THE IMPORTANT SEMINIC BELIEFS
AND CUSTOMS IN BEDULF

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4-29-1970
(date)
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FOREWORD

The purpose of this paper is to show the important Germanic beliefs and customs that are interwoven in the story of Beowulf. Although Beowulf is written in the English language, it portrays the life of Germanic people. The story was written in the age after the Germanic invasion of England in 499 A.D. ¹

Beowulf was written by a Christian, although he was not very dedicated to the task of uprooting the pagan influences on the story. However, the author did add a Christian afterthought to a story now and then.

Christianity itself was not foreign to the Germanic people. In the year 300 A.D. Wulfila translated the Bible into the Gothic and the Goths were gradually converted to Christianity. Many Vandals and Burgundians came into contact with the Goths and they, too, became Christians. ²

Because of this Christian influence, the ancient religion of the Germanic people is not described in sufficient detail in Beowulf to make a study of it in this paper. Germanic gods such as Wotan and animals sacred to the gods like the raven are mentioned in Beowulf, but there are few examples of them and even fewer examples of the beliefs of the Germanic religion.

THE IMPORTANT GERMANIC BELIEFS
AND CUSTOMS IN BEOWULF

FATE

The Germanic people had a stubborn belief in fate, a determination to struggle to the last breath, accepting, yet defying fate.1 Numerous accounts of fate are given in Beowulf. Upon arriving at Heorot, Beowulf informs Hrothgar that he will "...scorn to bear sword or broad shield, yellow wood, to the battle, but with...(his)grasp...shall grapple with the enemy and fight for life. The one whom death takes can trust the Lord's judgment."2 Going further, he explains that even if Grendel defeats him in battle and carries his lifeless body away to devour, Hrothgar need not worry about burying him. "Fate always goes as it must."3

In the preceding passage it can be seen how Beowulf defies fate by spurning weapons in his battle with Grendel, yet resigns himself to fate by saying, "Fate always goes as it must." The Germanic person not only recognized the necessity of fate, but was willing also to let fate be fulfilled.4

Although the Germans held the belief that one could not stand against fate,5 they believed that through courage an undoomed person could be saved by fate. That is, if a person who is fated to die at a later time

1 Ibid., p. 161.
3 Ibid., p. 9.
5 Ibid., p. 206.
finds himself in a fatal predicament, fate may save him if he redeems himself through courageous actions. Beowulf explains his escape from a seemingly hopeless battle with sea monsters during a swimming contest by saying, "Fate often saves an undoomed man when his courage is good." Another such example is found in the account of the stealings in the dragon's storehouse. The robber had stepped too near the sleeping dragon's head, yet escaped unharmed. The author relates that, "So may an undoomed man who holds favor from the Ruler easily come through his woes and misery."

Fate was not, however, impersonal. Each person had his own fate, developed from his own soul. Although at the moment fate makes itself manifest the subject is made aware of his end and is, naturally, fearful, in that instance he summons all his powers to make his end worthy.

This belief is mirrored in the episode of the fight with the dragon. Although,

... Beowulf's own sad mood and intimation of his approaching end is doubly felt (in the poet's words and in the theme of the hero's speech and elegy), it must not give the impression of weakening in the slightest way the hero's resolve...

Indeed, if Beowulf was not aware of his fate, then the audience certainly was. Countless times the author exclaims that, "... very close was the fate which should come to the old man..." But it is reported that Beowulf, himself, "... was mournful, restless and ripe

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2 Ibid., p. 40.
for death . . . 1

In this, his last battle, Beowulf does strive to make his end worthy, accepting, yet defying fate:

I would not bear sword, weapon, to the worm, if I knew how else according to my boast I might grapple with the monster . . . I will not flee a foot-step from the barrow-ward, but it shall be with us at the wall as fate allots, the ruler of every man. I am confident in heart, . . . By my courage I shall get gold, or war will take your king, dire life-evil." 2

This stubborn acceptance of fate, yet defiance thereof is seen also in the Nibelungenlied. Similarities exist between the story of Beowulf's fight against the dragon and the episode in which Hagen leads a force against Attila.

Upon approaching Hunland, Hagen learns from two mermaids that he and his entire company are doomed to meet death, save one: the chaplain. 3 While ferrying across the Danube, the Hunnish border, Hagen throws the chaplain overboard to see if the prophecy is true. The chaplain, who cannot swim, does not drown, indeed, but is borne by the waves back to the shore. Hagen then knows that the prophecy is true and in an act of defiance, similar to Beowulf's firm intent to go ahead and fight the dragon, he destroys the ferry, his only means of returning to home territory, and continues on to Attila's Court. 4

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1 Ibid., p. 42.
2 Ibid., p. 44.
GIANTS

The giant is found quite often in Germanic writings, and was believed to have been a member of an ancient race of large and strong men that had subsequently passed out of existence.¹ If it is taken into consideration that Beowulf was written by a Christian poet, one can see how Grendel also fits this description.

