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"THEY BEGAN TO SING HIM A *SORHLEOÐ*": POSSIBLE ECHOES OF THE ANGLO-SAXON FUNERARY RITES IN *THE DREAM OF THE ROOD*

Abstract

The Dream of the Rood constitutes one of the most intriguing products of Old English literature, both in terms of its highly imaginative, heroicised depiction of Christ and the Cross and on account of its numerous Christian and pre-Christian intersections. One of the most arresting issues in it, however, particularly as regards the poem's cultural background, is its mention of a *sorhleoð* (l. 67), the 'sorrow-song', or 'dirge' that the disciples begin to sing once they have placed the body of the Saviour in the sepulchre. Given that there is no mention of any songs being chanted at the time of Christ's burial in the canonical Gospels, it seems rational to suggest that the anonymous poet must have supplied this 'missing' information on the basis of his own, perhaps somewhat antiquarian, knowledge of the burial customs in Anglo-Saxon England.

Keywords: Jesus Christ, Gospels, elegy, Old English poetry, *The Dream of the Rood*, *Beowulf*

The Old English poem which in the modern era came to be known as *The Dream of the Rood* is, without doubt, one of the most captivating and, for that reason, oft-discussed products of Anglo-Saxon literary culture.[1] It is also probable that this highly imaginative rendition of the Crucifixion was, in its time, a relatively popular work whose

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[1] There are four major scholarly editions of the poem (and the manuscript from which it originates) in the English language, namely those of George Philip Krapp (1932), Bruce Dickins and Alan S.C. Ross (1934), John C. Pope (1966) and Michael Swanton (1970). Besides, *The Dream of the Rood* may be found in practically every anthology of English verse, both medieval and those that cover the entire history of English literature (e.g. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* in six volumes).

territorial reach and influence (at least as far as the characteristically Germanic Christian-heroic implications are concerned) stretched from Northumbria to Wessex, Kent and even beyond. As is quite well known, the sole complete version of the poem (or so it appears) is to be found in northern Italy, in the so-called Vercelli Book, a late-tenth-century codex of West Saxon, perhaps Worcester,[2] origin.[3] Some lines from an earlier, though not necessarily primary, rendering of the poem are to be found inscribed in runes (in the Northumbrian dialect) on the eighth-century cross which, until 1642, stood in the parish church of Ruthwell, Dumfriesshire (hence its name the Ruthwell Cross).[4] It is sometimes suggested that the inscription on the eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon cross-reliquary kept in the treasury of the Cathedral of St. Michael and St. Godula in Brussels (and, accordingly, known as the Brussels Cross) bears an inscription that, at least in some way, corresponds to lines 44 and 48 of the Old English poem.[5] Finally, though, it appears, by no means exclusively, certain reverberations of (or analogies to) *The Dream of the Rood*, or, at any rate, its overall cultural imagery (where Christ is assigned the role of a military leader) could be detected in the ninth-century Old Saxon epic poem *The Hêliand*.[6]

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[2] Max Förster, 'Der Vercelli-Codex CXVII nebst Abdruck einiger altenglischer Homilien der Handschrift', *Festschrift für Lorenz Morsbach. Studien zur englischen Philologie*, 50 (1913), 20–179.

[3] Unfortunately, it is not known how the Anglo-Saxon manuscript ended up in northern Italy. For an outline of the manuscript's early history, see Michael Swanton's edition of *The Dream of the Rood* (Exeter, 2000), 1–9.

[4] In 1642, in accordance with the *Act anent the demolishing of Idolatrous Monuments* that had been passed two years earlier by the General Assembly in Aberdeen, the cross was thrown down by the Presbyterian iconoclasts and buried in the churchyard; John L. Dinwiddie, *The Ruthwell Cross and the Ruthwell Savings Bank* (Dumfries, 1971), 25–35. Nearly two centuries later, in 1823, the Scottish minister Rev. Henry Duncan had the monument restored and re-erected next to the entrance gateway to his own manse (4–41). Finally, in 1887 the cross was moved to its present location, the purpose-built apse of the Ruthwell Church (46–9).

[5] See, especially, *Rod wæs ic arǣred; ahof ic ricne cyning … Eall ic was mid blode bestemed* (*The Dream of the Rood*, l. 44). "Rood was I reared; I bore aloft the mighty King. … I was all drenched in blood"; and *Rod is min nama; geo ic ricne Cyning bær byfigynde, blod bestemed* (Brussels Cross; Monika Opalińska, *Sen o Krzyżu. Staroangielski poemat mistyczny* [Warszawa, 2007], 16) – "Rood is my name; trembling, once, I bore a mighty King, [all] soaked with blood".

[6] In this fascinating alliterative gospel harmony of unknown authorship, Christ is, by and large, envisaged as a genuine early medieval chieftain, the *manno mahtig*

It is this depiction of Jesus as a well-nigh Germanic hero that – besides the appearance of the animistic Cross as His faithful retainer and, at the same time, a twofold instrument of Christ's execution and our salvation – for nearly two centuries has received much of the scholarly attention. Amongst the most intriguing passages and lexical ambiguities that came to be frequently approached by successive generations of literary critics is, for instance, the concept of our Saviour essentially stripping Himself (l. 39), almost in a berserk-like fashion, prior to what the poet subsequently declares to be *micel gewinn* (l. 65), a somewhat equivocal phrase which could be understood as a great 'strife', 'gain' or 'win', all of which were obviously very much in line with both the form and function of the Crucifixion.[7] Of particular interest to our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon mentality in the wake of the apparent seventh-century missionary efforts are also the noticeably Germanised epithets used to describe the Son of God, epithets of an evidently cultural (e.g. *frea* – 'lord', *beorn* – 'warrior'[8]) or martial (e.g. *heofonrices weard* – 'guardian of the Kingdom of Heaven', *sigora Wealdend* – 'Lord of victories') nature. Last but not least, the passage in which the poet relates the funerary practices initiated by those *æþelingas* – 'nobles' – who come to bury the body of Christ once their Lord has been slain (ll. 57–69) reveals a great deal about the local customs and laws.[9]

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drohtin (*Hêliand*, l. 37) – "mighty Lord of men", who walks the visibly Germanised land of Palestine in the company of His *sâlige gisîðos* (l. 3958) – "trustworthy retainers".

[7] See below, footnote 36.

