# EARLY CHRISTIAN FUNERAL CEREMONIES AND GERMANIC FUNERAL RITES IN OLD ENGLISH EPIC

It is obvious to say that the effect of any work of art depends not only on the author's skill, but also on what is already present in the minds of its readers or hearers. Our purpose in this essay is to suggest that the Anglo-Saxon audience of epic poems would have seen in the descriptions of the hero's death and in the description of the hero's tomb rites some analogies with the early Christian funeral ceremonies and the Christian cult of the saints. The audience of Anglo-Saxon epic was acquainted with the Christian faith as well as with the liturgy and funeral ceremonies as pointed out Whitelock: "Beowulf's poet was composing for Christians whose conversion was neither partial nor superficial. He expects them to understand his allusions to biblical events without his troubling to be explicit about them"(1951: 5). Some critics, however, have overestimated the Germanic influence on Beowulf's death. Chadwick, for example, says:

> In the long account of Beowulf's obsequies - beginning with the dying king's injunction to construct for him a lofty barrow on the edge of the cliff, and ending with the scene of the twelve princes riding round the barrow, proclaiming the dead man's exploits - we have the most detailed description of an early Teutonic funeral which has come down to us, and one of which the accuracy is confirmed in every point by archaeological or contemporary literary evidence (We may refer especially to the account of Attila's funeral given by Jordanes). Such an account must have been composed within living memory of a time when ceremonies of this kind were still actually in use. (1907: I, 30)

But we must bear in mind that the audience of *Beowulf* was Christian, though the poem in its first step must belong to the very earliest Christian pe-

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riod in England. It is known that in *Beowulf* there are two ceremonies treating Beowulf's funeral, one in which he was cremated, revealing its Germanic origin, and one in which he was buried with treasure. Chambers says that the double ceremony simply shows the Christian poet's ignorance of pagan practice (1959: 122); at the same time, while archaeology provides little evidence of seventh century Christianity, it also provides little evidence for paganism, and inhumations with eccentric orientations and rich grave-goods can no longer be assumed to be pagan as pointed out some scholars such as Young (1977), Morris (1983) and Bullough (1983: 195-7); moreover, burial in and beside churches for very important people go back well into the seventh century, though they were not very religious Christians. In fact, in Theodore's *Penitential* it is assumed that even pagans might contrive to be buried in churches (Wallace-Hadrill: 1988, 120), and as Sim-Williams says:

> The Church would not have been slow to realize that in return for providing the deceased with resting-places in holy ground it could divert some of their wealth from kinsmen and from the conspicuous waste of "pagan" rites, in the direction of soul-scot or more elaborate burial fees. In or about 804 the Hwiccian noble Æthelric bequeathed four estates to the community at Deerhurst on the strict condition that he should be buried there. (1990: 64)

In any case, most Old English epic, and chiefly *Beowulf,* must be considered as a production of the Germanic world enlightened by the new Christian faith.

Our procedure will be to survey the Christian cultural background and to see whether Christian funeral manifestations bear any resemblance to the funeral rites in Anglo-Saxon epic.

The Christian doctrines on the transcendence of the human soul and the final resurrection of the flesh are expressed in concrete terms by a profound respect to the corpse and the solemnity of all the ceremonies mean to prepare it for its journey to eternity. From the earliest Christian times, the Catholic liturgy has always striven to ensure the suitable preservation of the deceased and the dignity of the grave. This special care for body and tomb, common to any human religion, was shared in those early times by both Christian and pagan rites, which followed similar practices. Thus, the dead bodies of both pagan Roman dignitaries and famous Christian martyrs were equally washed,

anointed, wrapped in plain bandages or valuable clothing, perfumed, surrounded by candles and carefully placed in a reverently respected tomb. Together with this particular treatment of corpses, special emphasis was placed on finding a safe place for the tomb in order to avoid profanation. In the early Christian times, this concern was undoubtedly due to the pagan belief- still strongly rooted in the newly-converted Christians-that an unspoilt tomb was absolutely essential for the deceased to enjoy a peaceful rest in the hereafter.

