BEOWULF: MYTH AS A STRUCTURAL
AND THEMATIC KEY

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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Denton, Texas
May, 1990

Very little of the huge corpus of *Beowulf* criticism has been directed at discovering the function and meaning of myth in the poem. Scholars have noted many mythological elements, but there has never been a satisfactory explanation of the poet's use of this material. A close analysis of *Beowulf* reveals that myth does, in fact, inform its structure, plot, characters and even imagery. More significant than the poet's use of myth, however, is the way he interlaces the historical and Christian elements with the mythological story to reflect his understanding of the cyclic nature of human existence.

The examination in Chapter II of the religious component in eighth-century Anglo-Saxon culture demonstrates that the traditional Germanic religion or mythology was still very much alive. Thus the *Beowulf* poet was certainly aware of pre-Christian beliefs. Furthermore, he seems to have perceived basic similarities between the old and new religions, and this understanding is reflected in the poem. Chapter III discusses the way in which the characterization of the monsters is enriched by their mythological connotations. Chapter IV demonstrates that the poet also
imbued the hero Beowulf with mythological significance. The discussion in Chapter V of themes and type-scenes reveals the origins of these formulaic elements in Indo-European myth, particularly in the myth of the dying god. Chapter VI argues that both historical and mythological layers of meaning reflect traditional man's view of history as cyclic, a temporal period with a beginning and an end. At the juncture between end and beginning is conflict, which is necessary for regeneration. The interlacing of Christian, historical and mythic elements suggests the impossibility of extricating the individual and collective historical manifestations from the cosmic imperative of this cycle. The Beowulf poet perhaps saw in the ancient myths which permeated his cultural traditions the basis of meaning of human existence.
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CHAPTER 1

BEOWULF IN THE TRADITION OF MYTH AS LITERATURE

It was Voltaire's conviction that the study of myths is an occupation for blockheads.¹ If he is right, modern criticism includes the work of many blockheads (surely not all of whom are myth-critics). Especially in the second half of this century, it has become common in literary criticism to uncover mythic patterns, rituals, and archetypes. This focus is largely the outcome of the wide scope and popularity of formulations of theories of myth by numerous scholars with a variety of approaches.²

Theoretical accounts include functionalism, which describes myth in terms of its operation within a social structure, often in connection with rituals. Its major spokesmen are Bernard Malinowski, who argues that myths justify rites or ceremonies,³ and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, according to whom ritual and myth are not always distinguished.⁴ Another group of theorists believes that myth shows the universal character of the human psyche, that it reveals certain characteristics of the functioning of the human mind. Obviously, Freud and Jung are important for their psychological speculations on the significance of
myth. Freud feels that myth is a symbolic representation of
cflict in the psyche and that it attempts to capture the
language of dreams.\textsuperscript{5} For Jung, archetypal forms
(transcendental symbolic forms) in man's psychic life are
revealed in myth, along with dreams, magic, ritual and art.\textsuperscript{6}
Another theory of myth can be classified as "religious," in
the sense that its major proponents, Joseph Campbell\textsuperscript{7} and
Mircea Eliade,\textsuperscript{8} believe that the language of myth has a
religious or metaphysical foundation. Still another school
of thought, most effectively represented by the work of
Ernst Cassirer, addresses myth as a self-contained symbolic
language, a body of symbolic forms.\textsuperscript{9} Finally, there are the
structural theorists, the best known of whom is Claude Lévi-
Strauss. Lévi-Strauss contends that the meaning of
mythology "cannot reside in the isolated elements which
enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way
those elements are combined."\textsuperscript{10}

The work of all these and many more theorists of myth
has been used in the analysis of literature. It is perhaps
fair to inquire why literary analysis should admit a
consideration of myth. Malinowski writes that "myth
contains germs of the future epic, romance, and tragedy."\textsuperscript{11}
The traditional narrative, Lord Raglan insists, "has no
basis either in history or in philosophical speculation, but
is derived from the myth. . . ."\textsuperscript{12} Joseph Strelka contends
that "it is necessary to examine . . . mythical structures in literature because time and again there has been a direct inner link between literary language and the codes of myths and dreams." Even such a caustic assessor of myth criticism as William Righter grants that in some instances in literature, the myth has a role "of bringing many things together, of suggesting much through little." The main reason for regarding myth as germane to the analysis of literature may be found in "the universality of myth . . . . And behind this lies the notion that myth conceals a message, is a code to be broken in order to unfold the inner meaning." Like myth, literature can be a message that must be decoded in order to expose its meaning. Also, many of the major works in English literature since Beowulf have plainly incorporated myth. As Harry Slochower has said, "A study of the great literary classics shows that their themes are organically interwoven with mythic and religious belief." Perhaps the relationship of myth to literature is best explained by Righter: "To our openness in the face of ultimate questions to which we have no answers and for which explanations are simply not explanatory the myth poses another question 'It's like this, isn't it?' And what follows is the story." 

Despite the popularity of myth criticism until fairly recently, damning voices have often been heard. Righter
disagrees with comparisons of literature to myth, with the idea that "the particular is best explained through the more general." A fair complaint regarding much of myth criticism is that "The myth may seem thin and lifeless compared to the density and richness of the work which is supposedly 'explained' by it." This is, as a matter of fact, the problem with most myth criticism done on Beowulf. Another sometimes well-founded charge is the existence of suppressions and distortions, the replacement of "wishful thinking or academic habit" for genuine insight.

With all due consideration of these voices of caution, the present study will discuss myth in Beowulf, not because it is interesting to talk about myth but because a full understanding of the shape and meaning of this poem depends on a comprehensive examination of myth. The truth of this statement, however, would not be supported by the amount of relevant literature. Only a small portion of the enormous body of critical work on Beowulf deals with myth. This fact is curious, considering that the earliest studies of Beowulf in the nineteenth century began with myth. It was natural that myth would be a first avenue of approach to the poem, since the "science" of mythology developed in the nineteenth century from the new hypothesis of a new primitive language called Indo-European. Max Müller, who believed that "the mythology of the Veda is to comparative mythology what
Sanskrit has been to comparative grammar," applied the methods of comparative philology to mythology.\textsuperscript{22}

For modern critical scholarship the role of folklore, myth, and ritual really began with the Brothers Grimm in the nineteenth century, and the critical discussion of mythological influences in \textit{Beowulf} is no exception. The Grimms became interested in \textit{Beowulf} at the beginning of their active scholarly careers, even before the 1815 publication of Thorkelin's edition: Jacob Grimm had seen a sheet of the poem in advance and written his brother Wilhelm about its importance. Most often the Grimms used \textit{Beowulf} to illustrate Germanic story and culture. In \textit{Deutsche Heldensage} (1829), Wilhelm Grimm uses the poem for support in his discussions of Weland, Sigemund, Waels, Fitela, Hama, Eormenric, and Heremod.\textsuperscript{23}

Jacob Grimm's work with \textit{Beowulf} is, of course, more clearly related to mythology. He freely uses Anglo-Saxon poetic sources, including \textit{Beowulf}, in \textit{Deutsche Mythologie}, first published in 1835.\textsuperscript{24} As Eric G. Stanley points out, the outstanding characteristic of Jacob Grimm's philological work was his illustration of the post-Christianity continuity of "pagan" concepts by examples from the Anglo-Saxon poetic vocabulary. For instance, Grimm interprets "gif mec Hild nime" (\textit{Beowulf} 452, 1481) as mythological, explaining that "Hild" is the name of one of the Valkyries,
specifically Bellona, the pagan goddess of war. While such etymological connections may seem far-fetched, Grimm offers a reasonable explanation:

If we look carefully we shall find that traces of pagan gods adhere to the poetry which followed immediately upon the conversion of the Germanic tribes; and how could it be otherwise, seeing that all religion permeates also language, expression, and the processes of thought?25

Grimm's insistence on the "paganism" in Anglo-Saxon poetry and on the superiority of this mythological paganism to what he perceived as Christian contaminations influenced the methods and attitudes of Anglo-Saxon scholars for the rest of the nineteenth century and even longer.26 Klaeber reviews these theories, starting with that of John R. Kemble, who originated the theory that the hero of Beowulf was, before confusion with a historical person of the same name (the nephew of Hygelac), originally Beowa (Beowulf I), "a divine being worshipped by the Anglo-Saxons and credited with wondrous deeds of the mythological order." This theory was widely accepted and further delineated by Karl Mullenhoff, who made the connection of Beow with Sceaf (sheaf) and Scyld (shield) and drew the conclusion that Beow was thus equivalent to Frea, the god of fruitfulness. Furthermore, both Grendel and his mother were thought to
personify the North Sea, and Beowulf's successful fights against them symbolic of the "checking of the inundations of the sea in the spring season." Following this same line of reasoning, the death of the old hero was seen as the coming of winter, revealing an underlying seasons-myth. There were, in this tradition, as Klaeber points out, quite a few additional "more or less ingenious" mythologically-induced theories advanced, also mostly by German scholars. Examples include views of Beowulf as a type of Balder, as a lunar deity, and as a personification of elements of nature (wind, storm, lightning).

It is, as W. W. Lawrence says, extremely difficult to assess these scholars' mythological theories because of their inconsistency and confusion with other theories. On the positive side, these efforts provided a starting point, and Mullenhoff's hypothesis in particular is significant as "the first attempt of any consequence to account for the non-historical events in the poem by appealing to mythology." Clearly, the shortcomings of these first mythological studies of Beowulf lie in their fragmentary nature. These early scholars have in common the selection of details, mainly based on philological considerations, for the "proof" of mythological allusions. This method is not in itself objectionable. One problem, however, is the lengths to which some critics were willing to go to justify
the bias in favor of "pagan" elements, notably Grimm's "characteristic mythologizing of the locutions." Another problem is that no attempt was made to fit these mythological details into a consideration of the poem in its entirety. It is exactly this failing which drew justifiably negative responses like that of John Earle, who complains that Mullenhoff's reading of Beowulf tries to demonstrate that the poem "is not that highly organized thing which is called a Poem, the life of which is found in unity of purpose and harmony of parts" and that it tears the poem apart as though it were "a thing without a core or any organic centre." It is not surprising, then, that subsequent scholar-critics of Beowulf rejected the so-called mythical allegory approach. In 1909 W. W. Lawrence dealt what seemed to be a death blow to these German investigations which, in his view, "vastly exaggerated" the mythological elements. Although the early studies depend largely on the premise that the "god" Beowa was the original hero, Lawrence concludes that evidence does not warrant regarding Beowa as the "divine hero" of the Grendel episode. Lawrence strongly criticizes mythological interpretations of Beowulf primarily on the basis that they are unnecessary: "Beowulf is no less heroic as a mortal facing with undaunted courage these grisly phantoms of the moor and mere than as a god
subduing the sea or the darkness."34 On the other hand, he makes a curious statement in which he seems to contradict himself: "Scholars have been slow to perceive that the mythology in Beowulf is the ultimate goal of criticism, and in no wise its starting-point."35 Here, although he does not elaborate, Lawrence seems to be expressing dissatisfaction with the fragmentary nature of previous mythological approaches and wishing for a synthesis of these elements with all the elements of the poem. With this indirectly stated demand it is difficult to disagree.

In spite of the rather inauspicious early history of mythological approaches to Beowulf, critical studies of this kind did not end with Lawrence's rejection. In fact, J. R. R. Tolkien's landmark study "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," considered by most scholars the beginning of modern criticism of Beowulf as poetry, appeared in 1938. Tolkien's interpretation is basically mythological. He makes his position clear near the beginning of his article. In a listing of critical opinions of Beowulf, he refers to the mythological readings as "very old voices these and generally shouted down, but not so far out as some of the newer cries."36 Even if modern taste resists myth, he says, the Beowulf poet and his audience esteemed it: "there was room for myth and heroic legend and for blends of these." Tolkien further elucidates his point of view when he refuses
to defend the "mythical mode of imagination" or to
disentangle "the confusion between myth and folk-tale,"
stating that "The myth has other forms than the (now
discredited) mythical allegory of nature: the sun, the
seasons, the sea, and such things." And it is obvious that
it is of another form of myth that Tolkien is speaking when
he contends that the Beowulf poet has presented a myth
"incarnate in the world of history and geography."37 He
sees Beowulf as "something more significant than a standard
hero, a man faced with a foe more evil than any human enemy
of house or realm . . . and yet incarnate in time, walking
in heroic history. . . ."38

Tolkien argues that Beowulf is unified by the symbolic
meaning of the hero's battles with the monsters and that
combat is central to the theme of "man at war with the
hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time." He
insists, then, that the mythology in Beowulf as represented
by these battles reflects the basic meaning and purpose of
the poem. He answers those critics who had complained that
the poet had misplaced important things at the outer edges
of the poem and unimportant, thinly disguised folktale
elements (monsters) at the center: "The particular is on
the outer edge, the essential in the centre."39 His idea of
the relationship between the mythological and the historical
in the poem is further clarified when he states that the
poem "glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts; it stands amid but above the petty wars of princes, and surpasses the dates and limits of historical periods, however important."  

For Tolkien, this myth informs the structure of the poem as well as the theme. Because the myth reveals the theme, it is understandable that the poem is not a straightforward narrative. He counters Klaeber's comment that Beowulf "lacks steady advance," contending that narrative advance was not intended. The poem is, instead, essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death.  

Obviously, Tolkien sees myth as the underlying structure, finely balanced with other elements. "The large symbolism is near the surface," he states, "but it does not break through, nor become allegory."  

Assessing Tolkien's contribution to the study of Beowulf from a myth perspective is a daunting task, not unlike that of a gnat sizing up a giant. It is an accepted
fact that his example of directing criticism to the understanding of Beowulf as a poem is invaluable. Just as incontestable is the worth of his attempt to discuss the entire poem in terms of myth. In this, he succeeded where early proponents of mythological interpretation failed. Nevertheless, because of the audience to whom his article is addressed, he limits his consideration of mythical elements largely to the "monsters." Thus, his article is a starting point for a complete investigation of myth in Beowulf and its operation in the thematic context of the poem.

In spite of the far-reaching impact of Tolkien's treatment of Beowulf on virtually all criticism of the poem since 1938, no further discussion of Beowulf as myth appeared in print until 1951. Even then, it was only a brief note vaguely titled "Beowulf," the purpose of which was to refute the idea that Beowulf is divided into two parts joined only loosely together by the hero. Here S. J. Johnson categorically states that the poem is "essentially a primitive myth with additions," similar to most primitive myths in that it is an "account of a tribal coronation rite." The story of the deeds and death of the hero of Beowulf, Johnson explains, follows the basic pattern of Indo-European myth. The hero, like Tammuz or Adonis, must go through rites of passage before he can become king. The essential features of these rites of passage are victory
over an evil antagonist and descent to and return from the underworld, which symbolizes rebirth into manhood. Thus, Johnson believes that the defeat of Grendel and the killing of Grendel's mother are "the initiation rites that make possible Beowulf's good reign of fifty years." Furthermore, even in death, Beowulf follows the model of the hero whose death "confers benefits on society."  

Johnson was apparently the first to connect the poem explicitly with Indo-European myth. And even though his premise that most primitive myth is based on tribal coronation rites is at best restrictive, his inherent suggestion that a study of mythic rites of passage can lead to a fuller understanding of the poem is useful, as will be seen later in this paper. The limitations of Johnson's interpretation are the same as those which have beset most handlings of the poem by myth-critics: selection of disparate details, which taken separately are unconvincing, and a lack of synthesis of the mythological elements with other elements.

It may be that fashions in criticism simply shifted, but perhaps these shortcomings lay behind the apparent lack of interest on the part of Beowulf scholars in mythological considerations, which lasted almost another decade. Then, from the late 1950's through the early 1970's, a number of
such studies appeared, undoubtedly the fruits of the vogue that myth criticism in general was enjoying at that time.

In 1958, Peter F. Fisher analyzed Beowulf on the principles outlined by Joseph Campbell in his theory of the "monomyth" of the hero. Fisher views Beowulf as an epic hero who is not just a symbol but the incarnation of racial trials. The emphasis in this kind of epic is on the individual trials of the hero. These trials, as outlined by Campbell, involve three main tests, which Fisher identifies in Beowulf. The first involves the hero leaving the safety of home to "encounter and overcome the initial trials of his task," the events leading up to the fight with Grendel. In the process of undergoing this first test, the hero "defeats or conciliates the power barring his passage or preventing him from successfully completing his mission," as Beowulf does in his encounters with the coast-guard, Wulfgar, and Unferth. After passing the first test of killing Grendel, the hero must pass the threshold into "an unfamiliar and frequently subterranean realm in search of the maternal root of the earthly power which he has already encountered."

Obviously, Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother fits here. During the second test, the hero usually is granted supernatural aid. As Fisher notes, Beowulf receives the giant-made sword and "returns to gain recognition by the initiator of his quest," Hrothgar. The third and final test
is faced by the hero after his return home and period of kingship; in *Beowulf*, this is of course the fight with the dragon. Fisher's use of Campbell's monomyth theory may now seem an obvious application, but Campbell himself does not mention *Beowulf*, and the connection had not been made before, at least not in print.

Despite its relevance, Fisher's work is not referred to in Carl Meigs' 1964 article "*Beowulf, Mythology and Ritual: A Common-Reader Exploration.*" In attempting to account for the emotional response the poem still evokes, Meigs also deals with *Beowulf* in Campbell's terms as well as those of Jessie Weston. According to Meigs, applying the formulas of Campbell and Weston results in "an idea of the structure of *Beowulf* as inherently following the growth pattern in the development of the hero." While admitting that there is "no exact or continuous" parallel to the Grail stories, Meigs conjectures that "there are momentary similarities in agent and situation which offer the interesting, if inevitably obscure, speculation that *Beowulf* also has in its traditional background vegetation myth and fertility ritual." He concludes:

As myth and ritual, *Beowulf* outlines the mythical progress of a world hero; he is initiated into kingship; he rules prosperously for a time in which nothing particularly dreadful happens; and
he dies, encountering and defeating at the cost of his own life, the last and greatest threat of all to the health of his land...  

Meigs believes that the emotional significance of the poem lies not in ritual but rather in "the source of ritual, the dream mythology of the individual mind expressed in communal rites." This idea is again based on Joseph Campbell, who explains myths in terms of modern psychoanalysis. In identifying Beowulf as archetypal initiation myth, Meigs adds a new element to myth criticism of the poem. Whether or not his thesis is valid is impossible to judge. His reading is, however, open to the criticism that it ignores the complexity of the poem.

Jeffrey Helterman also treats Beowulf as an archetypal hero, but in a more unified and therefore more convincing way. Taking as his point of departure Tolkien's view of the essential mythic content as "the conflict between chaos and order," Helterman believes that representative of this conflict in the poem are two mythologies. The Norse mythology, in which the "triumph of chaos" is the ultimate conclusion, seems to overshadow the Mediterranean (Christian) mythology, which "emphasizes the triumph of spring and rebirth." Nevertheless, Helterman contends, Beowulf transcends its Germanic origins. The actual defeat of the hero is a symbolic victory in the sense of
"validation of a temporal act through its ritual significance." According to this theory, historical acts are transformed "into archetypal acts which occur outside of history and are, therefore, timeless." The deeds that Beowulf performs, then, have ritualistic value and repeat the deeds of a god. Beowulf, while neither god nor man exactly, is a hero "repeating symbolically the acts of a god." For example, by having Beowulf remove his armor, the poet indicates the timelessness of the Grendel fight: "The battle becomes a clash between two elemental forces."

An equally interesting aspect of Helterman's thesis, and one requiring less tricky reasoning, is that the archetypal hero becomes demythologized as the poem progresses, so that "Beowulf has descended fully into the world of time" when he recounts his adventures to King Hygelac. According to Helterman, Beowulf begins this process of descent in his battle with Grendel's mother, where he is "away from the sacred precincts of Heorot." The demythologizing is complete by the end of the poem: "When the dragon decimates Beowulf's gifstol, he symbolically destroys the hero's effectiveness as an archetypal figure" because Beowulf has lost his center of power" and no longer has "a place in which he can repeat the archetypal act of creation."
Janet Dow also deals with the archetypal descent of the hero in Beowulf, but for her the descent is into himself rather than history. Obviously, the main thrust of Dow's interpretation is psychological. She suggests that Grendel is "the shadow side of Beowulf" and that this is the monster Beowulf battles. The descent into the mere, she explains, symbolizes the hero's return to the womb, "to his own beginning." The hero is initiated into "a new spiritual existence" through his descent into the Underworld: "he no longer need fear death" because "he has faced its terrors and attained a kind of immortality, the goal of all heroic initiations." Dow believes that Beowulf, like Christ, has his roots "in the same ancient mythos, but this is not to say that Beowulf is a Christian hero." The poet has, she argues, "made use of a universal theme that is not Christian, but pre-Christian, the archetypal pattern of the Savior-Hero who suffers, dies, and is reborn—a timeless theme that has worked its enchantment on all men and in all ages." What connection this theme has with the historical component is unclear.