"... Grendel (was) known as a rover of the borders, one who held the moors, fen and fastness. Unhappy creature, he lived for a time in the home of the monster's race, after God had condemned them as kin of Cain ... From him (Cain) sprang all bad breeds, trolls and elves and monsters ---- likewise the giants who for a long time strove with God ..."

This quote gives a further explanation and description of the origin of giants. One old Germanic explanation of the existence of giants was that they were a race of ancient gods.³ In the light of the fact that a Christian poet wrote Beowulf, a description of giants coming from an ancient race of gods and a description of giants coming from Cain, one of the original inhabitants of earth, are similar.

The mention of trolls and elves in the quote above is also interesting since the Germans believed that the woods and streams abounded with spirits, trolls and dwarves.⁴

One explanation of why giants diminished in number is that when men settled the areas the giants once roamed, they succeeded in driving the giants out. The giants, retreating to the mountains and waste lands, gradually died out, or so the Germanic people believed. Grendel, for example, was known as "... a rover of the borders, one who held the moors, fen and fastness," as has already been said on the previous page.

Ordinarily, giants are shown as being stupid and easily outsmarted by men. Grendel, to be sure, meets with a great deal of success during his plundering of Heorot. He meets little resistance, however, and upon being seriously challenged by Beowulf, "... in mind he became frightened, in his spirit: not for that might he escape the sooner. His heart was eager to get away, he would flee to his hiding-place ... "

Although this passage shows mainly the strength of Beowulf and praises his stamina, it also, if not through exact words, then through its mood, implies the impotence of Grendel.

Giants are also ugly in appearance, as a rule. Here again, it is difficult to find words describing Grendel's appearance, but certainly passages like, "From his eyes came a light not fair ... dreadful monster ... ", give the impression of an ugly appearance.

Natural phenomena were often explained by Germanic people through crediting them to giants. Mountains and boulders came from dirt and rocks dropped from giants' shoes. Earthquakes resulted from their fighting.

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2 Ibid., p. 177.
Although it is totally in the realm of supposition, at one time a natural phenomenon may have occurred at Heorot during which time a man was killed and part of the building destroyed. The Germans may well have blamed it on giants. This, of course, differs from thunder, earthquakes, and boulders, in that these can be caused by giants not seen by people, whereas breaking into a hall and killing a person is in front of witnesses.

It is interesting to note here, that the brothers Grimm once noted that giants are never portrayed as man-eaters on Germanic soil.¹ This should not raise doubts about the authenticity of the giant story in Beowulf or question whether the story actually did occur on Germanic soil, since Grendel and his mother do eat men. John R. Broderius has discounted the Grimms' findings and cites several Icelandic tales and many tales from Sweden, western Germany and Austria in which giants do eat men.²

¹ Ibid., p. 117.
² Ibid., p. 117.
According to Tacitus, for a German to pass an entire day in drinking was not a disgrace and that they could not bear thirst. The Germanic people were on the move, restless. The men were warriors, and their codes of conduct were necessarily different from the later Germanic people who, as farmers, could not spend so much time drinking because of the hard work necessary.

In Beowulf numerous accounts are given of feasts where the drink flows freely. On one instance, Grendel came "... after their beer-drinking ... †2 to reak his havoc. Upon his arrival at Heorot, Beowulf is treated, along with the other Geats and Danes, to a feast at which a thane "... bore in his hands an embellished ale-cup, poured the bright drink ... "3 During the celebration feast after Beowulf's victory, Unferth challenges Beowulf on his bravery and Beowulf replies, "Well, my friend Unferth, drunk with beer you have spoken ... †4 At different times Heorot is referred to as a wine-hall (p. 18), a beer-hall (p. 9), and a mead-hall (p. 18). This all seems to verify the fact that the Germans described in Beowulf did like to drink.

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3 Ibid., p. 9.
4 Ibid., p. 10.
The very words beer and ale are generally believed to be of distinctly Germanic origin. The oldest alcoholic drink known, however, is mead. Mead, which comes from the Sanskrit work for honey, madhu, is made by boiling a mixture of water and honey, then letting it ferment.¹ In the Edda, an old Germanic saga, mead is the favorite drink of the gods and heroes.

WEAPONS AND ARMOR

Among the weapons of the Germanic people, the ash spear, axe, and sword were the most popular. Defensively, the shield stood at the fore, but helmets and armor of ring-mail were also used. The sword became the chief weapon of offense, since the iron used in its production was fairly plentious and cheap.¹

These objects are mentioned often in Beowulf. Describing the Geats' arrival at Heorot, the author mentions that,

... they set down their broad shields ... then
they sat down on the bench --- mailshirts, warriors' clothing, rang out. Spears stood together ... ash steel-gray at the top.²

On another occasion, the author describes Beowulf as "the war-leader, hardy under helmet ... his mail-shirt glistened, armor-net woven by the blacksmith's skill ... ."³

The sword, however, was thought to have practically its own will. The Germanic warrior often spoke with his sword prior to a battle, and thus did all the swords of the heroes of Germanic sagas have their own names.⁴ Beowulf's iron-edged sword that he used in the battle against Grendel's mother was named Hrunting.⁵ Hrunting was spoken of of doing acts of courage, and of having a glory.⁶