Christian obsequies shared many of the characteristics of the funeral rites of pagan Rome. The Church found no objection to preserving or imitating some of them on the grounds of the common veneration in which the deceased were held in both cultures. Thus, the funeral processions that escorted the corpse to the grave were a sacred duty for the heathen. During the Roman republic, they took place by night, and mourners had to carry lit candles or torches. Later, during the imperial period, obsequies began to be celebrated in the day, but the custom of the candles remain as a tribute to the dead person. The Church kept these traditions as did not seem in the least reprehensible.

However, the pagan tradition of paying a group of women to precede the coffin and feign tears and sorrow while they sang the praises of the dead person was soon replaced with the chanting of hymns, psalms and prayers. In the midst of this accompaniment of lights, chants and also incense, the corpse lay in an uncovered coffin, or wrapped in a shroud, on a stretcher carried by people purposely appointed to such a job *(lecticarii).* Dead bodies were buried outside the walls of towns, according to Roman law. The grave normally faced east. This orientation of tombs was a consequence of the general belief that soul went up to heaven from the east. Thus, we read *passi eramus et exivimus de carne, et coepimus ferri a quattuor angelis in orientem* in St. Felicitas and Perpetua's *Acta:* and when narrating St. Benedict's death, St. Gregory says: *Via recto Orientis tramite ab eius cella in caellum usque tendebatur* (Ruiz 1951).

Righetti briefly describes some funeral traditions that were popular during the first centuries of the Christian era, though not always approved of by the ecclesiastical authorities. For example, the practice of putting a eucharistic particle in the mouth of the deceased was condemned in the Third Council of Cartage in 398. However, this practice was later replaced by the custom of placing a box containing the holy host, and sometimes also a chalice with the

consecrated wine, beside the body or in its chest. This practice was continued until after the year 1000. All these traditions originated in the superstitious fear, then widely spread among Christians, that impious hands might plunder the mortal remains of the deceased and, consequently, disturb their eternal rest. The presence of Christ in the form of the holy host would certainly ensure inviolability. With the same aim, inscriptions with the names of angels and martyrs, relics, bells, amulets, etc. were placed in the tombs. (Righetti 1955)

Another superstitious tradition was the so-called *refrigerium*, which was quite popular among Christians and pagans until shortly after the sixth century. Souls were believed to dwell together with their dead bodies in the same tomb and to feel the same need to eat and drink as the body when alive. For this reason, people used to bring different kinds of food and drink to the grave for the soul to satisfy its needs. The Church made no objection to this tradition: the faithful gathered round the tombs of their dead relatives and celebrated a little banquet and the remaining food was distributed among the poor. However, the Church strove to remove any sort of pagan echo from the Christian *refrigerium.* Thus, this rite expressed the permanent union of the living faithful and the dead. Especially, on the anniversary of the death or martyrdom, the *refrigerium* commemorated the participation of the deceased in the heavenly banquet. In addition to the solemnity of the funeral ceremonies, the Church also arranged that the memory of the dead person be periodically remembered. In this way the soul's eternal bliss was supposed to be more easily obtained; or, if this had already been achieved, the soul could in turn pray to God in favour of the living. Moreover, if the dignity of the dead person was such that his or her life could set an example to the living, the memory of their actions would have an edifying effect. Finally, the memory of their holy martyrs, bishops, confessors, etc. on appointed dates and in well-known places contributed to increase their fame (Lapidge 1991).

The Christian belief in the intercession of the living with God for the dead dates from the first century. It was a widely spread doctrine, even among the heathen, that souls needed to atone for their own faults before entering heaven and that the prayers and sacrifices of the living were of great help to that end. From the fourth century onwards, prayers for the dead were already being included in the liturgical framework of the mass. This periodical prayer for the deceased echoed the one said during the funeral wake. In the daytime,

and above all by night, the corpse was watched over, psalms were sung and texts from the Holy Scriptures were read. This wake could also be lengthened by reading out the entire Psalter or by singing the litanies of the saints. All this ritual constituted the earliest antecedent of the *commendatio animae*. In fact, the *commendatio* can be found prescribed in the oldest rituals either for the vigil of the corpse, *praesente cadavere,* or for the third, seventh and thirtieth days *post mortem* and the anniversary. Generally speaking, it was also used as a liturgical formula to intercede for the deceased. However, the main prayer for pleading with God on behalf of the dead was the celebration of the mass. The custom of officially saying the names of the deceased in the mass soon grew up alongside the frequent mention of the names of those dead Christians whose recognised sanctity made them particularly suitable to be included in the prayers of the living. On the other hand, the names of those who died excommunicated (on the grounds of heresy, for example) were not mention in the mass prayers.