[8] The former cognates not only with Saxon *frâho* and Old High German *frao*, but also, most importantly, with Old Norse *Freyr*, a theonym which happens to be associated with the North Germanic fertility god. The latter is of uncertain origin, but it appears to be related to Old Norse *bjǫrn* "bear".

[9] All in all, a surprisingly wide range of topics (surprisingly, of course, when we consider the poem's brevity and ostensible clarity of thought) appears to have been covered since its rediscovery in the first half of the nineteenth century. See, for example, Susan Irvine, 'Adam or Christ? A Pronominal Pun in *The Dream of the Rood*', *The Review of English Studies*, 48:192 (1997), 433–47; Carol Braun Pasternack, 'Stylistic Disjunctions in *The Dream of the Rood*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 13 (1984), 167–86; Daniel F. Pigg, '*The Dream of the Rood* in its Discursive Context: Apocalypticism as Determinant Form and Treatment', *English Language Notes*, 29:4 (1992), 13–22; and Barbara Raw, '*The Dream of the Rood* and its Connections with Early Christian Art', *Medium Ævum* 39:3 (1970), 239–56. These articles deal with, respectively, the Christ-Adam parallels, stylistic disjunctions in the poem, its discursive context and, connections with early Christian art.

While the depiction of these practices may not constitute the most essential component of *The Dream of the Rood*, much as in the poet's portrayal of the Crucifixion, it provides us with an intriguing amalgamation of the biblical accounts of Christ's own burial and the early Germanic traditions which accompany the corresponding funerary passages found in, particularly (but not exclusively) the epic poem of *Beowulf*. In other words, it evidently tells us more about the burial practices in early Anglo-Saxon England than in the Roman province of Judea in the first century AD. What may, therefore, be seen in *The Dream of the Rood*, after *Cyninges fyll* (l. 56), "the fall of the King", is a thoroughly contemporarised vision (contemporarised, of course, from the poet's point of view) of the events which are usually dated to the period of the governance of Pontius Pilate, an *interpretatio Saxonica* of what constitutes a significant element of all Christian theology.

The events which came to pass between the ninth hour on the day of the Crucifixion (Matt. 27:46; Luke 23:44–5) and the entombment of Christ's body are only succinctly summarised in the four canonical Gospels.[10] According to Matthew, in the evening,[11] Joseph of Arimathea "took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, and departed" (27:59–61). Mark is a bit more informative in this regard, although much of his account is devoted to the interaction between Pontius Pilate and Joseph of Arimathea. According to him, Joseph "bought a linen shroud, and taking Him down, wrapped Him in the linen shroud, and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb" (15:46–7). In the words of Luke, Joseph of Arimathea "took it [i.e. the body of Christ] down and wrapped it in a linen shroud, and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb, where no one had ever been laid" (25:53). Finally, in the Gospel according to John, Joseph "came and took away His body. Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and

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[10] According to Matthew and Luke, the Law was fulfilled around the ninth hour of the day, i.e. 3 p.m. (time was reckoned from sunrise to sunset).

[11] It is not entirely clear what the author has in mind by ὄψιος (Matt. 27:57; Mark 15:42) 'evening'. If Christ had died at around 2.00–3.00 in the afternoon, this could have been no more than three or four hours later. The following day was the Sabbath, starting a few minutes before sunset, and so, according to the Jewish law, all the dead bodies had to be interred by that time.

aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there" (19:38–42).

Taken together, the above-quoted measures could be summarised as follows. First, Joseph of Arimathea, either in the company of Nicodemus (John 23:39) or other people (it would have been rather difficult for him to do it on his own), takes the body of Christ from the Cross. After that it is wrapped in a linen shroud/clothes (σινδών/ὀθόνη) and anointed with a mixture of myrrh and aloes (μύρρα καὶ ἀλόη). Finally, it is laid in a rock-hewn tomb (μνημεῖον, μνῆμα) not far from the place of the execution. It is important to note that, as the author of the fourth Gospel claims, everything was performed καθὼς ἔθος ἐστὶν τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ἐνταφιάζειν (John 19:40) – "according to the burial customs of the Jews". Hence, even if the accounts in the four Gospels are not particularly exhaustive (after all, what would have been the point of relating the things which were, at that time, rather common knowledge?[12]), it is of vital significance that the burial rites were carried out in accordance with the Jewish customs – customs which, in the first century AD (as well as prior to and following that time), would have obviously included several other elements required in the Mosaic tradition before, during, and after the rites of intercession (prayers, lamentations etc.).[13]

In *The Dream of the Rood*, those of the disciples who have come to collect the body of their *æðeling* (l. 58) – "prince" naturally follow roughly the same sequence of activities as in the Gospels. First, *aledon hie* [*Him*] *ðær limwerigne* (l. 63) – "they laid Him down there, limb-weary", *ond He Hine ðær hwile reste* (l. 64) – "and there He rested for a while". After that, a *moldærn* (l. 65) – "grave, sepulchre" (lit. "earth-house",

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[12] This is particularly visible in the Gospel of Matthew, where the evangelist often assumes the reader to be well acquainted with the Jewish customs he refers to in his work.

[13] See, for instance, the Book of Ecclesiasticus: "my child, shed tears over the dead, lament for the dead to show your sorrow, then bury the body with due ceremony and do not fail to honour the grave. Weep bitterly, beat your breast, observe the mourning the dead deserves for a day or two, to avoid censorious comment, and then be comforted in your sorrow" (36:16–17).

perhaps in the sense of a tumulus, a mound of earth and stones erected over the tomb[14]) – is built and *gesetton hie ðæron sigora Wealdend* (l. 67) – "there they placed the Lord of victories". In the end, following the burial, the disciples are reported to have *Him þa sorhleoð* [*ge*]*gal*[*e*]*n* (l. 67) – "sung Him a dirge" (lit. "sorrow-song").

It is not difficult to notice that one of the main differences between the two accounts, the biblical and the poetic, is the absence (in the former) and inclusion (in the latter) of the *sorhleoð* – "sorrow-song" – which the followers of Christ sing prior to the interment of His body in the sepulchre. This does not, of course, deviate in any notable way from what is known today of the Jewish burial customs in the first century AD (or around that time).[15] Various songs (typically psalms, but not only) are known to have been performed during important social gatherings within one's life cycle, occasions such as circumcision, marriage, and funeral. However, what is quite striking here is the fact that in his visualisation of Christ's burial, the Anglo-Saxon poet could only have relied on the authority of the Gospels (as well as Gospel harmonies or other contemporary works that were not necessarily more knowledgeable on the matter of the mourning compositions chanted on the occasion of some funerary rituals), where no such references are to be found.

