to the lord who had owned the relics:

Bill aér gescód
--ecg waes iren-- eald-hlafordes
þam ðára máðma mund-bora waes
longe hwile. (2777b-2780a)

The other sword was among the armor and weapons which had been the possessions of Ongentheow. When he is killed by Hygelac's warriors, they are borne to the Geat king:

"nam on Ongendio . . .
"heard swyrd hilted . . ; .
" . . . Higelace baer." (2986-2988)

The Beowulf poet treats other weapons in less detail.

None are, as is the sword, given individual names; and none are endowed with personalities which set off one from the other.

Next to the sword in importance to the Germanic warrior was the spear. This weapon "was evidently that for throwing--a javelin; . . . it was used both in boar-hunting and war . . . [and] was provided with hooks or barbs."¹⁶

The spear is the first weapon named in the poem:

¹⁶Stjerna, p. 40.

the people, the "Gár-Dena" (la), to whom the work is addressed are the "Spear-Danes." The coast warden who challenges the Geats when they step onto Danish land "pryllum cwehte / maegen -wudu mundum" (235b-236a) before he speaks to the invaders. The Geats carry spears; when they reach Heorot, the weapons "'here-sceafta héap'" (335a), are stacked beside a bench before the hall. When Hrothgar's messenger returns from announcing to his chief the arrival of the Geat band, he suggests that "'wudu, wael-sceaftas'" (398a), be left outside the hall.

Spears are used while the Danes and the Geats stand on the bank overlooking the waters in the depths of which dwell monsters, including Grendel's dam. Beowulf ← —————— * uses bow and arrow to kill one of those monsters which is then pulled ashore by the use of barbed spears:

Hraeþe wearð on yðum mid eofer-spréotum
heoro-hocyntum. (1437-1438a)

Wiglaf is described by the poet as "geongum gár-wigan" (2811a); and after the death of Beowulf, the young warrior tells the Geats that

"nú se here-wísa hleator álegde,
"gamen ond gleo-dréam. (3019-3020a)

Since all pleasures can no longer be enjoyed by Beowulf,
all sports and song ceases among the people. "Forðon

sceall gár wesan / monig morgen-ceald" (3021b-3022a).

The bow and arrow receive more limited attention.

Beowulf uses this weapon to kill the monster in the waters above the lair of Grendel's dam:

Sumne Géata jéod
of flán-bogan feores getwaefed,
yð-gewinnes, þaet him on aldre stód
here-strael hearda. (1432b-1435a)

In Hrothgar's parable on the soul, the "sáwele hyrd" is unsuspectingly shot by "'flán-bogan'" (1744a). Finally, the dilemma which Hrethel faces begins

"syððan, hyne Haedcyn, of horn-bogan,
"his frea-wine fláne geswencte,
"miste mercelses ond his mæg ofscét,
"broðor oðerne, blodigan gare." (2437-2440)

→ The last of the weapons used by the characters in the poem is the short-sword or knife. This weapon is mentioned twice, once as used by Grendel's dam and again as used by Beowulf.

When Beowulf finds that Hrunting is useless against the troll, he flings aside the weapon and grapples with her. When Grendel's dam is unsuccessful in her attempt to sink her talons into the body of the Geat hero, she pulls forth her poniard: "ond hyre seax getéah, / brád [ond] brún-ecg" (1545b-1546a). Her use of the short sword fails, however; and Beowulf is able to kill her.

Beowulf uses a knife, more successfully, in the dragon fight. When Naegling breaks, Beowulf is wounded. Wiglaf attacks the dragon, and Beowulf, beneath the worm, draws his knife from its sheath on his byrnies:

þá gén sylf cyning,
gewéold his gewitte, waell-seaxe gebráed,
biter, ond beadu-scearp, þaet he on byrnan waeg;
forwrat Wedra helm wyrm on middan
Feond gefyldan --fehr, ellen wraec--
ond hí hyne þa bégen abroten haefdon,
sib-aeðelingas!-- (2702b-2707a)

Although the several weapons carried by the Germanic warrior could also be used defensively, the purely defensive gear of the warrior consisted of the helmet, the corselet, and the shield. The helmet also often symbolized leadership:

[The] oft-recurring expression for kings (verses 371, 456, 1321, 2381, 2705) . . . implies something more than the bare idea of "protector." We may suppose that there was a direct and natural association of ideas between this word and the concrete helmet, the splendid head-gear of princes, which, on account of its elevated position and its lustre, was well fitted to be the symbol of a chieftain. . . . [The] Lord of Heaven is . . . called helm-heofena at verse 182.¹⁷

Whether all fighting men were equipped with helmets is questionable. Stjerna declared that helmets were "relatively numerous,"¹⁸ but Hatto's view is that they

¹⁷Stjerna, p. 7.

¹⁸P. 1.

"were comparatively rare in early Germanic days, and it has been surmised that only chiefs and picked warriors wore them."¹⁹ Beowulf, however, deals only with the leader and the comitatus, all of whom are equipped with helmets.