¹Ibid., p. 129.
³Ibid., p. 8.
⁶Ibid., pp. 26-27.
REVENGE

Another ideal of the Germanic people was revenge (Rache). Part of this belief was that a Sippe, the unit of their society, must avenge the death of a member. In fact, it did not even have to be the murderer that revenge was brought against.\(^1\) Part of the requirements for joining a leader's following was that one must avenge the leader's death if and when it occurred.\(^2\)

An example of this ideal of revenge is seen in the story related at the banquet honoring Beowulf for his conquest of Grendel. The Jutes and Danes had met at Finnsburg, where a fight broke out in which several Jutes and Danes were killed, including Hnaef who was described as the king of the Danes. An uneasy peace was declared, which prescribed that the Danes had to live in peace with and in essence follow the Jutish king responsible for the death of their own king, Hnaef.

One Dane named Hengst stayed on in the Jutish land, but after a winter still "... more he thought of revenge for his wrongs ... ."\(^3\) Eventually an attack was made on the Jutish King and revenge was had. The ideal of revenge is mirrored in Hengst. He cannot live under the awful guidelines of following a king who has murdered his own leader. Even Grendel's mother follows this ideal of revenge. After her son's


death, she "... would go on a sorrowful venture, avenge her son's death." This took the feasting people at Heorot by surprise. They did not believe that giants, monsters and forces of evil had anyone to avenge them.

But the most meaningful example of what the ideal of revenge is, comes from Beowulf, himself, as he says, "It is better for a man to avenge his friend than much mourn." This is the meaning of the Germanic ideal, avenging rather than grieving.

The story of Beowulf also relates an ironic twist on the ideal of revenge. A man strikes down accidentally one of his own kinsmen. This was "... a fatal fight, without hope of recompense, a deed wrongly done, baffling to the heart; yet it had happened that a prince had to lose life unavenged." There is no provision given for revenge in the case of one member of the Sippe killing a fellow kinsman: a truly tragic death.

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1 Ibid., p. 23.
2 Ibid., p. 25.
3 Ibid., p. 43.
FEUDS

The Germanic belief in revenge is related closely to their concept of feuds. Germanic feuds broke out in many ways. The feud between the Swedes and the Geats, mentioned before Beowulf's funeral, for example, originated with the Geatish invasion of Sweden under Hygelac and Hæthcyn. Heavy losses were sustained by both sides, with the Geats emerging victorious. It is this invasion that the Swedes will most likely remember upon hearing of Beowulf's death, for according to the Germanic belief in revenge, the Swedes should seek revenge, and no time would be more opportune than that shortly after Beowulf's death.¹

Another feud mentioned at this same time is the one between the Geats and the Friesians and Franks, started when Hygelac attacked the Friesians, who with the help of the Franks, repulsed the attack and subsequently killed Hygelac.² Other feuds mentioned in Beowulf include the feud between the Jutes and Danes mentioned during the discussion of revenge.

In order to avoid these feuds or to end them, the Germans would often pay 'wergeld' to the injured party.³ Hrothgar mentions to Beowulf how he at one time ended a feud caused by Beowulf's father by paying 'blood-money'.⁴

²Ibid., p. 41.
Wergeld is also mentioned in conjunction with Grendel's repeated attacks. It is said that,

Grendel had fought a long time with Hrothgar, for many half-years maintained mortal spite, feud, and enmity --- constant war. He wanted no peace with any of the Danish host, would not withdraw his deadly rancor, or pay compensation: no counsellor there had any reason to expect splendid repayment at the hands of the slayer.¹

It was also not unheard of to give daughters of kings in marriage to the king of a hostile nation as wergeld.² Such an occurrence is mentioned by Beowulf in the passage in which he calls the queen Kothryth "one who weaves peace."³ In other words, she was one who had brought about peace by marrying the king of a hostile country.

¹Ibid., p.4.
²Ibid., p.34.
³Ibid., p.34.
HUMOR

Humor is not lacking in Germanic writings. One is reminded of this in reading the Waltharius, where after a terrible fight, Hagano, Gunthari, and Walthari, severely named, sit down to some wine and become good friends again. The humor in this passage is geared for a listening audience, the type of audience these early Germanic writings were subjected to. It is a grim humor, as befits people deeply influenced by the arduous life of the sea and the foreboding forests.

The passage begins with Hagano talking to Walthari, who has lost his right hand in the fight:

Hagano sprach: Von jetzt an, Freund, wirst du Hirsche jagen, um dich an Handschuhen stets aus ihrer Decke zu lüben. Aber den rechten stopf' aus mit weicher Wolle, das rat' ich, um durch das Abbild der Hand den, der nicht Bescheid weiss, zu täuschen. Aber was wirst du nun sagen, erkennt man, dass du die Übung deines Volkes missachtend, das Schwert an der Rechten befestigst, dass du dein Weib auch, ergreift dich einmal wohl ein Verlangen, mit deiner Linken zärtlich umschlingst in verkehrter Schirmung?