Various critics have pointed out that the worship of the saints is a continuation of the cult of the ancient gods, and pagan heroes. In the classical literature the deification of heroes presents many instances. For example, Alexander the Great, after he was hailed as the son of Amon-Zeus by the oracle of Amon in 332 BC, because increasingly convinced that he was a god and as such began demanding homage from his subjects; the Roman emperors came to make similar pretensions, in fact, the distinction between god and hero was uncertain (Hammond: 1970). Many examples of deification are cited in different books and in all cases gods, heroes, ancient kings and rulers from different cultures were venerated as gods after their deaths. (Robinson 1993: 3-19)

Some similarities between saints and heroes can be observed, mainly in the description of the lives of saints written by Ælfric in Old English (Skeat 1966). It is known that the hero's tomb was a place of worship in classical literature; Hector, for example, was worshipped in the Troad and at Thebes, Theseus in Athens etc., the nation that kept his body was proud of it, built sumptuous temples in his honour and chose him as the people's protector. If the hero's burial place was known a memorial was erected, but if it was found, his body was ceremoniously carried into the nearest town in a way that brings to mind the pomp surrounding Christian translations of relics. The hero's relics were similarly the object of worship, but it must be remembered

that the reasons for both kinds of worship were different. In the case of the heroes, their civil merits were uniquely exalted and their cult was absolute: they were not subordinate to a superior being. Contrarily, the worship of the saints is entirely subordinate to the worship of God and, in fact, originates in their supposed power of intercession with Christ.

To sum up, veneration for the saints and confidence in their mediation gave rise to the series of practices so far mentioned, the homage paid to their relics and tombs, the celebration of the anniversaries of their deaths and the prayers based on their efficacious intercession on behalf of the living.

Old English epic, mainly in *Beowulf* and in *The Battle of Maldon,* contains such a large number of passages in which the elegiac tone is dominant that some critics have raised no objections to considering Old English epic as elegiac poetry. In dealing with *Beowulf,* Tolkien says:

> Beowulf is not a epic, not even a magnified lay, no terms borrowed from Greek or other literature exactly fit: there is no reason why they should. Though if we must have a term, we should choose rather "elegy". It is an heroic elegiac poem; and in a sense all its first 3136 lines are the prelude to a dirge: *Him tha gegiredan Geata leode and ofer eorthan unwaclicne.* (1963: 85)

These Old English words precisely introduce one of the most representative passages of the elegiac character of the poem. The grief of the Geat people accompanies the preparations for the funeral ceremony in which the hero's body is arranged on a barrow and finally cremated:

> Him tha gegiredan Geata leode
> ad on eorthan unwaclicne,
> helmum behongen, hildebordum,
> beorhtum byrnum, swa he bena waes;
> alegdon tha tomiddes maerne theoden
> haeleth hiofende, hlaford leofne.
> Ongunnon tha on beorge baelfyra maest
> wigend weccan: wudurec astah
> sweart ofer swiothole, swogende leg,
> wope bewunden windblond gelaeg,
> oth thaet he tha banhus gebrocen haefde,
> hat on hrethre. Higum unrote

modceare maendon, mondryhtnes cwealm;
swylce giomorgyd sio geomeowle
aefter Biowulfe bundenheorde
song sorgcearig. Saede geneahhe,
thaet hio hyre hearmadagas hearde ondrede,
waelfylla worn, wigendes egesan,
hyntho ond haeftnyd. Heofon rece swealg. (Klaeber, 1950. ll. 3137-55)

The people of the Geats erected then on that high ground a splendid pyre hung about with helmets, with battle-boards, and with shining coats of mails, as he had asked: then the lamenting warriors laid in the midst the renowned king, their beloved lord. Then the warriors proceeded to kindle upon the headland a most mighty funeral pyre. The wood-smoke climbed up black above the roaring flames, mingled with weeping, until, when the swirling of the turbulent air died down, the fire had by then destroyed his bone-framed body scorched to its core. Sad in their thoughts, the warriors grieved for the death of their lord. An old woman also, her hair bound up, anxious in her grief, sang over and again a melancholy tale, how she for her part sorely dreaded evil days, a multitude of violent deaths, the terror of troops, humiliation and captivity. Heaven swallowed up the smoke.