In Beowulf the first description of helmets is given in a colorful passage describing the Geat warriors as they march from the Danish shore to Heorot:

ofer hleor̄ ber[ɔ]an: fah ond fyr-heard, guð-mod grummon.	Eofor-līc scionon gehroden golde, fehr-werde heold: (303b-306a)
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When Beowulf speaks to Wulfgar, Hrothgar's messenger, before the hall, the Geat warrior is, as he is also at several other places in the poem, described as "heard under helm." When Wulfgar returns from speaking with Hrothgar and invites the Geats into Heorot, he suggests that, although their weapons should be left where they had stacked them near the wall, they may wear their helmets into the hall:

"Nu gé móton gangan "under here-griman."	in éowrum guð-getáwum (395-396a)
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A helmet is included among the gifts which Hrothgar gives to Beowulf after Grendel is vanquished. The helmet

is bound with wires which will halt the sweep of a sword:

Ymb þaes helmes hróf héafod-beorge
 wirum bewunden walu útan heold,
 þaet him fela láf[e] frecne ne meahton
 scur-heard sceþan, þonne scyld-freca
 ongean gramum gangan scolde. (1030-1034)

In the Finnsburg lay, the bodies of Hnaef and his nephew (the son of Finn and Hildeburh) and of the other warriors killed in the initial fighting are placed upon a funeral pyre and burned. Among the flames can be seen the dead bodies still adorned with their helmets: "swýn eal-gylden / eofer íren-heard" (lll1b-lll2a).

After Grendel's dam seeks revenge for the death of her son and invades Heorot where she kills Aeschere, Hrothgar remembers his favorite warrior as the best companion to have by one's side in battle, when "eoferas cny sedon" (1328a).

The helmet which Beowulf puts on before he dives into the water to seek out Grendel's dam is one ornamented with treasures. It was shaped by an ancient workman who had adorned the helm with swinish shapes:

. . . se hwita helm hafelan werede
 since geweordad
 befongan fréa-wrásnum, swa hine fyrn-dagum
 worhte wáepna smið, wundrum teode,
 besette swin-licum, þaet hine syðban nó
 brond né beado-mecas bitan ne meahton.
 (1448-1454)

The Sutton Hoo discoveries, among which is a helmet, have shown the faithfulness with which the Beowulf poet has depicted the weapons and armor of his age.²⁰ Since to the Germanic warriors the helm was of prime importance in defense, the helmets were adorned with figures of the boar, "a protective symbol."²¹ It was Chambers' view that "the golden boar was a symbol of the god Freyr: some magic protective power is still, in Beowulf, felt to adhere to these swine-likenesses, as it was in the days of Tacitus."²²

The boar as a symbol was of great significance to the Teutonic people. It "was one of the beasts particularly sacred to Freyr, the god of fertility."²³ Freyr

²⁰ Whitelock, pp. 83-85.

²¹ Wrenn in Chambers, p. 519.

²² P. 359.

Some scholars suggest that the boar design is a Celtic symbol, "in a direct line of descent from the large number of boars portrayed in a similar form by pre-Roman Celts." Wilson, p. 141. Cf. also Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology (London, 1959), p. 247. Hereafter cited as Larousse.

The major Sutton Hoo weapons and armor, including the helmet, however, show a close affinity to those found in Scandinavian graves and may have been imported from Sweden. Peter Hunter Blair, An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England (Cambridge, Eng., 1956), p. 57. Cf. also Charles Green, Sutton Hoo: The Excavation of a Royal Ship Burial (London, 1963), pp. 134-139; and Wrenn in Chambers, pp. 510-512.

²³ E. O. G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia (New York, 1964), p. 166. Hereafter cited as Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion.

was "one of the chief gods of the Swedes. . . . He was also the divine ancestor of their kings."²⁴ To him belonged "the boar Gullinbursti (Golden-bristled) or Sliðrugtanni (Cutting-Tusked)."²⁵ The golden boar pulled the chariot of the god and "had been forged by the dwarfs Brokk and Sindri. It sped through the air or across the earth more quickly than a galloping horse. As soon as it appeared the night would be illuminated."²⁶

The boar was also a symbol of physical courage. Hatto compares the animal to Germanic warriors: "Like the German heroes, the boar was at his most magnificent and dangerous when ringed by his enemies at his last stand. . . . No animal displays more desperate courage when brought to bay."²⁷

As a rhetorical figure, the helmet is used in one of the finest poetic passages in the poem. On the evening of the celebration following Beowulf's successful journey to the lair of Grendel's dam, the poet describes the coming of night in a lovely martial metaphor: "Niht-helm geswearc / deorc ofer dryht-gumum" (1789b-1790a).

²⁴ Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion, p. 168.

²⁵ Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion, p. 168.

²⁶ Larousse, p. 276.

²⁷ P. 156.

The poet mentions the helmet several other times in the poem. Among the gifts which Beowulf receives from Hrothgar and passes on to Hygelac is "heāðo-steápne helm" (2153a); among the treasures which are guarded by the dragon is

"sé hearda helm, hyrsted golde" (2255);

among the gifts that are given to Wiglaf by the dying Beowulf is "gold-fahne helm" (2811b); among the trophies which the Geats take from the body of Ongentheow and present to Hygelac is "his helm somod" (2987b).

For "helmet" the poet uses a compound term, "grum-helm" (334b), which is defined in Wrenn's Glossary as "helmet with mask-protection; helmet with mask as 'vizor.'" Klaeber's Glossary adds, "'Visors, in the strict (technical) sense, were unknown in Beowulf's time, but the face was protected by a kind of mask.'" This visor was not a peaked affair; instead, it covered and protected the face and "was joined to the upper part of the helmet. . . . A man could not take his helmet off alone and without help."²⁸

²⁸ Stjerna, p. 5.