The explanation for this intriguing discrepancy seems to lie in the rather common practice (not only in the Middle Ages) of supplying the lacking, or otherwise required, components of a larger picture upon the basis of one's own, obviously largely anachronistic, experiences. More often than not, such additions or emendations are of a predominantly cultural character, with the new material often being a significant, if somewhat idealised, constituent of the local people's heritage and traditions. Depending on the author's intentions and his awareness of the source material he wishes to adapt, this could operate on at least two principal levels: lexical and conceptual. In *The Dream of the Rood*, for instance, a good illustration of the former could be the poet's employment of the words *frea* (l. 33) and *middangeard*

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[14] For more information concerning the way important people used to be buried around the time of the first Christianising efforts in England, see Stephen Pollington's book *Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds. Princely Burials in the 6th and 7th Centuries* (Swaffham, 2008).

[15] A good summary of these traditions, from the sixth century BC until AD 70, can be found in the excellent monograph by Rachel Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period* (Leiden, 2004).

(l. 104), both highly ambiguous terms whose roots evidently lie in the pre-Christian beliefs of the Anglo-Saxon people.[16] On the other side of the coin, the portrayal of Christ as an almost archetypal Germanic hero (much as in the Old Saxon *Hêliand*) may be seen as a model illustration of the latter.[17]

At this point, perhaps, a vital question (or two) ought to be asked in connection with the aforementioned elegiac addition to *The Dream of the Rood*. Given that the Anglo-Saxon poet was in all likelihood unaware of the cultural implications of the various types of versified lamentations which are believed to have been sung in funerals in the days of Christ, what did the *sorhleoð* actually mean to him? Or, perhaps more importantly, what mental images might have been formed in the minds of the seventh- or eighth-century audiences, much more accustomed, it seems, to the by and large tragic lays of some intrepid Germanic heroes, real as well as fictional?[18]

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[16] The former term, as we have seen, through genericisation (i.e. the proper noun becoming a common one) preserves the name of an ancient Germanic deity (Brian Branston, *The Lost Gods of England* [London, 1974], 139). The latter testifies to a more complex etymological and cultural-generic development. Being a cognate with, amongst others, the Old Norse *Miðgarðr*, Old Saxon *Middilgard* and Old High German *Mittilagart*, it is believed to have once referred (prior to the coming of Christianity, of course) to the central (*midd*) cosmological enclosure (*geard*) in which men lived (the other eight were inhabited by the gods, giants, and other otherworldly beings). Much as Easter, Yule as well as four of the seven days of the week (Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* [Cambridge, 1966], 122–23), over the years it gradually changed its semantic value and came to mean the very world that we live in. Apart from *The Dream of the Rood*, the term *middangeard* may also be found in *Beowulf* (ll. 75ff.), *Crist* (ll. 105ff.), and in Cædmon's *Hymn* (l. 7). In his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede translates it as *terra* (b. IV, ch. 24).

[17] Of course, various bellicose depictions of God the Father may be identified in the Old Testament (e.g. Ex. 14:14; Deut. 1:30; Josh. 10:14) and Psalms (e.g. 18, 24, 68; Marc Brettler, 'Images of YHWH the Warrior in Psalms', in Claudia V. Camp and Carole R. Fontaine (eds.), *Women, War and Metaphor: Language and Society in the Study of the Hebrew Bible* [Atlanta, 1993], 135–65). It is, however, not until the late Antiquity and early Middle Ages that the figure of Christ begins to be imagined with a sword, spear and/or shield in His hand. For a more in-depth treatment of the warrior- and shepherd-like Saviour in the early Christian art, see, in particular, Michael W. Herren and Shirley Ann Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity: Britain and Ireland from the Fifth to the Tenth Century* (Suffolk, 2012); and Lee M. Jefferson, *Christ the Miracle Worker in Early Christian Art* (Minneapolis, 2014).

[18] In early medieval literature, the archetypal Germanic hero appears to be a high-born figure recurrently confronted with what Brian Murdoch calls 'the blows of fate' (*The Germanic Hero: Politics and Pragmatism in Early Medieval Poetry* [London

Yet before we try to find some funerary analogies in the extant works of early medieval lore, it may be worthwhile to take a quick look at the etymological roots and semantic ranges of various Anglo-Saxon "songs". The Old English noun *leoð*, a cognate with, amongst others, Old Norse *ljóð* and Modern German *Lied*, could mean either a "song" or, in fact, practically any other type of metrically-bound verse. It may also be found as a modifier in words such as, for instance, *leoðweorc* "poetry", *leoðcræft* "poetic skill", *leoðword* "poetic word", *leoðlic* "versified" etc. Finally, as a base word, *leoð* could be spotted in *sigeleoð* "song of victory" and, most importantly for the purposes of the present investigation, *fuseleoð* and *sorhleoð*, both of which may be translated as a "song of longing" or "sorrow-song", almost invariably, it seems, meaning all sorts of dirges, elegies, or other mournful compositions performed as part of the funerary rituals in honour of some great historical figure (king, ealdorman, thane etc.).

Our knowledge of these often complex rituals of the past is obviously limited. Being restricted to the somewhat narrow range of material evidence, archaeology can hardly provide us with satisfactory answers in connection with the transcendental character of these rites and/or the actual sequence of their occurrence. Needless to say, such evidence can be best identified in the material records of the past, both factual and literary, textual as well as pictorial. Some of the first known accounts of ancient burial rites are to be found in connection with the inhabitants of Bronze Age Mesopotamia and Egypt (e.g. the so-called *Book of the Dead*). In the subsequent centuries, detailed depictions of how certain distinguished people were buried in the land of the Nile and in Scythia can be read in the *Histories* of Herodotus.[19] A fairly comprehensive, though, perhaps, at least to a certain degree fictionalised, account of how great heroes may have been buried in Homeric Greece (eighth or seventh centuries BC) constitutes the narrative backbone of books XXIII and XXIV of *The Iliad*.[20]

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and Rio Grande, 1996], 33). In effect, his ultimate death is practically a *sine qua non* for the subsequent promotion of the likes of Beowulf, Sigurd, and Roland to the ranks of those that contemporary audiences clearly held in the highest esteem.