These lines provide a detailed account of the funeral honours given to Beowulf's body and tomb. Chadwick asserts that there is enough literary and archaeological evidence to confirm that Beowulf's obsequies are an accurate description of an old Teutonic funeral (1912). In *Beowulf* the corpse is laid on a funeral pyre together with the hero's helmets, swords and war gear. This is done by a group of the hero's bereaved comrades, who will also carry out the painful task of lighting the fire that is to burn away their beloved lord. The scene closes with these words *heofon rece swealg*, "heaven swallowed up the smoke", many critics have noted that the smoke from the cremation fire passing directly up to the heaven is a Germanic pagan motif documented in the *Ynglinga saga*. In addition to these ceremonies, a memorial barrow is erected on a headland so that all seamen can see it and know who is buried there. Enclosed in a wall, Beowulf's memorial also contains a huge treasure of gold and jewels. Such is the description provided by the following lines:

Geworhton tha Wedra leode
hlaew on hlithe, se waes heah ond brad,

weglithendum wide gesyne,
ond betimbredon on tyn dagum
beadurofes becn; bronda lafe
wealle beworhton, swa hyt weorthlicost
foresnotre men findan mihton.
Hi on beorg dydon beg ond siglu,
eall swylce hyrsta, swylce on horde aer
nithhedige men genumen haefdon. (ll. 3156-65)

Then the Weders built a memorial barrow on the headland, which was high and broad and to be seen far off by those travellers of the ocean, and over ten days they built the monument to the famous man bold in battle for his striving. The remnants from the flames they buried in the walls in a way men of foremost skill could not worthily devise it. They placed within this barrow rings and jewels, all such ornaments as the brave-minded men had previously seized from the hoard.

We can similarly draw a parallel between Beowulf's obsequies and the Christian funeral ceremonies mentioned above. Thus, three aspects can be noted in the attitude of those present in Beowulf's funeral: the lament for the loss of the hero, the funeral cortège (twelve noblemen on horseback) that exalts Beowulf's heroic deeds, and a final panegyric that summarizes his virtues:

Tha ymbe hlaew riodan hildedeore,
aethelinga bearn, ealra twelfe,
woldon care cwithan, ond kyning maenan,
wordgyd wrecan ond ymb wer sprecan:
eahtodan eorlscipe ond his ellenweorc;
duguthum demdon, swa hit gedefe bith
thaet mon his winedryhten wordum herge,
ferhthum freoge, thonne he forth scile
of lichaman laeded weorthan.
Swa begnornodon Geata leode
hlafordes hryre, heorthgeneatas;
cwaedon thaet he waere wyruldcyninga,
manna mildust ond monthwaerust,
leodum lithost ond lofgeornost. (ll. 3169-82)

> Then round the barrow rode twelve sons of noblemen, valiant in battle. They wanted to mourn and speak of their king, to utter a lay and speak about the man. They honoured his nobility and his deeds of courage, proclaimed them majestically, as it is fitting that one should do to extol which words and cherish in the heart one's lord and friend when he must be led forth from his life, the body's home. Thus the people of the Geats, his hearth-companions, bewailed the fall of their lord. They said that he was of all the kings of the world the kindest to his men, the most mildhearted of men, the best to his people, and the most eager for fame.

Expressions of grief and sadness are common among those present, but they are more intimately shared by the members of the hero's *comitatus*. The twelve horsemen riding round the barrow acclaim their dead leader with words of lamentation and remind the mournful audience of his bravery, strength and heroic deeds. According to the poet's words, a loyal comrade has to keep his lord's memory in his heart and spread his fame at the same time.