"The [Sutton Hoo] helmet was basically a hemispherical iron cap to which were attached vizor, cheek-pieces and neck-guard of iron. The cheek-pieces were hinged, but the front and back attachments were rigidly secured. Inside the cap there was space for padding and

The corselet, or byrnies, also receives high praise from the poet. The attention paid to it in the poem attests to the special affection and regard which the Germanic warrior held for this part of his defensive gear. Several times, it meant to Beowulf the difference between life and death.

Among the armor which adorns the burial ship of Scyld are byrnies (40a). As the Geats step onto Danish land, "syrecan hrysedon" (226b); and the shore guard challenges them and asks who they are, "'byrnum werede'" (238a).

When Beowulf is introduced to Hrothgar,

on him byrne scán,
searo-net seowed smipes orþancum. (405b-406)

The Geat warrior informs the king that he has come to fight Grendel; but, if he fails to overcome the monster, his

the head was further protected from weapon-blows by the tubular crest which ran from back to front. This was an iron tube encased in silver of about 1/8-inch thickness and its ends carried gilt-bronze dragon heads. Other bronze fittings are the eyebrows, further decorated with silver wire and niello-inlay and edged below with garnets inset over gold foil. The eyebrows are further embellished with a gilt boar's head at each outer end. A single bronze casting also comprises the nose and mouth-piece of the vizor, again decorated with silver and niello-inlay. And to complete the adornment, the iron surfaces of the cap and its attachments were originally covered with very thin sheets of tinned bronze decorated with panels in relief and further bound at the helmet-edges by a rim of gilded bronze." Green, pp. 69-70

corselet should be returned to Hygelac:

"Onsend Higelác, gif mec hild nime,
 "beadu-scrýda betst, þaet mine breóstum wereð,
 "hýaegla selest þaet is Hraedlan laf,
 "Welandes geweorc." (452-455a)

Beowulf describes how, during the contest with Breca, he is protected from the onslaughts of sea monsters:

"þáer mé wið láðum líc-syrce mín,
 "heard, hond-locen, helpe gefremede,
 "beado-hraegl broden on breostum laeg
 "golde gegyrwed." (550-553a)

His gold-ringed war-corselet serves him again in ✓ his fight with Grendel's dam. As he prepares himself to dive into the water and seek out her lair, he dons his byrnies:

sçolde here-byrne hondum gebróden,
 sjd ond searo-fah, sund cunnian,
 seo ðe ban-cofan beorsan cuþe,
 þaet him hilde-gráp hreþre ne mihte,
 eorres inwit-feng aldre gescepðan. (1443-1447)

Although for Beowulf to reach the bottom of the pool requires "hwil daeges," as soon as he nears his goal, Grendel's dam "gúð-rinc geféng / atolan clommum" (1501b-1502a). Her talons clutch at him but fail to do him injury:

nó þýáer in gescód
 hálan líce; hrинг utan ymb-bearh,
 þaet heo þone fyrd-hom durhfon ne mihte,
 locene leoðo-syrcan láþan fingrum. (1502b-1505)

While she bears Beowulf to her underwater hall, sea-monsters attack him; but, against his byrnies, their tusks break:

hilde-túxum	sáe-déor monig here-syrcan braec.	(1510b-1511)
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The war-sark again protects him against the troll when, after Hrunting is cast aside and the two wrestle, Grendel's dam tries to use her "seax." Once more, the byrnies foils her:

bréost-net bróden; wið ord gnd wið ecge Haefde ða forsiðod under gynne grund, nemne him heaðo-byrne here-net hearde	Him on eaxle laeg þaet gebearh feore, ingang forstod. sunu Ecgþeowes Geata cempa, helpe gefremede, ond hálig God. (1547b-1553)
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This passage illustrates the special affection which the warrior had for his war-corset. It was a valuable part of his war-gear and was among treasures offered as gifts or rewards. Hrothgar gives Beowulf a byrnies, (1022b) which he, in turn, gives to Hygelac (2153b). Among the relics which the dying Beowulf passes on to Wiglaf is a war-corset (2812a).

In time of battle, a vanquished hero's sark could be taken as a trophy or could accompany his body in the funeral rites. The Geats take from the body of Ongentheow "íren byrnan" (2986b) and present it to Hygelac; in the flames of the funeral fire at Finnsburg can be seen

"swát-fáh syrce" (llla), and Beowulf's pyre is hung with war-corselets, "beorhtum byrnum" (3140a).

The last of the three major defensive items was the shield. In Beowulf, only in one incident, the dragon fight, does the shield play an important role.

When the Danish sentry first glimpses the Geats, he sees "beorhte randas, / fyrd-searu fúslicu" (231b-232a); and he describes the warriors as "'lind-haebbende'" (245a). At the door of Heorot, the men discard "fáette scyldas" (333b) and Hrothgar suggests

"láetað hilde-bord hér onbídan."