Other critics have approached the question of the importance of mythological tradition in Beowulf in a slightly different way. G. V. Smithers is representative of a group of scholars who were trying to revive the theory that the poem is primarily based on Germanic pre-Christian
heroic and mythological tradition. In Smithers' opinion, we "cannot understand what Beowulf is really about without recovering the buried meanings in the story; and we cannot evolve a valid critical judgment of the poem without understanding it in this sense as well as others." Smithers' argument is that the first and second parts of Beowulf are based on Scandinavian sources, now lost but recorded in extant sagas. In quite some detail, he uncovers parallels between Beowulf and Scandinavian mythology as revealed in the sagas. His bias, reminiscent of Grimm, in favor of the "heathen" is apparent in his reference to a Christian idea as an "unhappy intrusion" in the poem. In 1966, Paul B. Taylor turned his attention to this same argument. He takes a compromise position: "Christian poetic impulse and Germanic myth and legend are not only compatible informing principles, but together constitute a major contribution to Beowulf's overall artistry." The bulk of his article is concerned with pointing out the similarities between the Christian tradition and the northern mythological tradition as recorded in the Icelandic Voluspa and with showing how both traditions may be seen at work in Beowulf, specifically in the portrayal of Heorot. His conclusion is that the poet's "conception of Heorot . . . may be attributed to two traditions." In fact, "It is precisely from the point where Christian and pagan
traditions meet that the poet derives his informing pattern.⁶¹

In the same vein is "The Essential Paganism of Beowulf" by Charles Moorman. Although the emphasis is on Germanic heroic elements, Moorman does deal with mythology. He suggests that "in the end, the archetype of the poem, or at least the folk elements from which it sprang, comes to dominate its mood and theme." For Moorman, it is not that the Christian aspects are undesirable; they are simply overshadowed by "the pessimism of Nordic mythology." It is evident that Moorman uses the term "mythology" here to mean the large concepts underlying the mythological stories of a culture:

Scandinavian mythology presented a negative, pessimistic view of history in which man and earth and giants were to be destroyed as the final act of a conflict between gods and giants in which all men, living and dead, were to take part. Although a new heaven and earth might eventually arise from the ashes of the old, the present life of man was marked not only by struggle, but by a sense of the futility of struggle.⁶²

Moorman also discusses the possibility that "the pagan notion of kingship and ritual sacrifice" is reflected in Beowulf.⁶³ Although he does not say so, this notion is of
course based on "myth" in a wider sense than the way Moorman uses the term.

A summary such as this would be incomplete without turning to the work of Joseph Fontenrose, whose *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origins* was published in 1959. Fontenrose, a classical scholar, is well known for his work in mythology. Relevant to the present study is his application of the combat myth to Germanic myth and legend in general and to *Beowulf* in particular. As might be expected, he sees Part I (combat with Grendel and his mother) and Part II (combat with the dragon) as important variants of the combat myth pattern found scattered around the Mediterranean Sea and across Asia to Japan, as well as in northern and western Europe. This pattern is broadly outlined as follows: The hero, who wants to cleanse the land, fights two enemies, first a male and then a more terrible female. These enemies, who are terrorizing the land, appear most often in dragon and/or giant shape and are powers of death and of the sea. The hero must meet them by descent into the lower world. He almost dies or does die, but the enemy is defeated. At the end, the hero celebrates his victory. Fontenrose systematically shows the points of connection between *Beowulf* and the myth pattern, which are, as is obvious to even novice readers of the poem, remarkably numerous and significant. While clearly a much more
extensive consideration of *Beowulf* as myth than previously seen in the literature, Fontenrose's treatment is naturally limited to his use of *Beowulf* as an illustration of the main focus of his book.65

Eleven years after Fontenrose's *Python* was published, an article titled "*Beowulf*: Myth and Meaning" appeared, in which Terry A. Babb also states that "*Beowulf*'s three fights are patterned on a combat myth which is itself a part of a larger mythical pattern of creation and dissolution."66 Since his goal is literary criticism and not mythology, Babb goes on to say that it is this myth which lends the poem its "dignity and richness." In his opinion, "*Beowulf* is an elegy; its theme is the death of a people."67 It follows that "the myth is used to illustrate and parallel the historical predicament of the Geats and Danes."68 Babb contends that "The myth has been so adapted that it is Nordic history writ large...." The Geats and Danes, he believes, are combatants "in the perennial struggle between light and darkness, life and death, cosmos and chaos."69

Babb dismisses the Christian elements as "equivalents for what had become vague or meaningless in older versions of the poem."70 It is to Babb's credit that he attempts to account for the myth, historical background, and Christian elements in *Beowulf*. Even so, his view of the theme seems unnecessarily limiting. And, in fact, he seems to
contradict himself in this respect when he argues that "The
mythical element . . . is there to reconcile man to his
inevitable destruction."71

In this survey of the criticism addressing Beowulf from
the perspective of myth, Alvin A. Lee's The Guest Hall of
Eden is unique in its contention that Christianity and
specifically the Bible is the source of "the dominant
overall mythology and symbolism of Old English poetry."72
Although he devotes considerable space to Beowulf, Lee
admits that this poem "is not as clearly and unmistakably
shaped and informed by Christian myth and symbol" as the
other poems he considers.73 Lee recognizes four major myths
in Beowulf: the "cosmogonic myth" (growth of Scylding
dynasty and building of Heorot) connected with the Christian
biblical creation story; "the myth of the Fall and the
beginnings of fratricide and crime" (attack on Heorot by
race of Cain); "the myth of the heroic redeemer" (victory
over race of Cain); and "the myth of the hero's death and
the return to chaos."74 For Lee, "each creative human
act . . . has its archetype in the creative and redemptive
acts of God or Christ."75 "Beowulf's immersion and
emersion" in the mere episode, for example, are
mythologically "both a descent into hell . . . and a
resurrection into a world newly restored by his acts of
rescue."76 But Beowulf is after all a man, and human
victory, however heroic, is only temporary. Lee states: "The theme of Beowulf is "human defeat in time-dominated middle-earth," and the poet's vision is tragic: "The closing scene expresses a pronounced tragic sense of confinement, of the putting into dark places of all that is splendid in this world." If the vision is indeed tragic, as many readers of the poem have agreed, it is difficult to concur with Lee's interpretation that this tragic ending is strictly the outcome of a Christian mythology informing the poem. Northern mythology's view of Ragnarok in which gods and men alike are destroyed is darker, and all creation/dissolution myths share this portrayal of the inevitable power of chaos over order. Considerable value lies, however, in Lee's careful, detailed explication of the Christian "layer" of meaning in the poem from a myth perspective.

For eight years, no further treatments of myth in Beowulf followed Lee's study of Christian mythology. Then, in 1980 two articles dealing with Beowulf in the context of myth were included in the same collection of essays. The editor of this book, John D. Niles, explains in the Introduction that the essays presented reflect a movement in Beowulf criticism away from complicated symbolic interpretations and back toward a view of the poem either "as a Christian product or offshoot of a deep-rooted native
verse-making tradition. In a short essay, Albert B. Lord discusses the way in which "two discrete narrative patterns" widely dispersed in Indo-European tradition are interwoven in Beowulf. The first pattern consists of the absence and/or powerlessness of the ruler and/or hero (Hrothgar and Beowulf), the devastation of his people and/or land (Grendel at Heorot), and the return of the hero and/or his power (peace returning to Heorot). The second pattern involves "the encounter of the hero and a companion, or companions, with first a male monster, which he overcomes, and then a female monster, or a divine temptress, who wants to keep him in the 'other' world." After escaping these monsters, the hero makes a journey in the course of which he learns the answer to the question of "his own mortality or immortality." The last stage of this pattern is "a death at a climactic point." Lord finds the significance of these patterns in Beowulf in the fact that they give a mythic base to Beowulf's actions as hero.

In the other myth-oriented article in this collection, Michael N. Nagler uses "myth" in the sense frequently encountered in contemporary literary criticism, as symbolic metaphor. He agrees with Fontenrose that the three fights in Beowulf are based on the Python myth and that in this poem "the myth takes the specific form of a clash between the 'daemonic' forces of nature and the lightly
Christianized sky-god who orders, tempers, and after all has created nature." Nagler illustrates how this myth informs the literary features of the poem. Nagler argues that the Beowulf poet saw the Indo-European creation myth and the Old Testament creation story as having the same meaning: "Both levels of mythology in his cultural tradition pointed to man's heroic capacity to overcome disorder in himself, exemplified in Christ's struggle and resurrection in the service of God." This line of argument leads Nagler directly to his conclusion that the continuing power of the poem lies in "the insight of the myth . . . into human nature." Entering the realm of psychological myth criticism, Nagler sees the poem, and especially what he perceives as the climactic fight in the mere, as primarily symbolic of the struggle within the individual. The monsters are the "fiends within us," but "there is also a great source of energy by which to control them." Nagler explains this energy source as "the untapped sources of will by which we are, or could be, capable . . . of choosing whether to hoard our vitality for ourselves or use it to make our fullest contribution to the forces of living order within us and around us." This interpretation, while perhaps plausible,
seems an unnecessarily vigorous search for reasons to explain Beowulf's power as a poem.

The most recent study of Beowulf from a "myth" perspective is found in Paul C. Bauschatz's The Well and the Tree, published in 1982. The thesis of this book is that "Germanic culture was dominated by its conception of its own past," which is, as Bauschatz acknowledges, a well-established fact. Basic to Bauschatz's approach is his use of "myth" as "a cultural manifestation of underlying structural impulses." In other words, he does not view myth as a narrative but rather as abstract structure, and the structure he sees underlying Germanic culture is the opposition between past and non-past events, which he insists is unique among Indo-European peoples.

According to Bauschatz, "the most overt 'mythical' representation" of the elements underlying Germanic culture "is found in the 'iconic' figure formed by the union of the world tree, Yggdrasil, and Urth's Well." He explains that the tree signifies the worlds of men, gods, and other beings. The roots of the tree extend into the water of the well, which nourishes the tree. The well represents the past, including the actions of all beings who exist in the world-tree. As the actions of men, gods, or giants are collected in the well, "all actions become known, fixed,
accomplished." And, of course, this stratified past nourishes or significantly affects the non-past.⁸⁸

In Chapter III, "Beowulf and the Nature of Events," Bauschatz applies this theory to an interpretation of the structure of Beowulf and contends that it explains the way events are presented throughout the poem. "Every action calls to itself other actions to which it is significantly linked. . . . Such linkage is valuable because it illustrates and extends the significance of the associated actions." Naturally, Bauschatz considers "digressions" or "extraneous" material to be essential to a full understanding of the meaning of the poem. All of the references to Beowulf's earlier exploits, to other figures such as Wiglaf or Hygelac, are necessary in conveying the full significance of Beowulf's life. "The importance of his actions lies not only in what he performs . . . but in the extent to which these actions touch upon and are touched by other aspects of human activity from earliest times onward."⁹⁰

It would be difficult and incorrect to disagree with Bauschatz's conclusion that the poem is "the container of Beowulf's life, his actions, and the actions of others whose lives his touches in a significant way."⁹¹ It is, however, equally difficult to see the myth of the Well of Urth and the tree Yggsadril as directly informing the poem's shape.
Bauschatz seems to be examining Beowulf from a myth point of view only in the sense that he has chosen an apt figure to describe the interrelationship of past and present in the poem.

From this summary of myth criticism of Beowulf, it is clear that, while much has been said about the subject, a complete discussion including all the mythological elements in the poem has yet to be written. Even more significant is the need to identify and explain the relationship between this level of meaning and the other components. Such a synthesis is the ultimate goal of this study. It is hoped that by achieving a thorough, systematic synthesis, the interpretation of the poem offered here will escape the charge that myth criticism is usually disappointing in the sense that "It tells much of interest, but not what we really want to know." \(^{92}\)

An integral part of this synthesis involves accounting for the Christian elements in Beowulf. The extensively treated argument over whether the poem is essentially Christian or pagan will probably never be resolved. \(^{93}\) Opposing the "Patristic Exegetical" school of critics are those who believe that the poet composed orally, drawing from a large tradition of inherited pre-Christian formulas and themes. For these critics, the Christian elements are late additions and not integral to the poem. \(^{94}\) For the
purposes of myth study, it is hardly necessary to decide in favor of either Christian or "pagan." In fact, neither Sir James Frazer nor Jessie Weston makes an effort to separate the two developments. In any case, it will be seen that both pagan and Christian myths derive ultimately from the same sources. And since the unique texture of the poem is produced by the careful interweaving of Christian and pagan myth with the historical heroic elements, no attempt will be made to determine special import for either Christian or pagan.

It should also be obvious from the foregoing summary of myth criticism of Beowulf that the term "myth" has been used with a sometimes bewildering variety of meanings. It is imperative, then, to define the meaning of "myth" as it will be employed in this paper. G. S. Kirk claims that, while not all oral tales are myths, "the only safe basis for a broad definition of myth" is "non-literary tales . . . repeated and developed by anonymous storytellers. . . ." An even broader definition is put forward by Richard Chase: "the simplest meaning of the Greek word 'myth' is the right one: a myth is a story, myth is narrative or poetic literature." Beowulf certainly fits both of these definitions, but they are so broad that they fail to be usable in any concrete application of myth to literature. A more specific explanation is offered by Lord Raglan, who
saying that myth "embodies a situation of profound emotional
significance, . . . which is in its nature recurrent," and
which is represented by a "ritual which deals with the
situation and satisfies the need evoked by it." It is
primarily in this sense that myth will be explored in its
relationship to Beowulf.

Gwyn Jones distinguishes between myth and wondertale or
heroic legend, defining myth as a story involving gods which
deals with creation and with the nature of the universe.
Everything else is either wondertale or heroic legend, and
it is on this basis that Jones rejects Beowulf as myth. It
can easily be shown, however, that even by Jones' definition of myth, Beowulf contains a mythological story.

Perhaps William Righter is correct when he says that
Joseph Margolis' definition of myth as "a schema of the
imagination" which is "capable of organizing our way of
viewing the world" is best for the purpose of literary
criticism. At least it is useful in speaking of the
workings of myth in Beowulf. Thus, "myth" will designate a
recurring pattern of intense emotional significance, which,
within the poet's imaginative schema, is "capable of
organizing our way of viewing the world." The emotional
import of this pattern is reinforced by its association with
the acts of gods, its metaphysical resonance.
Edward B. Irving, Jr., argues that Beowulf does not fit the definition of myth because it lacks cyclic or recurring reenactment of significant events, so important in myth properly defined, with its invariable associations with actual regularly repeated rituals. The historical nature of the events and characters in itself takes the story out of any cyclic pattern. . . . If it really happened, it happened once and once only.\textsuperscript{101}

In fact, as this study will show, an examination of the mythological elements clearly supports an interpretation of Beowulf as myth, precisely as defined by Irving. Even so, Beowulf is neither myth nor rite; it is literature made out of myths. As Ruthven says of Euripides and Ovid, the Beowulf poet has created "something which, in its stabilized and codified form, is quite remote from what the anthropologist encounters in his fieldwork."\textsuperscript{102}

Nevertheless, myth and rite underlie its structure, its characters and its plot and, most significantly, illuminate its theme. It will be seen that myth infuses not only the recurring struggles with the monsters but informs the imagery and diction used by the poet and controls his theme. Certainly, no claim will be made for this study as a theory of ultimate significance, but rather as a way of studying Beowulf in terms of special significance.
Further, the historical level of the poem does not force us to reject the cyclic nature of the events depicted there; on the contrary, history repeats itself often enough within the context of the poem. The cyclic nature of the historical events echoes the cyclic pattern revealed in the mythological level of the poem. These two levels of story and meaning are further reinforced by the Christian elements. At any rate, as Lillian Feder warns, "Myths must be regarded as both historical and perennial structures."\(^{103}\)

This study will not deal primarily with origins, neither those of natural phenomena, such as the rising and setting of the sun, nor geographical, such as the diffusion of myths from India. Instead, the emphasis will be on the structure and function of myths, the same emphasis given in twentieth-century general studies of myth. Further, the present discussion will involve two concepts of myth: myth as a structure and myth as received mythological material. It is not suggested that the *Beowulf* poet used myth intentionally as modern practitioners like Yeats, Joyce, and Eliot have. While he may have been conscious of the mythic elements he inherited from the tradition in which he was working, he almost certainly did not invent myth for his own purposes as, for example, Yeats did.

As David Daiches points out, modern critics tend to view myth "as a kind of symbolic situation produced by the
proper use of 'archetypal' imagery." While "archetypes" do occur, this paper will avoid discussing Beowulf in terms of Jungian archetypes. Referring to Jung's theories of archetypes, Ruthven says that they strikingly illustrate "what Whitehead used to call the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness, for Jung's 'collective unconscious' is no more empirically verifiable than Noam Chomsky's 'deep structure,' which similarly appears to explain everything except itself." Another problem with this approach is aptly summed up by Alan Dundes' question: "If archetypes are innate and 'genetic,' why aren't the same myths found in all cultures?" Although "the cultural relative approach must not preclude the recognition and identification of transcultural similarities and potential universals," it seems that Dundes is right when he reasons that "Mythology must be studied in cultural context in order to determine which individual mythological elements reflect and which refract culture."

Before beginning a detailed analysis of Beowulf as myth, then, it is appropriate and perhaps even necessary to look at the world in which the poet lived. Only by a complete understanding of the way in which mythology permeated his culture and society can a true assessment of the workings of myth in his poem be made.
Notes


9 See Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Suzanne K. Langer (New York: Dover, 1946) and *The Philosophy of

10 Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in Myth: A Symposium, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1958), 53. Lévi-Strauss could be included with Freud and Jung because of his suggestion that the structure of myth may relate to organic features of the brain itself (Righter 19).


14 Righter 82.

15 Righter 19.


18 Righter 50.

19 Righter 45.
Righter 52.

21 Even so harsh a critic as Righter admits that the decline of myth criticism may not so much reflect "that the limitations of a method have been measured than that a certain form of magic has ceased to beguile" 127.

22 As quoted in Ruthven 33.


24 Stanley, "Continental Contributions" 23.

25 Eric G. Stanley, The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism (Totowa, NJ: Rowman, 1975) 18. This monograph, originally a series of articles printed in Notes and Queries, outlines the attempts made by scholars, mostly earlier ones, to discover pagan (that is, non-Christian) elements in Beowulf. Stanley refers to the poem's "Christian secularity" and contends that "no amount of probing will reveal a pagan core" x.

26 Stanley, Search 17.


28 Lawrence, "Disputed Questions" 260.

29 Lawrence, "Disputed Questions" 258-59.

30 Stanley, "Continental Contributions" 22.

31 As quoted in Stanley, Search 43.

32 Lawrence, "Disputed Questions" 271.

33 Lawrence, "Disputed Questions" 258.

34 Lawrence, "Disputed Questions" 273.

35 Lawrence, "Disputed Questions" 261.


37 Tolkien 63-64.

38 Tolkien 66.

39 Tolkien 67.

40 Tolkien 87.

41 Tolkien 81.

42 Tolkien 66.

43 S. F. Johnson, Explicator 9 (1951): no. 52.


45 Campbell 245-46.
49 Meigs 101.
50 Meigs 94.
51 Meigs 101.
52 Meigs 98.
54 Helterman 16-17.
55 Helterman 19.
57 Dow 48.
59 Smithers 17.

Moorman 12. The relationship of sacral kingship to myth will be dealt with in detail in Chapter IV of the present study.


Fontenrose set out to show "that the Apollo-Python myth and the Zeus-Typhon myth are two closely related expressions of a single antecedent myth, itself a member of a myth family that ranged over most of Europe and Asia" 465.

Terry A. Babb, "Beowulf: Myth and Meaning," Arlington Quarterly 2 (1970): 15. This article is evidently based on Fontenrose's work, and in fact Fontenrose is cited several times; however, the author makes no mention of Fontenrose's discussion of Beowulf.
Babb 16.


Lee 175.

Lee 211.

Lee 214.

Lee 209.

Lee 212.

Lee 223.


Albert B. Lord, "Interlocking Mythic Patterns in *Beowulf*" 137-39. Lord makes frequent comparisons of *Beowulf* with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in working out the details of the patterns.


Nagler 147.

Nagler 153.

Nagler 156.

Paul Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree: World and*
Furthermore, any action is important not for the way it occurs but because of its possibilities as a fixed action to be related to other facts. For example, Beowulf's giving the sword hilt to Hrothgar and Hrothgar's giving gifts to Beowulf not only bind the two men together "but continually weave events into each other and actually extend the physical presence of the actions they commemorate." 101.


95 Frazer, The Golden Bough, 1 vol. abr. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963). Both Frazer and Weston treat Christian and pagan mythology as variations on the same basic myth/ritual patterns which are shared by both traditions.


This statement reflects a basic premise of the present study. It is made with all due respect to the tenets of New Criticism, whereby it is legitimate for a work of art to mean something to a later period that it did not mean to its original audience. Indeed, I would agree that *Beowulf* can mean something to us that it may not have meant to its original audience; nevertheless, it seems an unnecessarily careless omission not to attempt to discover what the poem probably did mean to its first audience.
CHAPTER II

THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF BEOWULF

It seems fairly obvious that before one can arrive at any conclusions regarding the role of mythic elements in Beowulf, an understanding of the pre-Christian world view of the Anglo-Saxons is essential. It should be stressed that what we have been trained to call "mythology" from a thoroughly Christian cultural vantage point is the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon's religion. His belief shaped his way of looking at the world. A full grasp of pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon religious ideas and practices is plainly requisite to a complete understanding of the context in which Beowulf was composed. However, the information at hand is quite limited, making it difficult to obtain knowledge concerning the mysteries of Anglo-Saxon paganism in spite of the late date of the so-called revival of heathenism during the Christian period.

Written sources are particularly limited and vague as regards the pre-conversion religious beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons. Nevertheless, the absence of records does not mean that heathen practices did not occur. Writing was solely the province of the Christian clergy from the time of King
Ethelbert to the Norman Conquest. As J. S. Ryan explains, the Church "was practising a policy of suppression, and . . . such pagan material was not suitable for a Church-inspired record."¹ Clearly, while Pope Gregory warned the early church against blatantly attempting to stamp out all traces of the old religion, it was not advantageous for the Church to record heathen beliefs in detail. In any case, the later church was not so charitable, as is illustrated by legal codes listing increasingly harsher penalties for turning aside from Christianity.² Since virtually all the extant Anglo-Saxon written record is the work of clerics, there are but scant traces of the old religion here.