[19] The descriptions of burial rituals in Egypt and Scythia can be found in, respectively, chapters 85–90 of Book I and 71–3 of Book IV.

[20] Much of the last two books of the *Iliad* is devoted to the funerary customs, rituals, and ceremonies performed in connection with the deaths of Hector and Patroclus.

When it comes to the much later burial rites in Northern (i.e. not Mediterranean) Europe – more concurrent with the time of composition of *The Dream of the Rood* – some invaluable information may be gathered from Tacitus' *Germania*.[21] Other interesting accounts in which certain funerary practices of the early medieval Norsemen are depicted can be found in both the heroic (Sigurd, Brynhild) and the mythological (Baldr) lays of the *Poetic Edda* as well as in the *Vǫlsunga saga*.[22] The ninth-century merchant/traveller Wulfstan also outlines some burial customs of the Prussian noblemen in his interpolation in the Old English translation of Orosius' *Historiae Adversus*

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[21] According to the Roman historian, *Funerum nulla ambitio: id solum observatur, ut corpora clarorum virorum certis lignis crementur. Struem rogi nec vestibus nec odoribus cumulant: sua cuique arma, quorundam igni et equus adicitur. Sepulcrum caespes erigit: monumentorum arduum et operosum honorem ut gravem defunctis aspernantur. Lamenta ac lacrimas cito, dolorem et tristitiam tarde ponunt. Feminis lugere honestum est, viris meminisse* (*Germania*, ch. XXVII): "There is no ostentation in the funerals, their sole concern being to observe the custom of burning the bodies of their most famous men upon certain kinds of wood. Neither vestments nor spices are placed in the funeral pyre. Given to the flames, however, are the arms of the dead man and, in some cases, his own horse. Only a turf mound then forms the tomb, since more monumental and elaborate structures are despised by them and deemed oppressive to the dead. Tears and lamentations are soon dismissed; grief and sorrow they long retain. It is thought to be the women's part to bewail the dead and the men's to remember them".

[22] According to the eddic poem *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma* (*The Short Lay of Sigurd*), following the death of her might-have-been husband, Brynhild orders a great pyre to be erected, covered with *tjǫldum ok skjǫldum, valarift vel fáð ok vala mengi* (st. 66) – "shields and tapestries, foreign shrouds skilfully woven and many slaves". Finally, along with the hero, given to the flames are to be Brynhild herself as well as a number of *þjóna*[r] 'servants' and *tveir haukar* (st. 67) 'two hawks'. Much the same wording may be found in chapter XXXIII of the *Vǫlsunga saga*, where the account of Sigurd's funeral is provided in prose. However, in addition to Brynhild and her servants, burnt with the slayer of Fafnir is also Sigurd's own three-year-old son (*Vǫlsunga saga*, ch. XXXIII). The funeral of Odin's son Baldr is related in chapter XLIX of *Gylfaginning*, the first book of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*. Brought to the great ship Hringhorni, the body of the fallen god is placed upon the funeral pyre erected inside the vessel. Burnt with him are his wife Nanna (who has nevertheless died of grief) and a certain dwarf Litr (who only happens to be in a wrong place at a wrong time). Although fictional, the afore-related passages evidently preserve some of the most intriguing funeral customs of the Norsemen in the pre-Christian era, namely cremation, boat burials and equipping the dead with various precious objects, servants and animals that they could be in need of in the afterlife.

Paganos.[23] Last but not least, in his *Risala*, the tenth-century Arab diplomat Ahmad ibn Fadlan provides a detailed description of the funerary rites performed after the death of a Rus chieftain.[24]

Despite some notable variations and discrepancies, it might be inferred that with respect to the vast majority of Indo-European peoples (and beyond), the burial ceremony of some significant member of their tribe or nation (chieftain, prince, or king) would normally constitute a momentous event, one that would result in a mass gathering of those who were in some way connected and/or committed (familially, emotionally, politically, ethnically etc.) to the deceased person. Prior to their ultimate entombment or cremation, the dead would normally be fully clothed, often wearing some costly ceremonial gear (helmet, mail shirt etc.) and equipped with everything they might be in need of in

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[23] According to Wulfstan, in the land of the Esti, when a man dies, *þæt he lið inne unforbærned mid his magum and freondum monað, ge hwilum twegen* (ch. XXI; quoted in Gerard Labuda, *Źródła skandynawskie i anglosaskie do dziejów Słowiańszczyzny* [Warszawa, 1961], 86): "he remains there uncremated amongst his relatives and friends for a month or two". Interestingly, the actual length of this period of mourning depends on the wealth of the deceased. During that time, *þær sceal beon gedrync and plega, oð ðone dægþe hi hine forbærnað* (ch. XXI): "it is customary for there to be drinking and festivity until the day on which he is to be cremated". For an in-depth analysis of the burial customs of the Esti, with a particular focus upon their ritual cremation practices, see Rafał Panfil, 'Þæt is mid Estum þeaw þæt þær sceal ælces geðeodes man beon forbærned. Co właściwie powiedział Wulfstan o paleniu zmarłych przez Estów we fragmencie swojego sprawozdania z podróży do Truso?', *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, 4 (290) (2015), 557–78.

[24] Ahmad's eyewitness account of his encounter with the Rus' includes a vivid description of the ship-burial given to one of their chieftains (chs. 87–92). Apart from the rather conventional recital of the various garments in which he is dressed by the people (trousers, stockings, boots, tunic, caftan, and hat) as well as the nourishments (fruits, plants, bread, meat, onions) and objects (cushions, weapons) with which he is provided, the most shocking element of the ceremony is clearly the passage in which, having drunk two cups of *nabīd* and sung farewell songs to her girl companions, a volunteer slave-girl has a sequential intercourse with six men, following which she is sacrificially stabbed to death; Władysław Duczko, *Viking Rus. Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe* (Leiden, 2004), 137–54; Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (London, Oxford, and New York, 1973), 426–9. Some interesting parallels between the burial of the Rus' chieftain and that of Odin's son Baldr are pointed out in Leszek Paweł Słupecki's article 'Śmierć i pogrzeb Baldra w *Eddzie* Snorriego Sturlussona i w *Husdrapie* Ulfa Uggasona, a relacja Ibn Fadlana o pogrzebie ruskiego naczelnika', *Funeralia Lednickie*, 6 (2004), 49–59.

the afterlife.[25] Not infrequently, it seems, they would be accompanied by one or more of their slaves (who had to be ritually killed) or domestic animals (typically dogs and/or horses, likewise slain in some ritual manner). Finally, many (if not all) of these practices would be accompanied by the mournful tones of some elegiac verses, usually chanted by a selected group of grievers.