Although most shields used by Germanic warriors were made of wood, Beowulf's is of iron, especially made to protect him against the fiery breath of the dragon:²⁹

Heht him þá gewyrcean wígendra hléo
eall-irennæ, eorla dryhtan,
wig-bord wraetlíc. (2337-2339a)

When Beowulf faces the dragon, the Geat king carries "bord-rand onswáf / wið ðám gryre-gieste" (2559b-2560a). Beowulf attacks; the dragon retaliates. For a brief time the king is served well by "steapne rond":

²⁹A motif in epic poetry is that of special armor made for a hero, e.g., that which Hephaestus made for Achilles or that which Vulcan made for Aeneas.

lífē ond líce
maerum þeodne Scyld wél gebearg
laessan hwile
bonne his myne sóhte. (2570b-2572)

When Wiglaf comes to the aid of Beowulf, the wooden shield of the young warrior is useless against the dragon; "líg-ýðum forborn / bord wið rond" (2672b-2673a). Wiglaf immediately withdraws behind the iron shield of his king:

ac se māga geonga under his māege's scyld
elne geeode, bá his agen waes
gledum forgrunden. (2675-2677a)

From their shelter, the two warriors manage to kill their foe.

The shield was a major and honored part of the
Teutonic war gear. With the byrnies and the helmet, it
was used as a martial symbol to honor the memory of dead
heroes. Beowulf's funeral pyre is adorned not only with
war-sarks and helms, but also "hilde-bordum" (5139b).

Two additional pieces of equipment, supplementary to the Germanic warrior's weapons and armor, also figure prominently in Beowulf. These are the battle ensign or standard and the war-horn.

The first appears early in the poem. On the funeral ship of Scyld is set a golden standard which waves high over the head of the dead king:

pá gýt hie him ásetton segen gyldenne
heah ofer heafod. (47-48a)

An ensign, also golden, is one of the rewards which
Beowulf receives from the Danish king:

For geaf þá Béowulfe brand, Healfdenes
segen gyldenne sigores to leane,
hroden hilde-cumbor. (1020-1022a)

This gift, as are the others, is given to Hygelac:

Hét ðá in beran eofor, héafod-segn²⁹ (2152)

Later, when, at Beowulf's request, Wiglaf enters
the dragon's cave to bring back some of the treasures for
the Geat king's inspection, the young warrior sees,
hovering over the treasures, "Segn eall-gylden / héah
ofer horde" (2767b-2768a). Wiglaf gathers up as much
treasure as he can carry, including the ensign, "béacna
beorhtost" (2777a).

The war-horn is mentioned twice. When the Geats
and Danes gather at the edge of the waters which hide the
lair of Grendel's dam, the horn is sounded: "Horn stundum
song / fúslic fyrd-léoð" (1423b-1424a). The blasts of
the horns are so terrifying that the sea-beasts flee from
the area:

29 "In Beowulf there are six references to the boar
as a symbol. . . . Five of the six references concern the
helmet. . . . The sixth refers to the standard." Hatto,
pp. 155-156.

wyrmas ond wil-déor hie on wég h̄uron
bitere ond gebolgne; bearhtm ongeaton,
guð-horn galan. (1430-1432a)

During the description of the Haethcyn-Hygelac expedition against the Swedes, the horn announces the arrival of aid to the Geat forces which have been chased into the woods:

"Frófor eft gelamp
sárig-módum somod aer-daege,
syððan hie Hygelaces horn ond býman,
gealdor ongeaton." (2941-2944)

The sheer gusto and the obvious affection and even reverence with which the Beowulf poet describes weapons and armor and the intimacy in details with which he pictures the martial accoutrements of the Germanic thane clearly manifest the poet's interest in and enjoyment of the "pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!"

Every other aspect of the poem is subordinate to that of the warrior. And what is the warrior without his war-gear?

³⁰Cf. pp. 148-150.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WARS AND THE BATTLES

Studies of the historical elements in Beowulf have, for the most part, been directed toward illuminating major themes and patterns and explicating specific episodes, when they have not been concerned with relating such elements in the poem to Scandinavian sagas and archaeological remains and to such chronicles as that of Gregory of Tours. The studies have not often dwelt upon the poet's own consuming interest in the wars of the Danes and the Geats and the Swedes.

What most investigations have proved, directly or indirectly, is the poet's reliability in his descriptions of the happenings in the history of the Scandinavian tribes. These incidents are the "elements . . . which we naturally classify as 'historical,' i.e., based on history in contradiction to the frankly fabulous matter of a pre-natural character, [and which] have, in a large measure, an air of reality and historical truth about them which is quite remarkable, and, in fact, out of the ordinary."¹

There have been, however, a few studies concerned

¹Klaeber, pp. xxix-xxx

with the literary function of the historical elements. One notable and influential inquiry--that of Adrien Bonjour--points out that the so-called digressions and episodes of historical content "are actually made to play . . . a significant and often quite subtle part in the organic structure of the poem."² They supply background for the main events of the story and often motivate the action of the characters.

Lawrence suggests that, with the supernatural elements which form the main threads of the narrative in Beowulf, "there run contrapuntally, minor themes."³ Dorothy Whitelock describes these 'minor themes' as "two series of events [which] are referred to so frequently that it is obvious that the poet wishes them to be present in his hearers' thoughts as he tells his tale. The tragic stories of family strife within the Scylding dynasty, and of the wars fought by the kings of the Geats against the Swedes or Franks attain almost to the position of subplots."⁴ Arthur G. Brodeur also sees the historical elements as integral to the work: they "do not impede the action; they are a part of it."⁵

²Digressions, p. 43.