Even so, the information can be pieced together. As William Chaney says,

> Although no Anglo-Saxon work gives us full information on pre-Christian religion in England, almost no poem from before the Norman Conquest, no matter how Christian its theme, does not reflect it, and the evidence for pagan survivals and their integration into the new faith goes beyond even the literary sources.³

So while the corroboration for any statements made must be painstakingly retrieved from admittedly disparate and sometimes ambiguous sources, there is enough evidence to
gain some estimation of the role of pagan mythology in the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon world view.

One source commonly used to fill in blank spaces in the description of Anglo-Saxon beliefs is the poetic written record of Scandinavian mythology. In this chapter, examples from Scandinavian legends have purposely not been used to substantiate Anglo-Saxon beliefs, on the premise that only Anglo-Saxon evidence is patently admissible. Nevertheless, it seems logical to suppose that at least some of the legends in such a poem as the *Voluspa*, which belongs to the same tradition of alliterative half-lines as *Beowulf*, were familiar to the poet and his audience. In fact, the Sutton Hoo find has demonstrated that there was significant cultural contact between the Anglians and the Scandinavians, and even though Scandinavian mythology was not recorded in writing until the tenth century, it surely existed long before then. It is not particularly adventurous to suppose that wandering scops may have brought the stories of their or other peoples' gods to courts in England or that an English scop may have heard these stories and repeated them. The problem is that by the time the Scandinavian beliefs were written down, they may have changed substantially from those with which eighth-century Anglo-Saxon culture came into contact. Thus, although such radical alterations are unlikely, the use of Scandinavian parallels as sources of
information concerning Anglo-Saxon mythology will be as limited as possible.

In order to judge which sources are most relevant, it is necessary to determine a date for Beowulf. This is in itself problematic, as anyone familiar with the literature knows. A discussion of the possible dates and the arguments offered in support of those is beyond the scope of the present study, but as Colin Chase points out in the most recent lengthy treatment of the subject, most commentators date the poem from 650 to 800, although the West Saxon manuscript in which the poem is preserved dates from around 1000. The position taken in this paper is that the poem was fixed in its present form sometime during the first half of the eighth century, perhaps a bit earlier but almost certainly not later.

Another fundamental assumption is that Beowulf is a unified whole; it is neither a loosely bound collection of stories nor a pagan poem with late Christian interpolations. This is not to say that the poet's sources did not include a rich and varied native oral tradition. In fact, as William Whallon says: "Composed in a traditional language that would perhaps in itself have caused the past to seem less remote, Beowulf . . . shows the customs, ethics, and religion that the poet shared with his audience." The poem as we have it, then, is the poem
composed by "the Beowulf poet," who was himself a Christian but who was also familiar with the heathen religion which had never, as will be amply demonstrated, died out. It will be shown in the following chapters of this paper that the Beowulf poet incorporated mythological and historical elements from traditional oral poetry into his poem with a fine perception of their relation to the Christian elements and their contribution to his theme. He was very much aware of and a part of his world and certainly understood and shared the world view of his audience.

Beowulf was composed in either Northumbria or East Anglia, almost certainly Mercia. Fortunately, there is more information about the Anglians than about other Germanic tribes. Frederick Norman believes that they probably subsumed a number of other tribes on the continent and that their migration to England allowed them "to settle down and to preserve their own individuality, character, and identity." Although he does not mention mythological stories, Norman does suggest that the Anglians may be responsible for "a good deal of heroic material." He conveniently summarizes what we know of the people whose descendants comprised the audience of Beowulf:

We know that a rich store of story went over to England with the Anglians, . . . that they continued to collect heroic material from the
continent, . . . that in the eighth century they are possessed of an astonishing amount of information, in story form, from Scandinavia, . . . that their relations with the Danes who had gradually occupied deserted continental Anglia remained friendly and intimate for a long time after they had settled in England. . . .

From this starting point we can begin to examine the beliefs of the eighth-century Anglians specifically and Anglo-Saxons generally.

The oldest gods worshipped by the Anglo-Saxons were apparently the same as those worshipped by the natives of Britain. The earliest archaeological discoveries such as the rock tracings found throughout Western Europe, including England, support the widespread existence of solar images and cult objects during the Bronze Age in Celtic Britain. The predominant images depicted in these tracings are various circular forms, including spirals, spoked circles, rosettes and swastikas, as well as "sun-bearing or wheel-bearing ships." Celtic Christian pillar stones as well as the Stonehenge megaliths also bear wheels and circle crosses. Although more recent treatments of Stonehenge have tended to concentrate on its astronomic aspect, T.C. Lethbridge believes that Stonehenge, "known significantly
enough to Geoffrey of Monmouth as the 'Giant's Dance,' was constructed for the purpose of "the conducting of ritual and religious dances at the rites of both sun and moon alike." It seems likely that the religion of early Britain combined the two tendencies of nature cults: the matriarchal cult of the earth (as seen in the beliefs of the early Stone-Age settlers of Europe) and the patriarchal cult of the sky (as seen in the beliefs of the Indo-Europeans).

Knowledge concerning Celtic Britain is relevant since British mythology begins with the Celts and since the Anglo-Saxons apparently accommodated themselves to this religion just as they would later do with Christianity. In his study of the chalk hill-figures of England, Lethbridge includes a map showing the widespread distribution of surviving "traces of pre-Saxon religious survivals" and argues that this "serves to show the improbability of any large-scale dispersal of the former population by the Anglo-Saxons." It also shows that Celtic beliefs were not exterminated by the Anglo-Saxons; they were assimilated just as the population was assimilated.

It must be recognized, however, that the basic beliefs of the Celts were similar to beliefs held by people all over the Indo-European world. Consequently, essentially the same beliefs may have been held by the Germanic tribes before they even came in contact with the Celts. If so, these
shared conceptions could only have made assimilation occur more readily. For instance, in Celtic mythology, there were basically two tribes of gods who were always in conflict, one named after the god Don, who was symbolic of the sea and death, and the other after Tyr, who represented life and light. It is not surprising that these "tribes" can be easily identified in Beowulf, since the conflict between life and death, light and dark is probably the oldest mythological theme, certainly dating back to Indo-European origins. What is significant is the fact that this mythological theme has persisted in England in varying religious forms, inclusive of but not exclusively Christian. Thus, as Chaney warns, Christianity should not be too much divorced from "the culture, shaped by paganism, which formed and even warped it." 

Lethbridge contends that "the worship of the Earth Mother, the moon, and of her husband, son, or lover the sun was one of the most permanent beliefs in Britain." In the Gogmagog Hills of East Anglia, Lethbridge excavated the Wandlebury hillside chalk figures which made up a giant tableau one hundred yards long and thirty yards high. The oldest, dating from the Celtic Iron Age, was a female goddess on a horse. Two more figures, a one-hundred-foot warrior (with the familiar solar wheel symbol on his chest) brandishing a fifty-foot sword and a second male figure one
hundred seventeen feet high and eighty-five feet wide were added along with a chariot around 50 BC during the Celtic Bronze Age. Lethbridge interprets this scene as a depiction of the battle of the forces of light, represented by the moon (Epona, Magog, Earth Mother) and the sun (Gog, Sky God), against the dark, represented by the warrior.20

According to Lethbridge, this site and others like it were centers of ritual activity. The outlines of the chalk figures were not filled in as a result of Cnut's law against the worship of Sun and Moon in the eleventh century, and the Wandlebury site was used for religious festivities until around 1600, attesting to its continuing power of attraction. Finally, enough University members in the days of the Tudors participated in rituals at Wandlebury "that the University Senate had to take steps to discourage their members from attending them."21 Obviously, their Celtic provenance does not at all preclude the possibility that these figures were used for religious purposes by the Anglo-Saxons. As Chaney states, "The rites of pre-Saxon gods in England" such as those at Wandlebury "survived the coming of both the Anglo-Saxons and Christianity. . . ."22

There is, in fact, good reason to believe that the worship of sun/sky god and moon/earth goddess continued in England, both before and after St. Augustine brought Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons. Evidence is found in the
Anglo-Saxon calendar, archaeology and literature. The names for the first and second days of the week continued to honor the Sun and Moon. In *De Temporum Ratione*, Bede says that the heathen name of February was *Solmonath*, during which time the pagans offered cakes to their gods. The name *Litha*, meaning "moon," was given to two summer months. Almost half of two hundred fifty stamps on Anglo-Saxon burial urns excavated from an Anglo-Saxon cremation cemetery in Suffolk appear to be symbols of the sun: discs, circles with rays, swastikas, and equal-armed crosses (which might also be Christian symbols). The horse, serpent, boar, and stag, all "animals associated with light and sun" are also "uniquely connected with the burial urns." Male sun and female moon faces frequently appear above the cross in crucifixions in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. The Anglo-Saxon Charms also reflect religious beliefs pre-dating the worship of personalized gods. The charm which is sometimes called *Æcerbot*, a fertility charm, contains both sun and earth worship. Moon-worship can be found in two charms in *Herbarium* 8 and 10, where the charms are to be performed "when the moon is waning." As late as the first part of the eleventh century, Cnut the Great passed laws forbidding the worship of "the sun, moon, sacred groves and woods, and hallowed hills and fountains."
This ancient religion was of course influenced and transformed by the beliefs of pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons and Christians. The ancient gods were venerated along with the personalized Germanic gods, and the pagan English had priests and temples in which they set up idols. This fact is clear from Pope Gregory's often-quoted letter of June 17, 601, written to Abbot Mellitus, in which he says that the idols must be smashed but that the temples are to be consecrated for the use of Christianity. The problem is determining the exact nature of heathen beliefs concerning these gods. Again, information about the gods of the Anglo-Saxon heathen religion must be pieced together from varied sources, and there is disagreement among scholars even as to the exact list of gods.

The earliest personalized god known to have been worshipped by the Anglo-Saxons is Tiw (or Tyr), the old Sky Father, whose name is given to the third day of the week. Sometime before 300 AD, he took on the attributes of a war-god, as may be seen in the correspondence of Old English Tiwes-dag to Latin Martis dies, the day of Mars. Tiw is one-handed, and his weapon is the sword, "used for sacred oaths and in single combat a method of determining the outcome of larger armed conflicts by means of divine judgment." According to Hodgkin, Tiw was "so old . . . that by the fifth century he had faded in the background of
men's minds.\textsuperscript{32} Nevertheless, a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon spearhead and a sword pommel bear the runic symbol $\uparrow$ for this pagan war-god.\textsuperscript{33} Branston notes that placename evidence shows Tiw "was still worshipped by the English after AD 450." Tiw was remembered at Tuesley (Surrey), Tislea (Hampshire) and Tyesmere (Worcestershire). Tiw is also connected with the chalk horse figure cut into the hillside near Tysoe (Warwickshire), which means "Tiw's hill spur."\textsuperscript{34} Some of the attributes of Tiw may later have been taken over by Woden, especially since his huge spear could determine the outcome of battle.\textsuperscript{35} Tiw may be identical with the god known as Seaxnet, whom continental Saxons worshipped until the ninth century. Seaxnet appears as divine ancestor of the East Saxon kings, the only surviving Anglo-Saxon royal genealogy to claim Seaxnet rather than Woden.\textsuperscript{36}

A second sky-god worshipped by the Anglo-Saxons is Thunor (the English equivalent of Thor), whose name is preserved in the name of the fifth day of the week. Although Hodgkin suspects that all the gods except Woden were "little more than mere names,"\textsuperscript{37} a case can be made that Thunor continued to occupy a place in the heathen religion after the passage to Britain. The god of thunder, whose hammer was the thunderbolt, Thunor was especially revered by the common man and in particular the farmer.
"The proliferation of folk superstitions regarding thunder and its prophetic value might be taken as proof of English Thor veneration," as Ritzke-Rutherford acknowledges.\(^{38}\) Thunor seems to have been more popular than Woden in Essex and Wessex, judging by the more frequent occurrence of his name in placenames there. Sacred sites of the god are commemorated at Thunderfield (Surrey), Thundridge (Hertfordshire) and at six places in Sussex, Essex, Surrey and Hampshire in which Thunor's name "precedes -leah an Old English word meaning a 'wood' or 'woodland clearing," evidence for the worship of Germanic gods in sacred groves.\(^{39}\) Since Thunor was the god of farmers, the absence of his name in the royal genealogies does not mean that he was unimportant.\(^{40}\) In fact, in spite of his connection with common man, one of the pieces found in the royal grave at Sutton Hoo, a whetstone "sceptre," could be symbolically associated with the sky god, since one story told about him concerned a whetstone in his forehead.\(^{41}\) The main myth connected with his name was his struggle with the World Serpent, a myth with which the Old English were possibly familiar. In this role, Thunor is the champion against the dark forces of chaos and destruction.

The dominant god of pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon religion was Woden, whose name is commemorated in the name of the fourth day of the week. Hodgkin says that Woden, "chief god
of warriors," was replacing "Thunor, the Thunderer, the weather-god beloved by the common people, much as Thunor" had driven out Tiw. Elfric, writing in the eleventh century, identified Woden as Mercury, a man deified by the heathens. Like most gods, Woden was identified with life as dispenser of luck and with death as its controller.

Much of what is known about him is substantiated in the written record. Woden is referred to in the Nine Herbs Charm as a magician: "The snake came crawling and struck at none. But Woden took nine glory-twigs and struck the adder so that it flew into nine parts..." Branston explains that the glory-twigs, wuldortanas, "represent the 'twigs of Wuldor' or of the Sky Father... on which runic signs had been cut." Woden may also have been regarded as the inventor of the runic alphabet since in Solomon and Saturn, "Mercurius, the giant" is said to be the inventor of letters. According to Ryan, occurrences of the "beasts of battle" theme in Exodus, The Finnsburg Fragment, Genesis, Elene, and Judith, as well as in Beowulf are references to the cult of Woden, which is entirely possible since ravens and wolves were traditional cult animals of this god. Ryan offers the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 491 describing the slaughter of every Celtic warrior at Pevensey as "evidence that the first settlers in Britain practised the rite of total immolation of an enemy host" in honor of
Woden. Hanging was another form of sacrifice to Woden: the reference in Beowulf to the mourning father's son hanging as a joy to ravens ("^onne his sunu hangaS / hro&re," 2447b-2448a) may have been for the contemporary audience a clear reference to a heathen god.48

More tangible support is given by Brian Branston, who points out that "Traces of his cult are scattered more widely over the rolling English countryside than those of any other heathen deity. . . ."49 Wansdyke ("Wōdnēs dic"), an impressive earthwork extending from Hampshire to Somerset, was contructed in the fifth and sixth centuries.50 The Vale of Pewsey just below Wansdyke is "associated with the worship of Woden" but also has "religious affinities going even further back into the Early Iron Age, as evidenced by the White Horse cut into the chalk of the hillside."51 Early Anglo-Saxon placename evidence associates Woden with hills and artificial mounds,52 which is particularly interesting in light of the giant hillside figures. Near the White Horse figure are places which in the ninth century were still known as Wōdnēs beorh "Woden's barrow" (now Adam's Grave) and Wōdnēs denu "Woden's valley."

Other placenames which reveal his widespread veneration are Wednesbury and Wednesfield above the mouth of the Thames and Woodnesborough (near Sandwich), to name only a few.53 It is obvious, then, judging from the settlements named after him,
that Woden was widely venerated among the Angles of Northumbria, the East and West Saxons of Essex and Wessex, and the Jutes of Kent.

Most Anglo-Saxon kings traced their genealogies to Woden and continued to do so even after converting to Christianity. He appears as an ancestor of the royal houses of East Anglia and Mercia as well as those of Kent, Essex, Wessex, Deira, Bernicia, and Lindisfarne. Ryan believes that "this fact . . . may be taken as a principal proof of the deeply rooted worship of the divinity." This tradition was a significant part of the tribal culture since, as Sir Frank Stenton remarks, "kingship was less a matter of political authority than of descent from ancient gods. . . ." Largely as a result of this divine ancestry, the Anglo-Saxon king functioned as an intermediary with the gods, whom his people would serve as they served him. Naturally, as Jon Kasik explains, when the king converted to Christianity and at the same time retained his descent from ancient gods, serving the king's new God "would not have required an alteration of a people's essential world view. . . ." Woden's role as ancestor of kings is indicative of the powerful position he occupied in Anglo-Saxon religion.

The boar was one of the cult objects associated with Woden. However, this was an ancient cult figure, as attested
to by the first-century sandstone figure described by Davidson as wearing a neckring "with a fine crested boar carved on his chest, and a large staring eye on one side of the body," a traditional symbol of the ancient sun-god. It is interesting that Woden was also known as a one-eyed god, having traded his eye for the acquisition of hidden knowledge. Probably because of its association with Woden, god of war and royalty, the boar was a symbol commonly connected with kings and warriors. Thus, "there are ten representations of boars among the grave-goods" at Sutton Hoo, including the interlocking boars on the clasps and those on the eyebrows of the helmet. A boar also forms the crest of a helmet from a seventh-century grave at Benty Grange in Derbyshire, and Davidson conjectures that the gold bristles of this boar might show a "link between the boar and the sun." As mentioned earlier, Woden was the god of warriors, and in Beowulf (303b-306a) the boar is said to guard and protect warriors who wear it. Beowulf's boar helmet cannot be pierced (1453-54). Davidson suggests that the standard offered to Beowulf which had a boar on it ("eafor hēafodsegn," 2152) possessed religious significance as well as being a royal, ceremonial symbol. She also sees the golden collars such as that which Beowulf presents to Hygd (2172) and which Hygelac wears in his last battle
(1202ff) as probable symbols of Odin (Woden) "worn by his distinguished royal worshippers."  

The boar symbol is, however, not only found in a military context. It appears on a woman's seventh-century pendant (from White Low in Derbyshire) and on the ninth-century Alfred Jewel made after the firm establishment of Christianity. Obviously, the boar image retained its power long after the official eradication of the heathen religion.

The boar was also symbolically connected with fertility deities. In addition to the Moon and Earth Goddess, various personalized fertility gods and goddesses were worshipped in Anglo-Saxon England. The boar was the sacred animal of the mother-goddess Nerthus and of Frey(r) and his sister Frea, whose cult was derived from that of Nerthus. Most scholars agree that the earth goddess Nerthus was worshipped by the Anglo-Saxons just as the Continental Angli were faithful to her cult, even though fertility worship in England did not develop as it had done among the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons. The continental Anglians were probably the dominant member of a confederation of tribes which practiced the cult of Nerthus, and it is doubtful that they left her behind when they came to England. Chaney sees a possible connection between the Sutton Hoo ship burial and Nerthus: the ship was a cult object of Nerthus,
since she emerged from the sea. Although Anglo-Saxon England does not offer incontrovertible evidence of the fertility goddess Nerthus, "it is clear that, like their continental neighbors (and, indeed like most pagan peoples), the Anglo-Saxons acknowledged an Earth Mother whose favour was essential if they were to survive." 

Chaney believes that the cult of the fertility god Freyr (a son of Woden, identical to Frea) active among continental Germanic peoples continued in England and that "connotations of this deity may well have been present in the use of frea as a common kenning for an earthly lord and for the Anglo-Saxon king." As Chaney notes, this term appears seventeen times in Beowulf meaning "lord," and he interprets this use of frea as possible proof that Frea (Frey, Freyr) was known to the Anglo-Saxons. Branston contends that the reference to the necklace of the Brosings in Beowulf (1197-1200) is proof positive of the Anglo-Saxon knowledge of the goddess Freya, since in Germanic mythology this necklace was one of her famous possessions. Further support for Frea's existence may be seen in English archaeological finds which demonstrate "certain rituals associated with the fertility god in Scandinavian mythology." According to Icelandic tradition, the priests of Freyr (who owned a miraculous ship) were buried in ships,
so that this god may be the ultimate source of the practice of ship funerals which took place in Anglo-Saxon Suffolk.  

A fertility god who was himself buried in a ship was Balder the Beautiful, another son of Woden. Apparently, his name appears in the Old English genealogies as Balderæg and in only one placename, Baldereslec. Although the case for his having been worshipped in Anglo-Saxon England is extremely weak, the existing evidence is so striking that it demands consideration. His name, derived from an IE root *bal- meaning light, is the basis for the Old English word bealdor meaning prince or lord. This parallel suggests that Balder may have been identical with Freyr. In spite of the fact that he is not resurrected, Balder seems to belong to the tradition of Tammuz/Osiris/Adonis, of the dying god of vegetation who returns from death to his lover Earth. As told by Snorri Sturleson in the Prose Edda (c. 1200), Balder is killed when a mistletoe is hurled at him. This myth has, not surprisingly, been seen reflected in the Cynewulfian poem Dream of the Rood, particularly when Christ's cross says, "The warriors left me standing drenched with blood; I was wounded to death with arrows." The phrase "wounded with arrows" is also quoted in runes on the seventh-century Ruthwell Cross, indicating that the Anglo-Saxons knew the myth of Balder's death before the later Viking invasions.
Frig, the daughter of Mother Earth whose name lives on in the name of the fifth day of the week, is known in Scandinavian tradition as the wife of Woden and mother of Balder. She is another fertility goddess almost certainly worshipped by the Anglo-Saxons. The only reference to Frig found in the Anglo-Saxon written record "is the one by Elfric towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, contained in his homily De Falsis Deis, 'On False Gods,'" where she is portrayed as the Germanic version of Venus.79 Placenames, however, contain additional evidence for the existence of her cult in Anglo-Saxon England. Freefolk (Hampshire) is recorded as Frigefolc in the Domesday Book, and her name appears in Frydaythorpe (East Riding) and less obviously in Froyle and Frobury, villages whose names were once identical, Old English Freohyll meaning "the hill of the goddess Frig."80

There is considerable argument over whether two other fertility goddesses were venerated by the Anglo-Saxons. Eostre, whose name for April was appropriated for the Christian celebration, and Hretha, whose rites were supposedly celebrated in March, must have been fertility goddesses, since their rites were celebrated in the spring. Our sole authority for their existence is Bede. Since he is writing well after the establishment of Christianity, many scholars have been reluctant to accept their existence,
accusing Bede of back formation, inventing goddesses to match names of the months in the early Anglo-Saxon calendar.\textsuperscript{81} Stenton, however, insists that it would be "incredible that Bede, to whom heathenism was sin, would have invented a heathen goddess in order to explain the name of the month of Easter."\textsuperscript{82}

Very little is known about a fertility god named Ing. He was considered by Germanic peoples to be the hero of the Ingwine (the Danes). The Old English \textit{Rune Poem} says that "Ing was first seen by men among the East Danes until he afterwards went over the sea again." A rather obscure figure possibly identified with Freyr, who was titled 'Ingvi and 'Ingunar,'\textsuperscript{83} Ing is strangely reminiscent of Scyld Sceafing, who disappears over the sea in \textit{Beowulf}.