Even though no longer practised,[26] at least some of these rituals may have still been at least remotely reminisced – via old lays and songs – by the newly-converted inhabitants of Anglo-Saxon England around the seventh and eighth centuries, i.e. when *The Dream of the Rood* (or its earlier version) is believed to have been composed. A good – though at that time, it appears, already quite antiquarian – illustration of the ancient burial practices of the English peoples may obviously be found in *Beowulf*,[27] the narrative epic poem in which, depending on what we should actually consider to be a description of a burial (one being evidently disguised as poetic imagery), there are as many as four funerals described, namely those of Scyld Scefing (ll. 26–52), Hnæf (ll. 1107–24), the so-called "last survivor" (ll. 2241–70) and, most importantly, the king of the Geats himself (ll. 3110–82). In addition, there is also an imagined, though by all means realistic, depiction of a nameless old man lamenting the heart-breaking lot after the execution of his young son (ll. 2444–62).[28]

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[25] At this point archaeology comes to our assistance. Some of the best documented sites, especially in North-Western Europe, include the burial mounds at Sutton Hoo, where the remains of extraordinarily rich grave goods were found during the excavations in 1939 and 1940. These include, amongst others, a splendid ceremonial helmet, fragments of a sword, shield ornaments, golden buckles, cloisonné shoulder clasps and what appears to have been used as a standard. For more information, see Martin Carver's book *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* (London, 2000).

[26] Burial practices are known to have evolved, particularly in the early years of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. Material evidence of that might be found in plenty in the archaeological records of the period; Sonia Chadwick-Hawkes, 'The Archaeology of Conversion: Cemeteries', in James Campbell (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1991), 48–9.

[27] Despite the fact that the action of the poem takes place in sixth-century Denmark and Sweden, it could be argued that most of it was, at some point, adapted to fit the cultural context of early Anglo-Saxon England.

[28] For more information on the funeral passages in *Beowulf*, see, in particular, Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in Beowulf and the Structure of the Poem* (Manchester, 2009).

The first funeral, which, in a sense, sets the elegiac tone for the rest of the poem, is a splendid ship-burial, one which ought to remind us not only of those that came to be excavated in various parts of Scandinavia and the British Isles,[29] but also the funerals of Baldr (as imagined in Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* and the two eddic poems *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Baldrsdraumar*), or Sigmund's son Sinfjǫtli (*Vǫlsunga saga*, ch. 10). The legendary ruler of the Spear-Danes is placed inside the *cymlic ceol gegyrwan* (l. 38) – "beautifully adorned vessel" that is to bear him, it seems, in his voyage to the afterlife. As befits a great hero and king, he is endowed with numerous treasures including all sorts of *hilde-wæpnu, heaðo-wadu, bil ond byrnan* (ll. 39–40) – "war-weapons, battle-dress, swords and mail-shirts". Then, high above his head, the mourners set a *segen gylden* (l. 47) – "golden standard".[30] Apart from that, no specific rituals are mentioned, although the poet's assertion that *geomor was sefa, murnende mod* (ll. 49–50) – "sad was the heart, mourning the mind" seems to imply that, unless these rituals were performed in utter silence (which is not very likely), the accompanying sounds would be those of weeping, moaning, and, perhaps, some form of heathen prayers and incantations. Last but not least, it is not unlikely that heard upon the strand were also the words of some sombre dirge, lament or other funeral song.

There are no such doubts in connection with the second funeral in *Beowulf*, in which the mortal remains of Hnæf, the semi-historical leader of the Half-Danes and one of the principal characters in the tragic lay performed at the first of the two feasts in Hrothgar's hall Heorot, is brought to the pyre. Much as in the case of Scyld Scefing, numerous valuable items – a *swat-fah syrce, swyn eal-gylden, eofer iren-*

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[29] It should be borne in mind, though, that the vessels excavated at Landby, Sutton Hoo, Oseberg, etc., had in fact been deposited in purpose-built chambered tombs, not incinerated, as in the opening passage of *Beowulf*.

[30] The intriguing parallels which evidently exist between the depictions of Scyld Scefing's funeral in *Beowulf* (ll. 26–52) and the royal finds excavated at Sutton Hoo have led many scholars to conclude that the similarities are not incidental. See, for instance, the publications of Charles Leslie Wrenn, 'Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf*', in *Mélanges de Linguistique et de Philologie. Fernard Mossé in Memoriam* (Paris, 1959), 495–507; Rupert Bruce-Mitford, 'Sutton Hoo and the Background of the Poem', in Richie Girvan, *Beowulf and the Seventh Century* (London, 1971), 85–98; Sam Newton, *The Origins of* Beowulf *and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* (Woodbridge, 2004), 135–42; and Leslie Webster, 'Archaeology and *Beowulf*', in Daniel Donoghue (ed.), *Beowulf. A Verse Translation* (New York and London, 2002), 212–23.

heard (ll. 1111–12) – "blood stained mail-shirt, golden image of a boar, iron-hard swine [i.e. probably a boar-crested helmet[31]]" – are ceremonially consumed by the fire. Perhaps the only notable discrepancy is the sacrificial death of Hnæf's nephew, whom the fallen hero's sister Hildeburh orders to be given to the flames (ll. 1114–17). In the end, the whole ceremonial is capped by a vocal expression of her boundless sorrow, as the lady, we are told, *gnornode, geomrode giddum* (ll. 1117–18) – "mourned, sang her lament" – possibly just as much for her brother as for her son.

The imagined lamentation of an old man, which precedes Beowulf's fatal confrontation with the dragon, is naturally very different from the two passages outlined above. Without doubt the reason for this is the diametrically different status of the deceased, namely that of a convict. Nevertheless, also in his case one might sense a profound feeling of loss experienced by his father, a feeling culminating in the sorrowful *gyd* [*ge*]*wrece*[*n*] (l. 2446) – "lament raised" by the old man, and, most importantly, the *sarig sang* (l. 2447) – "sorrowful song" that may eventually be heard when his unfortunate progeny is left at the gallows, hanging *hrefne to hroðre* (l. 2448) – "to the delight of the raven". Moreover, this devastating sensation appears to haunt him for the rest of his life, as he keeps on singing his *sorhleoð* (l. 2460) – "sorrow-song"[32] many days after the death of his dear son, in this way prolonging the bereavement period and, in a sense, envisaging the funerary rituals that, as may be deduced from the context of the poem, never really took place.