³P. 27.

⁴P. 34.

⁵"The Structure and Unity of Beowulf," PMLA, LXVIII (1953), 1186-1187.

The poet's intent, then, in his use of the historical is to develop further his main theme, the adventures of Beowulf.

Yet the poet's primary concern, as has been argued here, is with the martial aspects of the life of his hero. His vivid recounting of battles expands these aspects of his work and furthermore contributes to the elevation of his tale to epic level. The earlier exploits of Beowulf are not unimportant: e.g., in the Breca episode, Beowulf's prowess serves to cleanse the seas of monsters that have been harassing seafarers. But only when Beowulf performs deeds which affect the fate of nations and of peoples does his fame begin to grow and does his own development become of the highest interest. Only then do the deeds of the hero take on epic majesty and significance.

The poet is intent upon giving his audience more than the mere bones of history; he fleshes out the skeleton of facts to communicate fully the pleasures which his audience most relishes, "the joys of eating, drinking, and fighting,"⁶ especially the last. And the poet shows as much zest in his painting of larger canvases as he does in his portrayals of individual combats, as, e.g., that of Beowulf and Grendel.

⁶Lawrence, p. 283.

The Beowulf poet does not picture vast armies in action. Sisam points out that "wars in those days were not fought out between organized national armies within a limited period. They were more in the nature of raid and counter-raid."⁷

It must also be remembered that, as C. M. Bowra has observed, in the arena of heroic poetry, "the bards' whole view of history is not historical but dramatic. They do not see events as the historians do; they are much more interested in personalities and vivid episodes than in great movements or the vagaries of politics. In reading their work we must look out for a tendency to shape material in the interest of artistic needs."⁸

The Beowulf poet exemplifies such a tendency in his martial epic. His concern, too, is with the relationship of the historical events to the individual, the family, or the tribe and with the dramatic effect of the recitation of the events on his audience.

Beowulf begins with allusions to the wars fought by the early Danes. Scyld, Beowulf the Dane, and Healfdene gain renown through their victories in intertribal conflict. As they subjugate their neighbors, the Danish kings are

7P. 57.

8Heroic Poetry (London, 1952), p. 519.

paid tribute and their power increases. Scyld,

monegum máegþum meado-setla oftéah;
egsode Eorl[e]. (5-6a)

His son wins fame in a similar fashion, and so also does Healfdene. To Hrothgar, too, "here-spéd gyfen / wíges weorð-mynd" (64b-65a).

Early in the poem, the poet also offers a brief description of the wars which had been fought between God and the giants. In linking Grendel with Cain, the poet includes other descendants of the first murderer:

þanon untydras ealle onwócon,
eotenas ond ylfe ond orcne-as,
swylce gíantas, þa wið Gode wunnon
lange þrage; hé him Ðaes lean forgeald. (111-114)

No details of the battles are offered, but the poet exults in God's victory and His giving to his enemies their just reward.

At the time of Beowulf's visit to the court of Hrothgar, the Danes are, except for the attacks by Grendel, at peace. Their feuding with the Heathobards has been temporarily (as Beowulf believes) halted by negotiations for the marriage of Ingeld and Freawaru. Beowulf is, to be sure, skeptical of the intended result of the alliance. In his forecasting, to Hygelac, of the probable outcome of the marriage festivities, Beowulf dwells on the old warrior's prompting of the son of the slain Wythergyld to

take vengeance for the death of his sire at the hands of the Danes.⁹ "'þára banena'" (2053a), "those murderers," the aged warrior calls the Danes; he continues to incite the younger man by pointing out how their former enemies strut like victors about the hall:

"'fraetwum hrémig on flet gá[i]ð,
"morðres gylþeð ond þone maðþum byreð.'"
(2054-2055)

Aroused by the old warrior's play on his emotions, the younger man will wreak vengeance for the death of his father. The feud will break out again; "'Weallað wael-níðas'" (2065a). Ingeld's love for Freawaru will cool; and Beowulf foresees no good resulting from the attempt at settling the feud.

The poet also forecasts future troubles for the Danes. When Heorot is built, "sele hlífade / héah ond horn-geap" (81b-82a). The next lines prophesy the downfall of the structure in flames of war--presumably the renewed war with the Heathobards: "heaðo-wylma bád, / láðan líges" (82b-83a).¹⁰

⁹The Ingeld episode is discussed above on pp. 39-40.

¹⁰"The poet refers to . . . [the disastrous end [of the hall] precisely at the moment in which he tells us of its construction and unsurpassed splendour[. It] is the first obvious instance in the poem of one of the author's favourite devices. The contrast inherent in the sudden rapprochement between a brilliant thing or harmonious

Another war concerning which the poet offers only a hint is one which had been waged by Heremod. It is alluded to in a lay joined to that of Sigemund and sung when the warriors are returning from following Grendel's bloody track through the fen. No details of the battles are given.¹¹

During the ensuing festivities at Heorot, the Finnsburg lay is sung. The lay sung in Beowulf is concerned mainly with the problem of vengeance and the dilemma of Hengest.¹² The fragment, usually entitled The Fight at Finnsburg, deals, to be sure, more vividly with the details of the actual fighting between the forces of Finn and those of Hnaef. In the lay, the poet's account of the heroes' funeral is, however, characteristic in its vividness of detail of the concreteness with which the Beowulf poet develops all his martial scenes:

situation vividly set forth and a brief intimation of disaster adds, in an effective way, to the impression of melancholy and sadness in which so much of the poem is steeped." Bonjour, Digressions, pp. 44-45.