Scyld Sceafing, like Nerthus, also appears from the sea. Scyld and Sceaf are traditional ancestors of at least West Saxon royalty. The sheaf, apparently seen as "the child of the grain deity," was used as a religious symbol by the Anglo-Saxons in a fertility ritual,\textsuperscript{84} and Sceaf and his son Beow (barley) were probably associated with some sort of harvest rites celebrated in September, known as \textit{Halegmonath} (Holy month) in pagan times.\textsuperscript{85} Scyld Sceafing's role in \textit{Beowulf} will be considered at length in Chapter IV, but it is worth noting here that the original pagan story recorded by the Old English chronicler \AE{}thelwere (who died around
the year 1000) says that Sceaf floated ashore as a baby on
the island Scania, where he was brought up and eventually
elected as king. According to William of Malmesbury, who
died about 1142, Sceaf arrived at Scandza, an island in
Germany, in an oarless boat as a sleeping boy with his head
pillowed on a sheaf of corn. When he grew up he became a
ruler in Old Anglia, the area from which the Angles came to
Britain. It is interesting that when the Anglo-Saxon
kings converted to Christianity and added ancestors of Woden
to their genealogies, Sceaf, "who traditionally arrived by
boat, is neatly made the son of the ark-builder."

One last possible "god" worshipped by the heathen
Anglo-Saxons remains to be considered. The concept of wyrd
must be accounted for in the overall view of the way the
Anglo-Saxons looked at the world. As Branston says, Wyrd is
the Old English version of a fundamental idea which is not
restricted to Old English mythology but is found generally
in Indo-European myth, "that of an all-powerful Fate or
Destiny . . . originally pictured as a woman, a dread
omnipotent personality to whom even the gods were subject."
Branston perceives Wyrd in Beowulf as undergoing the
transition to being subject to the Christian God. He notes
that in the earlier Gnomic Poems: "the glories of Christ are
great; Wyrd is strongest of all." Many scholars have
tried to show Anglo-Saxon belief in a personalized Fate by
citing parallels from the tenth-century record of Scandinavian mythology. It seems prudent, however, to agree with Dorothy Whitelock:

It would be natural enough that, even while yet heathen, the Anglo-Saxons should feel that man’s destiny is outside his own control, but stronger evidence would be necessary before we could assume a belief in the fate-weaving Norns at the foot of the world-tree Iggdrasil, as described in the much later, poetic, mythology of the Scandinavians. 89

Nevertheless, even if one resists the temptation to see a female goddess in Old English treatments of fate, there is surely something more in the depictions of wyrd than pure abstraction. 90

Long after the advent of Christianity and in spite of the fact that England could claim to be officially Christian by 664, the date of the Synod of Whitby, the pagan religion continued to exert an influence over the people. Illustrative are the activities of royalty, who led the conversion to Christianity. Raedwald, King of the East Angles, is the most famous example of reluctance to desert the old gods, although there surely must have been others like him. After returning from Kent, where Æthelbert had persuaded him to become Christian, he set up altars to both Christ and Woden in the same temple. 91 King Æthelbert, who
swayed other kings to Christianity, was unable to convert his own son.\textsuperscript{92} The sons of King Saebert of Essex reverted to heathenism and expelled Bishop Mellitus upon their father's death, in spite of having professed to be Christians during his lifetime.\textsuperscript{93} When King Edwin (who had been converted in 634) died, Northumbria "lapsed into paganism."\textsuperscript{94} In most of the converted Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, including East Anglia, royal apostasy occurred.\textsuperscript{95} The continued interest of the Christian kings in their pagan past is further attested to by a frieze sculpture depicting a Sigmund story related in the \textit{Volsunga Saga}. This frieze was found in the Old Minster of Winchester Cathedral, the burial place of West Saxon kings, when it was destroyed in 1093 in preparation for the new Norman cathedral.\textsuperscript{96}

Sutton Hoo offers another striking example of royal adherence to the old ways. When King Sigeberht the Learned, who acceded to the throne of East Anglia in AD 631, was killed in battle by the heathen Penda, the devoutly Christian King Anna became the ruler. It was, however, "this apparently firmly converted kingdom" that "buried in the old heathen fashion the rich funeral ship of Sutton Hoo."\textsuperscript{97} Although ship burial was apparently rare in Anglo-Saxon England, the Sutton Hoo discovery confirms the existence of this tradition in East Anglia. As H. R. Ellis Davidson mentions, this seventh-century royal grave was
located "in an East Anglian cemetery used for burials over a long period of time before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons."\(^{98}\)

The persistence of heathen beliefs is indeed manifest in burial customs. According to Elizabeth Martin-Clarke, with the full acceptance of the tenets of the Christian Church the burial of objects with the dead ceases. Pagan cemeteries were used in England between the coming of the Anglo-Saxons and about 700 AD when Christian burials within the churchyards took their place. The transition, however, was not abrupt. As Martin-Clarke says, "We should expect (and we find) a number of pagan graves with Christian objects and vice-versa."\(^{99}\) The grave mound burial itself has been interpreted as symbolic of placing the dead body in the breast of the Earth Mother goddess.\(^{100}\) Cremation is also connected with the heathen religion. As Ryan notes, in Germanic tradition the burning of the dead constituted a sacrifice to Othin, who had in fact instituted this custom and whose son Balder was burned on a funeral pyre. In England, cremation sites in heathen cemeteries are located on hills mainly in the north (which is logical since Thunor was worshipped more in the south), and "large-scale cremation cemeteries" are found only in the Anglian area.\(^{101}\) Ship-burial, such as that of Scyld in
Beowulf, is also associated with Woden as well as Balder and Freyr. According to Icelandic sources, the ship of the dead is bound for the kingdom of Othin. This tradition may be what the Beowulf poet obliquely refers to when he says of Scyld floating out to sea that men do not know for a fact who received this cargo ("hwā þæm hlæste onfeng" 52).

The strength of the heathen religion is also reflected in the laws enacted against it. Paganism was apparently not even outlawed in Kent until 640 AD, when King Eorcenberht commanded that the idols be destroyed. A hundred years after the arrival of Augustine, a king of Kent found it necessary to legislate against the worship of "devils," the Christian designation for the heathen gods. Even after the end of the eighth century, by which time "the Church was firmly established under the control of bishops," laws against the practice of the pagan religion were still necessary. Almost up until the Norman Conquest, in fact, legal enactments testify that even if the rulers were Christian, heathen beliefs and practices persisted among the people, especially in stressful times. This can be seen in Beowulf, where the Christian king Hrothgar's men resort to entreating the pagan gods to help them overcome Grendel.

Chaney does not believe that the continuance of heathen practices can be blamed on the Vikings. He admits that such
ancient practices may have gained strength "by the arrival of believing pagans from Scandinavia," but strongly denies "that they had ever died out among the English or that they reflect solely the customs of the newcomers from the North." Alcuin's letter complaining that the monks delighted in Germanic tales more than in God's word implies "that even the religious in the great century of Northumbrian monastic culture cared more for secular, pagan reminiscence than for Christian learning." Hodgkin remarks, "The century after Bede is generally regarded as an age of increasing degeneracy of the English church," but even earlier Bede wrote of "sham monasteries" controlled by laymen, whose members included apostate monks.

Even when no apostasy occurred, there was a gradual blending of heathen and Christian elements. Chaney explains that "The pagan genealogies of the Woden-sprung kings were in time assimilated to Christianity." According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 855 AD, in the lineage of King Aethelwulf of Wessex, "Woden is sixteenth in descent from 'Sceaf, who is the son of Noah and was born in Noah's Ark.'"

In literature Beowulf is of course a prime example, but discussion of this poem will be reserved for the remaining chapters of this study. References to heathen religion have been noted in the seventh- or eighth-century Dream of the
Rood: critics have perceived Teutonic tree-worship as well as striking similarities to the myth of the sacrificial god Balder, son of Woden. Martin-Clarke has suggested that the "old pagan myth" of Woden hanging on Yggdrasil Ash (the world tree) is also "embedded in the account of the crucifixion in the Dream of the Rood." She further notes the significance "of the fact that the lines of the poem are carved in the old native runic letters" on the seventh-century Ruthwell Cross. The Christian poet Cynewulf signed his poems in runes, which were almost certainly associated with pagan magic in the heathen religion, indicating that the integration of pagan and Christian elements may have been common custom. Perhaps the clearest demonstration in literature is seen in the Charms, which also contain runes. In the fertility charm mentioned earlier, Christian terminology appears alongside the thrice-intoned appeal to Erce, mother earth, and the pieces of earth are carried to the church to have masses sung over them. Chaney discusses the importance of Anglo-Saxon Charms as attesting to the survival of old superstitions and beliefs and concludes that "these manifestations of popular belief bear witness to the continuation of heathenism in Anglo-Saxon England." While the names of the gods have been suppressed, their stories seem to live on, most often in a Christian setting.
Naturally, the combining of Christian and pagan elements occurs outside literature, too. Heathen figures appear on Christian crosses and pagan symbols are found in Christian graves. The seventh-century Franks Casket from northern England is exemplary of the syncretism of the time. Depicted on it are scenes from the Bible and classical as well as pagan mythology. One of the figures is Wayland, the smith of the gods whose name appears in *Beowulf*, *Waldere* and *Deor’s Lament*, in spite of the Christian Church's strenuous attempts to suppress such references to pagan heroes. Interestingly enough, the artist of the Franks Casket carved identifying runic inscriptions beneath the classical and Christian scenes but not under the Wayland scene, indicating his audience's greater familiarity with this pagan hero's story. Clearly, the world-view of the *Beowulf* poet and his audience admitted and accommodated many gods.

Sometimes the melding of Christian and pagan elements is so subtle that the artist's intention is ambiguous. This ambiguity is further complicated by the near impossibility of distinguishing one cultural pagan symbol from another. The same predominant symbols appear in the mythologies of Celtic, Germanic, and Scandinavian peoples, making rigid distinctions among their cult practices difficult at best. The overlapping use of religious symbols by Celtic, Germanic and Icelandic peoples is not remarkable, because of
extensive parallels in their mythologies. As Davidson says, this resemblance "indicates an accepted framework, with emphasis on certain symbols and motifs..." These same symbols and framework can also be seen in Christian mythology. One example is the Sutton-Hoo purse-top with the motif of a male figure flanked by two wolves which appear to be in the process of eating him. This motif has been identified as "Daniel in the Lion's Den" as well as "the Sky Father being swallowed by the Wolf." The probable explanation is that such motifs descended from a common Indo-European original, which will be fully discussed in the ensuing chapters.

Christianity, however strong, was a relatively new accretion to the set of beliefs comprising the Anglo-Saxon world view. Dorothy Whitelock points out that "The Christian religion was established in Britain before the English came, but there is no evidence that any of the invaders deserted in its favour the rites of their forefathers which they brought with them." Even King Ethelbert of Kent, who so quickly adopted the new faith, insisted on meeting Augustine out in the open because he feared the stranger's magic.

The newness of Christianity at the time of the composition of Beowulf as compared to the long history of the heathen religion can be fully realized by the fact that
royalty were still being converted in the seventh century. The West Saxons were "free of Christian influence" when Augustine died in 604.\textsuperscript{120} The infamous pagan Penda's son Peada, who had been converted in 653 AD, sent missionaries into East Anglia and central Mercia as well.\textsuperscript{121} As Stenton has said, "throughout the country in which Augustine and his companions laboured, heathenism was still a living religion when it met the Christian challenge."\textsuperscript{122}

It is logical to ask why, if the heathen religion was so strong, the Anglo-Saxons were relatively easily converted to Christianity. After all, "Æthelbert was baptized less than three months after the arrival of Augustine, and there was not a single martyrdom during the entire period of the Anglo-Saxon conversion."\textsuperscript{123} There are several possible reasons for this apparently smooth transition. Nora Chadwick reminds us that Christianity existed in Britain long before Augustine's arrival. She points out that Britons became aware of Christianity during the Roman occupation and that the intellectual contacts between Britain and Rome created a climate favorable to the Christian religion.\textsuperscript{124} In the case of King Æthelbert of Kent, the contact with Christianity was more intimate. He had been married to Bertha, a practicing Christian from Paris, for nine years prior to St. Augustine's arrival, so his readiness for the new faith can be easily accounted
Since he used his power and influence to persuade the kings of almost all the other kingdoms to convert to the new religion, it is not illogical to suggest Æthelbert as a factor in the comparatively quick conversion.

A variety of other explanations have been offered. It has been noticed that the polytheism of Germanic religion may have facilitated the acceptance of another god, the Christian one. Another explanation frequently offered is that the Anglo-Saxon pre-Christian religion had no center of control or authority, with a consequent lack of orthodoxy and ability to punish apostasy. The absence of a "creed," a formal presentation of beliefs, would obviously have greatly contrasted with the religion of Augustine. Hodgkin conjectures that the Anglo-Saxons were unable to work their beliefs "into a coherent system like that of the Icelanders in a later age" because they lived in small, isolated communities. This lack of coherence may well have put the traditional Germanic religion at a disadvantage. Another reason given for the advantageous position of Christianity is that there was not a strong sense of the sanctity of the pagan temples, which would explain why Christian missionaries were able to use them as Christian churches, in effect deposing the old gods and setting up a new one. Finally, the decision to change religions might have been an essentially pragmatic one, as it was for Coifi, a heathen
priest in the court of King Edwin of the Angles. According to Bede, the King, uncertain about accepting Christianity, consulted his councilors. Coifi replied that the new religion might be better; the old one was not particularly efficacious since others, less devout than he, had received more favors from the king.¹³⁹

Chaney disagrees with any interpretation which would imply weakness of the heathen religion. On the contrary, he contends that the very strength of the pagan beliefs and the many ways in which Christian beliefs paralleled these explain why the Anglo-Saxons could accommodate themselves to the new faith. He believes, for example, that "The relation of heathen king with heathen religion continues in the relation of Christian king with Christian Church." Chaney perceives a general

continuity between present and past and the working within a tradition while accommodating to the Christian faith, instead of a radical break with the past and the casting off of deeply embedded tribal-centred processes of thought.¹³¹

Related to this view is still another eminently plausible explanation of why the Anglo-Saxons may have found it fairly natural to accept the new religion: in many cases Christian practices subsumed rather than supplanted the earlier religious practices. For example, Christianity's
incorporation of local pagan symbols into its iconography and of "heathen customs into the conduct of the Christian year" surely contributed to its acceptance.

There are some who would not agree that the Anglo-Saxons readily embraced Christianity. Margaret Murray contends that "the Augustine mission concentrated on the rulers, and through them forced their exotic religion on a stubborn and unwilling people." It is not necessary to agree with Murray's extreme views in order to concur with her statement that "No religion dies out with the dramatic suddenness claimed by the upholders of the Complete-Conversion Theory." She believes that the continual influx of pagan peoples over several centuries "more than counterbalanced the small number of immigrant Christians" and that "though the rulers professed Christianity, the great mass of the people followed the old gods. . . ."

This opinion is not far from Whallon's comment concerning the Christianity of Beowulf: "The Danes are nominally converted but insecure in their faith and not far removed from heathenism." Whallon believes that "Beowulf came from a people who had recently been converted from worshipping gods of the sky." God has displaced "the native sky-gods" and demoted "wyrd as a secondary agency." These native sky-gods, Tiw or Thunor or Woden, then became "both the gast-bona worshipped in the Danish apostasy (177) and
the bona who, like Apollo, wounds the defenseless with his arrows (17:43) for with no alteration of cosmology, the heavens came to be filled by God. It seems safe to concur with Branston's conclusion that Anglo-Saxons of 1500 years ago depended "on the gods and goddess of the sky, earth, and weather in combat with the demon giants of flood, fire, drought, and pestilence" for their success or failure.

The world view reflected in Beowulf undoubtedly admits the supernatural along with the natural. A. R. Skemp describes this cultural milieu as "a world in which the supernatural and the natural, the marvellous and the commonplace, formed adjunct territories in daily experience." Monsters and dragons filled the earth as gods filled the earth and the sky. As Dorothy Whitelock states, "the evidence of place-names supports well the statements of the Cottom Gnomic Poem that 'a dragon, old, proud of its treasure, shall (be) in a mound' and 'a pyrs shall inhabit the fens, alone in the depths of the country'. . . ." This world was especially conducive to the survival of myth. As Judith Vaughn-Sterling says,

Hand-in-hand with the references to the supernatural found in both Anglo-Saxon poetry and ritual magic are allusions to mythological stories or to heroic legends of the past, which are
intended, perhaps, to bolster the validity of epic tales being told, or the strength of spells being cast.\textsuperscript{139}

One has only to read a book such as Charles Hardwick's \textit{Traditions, Superstitions, and Folk-Lore} (1872), which records numerous instances of "heathen" beliefs still held in nineteenth-century England, to perceive that the \textit{Beowulf} poet must surely have lived in a cultural environment rich in mythology as a real part of daily life.

It should be clear by now that the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon was indeed religious, despite the ultimate impossibility of determining the extent to which Christianized Anglo-Saxons actually believed in the supernatural beings of pagan mythology. Even the poetry usually labeled "secular" is by no means free of references to heathen and/or Christian religion. As Frederick Norman states, "The only truly secular narrative preserved is \textit{The Battle of Finnsburg}," in which "There is no reference to the Deity, or to any deity. . . ."\textsuperscript{140}

Elizabeth Martin-Clarke aptly compares \textit{Beowulf} with a church in Rome which represented cultures from the twelfth century to all the way back long before Christ, to "a chapel thought to be used for the worship of the Egyptian god, Mithras."\textsuperscript{141} The world view of the audience of \textit{Beowulf} reflected a similar depth and synthesis. As Davidson says,
"Long after the Christian church had been firmly established, story-tellers and artists turned back to the old ways of thought for inspiration and imagery."¹⁴² The Beowulf poet is no exception. Davidson is surely correct that it is "beyond dispute that the Anglo-Saxon craftsmen were aware of obvious parallels between heathen legends and Christian teaching" and that similar "deliberate attempts to harmonize heathen and Christian elements can indeed be seen all through Beowulf."¹⁴³

The rest of this paper will be devoted to showing that the Beowulf poet worked within this tradition but that he reinterpreted traditional materials according to his personal beliefs and as they contributed to the demonstration of his theme. He seems to have seen the old traditions in light of the Christian interpretation of life. In this respect, he is like the other Christians who produced virtually all extant Old English verse. As Norman puts it, "God is never very far from their thoughts even when they are dealing with essentially non-religious matters."¹⁴⁴

The goal of the present study is to discover exactly what the Beowulf poet is dealing with. Much critical effort has been expended trying to solve what Norman calls the real crux: "how can we account for the well-informed interest taken by a Northern English Anglian audience . . . in a poem
the central theme of which is the exploits of a Geatish hero at a Danish court" and "the fight of this same hero, when king of the Geats, against a dragon. . . ." In the first place, the exploits of a Geat are the theme of Beowulf no more than the exploits of a Dane are the theme of Hamlet; one might just as well ask why a sixteenth-century English audience was so interested in a story about Danes. It is difficult to understand why so many critics have found it amazing that Beowulf is "a story wrought in Christian England but concerning a hero whose life is set against the background of events and peoples in northern Europe in the sixth century." No one particularly questions such poetic distancing in later literature.

The theme of Beowulf continues to speak to us because it is not geographically or historically limited. The theme is reflected in the historical level of the poem certainly, but it is grounded in the confluence of pre-Christian and Christian mythology which was so crucial a factor in the world of the Beowulf poet and his audience.

By examining this mythology, we may discover "something of the myth which transcends the poetry," and in so doing achieve "some feeling for the past beliefs, some greater response to the poetry itself, and the primitive nature of the beliefs, in fact, more respect for the monsters, and less for the critics." It is to these monsters which we
must now turn, for they are an integral part of the mythological level of meaning in the poem and thereby central to the poet's theme.
Notes


2 Ryan 465.


6 Chase explains that this was the opinion given by Karl Mullenhoff, who believed that "sixty percent of the extant poem had been interpolated" 4.

7 The first of many to argue this point of view was
Bernard ten Brink, "Beowulf." Untersuchungen, Quellen und Forschungen zur Sprach- und Kulturgeschichte 62 (Strassburg 1888), as discussed by Chase, 4.


9 Frederick Norman, "The Early Germanic Background of Old English Verse," in Medieval Literature and Civilization, ed. D. A. Pearsall and R. A. Waldron (London: Athlone; New York: Oxford UP, 1969) 15. The provenance of the poem has been argued over slightly less than its date. See Dorothy Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951) for the opinion that the Mercian court of Offa is as possible as Northumbria in the Age of Bede. Substantial support in favor of East Anglia was offered by Rupert Bruce-Mitford in his supplementary chapter of the 1971 reissue of Ritchie Girvan, Beowulf and the Seventh Century (1935; London: Methuen, 1971) 96. Considering the relation of the Sutton Hoo find to Beowulf, Bruce-Mitford emphasizes a possible connection between Swedish and East Anglian rulers that he sees reflected in Beowulf.