Finally, one of the most memorable passages in the entire poem of *Beowulf* concentrates upon the burial rites of the protagonist, an intricate and, to a certain degree, perhaps Christian-coloured depiction of the emotional farewell which the mourning Geats bid to their much-loved king.[33] In his attempt to eulogise the life and deeds of

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[31] Cf., in particular, the Anglo-Saxon helmets excavated at Pioneer and Benty Grange.

[32] Interestingly, the very same word is used in connection with the mourners of Christ in *The Dream of the Rood* (l. 67).

[33] For commentaries on various Christian colourings in *Beowulf*, not only in the connection with the hero's funeral, see Francis Adelbert Blackburn, 'The Christian Coloring in *Beowulf*', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, XII (1887), 205–25; Thomas D. Hill, 'The Christian Language and Theme in *Beowulf*', in Daniel Donoghue (ed.), *Beowulf: A Verse Translation* (New York and London,

his hero, the poet spares no effort to outline the successive stages of Beowulf's funeral with remarkable precision and richness of phrase. The burial begins with the preparation of an enormous pyre, *helmum behongen, hilde-bordum, beorhtum byrnum* (ll. 3139–40) – "hung with helmets, battle-shields, bright mail-shirts". Once the body of the monarch is placed on top of it, the *bæl-fyra mæst* (l. 3143) – "biggest funeral fire" is set ablaze and the mortal remains of Beowulf are consumed by the flames. At the same time, the roaring sounds of the flames and the tumult of the winds are accompanied by the sounds of *mod-cearu* (l. 3149) – "mind-sorrow" uttered by the gathered grievers. A certain Geatish woman, her hair bound up, is heard singing her *giomor-gyd* (l. 3150) – "mourning-song", time and time again declaring that she now lives in dread of the years to come.[34]

In the ensuing ten days, the Geats erect a mighty barrow, well visible from afar, in which they place the countless treasures that were found hoarded in the dragon's den. It is around this barrow that the *æþelinga bearn, ealra twelfa* (l. 3170) – "sons of nobles, twelve in all" – ride on horseback, *ceare cw[eþende]* (l. 3171) – "uttering words of sorrow", [*hiera*] *kyning mæn[ende]* (l. 3171), "grieving their king", *word-gyd wrecen[de] ond ymb wer sprec[ende]* (l. 3172) – "reciting an elegy and speaking about that man". Finally, in accordance with the ancient burial traditions, they may be heard *eaht[iende] eorlscipe ond his ellen-weorc, duguðum dem[ende]* (ll. 3173–4) – "praising his heroism and daring deeds, speaking highly of his nobility". After all, *swa hit gedefe bið þæt mon his winedryhten wordum herge, ferhðum freoge, þonne he forð scile of lichaman læded weorðan* (ll. 3174–7) – "it is fitting that one should mouth words in praise of his friend and lord, cherish in his heart when he [i.e. the lord] must be led out from the house of flesh".[35]

2002), 197–211; and the fifth chapter in Andy Orchard's book *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2007), 130–68.

[34] See, especially, the commentaries by Helen Bennett, 'The Female Mourner at Beowulf's Funeral: Filling in the Blanks/Hearing the Spaces', in Nicholas Howe (ed.), *Beowulf. A Prose Translation* (New York and London, 2002), 167–78); and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in* Beowulf *and the Structure of the Poem* (Manchester, 2009), 93–4.

[35] For possible complementary depictions of the Geatish woman and the twelve sons of nobles, see, for instance, Owen-Crocker (2009), 93–4. Also worth reading in the context of the fourth funeral is the in-depth examination of burial practices in Geatland by Fred C. Robinson, 'The Tomb of Beowulf', in Daniel Donoghue (ed.), *Beowulf. A Verse Translation* (New York and London, 2002), 181–97.

As may be supposed on the basis of the above passages from *Beowulf*, burial practices in the early days of Anglo-Saxon England were – particularly with regard to the members of the nobility – rich in all sorts of traditions, rituals, and unspoken rules, including perhaps no longer acknowledged traces of some past superstitions and apotropaic practices. While the amount of luxuries deposited in the graves naturally differed significantly, depending on the social status of the deceased person, a rough estimation of the sorrow experienced by their kith and kin could yield comparable results: tears shed and verses chanted in loving memory of those who were no longer on this side of life. Whether they were referred to as *gyd, sarig sang, sorhleoð, giomor-gyd, word-gyd* or otherwise, the laments heard centuries ago in various parts of Anglo-Saxon England (and beyond) clearly belonged to the same oral tradition of, in this case, a fundamentally pre-Christian character. As such, they would almost certainly be considered (by the anonymous poet) to be an essential component of the funeral rites performed in honour of the heroised Christ (heroised, that is, in the military sense of that word), the *sigora Wealdend* (l. 67) – "Lord of victories" – of *The Dream of the Rood*.

Perhaps the question that should logically follow the above summary of burial practices in the early Germanic world is: what kinds of qualities and/or thematic threads would have been conceived in the neophytic minds of Anglo-Saxon audiences upon hearing that Christ's own disciples, the loyal members of their Lord's *comitatus, ongunnon him þa sorhleoð galan* (l. 67) – "began to sing Him a sorrow-song"? Of course, the only sensible answer is that we do not know. Nonetheless, bearing in mind the heroic contexts of Beowulf's life and deeds on the one hand, and the assumed (by the audience) feats of heroic self-sacrifice that led to Christ's ultimate *gewinn* (l. 65) – "strife"[36]