Walthari replies to Hagano, who lost an eye and three molars in the fight:

Warum bist du so vorlaut? Mich wundert's, halbblinder Franke. Werde ich Hirsche jagen, so wirst du Eberfleisch meiden. Argwöhnlieh schießend wirst

2 Ibid., p. 156.

Humor in Beowulf is both of this grim nature and of a more light-hearted air. An example of the more grim humor in Beowulf occurs in the account of the battle with Grendel's mother. The following is reported:

Then the chief of the thanes, man daring in deeds, enriched by new glory, warrior dear to battle, came to greet Hrothgar. Then Grendel's head was dragged by the hair over the floor to where men drank, a terrible thing to the earls and the woman with them, an awful sight: the men looked upon it.!

The humor of this passage lies in the last line. After making much ado about the awfulness of the sight and how it was terrible to the earls and woman, the relater of the story says, "the men looked upon it." A listening audience of men, sitting around their mead-benches would find this funny.

Two further passages from Beowulf show the use of overstatement and understatement for humorous effects. In one, the author describes Beowulf's escape from the Frisians:

From there Beowulf came away by means of his own strength, performed a feat of swimming; he had on his arm, one man alone, thirty suits of armor when he stepped into the sea.2

This use of overstatement would humor the audience, as would the following usage of understatement.

At his arrival feast in Heorot, Beowulf is accosted by Unferth,

2 Ibid., p. 41.
who accuses him of being weak, having lost a swimming contest. Beowulf
proceeds to defend himself, describing the contest in which he spent seven
days, equipped with a sword and chain-mail, swimming across an expanse
of water. This in itself is humorous, but the punch line comes in the
following passage:

I have not heard say of you any such hard
matching of might, such sword-terror. Breca
never yet in the games of war --- neither he
nor you --- achieved so bold a deed with
bright swords. (I do not much boast of it.)

After a lengthy description of his feat, Beowulf's aside, "I do not much
boast of it," comes as a humorous ending.

\[^1\text{Ibid.}, p. 11.\]
HORSES

Germanic warriors used horses and, according to Caesar, were excellent riders. At death, a warrior would often be buried with the accompaniment of his horse.¹

The following are a few passages from Beowulf in which horses are mentioned: "At times battle-famed men let their horses gallop, let them race where the paths seemed fair, known for their excellence."²

Hrothgar ordered eight horses to be brought into Heorot at the celebration feast after Beowulf's victory over Grendel,³ and, true to the Germanic custom that important leaders were always mounted,⁴ when attack is made ready on Grendel's mother, "... a horse (was) bridled for Hrothgar, a curly-maned mount. The wise king moved in state; the band of shield-bearers marched on foot."⁵

³Ibid., p. 18.
The halls and houses of the Germanic people were built of timber, this being dictated by the vast forests and abundant timber in northern Europe. Indeed, Heorot, the hall mentioned in Beowulf, was a "timbered hall." Heorot is also described as being "firmly made fast with iron bands, both inside and outside." Iron was plentiful and cheap to the early Germans. They could have used it liberally in constructing halls, as they did in manufacturing swords.

In fact, Owen maintains that Heorot was not an Anglo-Saxon hall, but rather one from Denmark and probably of the sixth century A.D.

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3 Ibid., p. 14.
5 Ibid., p. 140.
Although women were denied the right to participate in tribal assemblies, they were still revered by the males. The woman seemed to hold the keys of the house and controlled household management. The following paragraph shows this reverence in which the women were held, and, to some extent, the control they had of household affairs:

Wealhtheow came forth, Hrothgar’s queen, mindful of customs, gold-adorned, greeted the men in the hall; and the noble woman offered the cup first to the keeper of the land of the East-Danes, bade him be glad at the beer drinking, beloved of the people. In joy he partook of feast and hall-cup, king famous for victories. Then the woman of the Helmings went about to each one of the retainers, young and old, offered them the costly cup, until the time came that she brought the mead bowl to Beowulf, the ring-adorned queen, mature of mind. Sure of speech she greeted the man of the Geats, thanked God that her wish was fulfilled, that she might trust in some man for help against deadly deeds. 

Further evidence of the reverence for women is found in Hrothgar’s saying, “Yes she may say, whatever woman brought forth this son among mankind --- if she still lives --- that the God of Old was kind to her in her child-bearing.” It would be hard for a culture that held a low opinion of women to give so much credit to the woman for bearing children and receiving God’s blessing.

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1 Ibid., p. 143.
3 Ibid., p. 17.
THE SIPPE

The central energ; source from which the lives of the Germanic people were affected was the Sippe, a family of kinsmen. These families were not, however, formed around a certain individual. On the contrary, the family formed the foundation, the unifying influence from which individuals departed. The individual knew what his duty in life was, for the Sippe told him and it stayed with the person much as we consider the conscience staying with people.

The early Germans did, in fact, have a word meaning conscience, but they were not plagued with problems of conscience, for that which was virtuous was prescribed by the Sippe. Rights and wrongs were spelled out by the Sippe. What one person of a Sippe was allowed to do, perhaps another person of a different Sippe could not do.