The concept of immortality from the point of view of the Germanic epic tradition is based on the spread of one's own fame after death. This mission is assigned to those who outlive the hero. Fell, commenting on the elegiac aspects of Germanic literature, says (1991: 175):

> The things that are *laene* are divisible into three: life itself, property and happiness. The first is a single entity, the other two composite. The poet of the *The Wanderer* says:
>
> Her bith feoh laene her bith freond laene
> her bith mon laene, her bith maeg laene.
>
> which summarized rather than translated, tells us that property, friend, man and kinsman are all "on loan" or transient (…) Since people may outlive all those they love, the only rational course of action is to transfer their affections to the undying, to seek "frofre to Faeder on heofonum (…)". It is customary to cite in this context the parallel text from the Old Icelandic eddic poem *Hávamál,* which offers the same wisdom in a pagan and secular context:
>
> Deyr fé,
> deyja fraendr,

deyr sjálfr it sama.

It is somewhat simpler: "cattle die, kin die, one's self dies", followed by the reminder that the one thing that does not die is one's reputation. It contrasts transient with permanent but both are human-centred, reputation being in the hands of the living.

A similar attitude, in relation to this Germanic heroic concept of immortality, can be noticed in Byrhtnoth's comrades' behaviour in the *Battle of Maldon*. Once Byrhtnoth has died, his loyal warriors recall aloud some of the attributes, particularly the generosity and valour, for which he deserves fame, and then, they all rush into the battle to avenge their lord. They in turn achieve fame themselves by following Byrhtnoth's exhortations to fight the enemy and avenge his death even at the expense of their own lives:

hi woldon tha ealle other twega,
lif forlaetan oththe leofne gewrecan (ll. 207-8)

Conversely, as Fell points out, the cowards who hurriedly desert the battlefield certainly save their lives but lose their good names (176); and at the same time a curse falls upon them.

The last lines of *Beowulf* show again the distressing atmosphere of desolation in which Beowulf's death has left his people, while at the same time vigorously depicting a sketch of Beowulf's most outstanding Germanic epic qualities. Words of praise for a dead hero are a common feature in all epic poems. They were not spared after Byrhtnoth's death, as has been noted. Hrothgar also sings, in tones of deep sorrow, the praises of Æschere, killed at the hands of Grendel's mother:

Ne frin thu aefter saelum; sorh is geniwod
Denigea leodum. Dead is AEschere,
Yrmenlafes yldra brothor,
min run-wita ond min raed-bora,
eaxl-gestealla, thonne we on orlege
hafelan weredon, thonne hniton fethan,
eoferas cnysedan. Swylc scolde eorl wesan,
(aetheling) aer-god, swylc AEschere waes! (ll. 1322-29)

> Ask not of joy, sorrow has come afresh upon the Danish people, Æschere is dead, Yrmenlaf's elder brother, my chief adviser and my counsellor, a comrade at my shoulder when we guarded our heads in the fray, when the armies clashed the boarcrested helms. So an earl should be, a noble man, good from the start, as Æschere was.

As is typical of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, Hrothgar begins his panegyric on Æschere by mentioning his kin: he was Yrmenlaf's brother. Then, he states his position within the *comitatus*: he was one of the Danish king's counsellors and confidants. He remarks on his loyalty as a war comrade and recalls the heroic deeds they both undertook side by side. Finally, Hrothgar holds him up as a model nobleman. All this obviously contributes to Æschere reputation as an excellent and famous member of Hrothgar's retinue. Therefore, sadness and mourning are perfectly justified, and so the possibility of showing any sign of joy is definitely ruled out by the king. This veto on joy is not only personal but also extends over the whole Danish nation. Accordingly, lamentation for the loss of a loyal warrior, close to his lord, should be shared by all members of the *comitatus* and, in general, by those to whom the hero's life must serve as a model. This general attitude of grief, common to both epic and elegy, seems to have a logical explanation if we take into account the Anglo-Saxon belief in Wyrd. Wyrd, as inexorable fate, is mainly responsible for human misfortune and disgrace throughout a man's lifetime. It consequently plays a decisive role in building up the fatalistic atmosphere in which the death of heroes is swathed. After quoting line five of *The Wanderer*: *Wyrd bith ful araed!* Trahern says:

> Whatever the last line means(…), it is uttered by the narrator as a prelude to a catalogue of personal hardships involving the degeneration of societal bonds, the loss of loved ones, lords and kinsmen, and the destruction of what seems to have stood for civilization as the narrator knows it. As the end of the poem approaches, there is a moving *ubi sunt* passage ("where did horses, kinsmen, treasure-giver, banquet seats and hall joys go?") which seems to be answered in a rhetorically parallel catalogue, in which many of the same objects fill the blank in the formula "*her bith ... laene"*:
>
> Her bith feoh laene, her bith freond laene,
> her bith mon laene, her bith maeg laene. (1991: 162)

This idea of transience expressed by the term *laene* brings gloom to the heart of the "lonely man" the poem talks about. On the contrary, stability and permanence are only provided by God in Heaven. Thus, the divine reward that the Wanderer longs for in the first two lines: *Oft him anhaga are gebideth, / metudes miltse ...,* ("Often the man on his own experiences grace, the mercy of the ordaining Lord …") is found in the last line, once all wordly things have eventually disappeared and everlasting peace and rest is reached: *to faeder in heofonum, thaer us eal seo faestnung stondeth* ("[consolation] from the Father in heaven, where for us all the immutable abides").

It is understandable that the impossibility of changing the designs of fate made the epic warrior feel intensely anxious and unprotected. A feeling that became even more intense when he experienced the death of loved ones and the loss of wealth, land and hall. (Fell. 180-82) According to pagan mentality, kin, wealth, land and hall were the main sources of happiness in life; therefore when they disappeared, grief and despair arose. If we, moreover, consider how frequently death and forfeiture occurred, it is easily understood that the elegiac aspect is significantly present in many of the literary works of the Anglo-Saxon period.

As a result of this pagan outlook on life, the only consolation left to the epic hero is none other but the perpetuation of his memory after death by means of oral or written records of his heroic deeds. Nevertheless, the pervasive Christian influence on the literature of this period conveniently counteracted those Germanic elements of the pagan past, and so the above-mentioned final lines of *The Wanderer* can be suitably quoted as an example of this. Both notions of immortality are similarly intertwined in *The Seafarer*. The following passage, for example, asserts that the best epitaph for a man is the praise of those who outlive him for having bravely fought against his earthly enemies and against the devil (that is to say, sin):

> Forthon thaet bith eorla gehwam aeftercwethendra
> lof lifgendra lastworda betst,
> thaet he gewyrce, aer he on weg scyle,
> fremum on foldan with feonda nith,
> deorum daedum deofle togeanes,
> thaet hine aelda bearn aefter hergen,
> ond his lof siththan lifge mid englum. (ll. 72-78)

> For every man, therefore, praise from the living, speaking out afterwards, is the best of epitaphs: that, before he has to be on his way, he accomplishes gains against the malice of fiends, brave deeds in the devil's despite, so that the sons of men may afterwards extol him, and his praise may endure for ever and ever among the angels.

It is worth noting Fell's remarks on the combination of secular Germanic and Christian traditions in the previous lines:

> The praise of the living clearly includes heavenly and earthly voices. The two lines which speak of actions on earth carefully balance human activity against human foe with spiritual battle against the infernal. The following two lines, equally impartially, balance rewards in reputation among the children of men and among angels. Anthropologists who tell us of shame cultures and guilt cultures might define the obsession with reputation among one's peers as the latter. For the Anglo-Saxons, having inherited one set of values through secular Germanic thought and acquired another through Christian Latin teaching, the one does not preclude the other (…) The poet of *The Seafarer*, in combining two traditions, the heroic - if we may so define it, preoccupation with survival of honour after loss of life - and the Christian hope for security of tenure in Heaven, is perceiving transience on two levels, or, at any rate, as contrasted with two types of permanence. (1991: 176)

Fell's comments allow it to be affirmed that, from both an earthly and spiritual point of view, the chief aim of all actions and deeds carried out by an epic hero is the perpetuation of his memory among the people. Accordingly, an elegiac atmosphere seems to offer a suitable setting to sum up the foremost epic traits of Anglo-Saxon heroes. Thus, the lament of the mourners in Beowulf's funeral indicates the grief of a people that foresees its own destruction as a result of future invasions, since the wisdom and fortitude of its king and protector are no longer available:

> Thaet ys sio faehtho ond se feondscipe,
> waelnith wera, thaes the ic wen hafo,
> the us seceath to Sweona leoda,
> syththan hie gefricgeath frean userne
> ealdorleasne, thone the aer geheold

with hettendum hord ond rice. (ll. 2999-3004?