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[36] Interestingly, the Old English noun *gewinn*, which could be translated as either 'strife' or 'gain' (both obviously very much in line with the actual character of the Crucifixion) incorporates the component *winn*, meaning 'strife, hardship' < Proto-Germanic *winna 'labour, fight, win'; Guus Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic* [Leiden and Boston, 2013], 587–8). It is thus not improbable that to the early audiences it could have invoked roughly the same semantic associations we would have today upon hearing the word *victory*, albeit one that comes with a great amount of effort. Accordingly, some Modern English translators, consciously or not, may give their rendering of *The Dream of the Rood* a notably more bellicose flavour. Kevin Crossley-Holland, for instance, translates the said passage in the

on the other, we may cautiously assume that, instead of the more traditional *naeniae funebris* of a Jewish character and atmosphere, the sombre tones of the "sorrow-song" intoned by the grief-stricken *hilderincas* (l. 61) – "warriors" – would have taken (in the minds of the apprehensive listeners) the form of some heroic-themed elegy by means of which they could, paraphrasing the words of the *Beowulf* poet, *eahtian eorlscipe ond Cristes ellen-weorc, duguðum His deman* "praise Christ's heroism and daring deeds, speak highly of His nobility".[37]

It may be hard today to visualise them *ymbe hlæw ri*[*dende*] (l. 3169) – "riding around the barrow" – like the twelve sons of nobles in *Beowulf.*[38] We are, however, badly "disadvantaged" here, having been reared and living in the world where the images of the *Via Crucis* are not only quite common but also much more accurate in their historical detail.[39] To the Anglo-Saxon audiences, doubtlessly brought up upon the breathtaking stories of Beowulf, Hnæf, Offa, and Sigmund (to name but a few great heroes whose names are recorded in the surviving works of Old English literature) as well as the ever-elusive concept of the heroic ideal,[40] the image of a warrior-like Christ being entombed to the accompaniment of a song of great deeds would certainly not have raised too many brows in surprise. After all, Christ could and should be perceived as a hero, one who had "not come to bring peace, but

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following way: "They laid Him down limb-weary; they stood at the corpse's head, / they beheld there the Lord of Heaven; and there He rested for a while, / worn-out after **battle**"; *The Anglo-Saxon World* (Oxford, 1999), 202 (emphasis mine – Ł.N.).

[37] In the original, in lieu of *Cristes* the poet uses the possessive pronoun *his* (*Beowulf*, l. 3173), naturally referring to the late king of the Geats.

[38] The number of the *æþelinga bearn* (l. 3170), "sons of nobles", so reminiscent of the number of Christ's disciples – invariably twelve in the Gospels (Matt. 10:1–4; Mark 3:13–19; Luke 6:12–16) – could be of some assistance, though.

[39] Our knowledge of the period naturally derives mainly from other contemporary texts and somewhat later iconographies which sustained the images of Christ and His followers.

[40] Apart from the aforementioned book by Brian Murdoch, some of the best analyses of the heroic ideal in early Germanic literature may be found in Rosemary Woolf, 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the *Germania* and in *The Battle of Maldon*', in Heather O'Donoghue (ed.), *Art and Doctrine: Essays on Medieval Literature* (London and Ronceverte, 1986), 175–96; Roberta Frank, 'The Battle of Maldon and Heroic Literature', in Donald Scragg (ed.), *The Battle of Maldon AD 991* (Oxford, 1991), 196–207; and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Values and Ethics in Heroic Literature', in Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 2014), 101–19.

a sword" (Matt. 10:34) and then "died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3), His subsequent resurrection was thus, in the strictly theological sense, the greatest victory one could ever conceive (hard as it may have been for the military-minded inhabitants of seventh- or eighth-century England to imagine).

Accordingly, the Anglo-Saxon *Crist* – as He came to be portrayed in *The Dream of the Rood* – embodies some of the most fundamental features usually associated with the traditional models of heroism, Classical, Germanic, Celtic or other. He is, obviously, a high-born chieftain, the *æðeling* (l. 58), *ðeoden* (l. 69), *frea* (l. 33), *dryhten* (ll. 35ff.) and *wealdend* (ll. 53ff.),[41] the *mihtig ond spedig* (l. 151) – "mighty and prosperous"[42] Son of God. As befits an archetypal Germanic ruler of the early Middle Ages, He is also pictured as an able competitor in the military sphere, hastening *elne mycle* (l. 34) – "with great courage"[43] to mount upon the Cross, the *geong hæleð* (l. 39) – "young hero" who, without hesitation (one could say, almost in a berserk-like manner) *ongyr[weþ] hine* (l. 39), "strips Himself",[44] *strang ond stiðmod* (l. 40) – "strong and unflinching", ready to *mancyn lysan* (l. 41) – "redeem mankind".[45] This apparently "reckless" behaviour of Christ – as it may have seemed to the poem's early audiences – appears to bear certain outward resemblance to Byrhtnoth's *ofermod* at Maldon (*The*

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[41] All of the above-listed words are to a large degree synonymous, invariably meaning a highborn member of the early feudal elite in Anglo-Saxon England.

[42] It seems unlikely that by *spedig* the poet actually meant any tangible worldly prosperity. Nor, it would appear, is his Germanised *Crist* to be imagined as being specifically *dives in*, say, *misericordia*. Instead, despite its lack of alliterative linking, the phrase *mihtig ond spedig* ought to be understood as a fixed bi-adjectival expression (much as *safe and sound* or, even better, *wear and tear*) meaning 'powerful', 'famous' or otherwise 'great'.

[43] Interestingly, the noun *ellen* could mean both 'courage' and 'strength'.

[44] The Gospels are unfortunately silent on this matter – we only hear of Christ's clothing being divided (Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19–23) – yet it seems unreasonable to think that, physically exhausted after his brutal treatment at the hands of the Roman soldiers, Jesus would have had enough strength in Him to take off His clothes.

[45] For an interesting analysis of the rulers' military obligations, see, for instance, Bohdan Lapis, *Rex utilis. Kryteria oceny władców germańskich we wczesnym średniowieczu* (Poznań, 1986), 35–56; and various parts of Paweł Żmudzki, *Władca i wojownicy. Narracje o wodzach, drużynie i wojnach w najdawniejszej historiografii Polski i Rusi* (Wrocław, 2009).