10 Norman 16.


12 Jean Ritzke-Rutherford, Light and Darkness in Anglo-Saxon Thought and Writing (Frankfurt: Lang, 1979) 35-37.


15 Ritzke-Rutherford 16.

16 Lethbridge 161.


18 Chaney 5.

19 Lethbridge 156.

20 Lethbridge 91ff. He identifies Gog with Helith, the sun god which he says is represented by the Cerne giant and mentions that Gog and Magog were particularly celebrated in London. He connects Magog, Earth Mother and Horse Goddess, with many other traditions in England involving a white horse, including the White Horse of Uffington (another hillside chalk-figure), Lady Godiva (Gog-diva), the fine lady who rode the white horse to Banbury Cross, and the hobby-horse ceremonies dotted over a wide area, and the white-horse banner of Wessex. This is particularly intriguing considering Tacitus' description of the sacred white horses of the Germans.

21 Lethbridge 64.

22 Chaney 2.

23 Gale R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-

24 Kenneth Harrison. "The Primitive Anglo-Saxon Calendar," Antiquity 47 (1973): 285. Harrison also explains that when a year of thirteen months occurred, a third Litha was added and the month was called Thrilitha. This is interesting in light of the customary three faces or phases of the Moon Goddess.

25 Lethbridge 140-141.

26 Ritze-Rutherford 41.


31 Ritzke-Rutherford 24.


33 Owen 59.

34 Branston 42.

36 Owen, 30. Owen suggests that Seaxnet may have originally been acknowledged by all the Saxon tribes, since there is no extant genealogy for the South Saxons and the West Saxon genealogy is "a political 'borrowing' from their Anglian superiors."

37 Hodgkin 239.

38 Ritzke-Rutherford 28-29.

39 Branston 42.

40 Ryan, footnote 3, 462.

41 Davidson, *Myths and Symbols* 128.

42 Hodgkin, II, 28.

43 Milton Gatch, *Loyalties and Traditions* (New York: Pegasus, 1971) 31. Woden is commonly accepted as the equivalent of Mercury, and their parallel positions are reflected in the names of the fourth day of the week in Latin languages (Fr. 'mercredi,' Sp. 'miercoles').

44 Branston 97.

45 Ryan 476.

46 Ryan 469-72.

47 Ryan 474.

Two different types of boar helmets seem to be described in *Beowulf*. As Chaney notes, the description of Beowulf's helmet as "besette swin-licum" (1453) suggests the Sutton Hoo type, but the Benty Grange type is reflected in the line "sweord swate fah swin ofer helme" (1286).

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Chaney 88.
Norman 22 and 26.
Chaney 101.
Owen 33.
Chaney 50-51. Similarly, Whallon argues that the word F _der _may _be _"a _survival _from _heathenism, _since _father _was _an _epithet _of _Odin _in _Old _Norse, _and _since _Tiw _father _would _be _an _exact _cognate _of _Jupiter." _He _also _believes _that _the _use _of _Metod _in _Beowulf _(2526-27) _as _a _kenning _for _wyrd _suggests_ _"that _some _of _the _kennings _for _God _may _have _been _established _in _the _poetic _diction _prior _to _the _advent _of _Christianity. . . ." _89

Branston 143.
Owen 31.
Owen 32.
Ritzke-Rutherford 31.
Branston 157.
Ritzke-Rutherford 30-31.
As quoted in Branston 158-61.
Branston 162.
Christine Fell, _Women _in _Anglo-Saxon _England
(Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) 27. Fell remarks, "It is a sad irony that under Christian theology the day of Frig should become . . . a day of fasting and abstinence" 28.

80 Branston 42.
82 Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England 98.
83 Owen 30.
84 Chaney 89.
85 Owen 49.
86 Branston 19.
87 Owen 33.
88 Branston 64-65.

90 I have made a distinction between male and female in the foregoing discussion of deities in the heathen religion of the Anglo-Saxons. Actually no clear distinction exists, just as Frey and Freya are identical. Male and female deities share many of the same symbols. The horse was associated with the Moon Goddess as well as with Woden and Tiw. The boar was sacred to the Sun God, Woden, Nerthus, and Freyr/Freya. The ship is a cult-object associated with the Sun God, Woden (particularly through his son Balder), Freyr, and Sceaf as well as with the Mother-Goddess Nerthus. Many gods started as female, such as the original deities of
the Northwest European tribes, and became male as the result of contact with a contrary Indo-European belief in a supreme male god.

91 Bruce Dickens, "English Names and Old English Heathenism," *Essays and Studies* 19 (1933): 149.

92 Dickens 148.


94 Owen 137.

95 Chaney 167.

96 Gatch 33.

97 Chaney 161-62.

98 Davidson, *Myths and Symbols* 128.


100 Davidson, *Gods and Myths* 19.

101 Ryan 466.


103 Chaney 43.

Owen 152.
Chaney 45.
Catch 29.
Hodgkin 417-18.
Chaney 41-42.
Cf. Hodgkin 461 and Martin-Clarke 33.
Martin-Clarke 34-36.
Charles Dale Cannon, "The Religion of the Anglo-
Chaney 45-46.
See H. R. Ellis Davidson, "Gods and Heroes in
Stone," Early Cultures of Northwest Europe, ed. Cyril Fox
and Bruce Dickens (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1950).
Davidson, "Gods and Heroes in Stone" 127.
Davidson, Myths and Symbols 218.
Branston 88.
Whitelock, Beginnings 19.
Bede's Ecclesiastical History, Ch. XXV, 75.
Cannon 22.
Chaney 165-66.
Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England 102. An opposing point
of view is expressed by John Godfrey, The Church in Anglo-
Godfrey feels that the relative ease with which the British
population was converted indicates that the heathen religion
of the Anglo-Saxons was considerably weakened by the time Augustine arrived.

123 Cannon 22.


125 Branston 57.

126 Cannon 32.

127 Ryan 461. Ryan thinks that this lack of centralization is perhaps due to a detrimental effect caused by geographical displacement, by the passage across the North Sea. This explanation seems illogical, since Germanic religion certainly flourished when the Scandinavians made a sea passage to Iceland and created a center for their religion.

128 Hodgkin 234-44.

129 Cannon 17.

130 Bede's Ecclesiastical History, Ch. XIII, 183.

131 Chaney 185.

132 Branston 38.


134 Whallon 87.

135 Whallon 89.
96

136 Branston 52.


138 Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf 75. A great deal more will be said in Chapter III about how monsters and dragons were perceived by the audience of Beowulf.


140 Norman 3.

141 Martin-Clarke 38-39.

142 Davidson, Myths and Symbols 12.

143 Davidson, "Gods and Heroes" 133.

144 Norman 4.

145 Norman 9.

146 Gatch 32.

147 Ryan 480. I have taken Ryan's words out of context. He is arguing from a narrower view for a more "sympathetic study of the old poetry for evidence of the cult of Woden."
CHAPTER III

THE MONSTERS IN THE MYTH

Most studies of the *Beowulf* monsters have felt the presence of Professor Tolkien's imposing shadow, and the present effort is no exception. This chapter supports Tolkien's view of the three monsters as "creatures, feond mancynnes (enemies of mankind), of a similar order and kindred significance."¹ The monsters are, as Tolkien contends, at the center of *Beowulf* and integral to its theme. The purpose here is to extend Tolkien's discussion of the monsters by illustrating that their significance for the audience of *Beowulf* was deepened by connotations related to pre-Christian, pagan religion. Because of their connections with heathen mythology, the monsters contribute to the richness of the mythological layer of meaning. Further, while their genealogies may indeed be traced to separate traditional folk-tales and legends, the *Beowulf* poet has bound the three monsters together by reference to one overriding myth clearly related to the historical and Christian layers or levels of meaning.

The poet offers little information about the monsters' physical characteristics. Thus, it is perhaps wise to
assume that what he does tell may have some significance. Grendel, he says, treads the paths of exile "on weres waestmum," except that "hē was māra  ēonne ēnic man ēðer." Though he has the form of a man, he fights with a superhuman grip (as does Beowulf). On the basis of this characteristic, he can be viewed as bear-like, an observation fortified by the fact that he also has claws. Obviously, Grendel shares many characteristics with Beowulf, not the least of which is his superhuman strength and giant size. As Stephen Bandy says, the theme of gigantism "runs deep in the poem, touching perhaps many other figures besides the eotenas—among them . . . Beowulf himself." The poet specifically refers to Grendel as an eoten (761a) and to Beowulf's watch against him as an eotenweard (668b). He is so big that it takes four men to carry his head to the gold-hall (1634b-39). According to H. R. Ellis Davidson, the motif of the enormous head "suggests the representation of a god," which may have been the poet's purpose in describing the size of Grendel's head.

As a giant, Grendel is related to the "eotenas and ylfe ond orcneas, / swylce gigantas,  pā wið Gode wunnon" (112-13). Hrothgar's word for Grendel is ealdgewinna (1776), and the poet calls him "Godes andsaca" (1682). The tradition of giants striving against God is again mentioned in connection with the giant-made sword with which Beowulf has killed
Grendel's mother. The poet says that on the hilt was written the origin of the ancient strife, "syðan flōd ofslōh / gifen gēotende giganta cyn" (1689b-1690). It is often assumed that this flood is the Biblical Flood. The poet, however, could also be referring to the World Flood of pagan mythology, in which giants were likewise annihilated.

The gods and goddesses of ancient mythology were depicted as giants, as is clear from the giant hillside chalk figures in Britain, of which the Cerne giant and the Wandlebury giants are two examples. Furthermore, as Oliver Emerson explains, "Early English commentators associated the divinities of the heathen with the giants." Commenting on where the poet got the idea of giants, William Whallon says that since the idea is found in "Homer as well as in the Edda" it may be assumed "with greater confidence . . . that it was pre-Germanic, or common to all the Indo-European nations."

Thus, the Anglo-Saxon audience may easily have perceived Grendel as a pagan deity. As such, he certainly would be the enemy of God.

Grendel is descended from Cain, the ancestor of the race of giants. As a type of Cain, a "mǣre mearcstapa" (103), a sceadugenga (703) and angenga (449), he is condemned to wander. David Williams calls Cain Beowulf's "ultimate antagonist" as progenitor of monsters, but according to myth Cain himself is a descendant, "originally
sired by Satan. Grendel is also associated with the devil: he is a "feond on helle" (101), a "helle gast" (1274), "se ellengæst" (86), "se grimma gast" (102), and one of the helrunan (163). Grendel is monstrous, a fyrs (426a), fifelcynnes (104). A horrible, flame-like light glows from his eyes (726b-727). The poet calls him an "atol Æglæca" (592, 732, 816) and an "atol angengea" (165). Beowulf refers to Grendel as "eatol Æfengrom" (2074). He is "wiht unhælo, / grim ond grædig" (120b-121a) and "feond mancynnes (164). He is "se manscaða" (712) who "Godes yrre bær" (711). It is possible that in this characterization of Grendel as a monster there are vestiges of ancient heathen tales, but now the monster is explained by the new religion and thereby associated with Cain and Satan.

Grendel may also be associated with Loki of Scandinavian mythology. Jacob Grimm was the first to identify Grendel with Loki, "the evil-bringer, and in the end destroyer of the gods." Eugene Crook contends that "the poet interpolates references to Cain and Abel gratuitously in place of the expected references to Loki." It is plausible to assume that the poet recognized the similarities between the pagan myth and the Christian story and purposely played on both myths, thereby enriching his poem. As Rosemary Woolf explains, the devil, owing to traits which the Church ascribed to him, had "natural
affinities" with Northern mythological characters, particularly Loki, whom gods bound and placed in a cave, where he was supposed to remain until Ragnarok, just as Satan was said to lie bound in hell until Judgment Day. Woolf also mentions that Loki and the devil are both shape-shifters, one of the devil's shapes being the dragon.¹³ This association, albeit circuitous, may have been known by the Anglo-Saxon audience of Beowulf. If so, Grendel and his mother may have been seen arising in dragon-form at what is the doom of Beowulf and Apocalypse for the Geats.

The poet introduces the second monster as "Grendles mōdor/ides āglācwif" (1258b-1259a). She has no name, which may be intended to accentuate her role as a symbolic figure. At the very least, she seems to represent the negative female principle. She is referred to as an "atol Æse wlacn" (1332, a horrible one glorying in carrion), and Helen Damico contends that "The Beowulf poet follows the customary portrayal of the valkyrie as a deadly battle-demon in his characterization of Grendel's mother."¹⁴ All the poet says about the appearance of Grendel's mother is that she has the form of a woman, "idese onlīcnes" (1351). Damico thinks that the use of the word ides denotes Grendel's mother as a valkyrie and/or pagan priestess and marks the polarized relationship between Grendel's mother and Wealtheow, who is also an ides. She further suggests that the two figures
might be a "stylistic rendering of a single persona" in which the diametrically opposed qualities and traits of the characters . . . act like the opposing poles of magnets."^{15} Similarly, according to Jane Chance, in her role "as a monstrous mother and queen" Grendel's mother perverts the role of "the queen as peace pledge or peace-weaver" and as such is the counterpoint for Wealtheow.^{16} Damico never specifies who the "single persona" might be, although she mentions the association of Wealtheow with Freya and compares Wealtheow with Yrsa, the queen of the Swedes who "reigned over a court that was the center of the flourishing cult of Odin, Frey, and Thor. . . ."^{17} It is possible to see this single figure as the mother goddess and Grendel's mother as the destructive hag side of the earth goddess who is nurturing in her positive face. Williams, in fact, argues that "Grendel's dam may be seen as an Eve figure, the origin of evil progeny. . . ."^{18} In Chance's opinion, Grendel's mother is a "parodic inversion" of the Virgin Mary,^{19} the Christian version of the Mother Goddess.

Whereas Grendel, "sē þe mōras hēold, / fen ond fāsten" (103b-104a), is primarily associated with the surface of the earth on which men walk, his mother is a creature of the deep. She is a *primwylf* (1506, 1599), a "grundwyrgenne, / merewIf mihtig" (1518b-1519a) and a "gryrelīcne grundhyrde"
(2136). The mere where her underground home is situated is depicted as an other-worldly place. As Damico states, the location of the mere has the aura of sacred ground, a place of prohibition, analogous to the sacred groves where Tacitus alleges the Germans worshipped their deities. The underwater hall itself with its supernatural light, magic sword, and hoarded treasure is evocative of the sacred underwater temples of pagan England.\textsuperscript{20}

The poet says that Grendel's mother is less terrifying than her son, "just as the power of women, the war-horror of a woman, is in comparison to that of an armed man" (1282b-1284). This seems, however, to be deliberate irony since she is the one who almost kills Beowulf and against whom he has to use magic and not just the strength of his grip.\textsuperscript{21}

According to Patricia Belanoff, the poet is implying that what Beowulf needs to fear is "something far more alien."\textsuperscript{22} In Scandinavian mythology females were commonly accorded great power and dignity, as is revealed by one of Thor's epithets: "Slayer of Giantesses." Belanoff notes that the tradition of elemental strength being concentrated in a female figure can also be seen in the Old English riddles, in which "nature's forces--particularly water--are often personified as powerful women."\textsuperscript{23}
Critics have been somewhat sympathetic with Grendel's Mother, finding her motive for revenge understandable. Nevertheless, such interpretations seem to wander far from the Anglo-Saxon audience's probable response to her. It is impossible to fully comprehend how this audience would have seen Grendel's mother without considering her function in relationship to the dragon.

The dragon, the last of the three monsters, is closely connected in the poem with Grendel's mother as well as with her son. Like Grendel and his dam, the dragon is of imposing size, fifty feet long (3042). The dragon, a mānsceāga (2514) and a ǣodsceāga (2278, 2688) is the disruptive end to Beowulf's peaceful reign of fifty years, just as Grendel the mānsceāga (712, 737) and lēodsceāga (2093) disturbs Hrothgar's fifty-year reign of peace. This dragon is a līgdraca (2333), a "frecne fyrdraca" (2689), and the poet also says a great deal about fire in connection with Grendel's mother. On the waters of the mere a fearful wonder is seen, "fyr on flōde" (1366), reminiscent of the flame-like light which shines from Grendel's eyes. When Beowulf reaches the hall of Grendel's mother, the first thing he sees is fyrloēht (1516). The blood of Grendel's mother is so hot that it melts the blade of the sword (1615-16). Similarly, a stream wells out of the mouth of the
dragon's mound, its waters boiling hot from the dragon's fire.

There are other similarities between the dragon and Grendel's mother. Although the dragon is sometimes simply called dracan (2211, 2290, 2402), mostly it is the treasure-guarding, barrow-sitting dragon of tradition: "sē þe on hēa(um) h(ē)p(e) hord beweotode" (2212). It is called a hordweard (2293, 2303, 2593, the "beorges hyrde" (2304); "beorges weard" (2524, 2580); "frætwa hyrde" (3133). Grendel's mother too is referred to as a guardian: she and her son are "huses hyrdas" (1666). She is a grundhyrde (2136), and her cave also contains a treasure-hoard. Grendel's mother is grædicr (1499) and gifre (1277) like the dragon. They both remain in their cave-like dwellings near the sea until the actions of men activate their responses. In each case, a man from outside explores the region which each has controlled. The path to the mere is "uncu gelad" (1410), just as the path to the dragon's barrow is "eldum uncūð" (2214). The mere of Grendel's mother and the dragon's barrow-cave are both, as Kathryn Hume has noted, anti-halls. The dragon is also related to Grendel's mother indirectly through Wealthow as a cup-bearer. (It is the theft of the cup, ironically intended as a friðowēre (2282), which brings about the abrupt end of Beowulf's peaceful reign.) Like Grendel's mother, the dragon comes
from underground to destroy man's attempts at order, the halls and homes above-ground. Grendel's mother is an "ættren ellorgæst (1617), and the dragon is the attorsceædan (2839) whose attor (2715) is the cause of Beowulf's death. There may even be a link between the two in the fact that Grendel's mother tries to kill Beowulf with a seax, the weapon with which Beowulf delivers the final blow to the dragon. In the end only an "ealdsweord etonisc" (2616) could avail in combat against the dragon, just as the "ealdsweord eotenisc" (1558), "giganta geweorc" (1562) is the instrument of death for Grendel's mother. Grendel's mother is called a grundwyrgenne (1518), and the dragon quite literally becomes an accursed monster of the deep after its burial. The similarities between what Adrien Bonjour calls the demoniac and draconic monsters are undoubtedly, as he says, much more important than the differences.\textsuperscript{25}

In connecting the monsters, the poet prepares his audience for the dragon in advance. Just after the gleeman has recounted the coming of Beowulf, he recites the tale of Sigemund the slayer of the dragon Fafnir, who was first a giant before becoming a dragon. In an accepted analogue of Beowulf, then, there is a distinct connection between giant and dragon.\textsuperscript{27} Interestingly, the implied comparison of Beowulf and Sigemund follows the slaying of Grendel, and
Sigemund is specifically mentioned as having earlier slain "ealfela eotena cynnes" (883). The sword with which Beowulf kills Grendel's mother has a hilt ornamented with serpents and a blade which melts, possible connections with the fiery serpent/dragon. Robert P. Creed points out that the dragon is introduced with the same formula, "oð þæt án ongann" (2210b), that was used earlier to introduce Grendel (1006). Scarcely over a hundred lines before the dragon appears, the poet has Beowulf mentioning the strange glove made of dragon skins which Grendel was carrying. Furthermore, having called Grendel and his mother devils, the poet specifies that this pouch was made by "dēofles cæftum" (2088). Beowulf himself associates the dragon with Grendel (2518-21). Then, analogous to Grendel's earlier anger at hearing the singing of men, the dragon is described by the poet as being aroused by "mannes reorde" (2555a).

The dragon, then, is an extension of Grendel's dam, of the forces that shaped her and her kind. The poet makes this continuity evident when he says "fā se wyrm onwōc, wrōht wās genīwad" (2287). The strife does not begin with the worm, he seems to say; it is simply renewed when the dragon awakes. Literally the dragon wakes up to find that a man has disturbed his treasure; on another level, its awakening is symbolic of the awakening of dormant but still living forces of evil and destruction. The seemingly
uneventful disposal of the dead dragon, in which it is unceremoniously shoved over the cliff, is not without significance. The poet says "lēton wēg niman, / flōd fǣramids frǣtwa hyrde" (3132b-3133), and the dragon disappears into the sea. Nevertheless, it is clear that the dragon lives on in a symbolic sense. He is embraced by the sea and rests underwater, even as Grendel's dam remains in her cave in the depths of the mere. Although she and her son are both decapitated Beowulf takes only Grendel's head with him. The second return from the mere and the feast following the defeat of Grendel's mother seem less exultant, possibly because there is a recognition of the continuity of evil, of the certainty that another enemy will come forth, which it of course does in the form of the dragon. It is good to remember that the sea in traditional Old English iconography is the realm inhabited by the "hron," the "whale of the Vulgate, also called Leviathan, the dragon of the depths." And in Revelation 12:4, the beast appears from the sea, causing men to worship the dragon. Just as the spirit of Grendel's mother lived again in the dragon's depredations, the dragon's spirit as a force of chaos awaits rebirth. Beowulf says, "nū se wyrm ligeġ, / swefēð sære wund, since berēafod" (2745b-2746). The dragon may indeed be sleeping in death, but symbolically it is destined to
live forever, just as the forces of darkness are never permanently quelled.