The individual was confident of his actions, since he believed in the rightness of his goals and the sufficiency of his powers. This confidence was practically inborn and the Sippe served as an ever-present wellspring of support for his actions. The individual was dependent on his Sippe. It dictated the success of his deeds. But even if the person was unsuccessful in a deed --- that, too, was inherent in his Sippe; that, too, was dictated by it.

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2 Ibid., p. 173.
3 Ibid., p. 175.
Individuals felt, though, that they must always prove themselves worthy to the Sippe through their deeds. ¹ Although he received his good fortune from the Sippe, the individual could increase the Sippe's prestige through his ventures. In fact, each member of the Sippe was expected to continually uphold the honor of the Sippe. Inaction only caused the Sippe to lose honor.²

Tacitus also knew of this desire for action, for fame. He reported that if a native state is without battle for a long period of time, the youths will voluntarily seek tribes waging battle, for inaction is odious to their race and they gain renown and fame more quickly in battle.³

References are made to Beowulf's Sippe in Beowulf. Hrothgar, in bidding Beowulf farewell, says, "... the Sea Geats will not have a better to choose as their king, as guardian of their treasure, if you wish to hold the kingdom of your kinsmen."⁴ Here, the "kingdom of your kinsmen" probably refers to Beowulf's Sippe, to which he is returning. Upon arriving home, Beowulf meets Hygelac and sat down, "kinsman with kinsman."⁵

Beowulf, like other early Germans, sought praise, not just for himself, but even more so for his Sippe. In his fight with Grendel's mother, he meets heavy odds yet fights on. The author states, "So ought a man to do when he thinks to get long-lasting praise in battle: he cares not for his life."⁶ And, as was stated above, the individual in the Sippe also

¹ Ibid., p. 173.
² Ibid., p. 175.
⁵ Ibid., p. 35.
⁶ Ibid., p. 27.
sought fame for the Sippe. Beowulf, too, "... was ... mindful of fame,"¹ as is seen in his fight against the dragon as well as against Grendel and Grendel's mother.

Beowulf exhibited the confidence obtained from the Sippe in his fight against the dragon. Before battle he states, "I will not flee a footstep from the barrow-ward, but it shall be with us at the wall as fate allots ... I am confident in heart ... ."² Pride and boasting are likely outcomes of the confidence one obtains from his Sippe and the belief in the rightness of his actions. Beowulf is blessed with both. In reference to boasting, just before his battle with the dragon, "Beowulf spoke, for the last time spoke words in boast: In my youth I engaged in many wars. Old guardian of the people, I shall seek battle, perform a deed of fame ... ."³ He also boasts to Hrothgar that, "... now alone I shall settle affairs with Grendel ... ."⁴ and tells of his many feats of strength.

Pride is also witnessed in Beowulf's demeanor. Take, for example, his speech at Heorot before the battle with Grendel, "I resolved that I should altogether fulfill the will of your people or else fall in slaughter ... I shall achieve a deed of manly courage or else have lived to see in this mead-hall my ending day."⁵

Beowulf also realized the price of inactivity. Upon hearing of

¹Ibid., p. 47.
²Ibid., p. 44.
³Ibid., p. 44.
⁴Ibid., p. 8.
⁵Ibid., p. 12.
Hrothgar's troubles, "He bade that a good ship be made ready for him, said he would seek the war-king over the swan's road, . . . since he had need of men."¹ The Sippe supported him in this venture as was natural. "Very little did wise men blame him for that adventure, . . . they urged the brave one on . . . "²

¹Ibid., p. 5.
²Ibid., p. 5.
DEATH

The Germanic people did not look upon death as a final end to life, nor even as a transformation to another form. Instead, death was considered a crisis in a person's life. Whether the deceased could conquer death and continue his existence unhindered depended on his inner power and the help he received from his friends.¹

The manner in which a person died was also quite important. The belief was that one should die while still healthy and strong so that in his next existence he could call on this surplus of strength left behind. Senility was feared.²

It was also held that the dead person could take revenge on others for injustices done him. Therefore, the burial was done not so much with love and honor for the deceased as with care to pacify him.³

One passage from Beowulf shows the influence of this belief. In revenge for her son's death, Grendel's mother killed Aeschere:

Then in her turn Grendel's mother . . . avenged her son fiercely killed a warrior; there the life of Aeschere departed . . . and when morning came the folk of the Danes might not burn him, death-weary, in the fire, nor place him on the pyre . . . she had borne his body away in fiend's embrace beneath the mountain stream. That was the bitterest of Hrothgar's sorrows . . . ⁴

¹ DeVries, Op. Cit., p. 188.
² Ibid., p. 188.
³ Ibid., p. 188.
If this lament for the inability to bury Aeschere is not made because of the fear the early Germans had for the dead, which may be the case, then perhaps the sorrow in the passage is expressed because of another belief: It was believed that with the sudden death of a person, the soul was left homeless.¹ Perhaps the friends of Aeschere were seeking to pacify the soul and feared that unless Aeschere were buried, his soul would wander homelessly.