Battle of Maldon, l. 89),[46] Roland's unnecessary heroics at the battle of Roncevaux Pass (*Chanson de Roland*, in particular *lais* LXXXIII–LXXXVII), and Beowulf's decision not to use any weapon in his duel with Grendel (*Beowulf*, ll. 677–87) and not to be afraid in the hero's ultimate confrontation with a dragon (ll. 2516–37). Indeed, such hubristic tendencies often seem to be an almost indispensable prerequisite in many a hero of early Germanic literature. In *The Dream of the Rood*, however, it appears to be no more than yet another instance, albeit an intriguing one, of a rather superficial cultural colouring, re-imagining the Saviour as an archetypal *ofermodig* hero, with no real intention to modify the actual sense of the Gospels. It seems logical then that the death of Christ, which naturally constitutes the focal point of the Old English poem, is depicted in well-nigh military terms, where the *Cyninges fyll* (l. 56) may stand just as much for the "King's demise" as, more etymologically consistent with its modern descendant, His dramatic "fall", also in the sense of a "heroic death in battle".[47]

It has already been pointed out by Tacitus that in the early Germanic world the leader's heroics should (at least in theory) have been emulated by an intrinsically determined host of his faithful followers, the *comitatus* of *Germania* (chs. XIII and XIV)[48] or *heorðgeneatas* in,

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[46] *Ofermod* is a problematic noun that, in the late nineteenth century, sparked an apparently unsolvable discussion amongst the scholars of Old English literature. It is usually translated as 'overconfidence' (Eric Valentine Gordon [ed.], *The Battle of Maldon* [London, 1954], 76), 'arrogance' (Donald G. Scragg [ed.], *The Battle of Maldon* [Manchester, 1984], 100), 'excessive courage' (O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Values and Ethics', 113) or 'overmastering pride' (John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son', *Essays and Studies*, 6 [1953], 13).

[47] Cf. the employment of *fyll* in other Old English poems of heroic content. In *Beowulf*, for instance, *fyll cyninges* (l. 2912) 'king's fall' features exactly the same wording (albeit in a different order) as in *The Dream of the Rood*, its significance being naturally that of the protagonist's death in combat.

[48] According to the Roman historian, the lord leads by example and the loyal followers defend him, the prime and most sacred part of their oath being *illum defendere, tueri, sua quoque fortia facta gloriae eius assignare* (ch. XIV): "to shield their lord, protect him, and attribute their own courageous deeds to his reputation". Astounded by these harsh customs, Tacitus adds that *vero infame in omnem vitam ac probrosum super stitem principi suo ex acie recessisse* (ch. XIV): "life-long infamy and disgrace should befall anyone who returns alive from the battlefield when their lord has been slain".

particularly, *Beowulf* (ll. 261ff.) and *The Battle of Maldon* (l. 204).[49] Such is also the nature of the steadfast loyalty of the Cross which, despite being *wita heardost, leodum laðost* (*The Dream of the Rood*, ll. 87–8) – "the worst of tortures, most hateful to the people", is in fact Christ's most dependable thane, sharing the pain of His agony (ll. 30–51) and loath to do anything *ofer Dryhtnes word* (l. 35) – "against the Lord's word". Just as loyal – though not reported to be sharing the physical discomforts of the crucifixion – are those of the disciples who *þær fuse feorran cwoman to þam æðelinge* (l. 57) – "came hither from afar to the Noble Prince". They might be late for the "battle", yet there is no way they could be discouraged from paying homage to their late King and burying Him in the grave that they *curfon … of beorhtan stane* (l. 66) – "carved from the brightest stone".

Given all these (and more) heroic colourings in *The Dream of the Rood*, it should come as no surprise that the *sigora Wealdend* (l. 67) – "Lord of victories" should be given a genuine heroic burial, complete with the *sorhleoð* that would, in the audience's minds, *eaht[i]an eorlscipe ond his ellen-weorc* "praise His heroism and daring deeds".[50] Some of the unbefitting elements would naturally have to be omitted (it is hard, for instance, to imagine Christ's body being cremated or some of His devotees being ritually put to death; nor is it likely to be there any mention of the customary grave goods). It is possible, of course, that by the late seventh or early eighth century, i.e. when the poem

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[49] The parallels which evidently exist between the near-suicidal commitment of Germanic warriors in the work of Tacitus and their much later counterparts in Old English poetry have been examined by a number of scholars, in particular: Hector Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge, 1912), 376–7; Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1990), 17; Woolf, 'The Ideal of Men', 175–96; and O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Values and Ethics', 101–19. Even though the similarities are clearly more than superficial, it should be borne in mind that the two military institutions are not by any means identical, for, as Steven Fanning rightly argues, "every society is acquainted with some sort of retinue and every person of power has an entourage"; Steven Fanning, 'Tacitus, Beowulf, and the Comitatus', *The Haskins Society Journal. Studies in Medieval History*, 9 (1997), 18. It is true, however, that, whether it be colourised by the Roman historian or not, the Tacitean depiction of men dying with their lord is an attractive cultural construct which often serves as a convenient frame of reference for the study of military loyalty and lord-retainer relationships in the early Middle Ages, particularly with regard to the texts of Anglo-Saxon provenance (*The Battle of Maldon*, *Beowulf* and, to a certain degree, *The Dream of the Rood*.

[50] This is obviously a quotation from *Beowulf* (l. 3173).

is believed to have been composed, these hitherto indispensable components of the grand pre-Christian funerals were no longer even taken into consideration. It should be quite clear, however, in the light of the above examination that, together with the *sorhleoð* that ultimately found its way into the alliterative account of Christ's crucifixion, they had all once been vital elements of the same funerary tradition.

It is interesting to see how, being somewhat obscure in its actual thematic substance, the "sorrow-song" of His disciples appears to have acquired, in the words of the poet, an air of relative universality. After all, as we have seen, all kinds of dirges, elegies and laments (or other versified reactions to human loss) are known to have been performed at funerals since time immemorial in different corners of the world. Consequently, the anonymous Anglo-Saxon poet, evidently unaware of the often complex particulars of Jewish burial traditions in the first century AD, could quite safely incorporate what, in his opinion, was "overlooked" in the Gospels, without, on the one hand, significantly modifying the biblical account and, on the other, at least superficially keeping in line with some of the traditional customs of his audiences. In effect, his *sorhleoð* – so dexterously interwoven with the cultural context of early Christian England – might easily go unnoticed in the eyes of the modern reader as a by and large irrelevant addition to the scriptural narratives of the Crucifixion. As has been demonstrated, however, its intended (and, we may assume, understood) semantic range was in all likelihood narrower, for the most part pertaining to the heroic ethos of the Anglo-Saxon people, complete with its seemingly incessant pursuit of glory in combat and a more sombre reflection upon the transience of our earthly existence.

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