It has been noticed before that there is a kind of progression in the monsters in terms of their increasing strength as adversaries. However, the progression from human-like to elemental seems more significant. Neither the dragon nor Grendel's mother is named, the only characters appearing in the poem who are not named. Possibly this indicates a shared status as symbols of unspecified, elemental chaos. Perhaps the dragon is even more appalling as it is more elemental. Grendel and his mother are giants, members of the race of Cain, a man. They are recognized as the shapes of a man and a woman. On the other hand, the dragon is sexless, totally non-human, elementally ambiguous, completely outside the world of men. Grendel has a name, ventures into the heart of the world of men, and the Geats know where he lives. While Grendel attacks Heorot because he is an exile, because he cannot be part of the ordered world of men, the dragon attacks the Geats because its separation from the world of men has been violated by an exile. In this scheme, Grendel's mother is a transition figure. She lacks a name and only once intrudes on Heorot. She is as a mother obviously female, but, as Belanoff has noticed, she is "designated by many substantives which are not sex-related." as well as the masculine secg
(1379a). As Jane Chance notes, the poet sometimes refers to her with a masculine pronoun (sē þe instead of sēo þe in 1260a and 1497b, for example).\textsuperscript{34} Unlike Grendel and his mother, whose lineage is explained, the dragon's provenance is a mystery.\textsuperscript{35} All the poet tells of its past is that, flying at night, burning and enveloped in flames, it sought a hoard in the earth until it found the treasure over which it has watched undisturbed for three hundred years (2278).

The poet is careful to state that this dragon lurked in the mound for three hundred years before being killed, and Wiglaf believes the dragon would have stayed there "oð woruldende" (3083). This phrase would possibly have reminded the Beowulf audience of Miðgarðsormr, the Encircler of the World in Scandinavian mythology and the doom of the gods at the end of the world, languishing in the sea bordered by the mountain ranges of Giantland.\textsuperscript{36} The original audience might also have thought more readily than a modern reader of the serpent-dragon Niðhoggr coiled at the base of Iggdrasil, the World Tree, slowly eating the roots until it is killed by Odin's son Thor, who, like Beowulf, also dies in the fight.\textsuperscript{37} The dragon's arrival in Geatish territory 250 long years before Beowulf even becomes king is indeed comparable to the serpent Iggdrasil gnawing at the roots of the tree of life. Before Beowulf battles Grendel or his dam, before Hrothgar's people suffer their
destruction, the dragon is there in Geatland hoarding the treasure which will be buried with Beowulf. It seems evident that the Beowulf dragon is no less symbolic than Yeats' rough beast or Hardy's Shape of Ice.

Ascertaining the symbolic meaning of the dragon has been the subject of much Beowulf scholarship. There is wide disagreement as to the dragon's significance. Professor Tolkien calls it "a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the undiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad (the evil aspect of all life)." Gang criticizes this interpretation and contends that the dragon is not malevolent because he was provoked by theft while simply carrying out his function of guarding the treasure. Lawrence agrees that the dragon's "raids were not made, like Grendel's, out of devilish malice, but in defence of his treasure." Other critics have interpreted the dragon as "the fate that settles down on old societies." Simpson contends that in the dragon section of Beowulf as well as in most other British dragon tales, there is a "total absence of religious or moral notions. . . ."ी Such interpretations which fail to recognize the evil nature of the dragon seem dryly intellectual, remote from the emotional overtones which the dragon undoubtedly had for the audience of Beowulf. This audience was certainly
familiar with dragons. Several placenames attest to such traditions: Drake Howe in North Yorkshire and Drakelow in Derbyshire, first recorded in 772, are two examples. In Lincolnshire, the bones of a dragon are supposedly interred in a long barrow.\textsuperscript{43} The Cotton Gnomes state, "draca sceal on hlæwe, / frōd, frætwum wlanc."\textsuperscript{44} Ethelweord’s Chronicle, in the entry for 773, refers to "some monstrous serpents" seen in Sussex.\textsuperscript{45} The famous entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 793 plainly says that "fiery dragons were seen flying through the air." There is also a reference at the beginning of the Finnsburg Fragment: the gables are burning, and the poet states rather ironically, "Ne is ne dagað ēastan, nē hēr draca ne flēogeð."\textsuperscript{46} Knut Stjerna claims that there is no archaeological confirmation of Beowulf's dragon,\textsuperscript{47} but as Davidson illustrates, this is not true. A small seventh-century workbox bears the earliest picture we have of the dragon fight in Teutonic art. . . . More dramatic confirmation of the Anglo-Saxon poet comes from the Sutton Hoo shield, on which there is a dragon equipped with four pairs of wings and jaws filled with sharp teeth."\textsuperscript{46}

Surely Adrien Bonjour is right to insist that however real dragons may have been to Anglo-Saxons, they "definitely suggested unpleasant associations."\textsuperscript{49} At the very least,
the Anglo-Saxon poet and his audience would have perceived the dragon as a portent of evil. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry mentioned above, the dragon is seen as a portent of the great famine which occurred in Northumbria in 793. Textual evidence alone suggests that the Beowulf dragon is more than the passive treasure-guarding creature, if such a presence can be called passive. The poet calls it a niðdraca (2273), "sē laða" (2305), a "lāð lyftfloga" (2315) and a "Weard unhiore" (2413). This dragon is a gryregieste (2560) and, like Grendel, an ægelca (2520, 2534, 2905), a "nið gaest" (2699) and "se gaest" (2312). Also like Grendel, the dragon is a þēodsceæda (2688). The foldbuend fear it very much (3274b-3275a), an irony which may or may not be intentional, since the dragon itself quite literally dwells in the earth. Finally, as Edward B. Irving says, "the dragon's chief weapon and its most memorable attribute is fire, and fire . . . has only destructive and deadly connotations in the poem."50

It has been suggested that since the poet does not specifically call the dragon a devil as he does Grendel and his dam, the dragon is a different creature, somehow less monstrous, more natural and thus less evil.61 This is a difficult position to defend. In the first place, perhaps the poet did not go to great lengths to name the dragon as evil because it already carried such a heavy load of
negative connotations. On the other hand, Grendel is a specifically named monster/giant, and it was to the poet's advantage to place such a specific character squarely in the tradition to which he wanted the audience to see that he belonged, at least on one level. The Beowulf dragon's physical connection with the serpent-demon group of mythological figures is specified in the text. The poet refers to it most frequently as a wyrm (2287, 2307, 2348, 2567, 2669, 2705, 2745, 2759, 2902, 3039). It is a hringbogan (2561) and a "wyrm wohbogan" (2827). It coils up quickly in battle with Beowulf, "se wyrm gebēah snūde tōosome" (2567b-2568a). As Paul Newman points out, "the devil was most clearly identified in his dragon-serpent guise. This form passed into folklore where the dragon and the devil were sometimes interchangeable." The fullest development of the tradition to which Newman refers is of course later than Beowulf, but it seems that at least the beginnings of such a tradition were known to the poem's original audience.

As newly converted Christians, Anglo-Saxons would surely have been aware of the meaning of the dragon in Christianity. Dragons appear throughout Old English religious literature such as the Vespasian Psalter and the Vespasian Hymn 7, which speaks of the "hatheortinis drācena" (dragon's wrath). In the poem Be Domes Dāre, the pains of
hell are flames and gnawing dragons, an image which is often
used in homiletic tradition and saints' lives.⁵³ As Evans
points out, "the Christian church and its central documents"
have provided "the resources as well as the belief-system
necessary for interpreting dragon lore in its spiritual
dimension." The biblical story of the Apocalypse introduces
Satan as "a great red dragon . . . who waits to devour a
child soon to be born of 'a woman clothed with the sun, with
the moon under her feet.'" (It is remarkable, if only a
coincidence, that this is a description of the earth/moon
goddess.) An angel binds this dragon, who is specifically
called the ancient serpent, the Devil and Satan, for a
thousand years and throws him into a pit which is then
sealed, "that he should deceive the nations no more."⁵⁴ Of
course, men knew then what men know now, that evil is never
permanently bound and has always existed to deceive nations
and men. As Gang states, "In heathen mythology the monsters
had been the foes of the gods, winning at the final battle
in which the earth is destroyed. In the Christian poem of
Beowulf the same monsters become the foes of the One
God. . . ."⁵⁵

There is, however, evidence that the Beowulf dragon is
more than the typical Christian dragon, more than the enemy
of God. As Irving urges, "the Christian references are in
no way necessary concomitants of evil monsters."⁵⁶
Certainly, as M. B. McNamee admits, "for the allegory a physical monster drawn from the old myths would serve the purpose better than a theologically accurate devil as long as the monster is associated with the powers of hell."\textsuperscript{57} John D. Niles insists that this is "a flesh-and-blood flying dragon and not a mythological creature."\textsuperscript{58} Nevertheless, no matter how vividly the dragon is portrayed, it is, like every dragon, by definition a mythological creature and as such probably has wider significance.

Albert B. Lord believes that the Grendel fights exemplify a narrative pattern "found fairly widely in Indo-European epic or story tradition"--the encounter of the hero with first a male monster, then a female monster or deity who wants to keep him in the "other world."\textsuperscript{59} Larry Benson notes that "In the \textit{Grettis Saga} version of the Grendel story, the hero fought first with a female monster and then with a male," which is not surprising "since that represents an ascending order of difficulty."\textsuperscript{60} The \textit{Beowulf} poet's version, a reversal of the order in the \textit{Grettis Saga}, seems to follow the more widespread Indo-European pattern mentioned by Lord. Such a tale is the Babylonian Epic of Creation, the \textit{Enuma Elish}, which has numerous parallels in other cultures. Joseph Fontenrose has examined Grendel and his dam as the dragon pair, mother and son, of this myth. He compares them to Apsu and Tiamat, whom Marduk had to meet
on her own ground, as well as to Vritra and Danu (Indra’s opponents) and the dragon and dragoness which Apollo had to deal with. In all these instances, the female must be fought after the male has been defeated, and she is a more powerful adversary, just as Grendel’s mother is more powerful than Grendel. The catalyst of Grendel’s mother’s transformation into a destructive force is the death of her son, and, as Simpson points out, the fury which turned Tiamat into "an agent of destruction" was caused by the killing of Apsu. The sea-beasts which attack Beowulf on his way to the bottom of the mere are comparable to the water-demons which attend Tiamat.

Tiamat and Apsu and their counterparts in other myths are clearly part of the Mother Goddess cult which emphasizes the child as son of the mother. Like Apsu, Grendel has no known father, and perhaps his mother’s designation only as his mother represents her role as mother goddess. Even Grendel’s association with Cain may be meaningful. Emerson points out that in the Scripture, it is not clear "why Cain, 'a tiller of the ground,' was in error in bringing to sacrifice of the fruit of the ground." A possible explanation is that Cain’s sacrifice was appropriate for the Earth Goddess but not for the sky-god who demanded live sacrifices such as those offered by Abel. As discussed in Chapter II, there is considerable evidence in support of the
worship of the Earth Mother, the moon, and her husband, son, or lover, the sun as one of the oldest and most enduring beliefs in Britain. It is perhaps, then, not so incredible that Grendel and his mother would have been seen by the Anglo-Saxon audience as types of the Earth Mother goddess and her son.

Of course, since the poem is thoroughly Christian in perspective, only their negative aspects survive, which incidentally is what happened to all the gods of pagan mythology when passed through the Christian sieve. As Lord indicates, "There is an essential difference between the adversaries" in the ancient myths and those in Beowulf: "In the former the adversaries are 'sacred,' and therefore the opposition to them by the hero is tantamount to sacrilege." The difference is, however, not so fundamental after all. According to Whallon, "the trolls and firedrakes were a menace to the missionary unless he could provide them with a biblical basis. . . ." The monsters in Beowulf may represent sacred gods in heathen mythology, but since Beowulf is a Christian hero, these figures are certainly no longer sacred and in fact have been transmuted into demons which must be overcome.

It is logical to ask how the dragon fits into this reading. Does such an interpretation imply that the dragon's part in the poem is indeed separate? On the
contrary, it seems obvious that the dragon is a mythological extension of Grendel's mother as Mother Goddess, a link further substantiated by the textual ties discussed above. As Newman mentions, serpent-dragons were "surrogates of the Mother Goddess" and as such were thought of as being divine or god-like. Newman points out that there is "a definite connection between the Mother Goddess and the dragon" and that the mother goddess and child were worshipped by the Draconians or Typhonians. He explains that Typhon, the Egyptian mythical parallel to Tiamat, "was known and worshipped as the Dragon of the Deep." She also had a son, Set, who by virtue of being the murderer of his brother Osiris, can be identified with Cain and of course with Grendel. This same goddess Typhon eventually emerged as the seven-headed Beast of Revelation, and her son Set took on the title of Satan, Lord of Hell. It seems reasonable, then, to consider Grendel's dam as a dragon-type, the female spirit emblematic of the goddess in her negative aspect.

This connection is even apparent in the dwelling-places of the two monsters. They both live in cave-like structures, and as Cirlot explains, the cave "appears fairly often in emblematic and mythological iconography as the meeting-place for figures of deities, forebears or archetypes." It is well known that the cave is a womb-symbol, which would link both figures to the Great Mother.
tradition. The under-water dwelling of Grendel's mother is reminiscent of the underground spring in which the female dragon is slain by Apollo. The poet makes a point to mention the forest surrounding both the mere and the barrow, which is perhaps meaningful in light of the fact that forest symbolism is also "connected at all levels with the symbolism of the female principle or of the Great Mother." Whatever the symbolic relationship may be, the Anglo-Saxon audience would certainly have been aware of sacred groves connected with the worship of the pagan deities, including the Earth Goddess. Grendel's mother lives in a hall in the earth under water, and the dragon lives underground too, near the sea in which it ultimately rests. Both earth and sea appear in cosmogonies from ancient to modern times with the same connotation of fertility and relationship to the mother goddess. According to Robert Graves, the Mother Goddess commonly took the form of "a marine deity with temples by the sea-shore." Thus, it is possible that both the dragon and Grendel's mother are representations of the Mother Goddess.

There is a distinct connection between the battle with Grendel's dam and the battle with the dragon. Other critics of Beowulf working from a mythic viewpoint have noted the symbolic importance of the battle in the mere. In fact, Michael Nagler argues that it is "the central combat
of Beowulf" and concentrates his entire discussion on it. Nagler's focus seems to betray a limited understanding of the almost identical symbolic value of Grendel's mother and the dragon. Peter F. Fisher explains that some versions of the dragon myth "speak of the dragon as a water spirit to whom human victims were sacrificed" and argues that the connection between the dragon fight and the other two episodes is therefore "made even more definite." As evidenced by the death of Tvastu in Vedic and Balder in Nordic mythology, the slaying of gods is a fairly common motif in mythology, and, as Puhvel says, "This motif involves centrally the slaying of a deity with a weapon uniquely suited for this purpose, in the fundamental myth apparently his own." So it is fitting that the giant-goddesses represented by Grendel's mother and the dragon are slain using weapons made by giant-gods.

The dragon apparently completes the traditional triad of deities. The number of monsters in Beowulf is undoubtedly a reflection of a widespread tradition. T. C. Lethbridge explains that in mythology any god or goddess "was at one time part of a trinity representing youth, middle age and age, corresponding to the three phases of the moon," the Mother Goddess. These trinities were separated with the passage of time and the gods worshipped individually. In his study of medieval number symbolism,
Vincent Hopper notes that "The Scandinavian races, among innumerable trios, elevated the three Norns, three colors of the rainbow, three roots of Iggdrasil, and three gods, Odin, Thor, and Frey. Much of Teutonic mythology follows this triadic pattern. The Celtic races also worshipped three-headed deities." So it is not surprising that the *Beowulf* poet introduces three monsters.

It is also not amazing that the dragon in *Beowulf* would have universal significance: allusions to dragon-slaying are found in the myths of all cultures. Tiamat, the Babylonian goddess-dragon who was killed by the sun-god Marduk, has been discussed earlier. Egyptian mythology tells of a serpent dragon named Apep or Apophis who attacks the boat of the sun-god Horus every night and, although bound or cut into pieces, returns to renew the combat. In Greek mythology, the she-dragon Python is slain by Apollo, the Greek parallel to Horus. It would in fact be more unusual if Anglo-Saxon mythology did not include such a myth. Charles Hardwick states categorically that "there can be little doubt the fiery-dragons and the numerous huge worm traditions of the North of England enshrine relics of Aryan superstitions."

Newman believes that the serpent-dragon became an enemy of Christianity in the first place because of its associations with the ancient female goddesses, in which
role it was revered. The Christian dragon is, in fact, part of the Indo-European dragon-myth tradition. Simpson notes that the Canaanite seven-headed dragon-serpent's name "Lotan" is the same word as "Leviathan" and that the sky-god Baal's destruction of Lotan was transferred to Yahweh, who, according to Psalm 74, "breakest the heads of dragons in the waters" and "the heads of Leviathan in pieces." Beryl Rowland also states that stories of dragon-slaying saints such as St. George were taken from ancient dragon-combat myths. She believes that such combats originally "symbolized the destruction of paganism" but were later "incorporated into the archetypal legend. . . ." Newman explains that the dragons killed by the saints "may be interpreted as the pagan deities whose following was once widespread."

A complete consideration of the dragon's role necessarily includes its treasure. While it is known that the dragon came to Europe from the East, how the dragon came to be so closely connected with treasure (especially gold) and with the burial mound in England and in Scandinavia is apparently still a matter of conjecture. According to Davidson, the suggestion that "the fiery dragon is a drought symbol . . . does not explain his preoccupation with gold," an ancient and widespread element of the dragon's character. Ladon, the dragon who watches over the golden
apples in the Garden of the Hesperides, provides a classical antecedent for the gold-hoarding dragon.87

The hoarding dragon is also a central figure of Indo-European mythology. The Rig-Veda tells the story of the battle between Indra, the sky-god and Vritra, a dragonlike creature who captured rain-clouds and withheld the waters from the earth.88 Clearly, in India, water would be regarded as the primary life-giving source, just as in cold climates like those of Scandinavia and England, the sun would be the key element. As the death of Vritra would release the life-giving waters, the death of the dragon in Beowulf would be expected to release a life-giving element. Since the dragon in these ancient myths is almost always involved in a fight with the sky-god, it does not seem illogical to suggest that the gold hoarded is symbolically related to the life-giving light of the sun. The poet says that the dragon is an "eald uhtsceæda", an ancient enemy of the dawn, just as he is a ðæodsceæða (2278, 2688). It is no accident that the Beowulf dragon hoards this gold in darkness under the earth and that Beowulf intends to unearth it and use it as a life-giving force for the Geatish people. As Williams explains, the dragon "hides treasure that could be used as a means of social good, as the pagans in Elene hide the true cross--not for their own good, but to deprive man of its benefits."89
It seems prudent to agree with Greenfield's conclusion that "we had better view the significance of the treasure as a problem that will forever remain unresolved. . . ." Nevertheless, without pushing the point too far, the golden treasure can be interpreted as a symbol of light, which, as treasure in Anglo-Saxon society generally does, nourishes. This fits in with Fontenrose's view of the treasure as "precious cosmic materials which the chaos dragon has withheld." Mythically, then, the treasure partly represents light withheld from the sky-god, its rightful owner. This meaning is connected to the historical level, where the treasure is the life-giving element of heroic society, in effect light withheld from the world of men. And these symbolic values intersect with the Christian view of worldly treasure as symbolic of the transitoriness of the things of the world.

The slayer of the dragon is of course the winner of the hoarded treasure. Without the dragon-slayer, the dragon has no meaningful existence in the poem or the myth. The dragon's purpose, in fact, is to defeat and be defeated by the hero. In this relationship lies the answer to the presentation of the dragon as both the double and the antagonist of the hero. The dragon and Beowulf are described in much the same terms. The two figures are referred to as "āglaécean" (2592). Like Beowulf, the
dragon is a solitary figure. He and Beowulf are both old, wise in winters (2209, 2277). The dragon is a hordweard, while Beowulf is an ēgelweard, a "folces weard" (2210, 2513). The ðæodsceawa (2688) ends the life of the ðæodcyning (2694). The dragon is "fyre befangen" (2274), and Beowulf becomes with "fyre befongen" after his war-blade fails him (2595). Irving says that "the dragon is a little like a mock king . . .; the dragon's castle is after all a grave." Even in death, the dragon is identified with Beowulf, as it is pushed into the sea where Beowulf had begun his heroic career. Ironically, the burial mound, home of the dragon, becomes Beowulf's final resting place after the king is burnt to ashes by fire, the element of the dragon.

But the resolution of this discussion must be delayed until the role of the treasure-winner has been fully explored. It is to this hero which the next chapter is devoted. Once this last piece has been properly placed into the puzzle, the broad outlines of the myth and its relationship to Beowulf can be clearly discerned.
Notes


4 Stephen C. Bandy, "Cain, Grendel, and the Giants of Beowulf," PLL 9 (1973): 235. Bandy discusses gigantism in terms of "moral ambivalence," whereas in this study it will be discussed in myth terms as related to the positive and negative faces of the gods. The full discussion of this theme will be found in Chapter V. Jeffrey Helterman, "'Beowulf': The Archetype Enters History," JELH 35 (1968):
argues from a Jungian standpoint that Grendel is the dark side of Beowulf's subconscious.


7 Brian Branston argues strongly that the creatures who drown in the flood "have been lifted straight from the Anglo-Saxon pagan mythology" and that the poet's reference to them as descendants of Cain is a deliberate attempt to Christianize the native pagan myth. See *The Lost Gods of England* (1957; New York: Oxford UP, 1974) 174.

8 Oliver F. Emerson, "Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English," *PMLA* 21 (1906): 913.


a similar point of view; he believes that "the identification of Grendel with the race of Cain . . . is best taken simply as a means of expanding and intensifying the poet's vision of the evil forces of pagan nature that Beowulf faces."