At the moment of death, the body is laid on the bare earth where it is soon visited by acquaintances.² As long as the corpse is above ground, it is kept watch over. The early Germans did this out of fear of the gloomy nature of death, the fear of the dead, and also to protect the body against evil spirits. During this watch, time is spent in dancing or singing.³

The Germanic belief in death's not being the end of life is expressed in Beowulf. Speaking of Aeschere's death, Beowulf tells Hrothgar, "Each of us must await his end of the world's life."⁴ Another allusion to this belief is made shortly after Beowulf's own death: "... he himself did not then know in what way his parting with the world should come."⁵ References to death such as these belie a feeling of continuation of life. Phrases such as "life's end" are replaced by phrases such as "world's life" and "divide the life from the body ... "⁶

² Ibid., p. 190.
³ Ibid., p. 191.
⁵ Ibid., p. 23.
⁶ Ibid., p. 13.
Beowulf is also portrayed as dying the type of death desired by the Germanic people, a death met with a still healthy and sturdy body. Shortly before his death in the battle with the dragon, he is described as "... hardy under helmet ... (he) had trust in his strength ...".\(^1\) Although he was described also as being old, he was not senile. The dread for this condition is seen in the following words, "... that was a king blameless in all things until age took from him the joys of his strength - old age that has often harmed many."\(^2\) Beowulf, rather, exemplifies in his battle the thought, "Let him who may get glory before death: that is best for the warrior after he has gone from life."\(^3\) Beowulf "... died a wonderful death."\(^4\)

At death, Beowulf was laid on the ground, after Germanic custom, as is witnessed in the report that "... they found on the sand, soulless, keeping his bed of rest, him who in former times had given them rings."\(^5\) Wiglaf kept watch over him, as is seen in the account, "Wiglaf son of Weohstan sits over Beowulf, ... holds death-watch over the loved and the hated."\(^6\) These, too, were Germanic customs. And, according to the same customs, "The company arose. Without joy they went below Earnaness to look on the wonder with weeping tears."\(^7\) Beowulf was thus visited by his acquaintances.

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\(^1\) Ibid., p. 44.
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 33.
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 25.
\(^4\) Ibid., p. 53.
\(^5\) Ibid., p. 53.
\(^6\) Ibid., p. 51.
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 53.
BURIAL

The burial customs of the Germanic people were different at different times of their history. During the Völkerwanderung, inhumation was prevalent, whereas in the Bronze Age through the Roman Age cremation was almost universal among the Germans of the North. The northern Germans and those who lived along those coasts and islands would also place the deceased on his boat along with all the owner's possessions and then set the boat on fire. Tacitus also reports that the Germanic funerals were not pompous, but consisted of burning the body with certain types of wood. His arms and sometimes his horse were given to the fire. The tomb was formed by a turf mound. He commented further that the Germans soon dismissed tears but were long in grief and sorrow.

DeVries also writes that many objects that the dead person used in life were often buried along with the body. This practice stemmed from the belief that the deceased could make use of these objects in his next life. He goes on to report that it was the custom of the Germanic people to carry the body around the church or the grave a number of times before burial.

2 Ibid., p. 178.
5 Ibid., p. 194.
In the first few pages of Beowulf, reference is made to a Germanic burial. The following passage describes the burial of Scyld:

His dear companions carried him down to the sea-currents. There in the harbor stood the ring-prowed ship, ice-covered and ready to sail. Then they laid down the ruler they had loved, in the hollow ship. There was brought great store of treasure. I have not heard of a ship more splendidly furnished with war-weapons and battle-dress, swords and mail-shirts. On his breast lay a great many treasures that should voyage with him. Then also they set a golden standard high over his head, let the water take him, gave him to the sea. Sad was their spirit, mournful their mind.¹

Although no mention is made of setting the ship ablaze, there are otherwise many similarities between this funeral and the ones of the northern coastal dwellers. Mention is also made of the sadness and mournfulness of the people, a condition also noted by Tacitus.

After the battle between the Jutes and the Danes, another funeral is described. This one is more similar to the cremation pyres attributed to the Germans of the Roman Age, as the following excerpt attests:

The funeral pyre was made ready and gold brought up from the hoard. The best of the warriors was ready on the pyre. At the fire it was easy to see many a bloodstained battle-shirt. Then Hildeburh bade give her own son to the flames. The woman mourned, sang her lament.²

It is Beowulf's own funeral, however, that is most similar to the traditional Germanic funeral. In fact, according to DeVries, the funeral

²Ibid., p. 20.
of Beowulf, although much decorated by the author, is quite similar to the description of Attila's burial.\(^1\)

Following is the description of Beowulf's funeral:

> Then the people of the Geats made ready for him a funeral pyre on the earth, no small one, hung with helmets, battle-shields, bright mail-shirts, just as he had asked. Then in the midst they laid the great prince, lamenting their hero, their beloved lord. Then warriors began to awaken on the barrow the greatest of funeral fires; the wood-smoke climbed... Sad in spirit they lamented... the death of their liege lord. (And the Geatish woman, wavy-haired queen of the weather-Geats, cried a lament, sorry-hearted sang, again and again.)