¹¹Klaeber suggests that the recitation of the lay concerning Sigemund raises "Beowulf, as it were, to the ranks of preeminent Germanic heroes." P. 158. The Heremod career, however, affords a contrast with that of Beowulf: "the poet stresses the contrast (. . . to Beowulf's great advantage) between Heremod's tyranny and the aversion it brought about, and Beowulf's popularity." Bonjour, Digressions, p. 48.

¹²Cf. pp. 37-39.

betst, beado-rinca
 AEt þaem ade waes
 swat-fah syrce,
 eofer iñen-heard,
 wundum awyrded;
 Het ða Hildeburh
 hire selfre sunu
 ban-fatu baernan
 Eäyme on eaxle
 geomrode giddum.
 wand to wolcnun
 hlynnode for hlawe;
 bengato burston,
 lað-bite lices.
 gæsta gifrost,
 bega folces;

Here-Sçyldinga
 wæs on bael gearu.
 , ep-gesýne
 swyn eal-gylden,
 aepeling manig
 sume on waele crungon.
 aet Hnaefes ade
 sweoloðe befaestan,
 ond on bæl do[a]n.
 ides gnornode,
 Guð-rjinc aðtah;
 wael-fyra maest,
 hafelan multon,
 ðonne blód aetspranc,
 Líg ealle forswaalg,
 para ðe þær guð fornam
 waes hira blaed scacen. (1108b-1124)

A few brief lines in the lay are devoted to the fighting which breaks out in the spring; the poet summarizes the action, noting only that Finn dies bravely on corþre:

féonda féorum, Dá waes heal hroden
 cyning on corþre, swilce Fin slægen,
 ond seo cwen numen. (1151b-1153)

Wars fought by the Geats are also celebrated by the poet. Most important of these are the Geat raids upon the Frisian coast and the battles fought in a series of campaigns with the Swedes, the latter the aggressors in most of these Geat-Swedish wars.

The subject of the raids along the northeast coast of Europe is first brought to the attention of the audience when Beowulf receives gifts from Hrothgar. Among the treasures is a necklace that is later given by Beowulf to his lord, Hygelac. The Geat king is wearing this treasure

when he is killed during the raids which he commands:

þone hring haefde Higelác Géata,
nefa Swertinges, nyhstan siðe,
siðþan he under segne sinc ealgode,
wael-reaf werede; hyne wyrd fornam,
syþðan he for wlenco wean ahsode,
faehðe to Frysum. (1202-1207a)

The poet stresses the folly of Hygelac in making such a rash raid upon what proved in the end overwhelming forces of Frisians and Franks. He "sought out his own fate" against an enemy that proved too powerful for the Geat invaders to conquer:

"Waes sío wróht scepen
"heard wið Húgas syððan Higelac cwom
"fāran flot-herge on Frēsna land
"þaer hyȝe Hetware hilde genaegdon,
"elne geeodon mid ofer-maegene,
"þaet se byȝn-wiga bugan sceolde,
"feoll on feðan." (2913b-2919a)

Other allusions to the Frisian raid are aimed at the "glorification of Beowulf."¹³ They illustrate and emphasize two martial virtues of the hero: his great strength and his adherence to the code that required vengeance for the slaying of one's lord.

Beowulf's strength aids him in escaping from the debacle. The lone survivor of the battle, he swims from the scene; yet he bears the spoils of conflict, the war-

13 Bonjour, Digressions, p. 42.

gear of thirty enemy warriors. The enemy try to entrap him, but many are killed by the Geat champion:

þonan Biówulf cóm
 sylfes craefte, sund-nytte dreah
 haefde him on earme, ana þritig
 hilde-geatwa, þá hé to holme stág.
 Nealles Hetware hremge þorfton
 feðe-wiges, þé him foran ongcean
 linde-þaeron; lyt eft þecwom
 fram þam hild-frecan hames niosan. (2359b-2366)

Later, Beowulf recalls how he had used his strength to wreak vengeance on Daeghrefn, "Húga cempan" and presumed slayer of Hygelac.¹⁴ Beowulf seems to exult, and the poet appears to share his elation, as the Geat king recollects how he used his mighty grip to break the body of the enemy:

"ne waes ecg bona,
 "ac hiȝ hilde-ȝrap heortan wylmas,
 "ban-hus gebraec." (2506b-2508a)

More attention is paid by the poet to the battles in the wars between the Geats and the Swedes. Various episodes are recounted by the poet, but the events are neither connected nor offered in sequence. To an audience that was acquainted with the history of the wars, however, no problem would arise from a brief allusion to some event which had occurred in the series of conflicts. Allusions to these episodes in the Geat-Swedish wars would

¹⁴Cf. pp. 76-77.