> This is the feud and this is the hostility, the murderous hatred between them, which the Swedish nation will visit upon us, according to the premonition I have, when they hear our lord is dead who once guarded the treasury, the kingdom and you brave shield-warriors against enemies.

The hero's death also brings out the Germanic epic traits of allegiance and generosity. Accordingly, Beowulf's vassals faithfully escort their lord's body and fulfil his wishes as to the disposition of the tomb while they proclaim the heroic deeds of their lord, from whom they have received so many gifts:

> Nu is ofost betost,
> thaet we theodcyning thaer sceawian
> ond thone gebringan, the us beagas geaf,
> on adfaere. (l. 3007b-10a)

> Now haste is the best thing, so that we may pay our respects to the people's king there and escort him who gave us rings on his journey to the funeral pyre.

The fatalistic atmosphere which constitutes a substantial part of the elegiac tone of the Old English epic, is now enhanced by the presence of birds of ill omen such as eagles and ravens, and beasts such as wolves as pointed out Niles (1991, 133). Known to be scavenging as man-eating creatures in the epic tradition, they all announce the fateful fulfilment of wyrd as can be seen in *Beowulf*:

> ac se wonna hrefn
> fus ofer faegum fela reordian,
> earne secgan, hu him aet aete speow
> thenden he with wulf wael reafode. (ll. 3024b-27)

> Instead, the black raven, greedy after men ordained to die, will croak a great deal, telling the eagle how well he had fared in his feasting as, with the wolf, he scavenged among the dead bodies.

These three fragments mentioned above have been taken from the herald's message announcing the sad news of Beowulf's death to the group of comrades that took part in the hero's last exploit (ll. 2900-3027). As we have repeatedly pointed out in this study, this is an elegiac passage which

sums up the most outstanding epic traits with which the Anglo-Saxon heroes were endowed. This lament over the dead hero's tomb actually embodies a cult tradition inasmuch as it involves the exaltation of the Germanic virtues that the hero represents and simultaneously serves the twofold aim of spreading his fame and proposing a model of good ruler:

> swa he manna waes
> wigend weorthfullost wide geond eorthan. (ll. 3098b-9)
>
> Since he was the most honourable soldier among men far and wide throughout the earth.

To finish with, homage to heroes and veneration for saints gave rise to ceremonies and rites so far mentioned. Therefore some similarities can be seen between the veneration in which both saints (particularly martyrs) and heroes were held and its practical consequences. Special reference should be made to the fact that belief in eternal bliss caused a twofold feeling in the saint's followers with regard to his death: sorrow for such a loss, on the one hand; happiness, on the other, when considering the everlasting joy awaiting him. This latter aspect is not always obvious in the case of the Anglo-Saxon heroes.

This assay shows, then, some analogies in the description of the funeral rites between Anglo-Saxon epic and the primitive Christian ceremonies; these resemblances suggest a Christian audience that still knew and felt certain enjoyment with the old Germanic rites, for instance, the description of the funeral of Scyld Scefing in the bosom of a ship, the ancestor of that Danish royal house which is to play so large a part in the story of the poem, or the funeral rites of Beowulf at the end of the poem as we have already seen; but as Robinson says in dealing with the poem *Beowulf*:

> For those in the audience who thought of pagan deification, the closing rites would have been a powerful culmination of the pervasive tension throughout the poem between inspiring heroism and the sad shame of heathenism. The poet reveres the exemplary conduct of Beowulf and his people while deploring the pagan darkness which leaves that whole world in danger perdition. (1993: 18)

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