> Then the people of the Weather-Geats built a mound on the promontory, one that was high and broad, wide-seen by seafarers... In the barrow they placed rings and jewels... They let the earth hold the wealth of earls... Then the brave in battle rode round the mound... would bewail their sorrow and mourn their king, recite dirges and speak of the man... Thus the people of the Geats... lamented the death of their lord...  

Besides the similarity of the funeral pyre, the cremation of articles the deceased might use in his next life and the lamentation, other Germanic customs and beliefs are seen in the account of Beowulf's funeral.

The riding around the mound, for example, is probably a throw-back to the custom of carrying the body around the church or the grave. Mention is also made of making the grave mound on a promontory, which is in accordance with the Germanic custom of choosing hills for public ceremonies in the belief that the earth is living where it has raised

\(^1\) DeVries, Op. Cit., p. 194.

itself up and also because a hill might be the gravesite of an ancestor.\(^1\)

The mound itself agrees with Tacitus' report that has previously been mentioned. Reference is also made in the preceding passage to songs sung at the funeral. In his study, DeVries has stated that these songs are especially similar to the songs sung at Atilla's funeral.\(^2\)


\(^2\) Ibid., p. 195.
The preceding passage not only mentions the importance placed on a large band of followers (or retainers as written here), but also mentions that after Hrothgar set a good example in battle, "his retainers gladly obeyed him."

In the beginning of the book, the author also mentions a Beowulf, the son of Scyld (not the hero of the book), who won fame and glory. It is said of him that, "In this way a young man ought by his good deeds, by giving splendid gifts while still in his father's house, to make sure that later in life beloved companions will stand by him, that people will serve him when war comes. Through deeds that bring praise, a man shall prosper in every country."¹

Beowulf, himself, serves as an example of the war-chief elected for the duration of a battle. Although self-elected, he leads a group of warriors to do battle with Grendel. This was often done during Caesar's time. One of the leading men in an assembly would announce a raid and ask for followers. The leader and his retinue, as the group of followers is called, were bound in a relationship only for the duration of the raid.²

Beowulf also expresses the practice of serving as an example rather than coercing his retainers to do battle. In preparation for battle with the dragon, he says to his retainers, "This is not your venture, nor is it right for any man except me alone that he should spend his strength against the monster, to do this man's deed."³ In fact, even when being defeated by the dragon, he still does not beckon his followers to come to his aid.

¹Ibid., p. 1.
³Donaldson, Op. Cit., p. 44.
The ideal of princely liberality is especially emphasized in Beowulf. Retainers were paid through feasts, as reported by Tacitus, and through the dispensation of treasure, which had more of a symbolic, spiritual importance than a material one. The ideal Germanic king would bestow the treasure he had captured from an enemy upon his retainers as a visible proof of the relationship in which the king and retainers were bound.

Hrothgar is referred constantly as "ring-giver" and "dispenser of treasure." Beowulf receives "... a decorated battle-banner — a helmet and mailshirt: many saw the glorious costly sword borne before the warrior ..." as well as a golden standard for his feat against Grendel. His retainers are likewise rewarded by Hrothgar. Upon another occasion, Hrothgar tells Beowulf, "Hold now and guard the best of houses: remember your fame, show your great courage, keep watch against the fierce foe. You will not lack what you wish if you survive that deed of valor."

Beowulf is no less liberal with dispensing treasure. The sword he gives his boat-guard (p. 33) is cherished by the receiver and, as an example of the symbolic meaning of these gifts, brings him much honor in the assembly. Beowulf's death is brought about in part by his desire to get the dragon's treasure for his people, and his retainers show their honor for him by burying much of the treasure with him, again emphasizing the symbolism of the giving of gifts.

Feasts are also a method used by Hrothgar to pay his retainers, as was the Germanic custom. Feasts are held to honor Beowulf's coming, his victory over Grendel and his victory over Grendel's mother.

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3 Ibid., p. 18.
4 Ibid., p. 12.
RETINUES

The sons of all Germanic warriors were taken into the assembly of warriors at puberty. At this time they were given weapons and designated as warriors. Those whose fathers were noble or who had given outstanding service were made principles, (or leading men). These men served in retinues, the following of a chieftan, and having gained glory in a retinue, they partook in the deliberations of the leading men.¹

The assembly might be compared to a draft pool. As has been mentioned before in the section on leaders, one of the leading men in the assembly could announce a raid and ask for followers from the assembly. These followers made up the aforementioned retinue. Service in a retinue was quite important, because the young warrior could not partake of the deliberations of the assembly until he had first proven himself by service in a retinue.