"bring home to the audience the theme of the Swedish-Geatish enmity in an impressive gradation. The recurrence of the theme subtly conveys the impression of an impending doom, and leads to the epic prophecy of the downfall of the Geats after Beowulf's death. The dramatic effect of the prophecy is thus heightened."¹⁵

The battles with which the Beowulf poet is chiefly concerned fall into two groups: those in which Beowulf apparently takes no part and those in which he does. The first group includes the battle of Ravenswood; the second occurs during the Geat-Swedish wars which result from unsought Geatish involvement with family feuds in Sweden.

During the later years of Hrethel's rule, the fighting between the Geats and Swedes had apparently ceased; but, after his death, the battles resume. Beowulf, while preparing to meet the dragon, recalls this resumption of war which had followed the death of the old king:

"þá yaes synn ond saçu S्वéona ond Géata;
 "ofer wíð waeter wroht gemaene,
 "here-nið hearda, syððan Hreðel swealt."
 (2472-2474)

Renewal of open conflict between the two nations occurs when the Swedes invade the land of the Geats:

¹⁵Bonjour, Digressions, p. 73.

The Swedes

"eatolne inwit-scear oft gefremedon." (2478)

The Geats rise in defense of their homeland. Haethcyn is slain in the fighting:

"baette Ongentheow	"ac waes wide cūð,
"Haēðcen Hrēþling	ealdre besynðede
"þa for gn̄medlan	wið Hrefna-wudu,
"Geata leode	áerest gesohton
	Gúð-Scilfingas." (2923b-2927)

In more detail than is used in describing any other battle in the poem, the poet pictures the combat that ensues. The audience of Beowulf would be struck with apprehension as the poet told of the dire situation of the Geat forces as they flee the victorious Swedes, the misery of the Geat warriors as, wounded and leaderless, they cower in Ravenswood, the arrogant promise of Ongentheow to see them all hanging from the gallows-trees at the coming of dawn:

"Besaet ðā sinherge	sweorda láfe
"wundum werge;	wéan oft gehét
"earmre teohhe	ondlonge niht,
"cwaed he on mergerne	méces ecgum
"getan wolde,	sum[e] on galg-treowu[m]
"[fuglum]	to gamene." (2936-2941a)

Then the audience's spirits would lift as did those of the trapped Geat warriors, for with the dawn comes the sounds of the war-horns of Hygelac's forces moving into the fray:

:

"sárig-módum "syððan hie Hygelaces "gældor ongeaton, "leoda dugoðe	"Frófor eft gelamp gomod aer-daeg, horn ond býman, ,þá se góda com on last faran." (2941b-2945)
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The fighting between the Geat and Swedish warriors begins with "wael-ráes weora" (2947a); at the sight of the hated Swedes, the Geats with "fáehðe tówehton" (2948b). The battle rages; Ongentheow is forced to retreat far into his own domain, to the entrenchments of his own stronghold (at old Uppsala?). The Geats follow in swift pursuit over the plains of Sweden until the Swedes stand and fight.

Besides those episodes which describe conflict between Beowulf and supernatural foes, no other battle scene in the poem expresses so clearly the poet's (and his auditors') delight in combat. The warrior-audience must in imagination have felt every blow that was struck, must have reeled from the shock of wounds, and must have exulted in the final victory of Wulf and Eofor. No doubt, they responded also with admiration to the valor of the undaunted though aged Ongentheow, "'blonden-fexa.'" For the fierce old Swedish king fights like a great boar, cornered in his own lair.

Attacked by the Geat warrior, Wulf Wonreding, Ongentheow is wounded,

"þaet him for swenge "foro under fexe."	swát áedrum sprong (2966-2967a)
--	------------------------------------

Stung by the wound, "'naes . . . forht swá ðéh,'" the aged Scylfing returns the blow. Wulf recoils unsteadily,

"ac hé him on héafde helm áer gescer,
"þaet he blode fah búgan sceolde,
"feoll on foldan." (2973-2975a)

To succor his fallen brother, Eofor rushes into the fray. He attacks the Swedish king and swings "'brád[n]e méce,'" aiming at "'entiscne helm / brecan ofer bord-weal'" (2979b-2980a). The old leader falls, "'waes in feorh dropen'" (2981b). Then, just as the slain Patroclus is stripped of Achilles' armor by Hector, so is Ongentheow shorn of his war-gear which is carried to the leader of the victorious Geats:

"nam on Ongendío íren-byrnan,
"heard swyrd hilted ond his helm samod;
"hares hyrste Higeláce baer." (2986-2988)

For a time following the slaying of Ongentheow, there is peace between the two peoples. In Sweden, however, civil strife breaks out between the king, Onela, and his two nephews, Eanmund and Eadgils, sons of Ohthere, brother of Onela. The two young men flee into exile at the court of Heardred; in pursuit of them, Onela invades the land of the Geats. The Geats defend their homeland against this invasion; during the conflict, Eanmund and Heardred are killed.