15 Damico, 51. She discusses the inherent ambivalence in the valkyries and disir, groups of subsidiary pagan deities. As she points out, "Both categories are armed, powerful, priestly. . . . Some honor and guard the hero-king; others wish to destroy him" 69-70. Obviously, Damico sees Wealtheow as related to the positive aspects of the valkyries and disir.

16 Jane Chance, Woman as Hero in Old English Literature (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1986) 108. Chapter 7, "Grendel's Mother as Epic Anti-Type of the Virgin and Queen," 95-108, is an interesting discussion and highly relevant to the present study. Damico had earlier discussed
the "antipodal relationship" between Grendel's mother and Wealtheow, contending that "This pairing is the most extreme example of the poet's style of characterization, the juxtaposition of opposites." 21. Much earlier Jeffrey Helterman proposed that "Mrs. Grendel represents the dark side of Wealhtheow . . . whose function in the society is as peace-weaver and cup-bearer" 15.

17 Damico 173.
18 Williams 110, note 4.
19 Chance 97.
20 Damico 70.
21 Martin Puhvel, 'Beowulf' and Celtic Tradition (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1979) 18-19, believes that the Celtic folklore motif of "the demonic hag more dangerous in fight than her similarly evil son" influenced Beowulf.

23 Belanoff 95.
24 See Klaeber, lli (Introduction) and John Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King," Medium AEvum 34 (1965): 90.
25 Hume 68.
8, states, "If there were any hint of a connexion between the dragon and Grendel, or the least suggestion that the former was connected with other unpleasant incursions from the fearsome world outside our little circle of light, we might concede it had universal significance." As Bonjour illustrates, a careful examination of the text shows that there are indeed rather broad hints of a connection between the dragon and Grendel. Bonjour enumerates many similarities between Grendel and the dragon in his defense of Tolkien's interpretation of the dragon as "a personification of malice, greed, and destruction."

27 Peter Lum, *Fabulous Beasts* (New York: Pantheon, 1951): 108. Fafnir had killed his father and driven his brother into exile (details curiously reminiscent of Cain, Unferth and Grendel) so that he alone could possess the treasure given by Odin as payment for the building of Valhalla. He brooded and gloated over his treasure and in time his giant form changed into that of a dragon. Marc Alexander discusses the connection in British folk-tales of giants as well as dragons to barrows; see *British Folklore, Myths and Legends* (London: Weidenfeld, 1982) 44-45.

Creed is arguing for the unity of the poem, and close identification of Grendel, his dam, and the dragon does contribute to the argument that Beowulf is of one piece. This is indeed a significant point, since critics such as Francis P. Magoun, Jr. have argued not only for multiple authorship of the surviving Beowulf material but for the division of the poem into Beowulf A and Beowulf B: See "Beowulf B: A Folk Poem on Beowulf's Death," in Early English and Norse Studies in Honor of Hugh Smith, ed. Arthur Brown and Peter Foote (London: Methuen, 1963) 127-40). W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance (1896; New York, NY: Dover, 1957) 160, also contends that "The adventure with the dragon is separate from the earlier adventures. It is only connected with them because the same person is involved in both."

Juan Eduardo Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, 2nd ed., trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philos. Lib., 1971) 141, notes that the head is the symbol of the spiritual principle "as opposed to the vital principle represented by the body as a whole." Thus, Grendel is truly dead when Beowulf takes his head away. There is, in fact, evidence that in England of heathen times, the head of an animal or human was offered to a heathen deity. This practice, according to A. W. Smith, "The Luck in the Head: A Problem in English Folklore," Folklore 73 (1962): 13-24, is only one example of widespread primitive veneration of the head resulting from
the belief that the soul resides in the head. Smith, "The Luck in the Head: Some Further Observations," Folklore 74 (1963): 398, contends that "the existence of a distinctive type of head-luck custom" in England is "reasonably ascribable to a pagan English origin."


32 Leyerle believes that the force of the monsters increases as their motivation "becomes better justified" 91. This seems an unlikely explanation. Nevertheless, the dragon's power for destruction is remarkably greater than that of Grendel or his mother. Although Grendel murders many of the Danes, he is unable to destroy Heorot. The dragon overcomes untold numbers of men and their homes with his fiery breath and melts Beowulf's hall with surges of fire. Grendel is unable to even approach Hrothgar's gifstol; the dragon burns up the gifstol of the Geats. While Grendel's mother kills only one man, the dragon annihilates whatever he can find of men and their edifices. In his efforts to destroy the objects of his hatred, Grendel has only the strength of his own hand-grip which is, while considerable, nothing in comparison with the dragon's equipment. Although Grendel's mother is a more difficult
opponent than her son, her strength and creature-made weapons are ones against which a man, at least a hero, can fight with hope of success. In contrast, the dragon performs its devastation with the elemental weapon of fire, against which no man-made (or giant-made) weapon can prevail. It wounds Beowulf with this fire and kills him with its venomous bite, weapons against which neither superhuman strength nor supernatural sword can protect Beowulf. It takes two men, one a renowned hero and king, to kill this dragon.

33 Belanoff 98.

34 Chance 95. Richard Butts, "The Analogical Mere: Landscape and Terror in Beowulf," ES 68 (1987): 120, suggests that such masculine references may be "hinting at the possibility of which Hrothgar himself may be unaware—that the fiend which Beowulf must face is as much within as without."

35 It has been suggested that the dragon is the last survivor transformed. Davidson believes that the account of the dragon occupying the hoard which had been left open "is a rationalization of the idea (which would be repugnant to a Christian audience) that the dead man himself became a dragon." This interpretation is not perhaps so implausible as it may first seem, since it is "a familiar idea in Old Norse literature"; even Fafnir turned into a dragon when he
had gotten possession of Andvari's treasure (Myths and Symbols, 181). Cf. G. V. Smithers, "Destiny and the Heroic Warrior in Beowulf," Philological Essays, ed. James L. Rosier (The Hague: Mouton, 1970) 11. Smithers theorizes that "the last survivor must have entered the mound with his treasure while still alive and have turned into a dragon at death" and offers this theory as a plausible explanation of the presence of the last survivor in the poem.

36 Branston 187.

37 Jonathan D. Evans, "The Dragon," Mythical and Fabulous Creatures, ed. Malcolm South (New York: Greenwood, 1987) 43. Jacqueline Simpson, British Dragons (London: Batsford, 1980) 26, argues that although no allusions to these Scandinavian cosmological myths survive in Anglo-Saxon written records, versions of them may well have been known to the pre-Christian English. Also, as discussed in Chapter II, there is sufficient evidence, such as the Sutton Hoo find, to support the possibility of such familiarity, even before the Viking invasions brought renewed and reinforced knowledge of Scandinavian religion.

38 Tolkien 66.

39 Gang 8.

40 Lawrence, Beowulf and Epic Tradition 208.

41 Harry Berger, Jr. and H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., "Social Structure as Doom: The Limits of Heroism in
Beowulf," Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope, ed. Robert B. Burlin and Edward B. Irving, Jr. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1974) 67. Leyerle also contends that "The dragon, little more than an agent of fate, presents the inevitable challenge to Beowulf's heroic susceptibilities." In Leyerle's view, the dragon is Beowulf's nemesis largely through the hero's own fault: "He disdains the use of an adequate force against the dragon" 95.

42 Simpson 116. Simpson does discuss the two exceptions, the stories of Piers Shonks, where the devil and the dragon are allies, and Sir John Lambton, where the devil and the dragon are identified as the same.

43 Simpson 29.


46 Klaeber 245, 1. 3.


49 Bonjour, "Monsters Crouching" 305.


51 See Gang, especially 6-8.


53 Evans 41.

54 Evans 39.


58 John D. Niles, 'Beowulf': The Poem and Its Tradition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983) 193. Niles seems to contradict himself when he suggests that perhaps the dragon is a threshold figure which reminds Beowulf of the "limits that bound all earthly success" 30.

Grendel's mother. He notes the powerful female demons of Persian mythology and the fact that Persephone was, before Hades, the ruler of the Underworld. He believes that the roles of Grendel and his mother reflect a transitional stage "marked by lack of uniformity in the relative attribution of powers to demons along lines of sex."


62 Simpson 20.

63 Emerson, "Legends" 845.

64 Lord, "Interlocking Mythic Patterns" 140.


68 Newman 14.

69 Newman 16.

70 Cirlot 40.

71 Fontenrose 13.

72 Cirlot 112.

73 Cirlot 132.

One of the cruces related to the mere scene preceding the battle is the mention of the horn (1423). It is tempting to interpret the horn as a symbol of the earth/moon goddess. While the better part of valor intrudes, such an interpretation seems as reasonable as that offered by Laura Braswell, "The Horn at Grendel's Mere: 'Beowulf' 1417-72," *NM* 74 (1973): 466-72. According to Braswell, the purpose of the horn is "to incite water creatures into movement which then exposes them to the hunters waiting on the banks of the mere." She feels that this lends realism to the scene and shows the author's "skill in making credible the improbable material of folklore."


Newman 17.

Simpson 21. The full implications of this myth for *Beowulf* will be discussed in Chapter V.


Newman 236.

Davidson, "The Hill of the Dragon" 182.

Newman 38.

Evans 31. Evans also mentions that in Indian mythology one thousand dragon-like beings inhabit Patala, the watery region under the earth, where "they reign in great splendor and guard treasures."

Williams 65.


Fontenrose 527.

Paul B. Taylor, "Traditional Language of Treasure in *Beowulf*," *JEGP* 85 (1986): 203, notes that there are no blunt "condemnations of earthly goods or burial treasures in *Beowulf*," such as that in *The Seafarer* (ll. 97-102).
However, as Kemp Malone, "Symbolism in 'Beowulf': Some Suggestions," *English Studies Today*, Second Series, ed. G. A. Bonnard (Bern: Francke, 1961) 90, says that the hoard "exemplifies . . . the vanity of worldly goods. . . ."

93 Irving, *Reading* 209.
CHAPTER IV

THE HERO AS PRIEST-KING AND GOD

No character in Old English literature has been so frequently and so thoroughly dissected and explicated as Beowulf. His motives, words and actions have been examined. He has been alternately praised and criticized, seen as the ideal heroic warrior as well as a flawed Christian hero. Others before now have discussed him as a mythological, archetypal figure; the purpose here is to attempt a fresh and more comprehensive account of how Beowulf's character functions in the poem, particularly on the mythological level of meaning. Bernard Huppe cautions the literary critic in search of the hero to be aware of limits and to understand that the "given" of a literary scholar "is not history, myth, theology, but the hero celebrated by a literary artist, a poet."1 This chapter will demonstrate that discovering the hero celebrated by the Beowulf poet involves considering Beowulf in mythological as well as historical and religious contexts. In significant aspects of his characterization, Beowulf is revealed as a mythological figure.

It is impossible to see Beowulf as less than superhuman, if not god-like. As Harry Berger and H.
Marshall Leicester note, "A kind of mana attaches to this hero, a misty and superstition-ridden aura of the uncanny, the 'unheimlich.'" In his youth he swims for at least five days in a stormy sea, slaying sea-monsters through it all. Beowulf is said to have the strength of thirty men, and indeed he swims across the sea from the battlefield in Frisia to Geatland carrying the armor of thirty men. The giant-made sword with which he kills Grendel's dam is "mare ðonne ðonig mon ðer / tō bēadulace ætberan meahte." And, unlike Hrothgar, in his old age Beowulf is still strong enough to insist on singlehandedly fighting the monster who is ravaging his kingdom. John Pope comments on Beowulf's "preternatural resistance to physical decay" in his old age and considers it "a mark of his heroic endowment." This supernaturally enduring strength also serves to support his image as god-king.

In the context of Germanic kingship alone, Beowulf would have been viewed as divine. William Chaney explains that kingship among pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon tribes depended basically on descent from ancient gods as demonstrated by the possession of mana, "a charismatic power on which his tribe depends for its well-being." This force was "distinct from mere physical power or strength. . . ." Henry Myers refers to this same quality as Heil and explains how it differs from 'luck':
Unlike the modern idea of 'fortune,' Heil was not separable from personal ability. A king won his battles through his Heil, but his Heil gave him special abilities; it did not compensate for the lack of them. The Germanic king was expected to look and act his part. He was supposed to be the best fighter and athlete among his men and to overawe strangers with his very presence. All this could easily describe Beowulf. When he first appears on the beach in Denmark, the coast guard automatically singles him out:

\[
\begin{align*}
Næfre ic māran geseah \\
eorla ofer eorpan, \ Sonne is ēower sum, \\
secg on searwum; \ nis \ fæt seldguma, \\
wæpnum geweorðad, \ næne him his white lēoge, \\
\ænlic ansyn. \ (247b-251a)
\end{align*}
\]

In his early career, as Fred C. Robinson mentions, "Beowulf seems to be protected by the manner in which nature reacts in concord with the hero's needs—as if nature were itself charmed." The sky and sea, for example, calm suddenly, thus making it possible for Beowulf to get back to land after his swimming match with Breca (569-70). As his body burns on the funeral pyre, the winds likewise cease, not disturbing the smoke bearing his spirit to the heavens.
The poet also seems to portray Beowulf as more than a man, even a heroic man, in the exchange with Unferth. The description of the swimming match with Breca during which Beowulf slays sea-monsters with his sword parallels the struggle with Grendel's mother. The poet includes numerous details that are later repeated. Beowulf says that when he and Breca are swimming, the weather is cold, the north wind turns against them, and the waves are rough; but after he has slain the sea-monsters, "Lēoht ēastan cōm, / beorht bēacen Godes, brimu swapredon" (569b-570). Later, as Beowulf and Hrothgar approach the mere,

\[
\text{\textit{ponon ȳōgeblond up āstīgeō}}
\]
\[
\text{\textit{won tō wolcum, \ ponne wind styrep}}
\]
\[
\text{\textit{lāō gewidru oū pēt lyft drysmāp,}}
\]
\[
\text{\textit{roderas rēotaō. (1373-1376a)}}
\]

And after Beowulf has defeated Grendel's mother, a light shines in the hall (1571-1572a), and the mere becomes calm (1630b). In both contests, a point is made of Beowulf's being saved by the mail-coat which he wears (cf. 550-553 and 1547-1553). The struggle with the enemy is described in remarkably similar terms. The young Beowulf is drawn to the bottom of the sea by the "fah fёнondscađa", fast in its grim grasp until it is granted to him to reach the aqlēcan with the point of his battle-sword and destroy the "mihtig meredecō" by his own hand (553-558). The poet says that in
The fight with Grendel's mother Beowulf is borne to the bottom of the mere by the brimwylf, caught in her terrible grasp. He is almost overcome by her when he sees the giant-made sword with which he is finally able to kill her. The significance of these parallels seems to be that the poet intended the audience to see Beowulf from the very beginning as a god-like figure, pitted against the monsters, giants, and all others of the race of Cain.

It is appropriate that the Breca story, which introduces Beowulf as at least a potential mythic figure, is in answer to the taunts of Unferth. His name does not alliterate in the usual way with that of his father, so the poet may have meant to introduce him as a symbolic figure. Beowulf's charge that "su yinum brōðrum tō banan wurde" (587) places Unferth squarely among the monsters and Cains of the world. Furthermore, when Beowulf addresses Unferth directly as "sunu Ecglafes" (590), the poet may have reinforced the role of Unferth as a descendant of the "sword-leavings," the ancient strife. Hilda Ellis Davidson discusses the fact that Unferth possesses information which the other Danes seem not to have concerning Beowulf and that Beowulf likewise possesses knowledge of Unferth's past. She sees Unferth as a fylr, who in Old Norse literature is able to discover what is hidden. She discerns mythic significance in the word-contest between Beowulf and
Unferth: "In the mythological poems of the Edda, such contests of knowledge are raised from a human setting to a cosmic level, as gods and giants compete and the loser is destroyed." 

Beowulf specifies that he killed "niceras nigene" (575) during the swimming match with Breca. The number nine "particularly connected with fertility, religion, and magic" in northern mythology may very well have had significance for the audience, especially as the number associated with Thor (the Norse version of Thunor). In his fights with all three monsters, Beowulf probably also reminded the Anglo-Saxon audience of Thunor since, as Brian Branston contends, "the main myth connected with Thunor's name, his fight with a demon of darkness, was known to the Old English." After all, Thor slays the World Serpent and afterwards dies from its venom. Also, the poet calls Beowulf eotenweard (668b), a phrase which aptly describes Thor's role in Asgard as guardian against invading giants. It may be worth noting that in Northern mythology Thor struggles against "the serpent sea, only to be defeated ('slain') at the approach of winter again." Plainly Thunor is a fertility god, a god who dies and is reborn each spring.

Beowulf's name, the subject of much scholarly debate, quite possibly carries mythological connotations identifying
him as a dying god. The hero's name was explained by Grimm as *Bienen-Wolf* ("bee-wolf"), the generally accepted translation.\(^{13}\) It may originally have meant *Barwelf* ("bear-whelp").\(^{14}\) In any case, both interpretations have the same general meaning of "bear." No satisfactory explanation of Beowulf's name has been offered. As Betty Cox states, no convincing "connection, heroic, mythical, classical, Christian, linguistic, has been found to explain the hero's name."\(^{15}\) The question remains as to why Beowulf is depicted as a bear.

It is interesting that Artemis, one of the manifestations of the Great Mother Goddess or Moon Goddess, was known as the Bear-Mother as early as 3000 B.C.\(^{16}\) The bear is symbolically related to the moon in its alternate disappearance and appearance.\(^{17}\) Primitive people regarded the bear as special because it appeared to die and come back to life.\(^{18}\) Its habit of disappearing into hibernation in the winter and reappearing in the spring may have also caused it to be associated with the mythic dying god. In the *Kalevala* the bear is said to have been born "in the lands between sun and moon," and to have died "not by men's hands, but of his own will."\(^{19}\) However, because there is no evidence that the bear possessed this meaning in Anglo-Saxon culture, the suggestion that Beowulf as "bear" might have
been viewed as a dying god is decidedly tentative, except that more evidence exists.

There may be an astrological explanation for why Beowulf is depicted as a bear, one which identifies him as a dying god. The constellations of Ursa Major and Draco are contiguous and are visible in the winter just after sunset. It is perhaps worth speculating about the significance of these facts. According to Otto Rank, myths were at some time projected for certain reasons upon the heavens, and may be secondarily transferred to the heavenly bodies. The significance of the unmistakable traces—the fixed figures, and so forth—that have been imprinted upon the myth by this transference must by no means be underrated.

In ancient myth, Beryl Rowland explains, the bear is "the majestic and luminous god of storms and sunshine." He is also traditionally "the progenitor of the magic hero in saga." Joseph Fontenrose sees the fight with Grendel as a Bearson tale, which is in itself the result of the combat myth travelling north at an early period and being influenced by the Sleeping-Bear cult. He suggests that the fight with the dragon is a different variant of the combat myth, conforming "more closely to the familiar dragon-slayer tales of northern and western Europe" such as
Sigurd/Fafnir and St. George. The astrological evidence, however, seems to indicate the existence of a myth involving the dragon and bear. Considerable astrological knowledge is exhibited in Northern mythology, so perhaps the Beowulf poet could have known of such a myth.

It is interesting to note that The Great Bear constellation consists of seven stars, the number most frequently associated with the dragon in lore. For example, the beasts of Revelation have seven heads, as does Leviathan. Typhon rules the seven stars known as Ursa Major, and the name of her son Set means "seven." Set also happens to be the murderer of his brother Osiris. So here in the Typhon myth is the female dragon figure, with a son who is associated with Cain, just as Grendel clearly is. She rules over the Great Bear, just as the Beowulf dragon finally rules over Beowulf, the great bear hero of the poem. In this sequence, there exists the possibility that the dragon is indeed Grendel's dam in a formidable transformation. As Fafnir transformed from a giant to a dragon, Grendel's dam, a giantess, reappears in the ultimate form of the archetypal dragon to defeat the bear-like hero.

Another possible explanation for the hero's name meaning simply "bear" is that it is a purposeful avoidance of the true name. In many cultures, there is a strong belief in the power of the name. According to Robert
Graves, "In ancient times, once a god's secret name had been discovered, the enemies of his people could do destructive magic against them with it." In his discussion of mana in euphemisms, Edward Clodd states that other names are sometimes used to confuse or deceive even death. One example he gives occurs in the Kalevala, where the "sacred Otso" is also called the "honey-eater" who gives his life as "a sacrifice to Northland." Beowulf, as "bee-wolf" or bear is also of course a "honey-eater," and it is not inconceivable that his true and sacred name, perhaps once known, became lost in the oral transmission of the myth. This loss would have been even more conceivable if Beowulf at one time had been regarded as a god; there is even more mana connected with the name of a god because to know the name gives the utterer the power to invoke him.

A definitive interpretation, however, of the exact meaning of Beowulf's name is neither possible nor necessary. It seems likely that his name held many if not all of these associations for the poet's original audience and that the name itself thus enriched the hero as a character, particularly in his role as a mythological figure.

Beowulf's name clearly links him with the god Woden, the chief of the god of warriors as well as a fertility god in northern mythology. The use of animal names for distinguished men was common practice in Scandinavia, and
the bear and wolf were most often used in the formation of these names. Davidson suggests that this custom was probably based on pre-Christian beliefs in which the bear and wolf were associated with battle-magic and closely linked with Woden. Beowulf's name with its double interpretation of wolf and bear quite likely would have called forth associations with Woden in the minds of the eighth century audience.