Tacitus noted this importance of gaining glory in a retinue. He reported that if a native state is without battle for a long period of time, youths will seek tribes waging battle, for inaction was odious to their race and they gained renown and fame more quickly in battle.²

Joining a leader's following meant that as long as the member continued to follow the chieftan, he must remain absolutely loyal to the leader,

defending him in battle, avenging his death, or to even perish for him.¹

In battle, it was "... an infamy and a reproach for life to have survived
the chief and returned from the field."²

The author of Beowulf includes accounts of both retinues and assemblies
in his story. Hrothgar's company, however, shows an unusual mixture of
both retinue and assembly. Hrothgar's "... company grew into a great
band of warriors,"³ and took on more of the characteristics of an
assembly. He commanded a hall be built to house his following and therein
"Many a noble sat often in council..."⁴ A retinue was, indeed, comprised
mainly of tribal nobility,⁵ thus hinting that this report of nobles' sitting
in council was just a description of a retinue. But as has been said
before, the relationship between the leader and his retinue became more
permanent in Tacitus' time and retinue and leader were together in war and
peace, thus paving the way for an assembly set up.⁶

More often, though, is mention given of retinues and the retainers
that made up these retinues. Beowulf assembled a retinue about him to
fight Grendel, and Hrothgar, as mentioned above, started out with a company
of retainers. The very account of so many feasts belies the existence of
retinues, for as Tacitus reported, when not fighting, the retainers would
spend most of their time feasting and in idleness.⁷

Reading Beowulf, the reader is almost certainly made aware that the

⁴Ibid., p. 4.
⁶Ibid., p. 29.
society described is a warrior society. The thoughts of Beowulf that, "Let him who may get glory before death: that is best for the warrior after he has gone from life." pervades the story. The people are always "mindful of fame." It is this sort of atmosphere that a society made up of people seeking glory in battle through service in a retinue creates.

The Germanic ideal of the retainer remaining absolutely loyal to the leader is especially emphasized in Beowulf. Nowhere is this more emphatically put forth than in the account of Beowulf's fight with the dragon. Instead of staying by his side, Beowulf's retainers "... crept to the wood, protected their lives." They are strongly chastized for this act, however, as they are told that "Death is better for any earl than a life of blame." They feel this shame, too, for "They bore their shields, ashamed, their war-clothes, to where the old man lay ..." This is a good example of the shame that the Germanic warrior is to have if he survives the leader in battle or forsakes him in battle.

Wiglaf, on the other hand, is the model of the Germanic warrior ideal, the warrior who will defend and avenge his leader, die for him if necessary. In his own words he mouths this ideal: "Let us go to him, help our war-chief while the grim terrible fire persists. God knows of me that I should rather that the flame enfold my body with my gold-giver. It does not seem right to me for us to bear our shields home again unless we can first fell the foe, defend the life of the prince of the Weather-Geats." Wiglaf then goes forth and fights by the side of his leader.

2 Ibid., p. 45.
3 Ibid., p. 50.
4 Ibid., p. 50.
5 Ibid., p. 46.
PRECIOUS SUBSTANCE

The Germanic people highly valued display and precious substance.¹

Heorot, for example, had hangings on the wall that shone with gold,² and leaders, following the ideal of princely liberality, often gave out valuable treasure, as has already been discussed in the sections on leaders and retinues.

Beowulf showed this value placed upon display when he asked to see the dragon's hoard shortly before his death. In his request he says,

Be quick now, so that I may see the ancient wealth, the golden things, may clearly look on the bright curious gems, so that for that, because of the treasure's richness, I may more easily leave life . . . .

³Ibid., p. 48.
CLOSING

These are some of the more outstanding examples of Germanic beliefs and customs in *Beowulf*. They are probably not all of the examples contained in *Beowulf*. Such beliefs as Germanic religion, or agricultural customs are not included in this paper, either because of the danger posed by other influences on *Beowulf*, as in the religion question, or because of the scope and coverage of the book, as in the agriculture question. Other examples of Germanic customs doubtless exist but were missed because of this writer's lack of knowledge of the total history of the Germanic peoples. The evidences of Germanic life recorded in this paper are some of the most obvious and concrete, while more abstract ideas, such as the very way the Germanic people looked upon life, why they boasted so or sought fame, are either not mentioned at all or are handled only briefly. A further handling of such abstracts would carry the writer beyond the scope of this paper.

Some Germanic beliefs besides religion may also have been corrupted because of the Christian author. Although the ideals of Ehre and Treue are well maintained as can be seen in the sections on leaders and retinue, the negative values of Haβ and Rache are evident but may well have been played down. The Christian author was good about maintaining many of the Germanic beliefs, however, and often glories in the past.

There is also no section included on the influences of the Germanic language on the Anglo-Saxon of the *Beowulf*. The decision not to include a section on this topic was made because of the writer's lack of linguistic training. A comparison of "Welaga nu waltant got, wermurt skihiht,"
from *Hildebrandslied* could have been made with a sentence like "Hwaet! we Gardena in geardagum . . . isig utfus, aethelings sciff . . . ." from *Beowulf* and a point could then have been made of the alliteration used in both instead of end rime, and a report made on the fact that the Germanic language had undergone the Germanic Consonant Shift which fixed the accent on the stem of the word, thus enabling the primitive form of Germanic verse that depended on alliteration, but the writer could have gone no further in comparing the two languages.

A prose translation of the *Beowulf* was read for this paper, however, and the writer concentrated entirely on the customs and beliefs of the Germanic people as mirrored in *Beowulf*. 
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