During this war, Wiglaf's father, Weohstan, fights on the side of Onela. Later, when Wiglaf prepares to go to the aid of Beowulf in his fight with the dragon, the young warrior draws "gomel swyrd," the legacy of his father, who has received the weapon for his deeds in the service of the Swedish king:¹⁶

Éanmundes láf

suna Óhtere[s]., þám aet saecge weardð,
wraeccan wine-léasum, Wéohstan bana
meçes ęcgum, ond his magum aetbaer
brun-fagne helm, byrnán hringde,
eald-sweord etonisc. þaët him Onela forgeaf,
his gaedelinges, gúð-gewaedu,
fyrd-searo fuslic; no ymbe þá fáehðe spraec.
(2611b-2618)

The feuds of the past have not been forgotten by the peoples of either side. As Beowulf reminds Hygelac,

As the plans for the wedding of Ingeld and Freawaru for a time halt the feud of the Heathobards and Danes, so has the military power of Beowulf brought to a temporary

16 "That Wiglaf's father was originally a Swede seems probable . . .; and this may be to some extent confirmed by the following account (2612ff) of his fighting in the service of Onela, slaying for him his rebellious nephew Eanmund whom the Geats were supporting, and receiving as a reward from Onela a wondrous ancient sword . . . which Eanmund had owned." Wrenn, p. 223.

cessation that of the Swedes and Geats. The messenger's recounting of the earlier stages of the Geat-Swedish feud ends with the prophecy that, now that Beowulf is dead, the Swedes will seek vengeance for former humiliations:

"Daet ys sío fáehðo ond se féondscipe,
 "wæl-nig wera, ðaes ðe ic [wén] hafo,
 "þe us secead tó Swéona lèoda,
 "syððan hje gefricgead fréan userne
 "ealdor-leasne, þone ðe aér geheold
 "wið hettendum hord ond rice
 "aefter haeleða hryre, hwate Scildingas,
 "folc-réd fremede oððe furður gen
 "eorlscipe efnde." (2999-3007a)

Only a poet primarily interested in composing a martial poem--one to be recited to a warrior-audience--would have dwelt to such a degree upon wars and rumors of wars, the crashing together of foot-troops, the clashing of swords upon helmets, the shower and the storm of arrows. The wars, to be sure, are not the primary topic of the poet; their function is to support his central theme, the contests of Beowulf with preternatural foes. Yet they envelop this central theme and narrative in an atmosphere heroic, martial, one ringing with "the soldiers' music and the rites of war."

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

Beowulf is a martial epic, composed by a warrior poet, of Christian faith, and addressed to an audience made up largely of warriors. The poem reflects the age in which it was composed; that age was a martial one, well mirrored in the content and tone of the epic. It was an heroic age, one in which heroic poetry could flower and one in which there was an audience that would enjoy and relish the adventures of a Beowulf pitted against uncommon foes.

The audience would be one that delighted primarily in action and secondarily in stories of action. Heroic poetry by its very nature would find favor with such listeners or readers:

The first concern of heroic poetry is to tell of action. . . . The most obvious field for such action is battle, and with battle much heroic poetry deals. Of course in treating it the poets are interested in much more than the ideals of manhood. They like the thrills of battle and know that their audience also will like them and enjoy their technical details.¹

That the poem was influenced by the advent and spread of Christianity in England is indisputable; but,

¹Bowra, p. 48.

"in spite of the obvious influence of the new religion, the dominant tone of the poem is courtly rather than clerical. . . . Certain it is that . . . [the poet] was a man . . . [with] a good education, according to the standards for laymen of his time."²

Many students of Beowulf agree that it was written for the court. Lawrence describes it as "highly sophisticated and aristocratic, essentially a court epic."³ Vries declares that "heroic poetry . . . is originally an aristocratic art . . . [and] lives at the court of the nobility."⁴ Dubois concludes that Beowulf reflects courtly life and is "fit entertainment for barons and kings."⁵

The actions of the characters in the poem would be acceptable to the audience and "are no doubt in conformity with the customs at an English court."⁶ Much of the setting, too, would be familiar to such an audience. The poet's listeners must have responded with delight as they visualized moving "continually across the stage kings and queens, and warriors; a mighty spectacle of vigorous and passionate

²Dobbie, p. lv.

³Lawrence, p. 4.

⁴P. 166.

⁵P. 405.

⁶G. Storms, "The Figure of Beowulf in O.E. Epic," ES, XL (1959), 11.

life--wars and combats, domestic feuds, . . . treacheries, villanies--[all] . . . revealed to the alert imagination by stray allusions, and in subsidiary episodes and songs."⁷

Beowulf not only provides such courtly or martial actions to delight an audience; it also portrays the audience itself. The festivities of drinking and feasting and reciting of lays are the festivities of Anglo-Saxon courts; the audiences which listen to such lays as those of Heremod or Sigemund of Finn are the audiences of early England. The listeners of Beowulf see themselves (as do those who would be warriors, including the Walter Mittys) as the heroes of such lays as they listen to or read or see heroic subject matter. The audience of Beowulf was no different from that which thrilled to the action of Homer's heroes or of the valiant but doomed warriors at Thermopylae or Maldon. The audience, too, would feel the stirring of the blood, the vicarious response to the primitive call to action, just as English warriors responded to the challenge of Henry V before the walls of Harfleur:

But when the blast of war blows in our ears
 Then imitate the action of the tiger;
 Stiffen the sinew, summon up the blood,
 Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage;
 Then lend the eye a terrible aspect.

(Hen. V. III.1.5-9)

⁷ W. Macneile Dixon, English Epic and Heroic Poetry, The Channels of English Literature, ed. Oliphant Smeaton (London, 1912), p. 57.

So, too, must the warrior-audience of Beowulf have responded to the challenge of the poet to recall the heroic past:

(1-3)

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