There does, in fact, seem to be other evidence to support a distinct connection between Beowulf and Woden. The second part of Beowulf's name associates him with berserkrs, warriors who are called "wolf-coats" in Old Norse verse, and whose particular god was Woden. In Old Icelandic, the name berserkr means "bear-shirt" and is perhaps derived from the belief that they took on animal form by changing their skins and thereby gained animal strength. According to Charles Hardwick, Beow or Beowulf is one of Woden's ancestors in his Anglo-Saxon pedigree. Also, Hardwick argues that the name of Beowulf's tribe is related etymologically to Woden. Woden's name in his aspect of fertility god was Gautr, the god of abundance. The imagery connecting Beowulf with Woden as war-god and as fertility god may link his function on the historical level as ideal heroic warrior with his function on the
mythological level as the god whose death ushers in new life.

Beowulf is also closely connected to the fertility god Scyld Sheafing, son of Sheaf, a corn-spirit. As Peter F. Fisher says, the description of Scyld with its suggestion of divine origins gives the idea that Beowulf is also divine in some way and thus sets the tone. An interesting and perhaps not entirely irrelevant connection between sheaf and wolf is found in the British tradition of wolf-as-corn-spirit, traces of which still exist in twentieth-century England.

The Scyld passage has long been treated as a crux because of the difficulty of accounting for the identical names of Scyld's son and of the hero. Another problem has been the inability to see the correspondence between the Scyld passage and the entire poem, not just the first section. A basic assumption here is that Beowulf the Dane is identified with Beow, a corn god. The poet specifically states the name of Beowulf Scyldinga (53), and it is reasonable to suppose that this is intentional, especially since this name connects the hero Beowulf in the minds of the audience with the divine ancestor of the Scyldings. Rank notes that "the transference of mythical motifs from the life of the older hero to a younger one
bearing the same name" is "a universal process in myth formation."³⁸

An examination of the similarities between Scyld and Beowulf supports the interpretation of Beowulf as a reappearance of the dying god in cosmic time. Scyld arrives from an unknown origin, and Beowulf's origins too are unclear. His mother is nameless. He says that his father is Ecgtheow, but as has been noticed before, his name does not alliterate as it would according to Germanic custom.³⁹ Besides, as son of "Ecg-theow," Beowulf could have been regarded as the descendant of the "(priestly) servant of the sword." The sword is an ancient symbol, weapon of the sun-god, who manifests himself both as warrior god and fertility god.

In a discussion of Freyr, Davidson notes that "the child coming over the sea from an unknown realm to bring the land blessing suggests a deity continually dying and being reborn. . . ."⁴⁰ As Graves puts it, "the variously named God of the Year always came out of the sea."⁴¹ Scyld clearly fits this mold: the waves of the sea carry him to the land he is destined to defend. Beowulf also comes from over the sea, albeit from a known realm, to defend first Denmark, then later his own Geatland. Scyld also returns to the sea. Although Beowulf does not return to the sea in death, he is portrayed throughout the poem as a creature of
the sea. He survives five nights and days in the swimming
match with Breca, and, after his successful struggles with
the sea-monsters, the sea bears him to Finland. Similarly,
the dead Scyld is given to the ocean, and the sea bears him
away (48-49). Beowulf also survives being dragged to the
depths of the mere with Grendel's mother, and he swims for
his life through the sea after Hygelac is felled by the
Frisians. Finally, he is buried on Hronesness next to the
sea.

Beowulf leaves Denmark with a ship full of treasure,
just as Scyld so many years earlier had left the land of the
Scyldings in his funeral ship loaded with treasure. Mack
Allen Perry notes that the mention of the mast in the
description of Scyld's funeral ship being readied "echoes
the mention of the mast when Hrothgar's gifts are placed on
Beowulf's ship (1898b-1899)." So perhaps the Beowulf
poet's audience would have made this connection between
Beowulf and Scyld and in so doing would have understood that
Beowulf's voyage to Geatland is a voyage into the mythical
as well as historical place where he will face death.

Beowulf's primary function in the poem as the slayer of
monsters replicates that of the dying gods of Indo-European
myths as well as the gods of the pagan Germanic religion.
This role is emphasized by his disassociation from society.
Unlike Hrothgar and Hygelac, he has neither wife nor child.
Thus, while he shares the status of king on the historical level with Hrothgar and Hygelac, he is set apart from them on the mythological level. In fact, in the lack of an ordinary domestic life and in the absence of heirs, Beowulf appears as a sacral priest/king. As Dorothy Whitelock points out, "A priest had to observe certain taboos. . . ." For one thing, he could not carry weapons.\textsuperscript{43} Chaney also notes "the forbidding of arms to the priests of the Angles and the banning of weapons from their temples" and argues that this is "a cult feature probably descended from the cult of Nerthus."\textsuperscript{44} Perhaps this fact partially explains why Beowulf does not bear weapons against Grendel, or why the sword he bears against Grendel's mother does not work and only the God-given sword on the wall of the cave avails him there.

Chaney states that by the time of the early migrations, the king "has become the tribal high-priest, the 'warden of the holy temple.'" The king "stood between his tribe and its gods, sacrificing for victory and plenty, 'making' the year."\textsuperscript{45} The function of "making" the year is exactly that of the fertility god. In mythology the fertility god is the dying god who restores the land through his death. Beowulf functions as the dying Savior-Hero whose death effects restoration. In her famous study of Grail literature,
Jessie Weston summarizes the main components of the Grail myth:

the story postulates a close connection between the vitality of a certain King, and the prosperity of his kingdom; the forces of the ruler being weakened or destroyed, by wound, sickness, old age, or death, the land becomes Waste, and the task of the hero is that of restoration.\(^{46}\)

This description could as easily be applied to Beowulf. Hrothgar's vitality is certainly diminished if not altogether destroyed, and Heorot, the center of his land, has in effect been laid waste by Grendel. Beowulf comes to restore the kingdom of Denmark and particularly to cleanse Heorot. When Beowulf arrives at Hrothgar's court, he asserts that without his help Heorot will never escape the monster. Thus he makes it clear that he has come to rid the mead hall of Grendel. He is able to restore Hrothgar's land through a ritual, substitute death in the mere. But the attempted restoration of his own land requires his death.

The sacral kingship, as Chaney explains, involved sacrifice: "in the royal responsibility for the tribe's temporal prosperity, when the heathen king lost his 'luck,' he himself might be sacrificed to maintain the mana of his house."\(^{47}\)

As Moorman says,
Beginning with Frazer, anthropologists and literary critics have seen as a ruling motif both in primitive society and in literature the ritual sacrifice of the sacral king as a means of assuring the continuing fertility of the land and the prosperity of the tribe.

Moorman agrees with Margaret Murray that "the sacrifice either of the king or of his substitute was a fundamental part of the Germanic paganism which infused England in the Anglo-Saxon period and continued well into the Christian Era." Beowulf's death naturally would have been viewed by the Anglo-Saxon audience as a ritual sacrifice, whether or not the myth behind the ritual was consciously apprehended.

This belief in the sacrificial nature of the divine king blended easily with the Christian idea of the savior who sacrifices his life for mankind. Graves calls Jesus the "greatest of all Sacred Kings" and explains that the symbols surrounding the Christian son of God were derived from the ritual of the gods whom He superseded. Some critics have noted parallels between Beowulf and Jesus Christ, but William Whallon argues that such similarities are probably coincidental, "since the Anglo-Saxon epic may have been produced under relatively little influence from Scripture or the writings of the Fathers."
It is, however, entirely plausible that similarities between Beowulf and Jesus Christ are intentional, not in the sense that the poem is heavily influenced by the Scripture but rather because both figures function as resurrection-gods. For example, one piece of evidence cited in the effort to prove that Beowulf is Christ is his troop of twelve retainers at the end of the poem. However, the number thirteen, including twelve members and a god, is common in pre-Christian religion and legend. Odin was accompanied by twelve lesser gods and the Danish hero Hrolf by his twelve berserks. As Murray points out, the combination of twelve plus one was not limited to Germanic tradition. She cites the example of "Romulus, who was both king and Incarnate God," being surrounded by his twelve lectors. Hercules also had twelve retainers. The number twelve is considerably more prominent in Northern mythology than in Christian narratives, indicating "something more than a late borrowing."

It is also possible that the original audience would have seen something of Balder, another dying god, in Beowulf. Branston contends that the Anglo-Saxons honored Balder and that the existence of Balder in their pre-Christian religion made it easy for them to accept Jesus Christ: "the Old English were content merely to replace the
old gods by a Prince of Peace who, after all, was for them only an extension of Balder."

One of the main symbols connected with the dying god was the sun. This symbol is obviously naturalistic, since the sun is born and dies each day in its rising and setting. The rising sun is a symbol of Jesus Christ as well, and the sun and light imagery so often discussed in relation to Beowulf seems to identify him as belonging to this tradition. It is strange that the sun in Beowulf is sometimes said to be in the south instead of the usual east or west. In his boast preceding his fight with Grendel, Beowulf promises King Hrothgar that anyone will be able to go happily into the hall at daybreak of the following morning when "sunne sweglwered sūpan scīneē!" (606). But when the morning comes, the poet makes no mention of the sun. In fact, the next reference to the sun occurs just after Beowulf has defeated Grendel's mother, lending support to the theory that Grendel is not vanquished until his mother also has been slain:

Līxte se lēoma, lēoht inne stōd,
efne swā of hefene hādre scīneē
rodores candel. (1570-1572a)

Much later, when Beowulf and his men arrive at Geatland, the poet says "Woruldcandel scān, / sigel sūān fūs" (1965b-1966a). One would expect the sun to rise from the east on
these occasions, from a symbolic as well as realistic viewpoint. So what could the poet possibly intend? It seems impossible to give a definitive answer, but these references may again be allusions to the fertility god who is also depicted as a sun-king. According to Graves, in mythology this sacred king is imprisoned at death "in the extreme north" where "only dead suns are to be found." In this context, it is perhaps significant that no sun is mentioned on the morning after Beowulf's death when his band

morgenlonge þæg mōðgiōmor sæt,
bordhǣbbende, bega on wēnum,
endedēgores ond eftcymes
lēofes monnes. (2894-2897a)

Myth critics, concentrating on Beowulf's descent into the mere in their discussions of his role, have failed to understand the significance of the hero's death. Michael Nagler, viewing the fight with Grendel's mother as climactic, completely omits any mention of the dragon fight. Similarly, Janet Dow discusses only the battle in the mere, arguing that Beowulf's descent is a return to the womb, where he battles "his own shadow self." She also states, however, that "The Hero has returned to the lair of Mother Earth, there to meet her terrifying and aggressive aspect, her demon self, Death." The sword is the phallic symbol of regeneration which effects the Rebirth. Carl
Meigs believes that Beowulf loses his adolescence and is reborn into manhood during the fight with Grendel's mother. Thomas Gasque agrees and is clearly tempted to suggest that "Beowulf defeats the darker side of his own mother when he defeats Grendel's." Such psychological interpretations are intriguing and even sometimes enlightening for modern readers, but they seem strangely unrelated to the poet's intentions or to what may reasonably be imagined as the perceptions of his original audience.

Furthermore, they generally deny mythological significance to the second part of the poem, neglecting even to analyze the fight with the dragon. Gasque argues that Beowulf's return to Geatland marks "the completion of his rite of passage" and that the mythic qualities which permeate the first part are missing in the second part. He agrees with Jeffrey Helterman that Beowulf "has descended fully into the world of time" upon completion of the recounting of his adventures to Hygelac. According to Helterman, "The flat telling of the encounters demythologizes Beowulf and sets him in a thoroughly secular setting." John D. Niles also insists that the Beowulf dragon "is a flesh-and-blood flying dragon and not a mythological creature." This claim is of course amazing in light of the rich mythological background of dragon-fights and dragons themselves. It is obvious that the
second part of *Beowulf* is just as thoroughly imbued with mythological significance. The dragon is after all a dragon, by definition every bit as much a part of the mythological world as Grendel's mother, in fact synonymous with her in mythological terms.

It is in the combat with the dragon that Beowulf is most decisively identified as a mythic figure. Niles asserts that "The mythic dimension of time is not evoked during the dragon fight . . . because the poet does not want this episode to be considered a new chapter in the continuing feud of God against His enemies." On the contrary, the mythic past is every bit as much referred to in this part of the poem, but it is not the Christian mythic past. It is a mythic past much farther back in the history of man, a past of which the Anglo-Saxons were aware long before they came to know the Christian stories.

After the advent of Christianity, the ancient myths of dragon-killers became part of Christian mythology. Paul Newman describes a bas-relief showing a "hawk-headed St. George, clad in Roman military uniform" fighting a dragon. This is clearly an example in Christian iconography of the same mythic story of Horus and Set. Newman concludes that "there can be little doubt that George did assume characteristics of the sun-gods that he supplanted." Even St. George's name connects him to these fertility gods: he
is "ge-orge" or "earth-stimulator." This fantastic interpretation is given more credence by the fact that St. George's day is on April 23, planting time. His role as opposer of the "harvest spoiler" is clear in a variant of the St. George legend in which the hero kills a serpent which is causing drought in the land by blocking the water-source. Once the serpent is dead, the water is released and the land is restored.  

In Beowulf, the image of water does indeed identify the hero as an otherworldly figure. The descent of the hero into water is a widespread motif in world mythology. In his psychological interpretation of the myth of the birth of the hero, Rank asserts that "the exposure in the water signifies no more and no less than the symbolic expression of birth." Niles says that "the waters through which the hero descends . . . separate the ordinary human world from the magical and threatening 'other' realm in so many tales of an otherworldly journey." Beowulf does not descend into water to fight the dragon, but the close connection of this motif with the dying god may explain the strange welling stream which comes from the barrow.

The combats with Grendel's dam and the dragon are in one sense struggles with the Otherworld. The dragon fight is, however, different from the struggle with Grendel's mother; in the barrow fight, Beowulf does not cross the
threshold. The poet is careful to state that the torrent of boiling water issuing from the mouth of the cave prevents any man from entering. Thus, the hero must do battle in his own kingdom, not in the Otherworld where there is magic. Nevertheless, the dragon's cave is cleansed and restored to nature just as the mere is. Wiglaf has the cursed treasure removed, and the dragon's body is dumped into the sea, just as the body of Grendel's mother remains underwater.

However, as Edward Irving says, "Cleansing implies the restoration of normality in human society as well as in physical nature." After the fight with Grendel's dam, human society is seemingly restored. The hall is safe, the folk rejoice, and the hero lives. The poet is careful, however, to let the audience know that this is only a temporary peace, a momentary haitus in the losing struggle against the forces of disintegration. Similarly, while the dragon is vanquished, the restoration of society is even more tenuous. The hero is dead and there is only the laf of his tribe to hold the kingdom. Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, is a loyal retainer and a heroic warrior, but he cannot be compared to the Heil-filled Beowulf. Whether or not Wiglaf may be able to perform the functions of the hero, one is sure that there will be another dragon to be fought.

Even seemingly superficial patterns of imagery contribute to the characterization of Beowulf as a
mythological figure. For example, animal imagery links him to the pagan gods. One of the animals mentioned frequently is the boar. As discussed in Chapter II, the boar is a symbol closely associated with several gods in the pagan religion, including Woden and the fertility gods Freyr and Freya. In her study of animal symbolism, Rowland discusses the ancient "concept of the boar as a symbol of divine essence" common in Europe as well as the East. She explains that the boar as Vishnu incarnated is said to destroy demons. In the golden boar-figures on the helmets of Beowulf and his men, then, there is a connection between the northern symbol of battle power and the symbol of the demon-slaying god of Indo-European mythology.

The stag is another animal significant in pagan religion as the enemy of the serpent. The antiquity of this belief is attested to by a Bronze Age figurine of a man-stag holding a wriggling serpent. According to Graves, the figure's "mouth and eyes express an excusable terror at the sight; for the serpent is death." In Beowulf, the image of the stag appears in the description of the mere. This animal, the poet says, would rather give up his life on the bank than enter the mere, home of Grendel's mother (1368-71). Davidson suggests that in pre-Christian religion "the stag may have served as a sacrificial victim. . . ."
As such, it would have been a totem of the dying fertility god.

The imagery which the poet uses in the description of the hero's death and burial is especially rich in mythological significance. In the first place, there are numerous references to pagan religion in the burial ceremony for Beowulf. Cremation is clearly related to the pagan god Woden, who, as J. S. Ryan explains, "instituted the custom of cremation and ordained that all dead men should be burned on a pyre." The burning sacrifice to the god generally took place on hills, "whence the smoke and spirit might go to Woden." Woden's son Balder is burned after death, and Sigurd is said to be burned in his ship as he floats out to sea, borne by the winds and the flame to the kingdom of Odin. It is curious that at Beowulf's cremation, as Ritchie Girvan notices, "windblond gelæg" (3146), exactly the opposite of the expected rising of wind as described in Homer and even in Hnaef's cremation. Girvan interprets this difference as evidence that the poet was working from sources which he did not understand. However, the poet may have meant to indicate simply that even the winds would cease when "Heofon rece swe(a)lg" (3155).

Beowulf commands Wiglaf to build his burial barrow on the headland next to the sea so that it shall "hēah hlīfian on Hronesnæsse" (2805) as a reminder to sailors. The burial
mound itself was "a tribal centre and cult centre among the Germanic peoples," including the Anglo-Saxons, and Chaney believes that this fact explains Beowulf's command that a barrow be built for him.76 According to T. C. Lethbridge, "Associated with the idea that burning a victim led to the general fertility, the ashes of the corpse were covered with a round mound to represent the breast of Mother Earth."77 Although Lethbridge is referring to Bronze Age barrows, this custom lingered on in Britain and is reflected in Beowulf. After all, Beowulf is not put in a ship, either in the ground or on the sea. A mound is built in his memory, and it is not so far-fetched to interpret this as the breast of Mother Earth and thus a fertility symbol.

One of the most perplexing features of Beowulf's funeral has been the presence of the weeping woman singing her sorrowful song as Beowulf's body is burning. Critics have theorized that she is Hygd, either as Beowulf's widow or as dowager queen of Geatland; that she is Beowulf's unidentified widow, or that she is just a mourning Geatish woman. Tauno Mustanoja believes that this woman is a professional ritual mourner whose song of lamentation "was an essential traditional feature in the funeral ceremony and had to be included in the description." Her presence, he believes, reflects an old Germanic tradition.78 This is undoubtedly true.
However, the lamenting woman was perhaps included also because of her symbolic relationship to the dying god. In ritual enactments of the myth of the dying god, the figure representing the Vegetation Spirit is customarily attended by mourning women. Weston mentions the problem of the weeping woman or women in the Grail romances. She notes that "in the interpolated visit of Gawain to the Grail castle, found in the C group of *Perceval* MSS., the Grail-bearer weeps piteously," as do the twelve maidens whom Gawain, in the prose *Lancelot*, sees at "the door of the chamber where the Grail is kept..." Weston points out that these figures "behave precisely as did the classical mourners for Adonis." 79

Still another aspect of mythic overtones in *Beowulf's* funeral ceremony is the ring made around his barrow by the twelve warriors chanting a dirge. Such a ritual is in accordance with early Germanic tradition. Martin Puhvel, however, cites much evidence in support of his argument that such a custom was much more widespread. He asserts that "it appears to have been essentially a question of a ceremony of imitative magic of cosmic import—relating to the movement of the sun, the great guiding light of the world." 80 The circular movement itself is ritualistic. Lethbridge says that in Druidic festivals honoring the sun-god, for example, there were bonfires and a ring dance accompanying a ritual
performance "in which the sun god overcame the demon of darkness; or the moon goddess progressed across the Heavens." Perhaps the circle of chanting retainers at Beowulf's burial is a remnant of the ring dance ritual, which was extremely important, according to Murray, "as a religious ceremony and an act of adoration of the Deity. . . ."  

The character of Beowulf clearly resonates with allusions to gods, particularly to the monster-slaying dying god so prevalent in Indo-European myth. It seems reasonable, then, to reject once and for all Irving's assertion that "Beowulf is not a god in any sense whatever, not even in the limited sense that Scyld is godlike because of his supernatural and mysterious origins." W. P. Ker admits that Beowulf is "something different from the giant-killer of popular stories, the dragon-slayer of the romantic schools." Indeed, Beowulf can be perceived as the god of light who battles the forces of darkness and chaos. It is no accident that this description can apply to the Christian Christ-god as well as the pagan sky-god.

As Chaney states, "Divine descent bound the monarch into temporal and cosmic history and served as a link between them." It seems clear that Beowulf as a divine figure as well as a hero in the history of the Danes serves as a link between the historical and mythological levels of
meaning in the poem. Beowulf may be the traditional Germanic divine king on the historical level of the poem and at the same time a Christ-like figure on the Christian level. Similarly, on the mythological level of meaning he could have been reminiscent of the dying gods of the pagan. Undoubtedly, these roles were not mutually exclusive but rather complementary, imbuing the hero with a richness of characterization deeper than he might have on any one level alone.

M. B. McNamee states categorically that "There is no doubt whatever that the Beowulf-poet has gone out of his way to exclude all the old pagan gods from an active place in his poem." It should by now be clear that this view is simply incorrect, the result of a narrow perception of the poem. By the same token, the same sort of tunnel vision would be apparent in an insistence that the poem is totally pagan and that the Christian elements are late additions not integral to the meaning of the poem. The truth seems to be that the poet understood the connection between the pagan religion and the Christian religion. McNamee bases his interpretation of Beowulf as an allegory of Christian salvation on "the remarkable parallel that exists between the outline of the Beowulf story" and the Christian story. He fails to note, however, the parallel between the Christian story and the myths of rebirth which exist in
practically every culture and which are certainly widespread throughout the Indo-European world.

Modern appreciation of Beowulf, Thomas Pettitt believes, can be brought nearer to that of the contemporaneous audience by the study of folktale analogues which "may reveal aspects of the 'original' narrative which are not immediately apparent to the modern reader of the poem." Surely it is profitable to examine the analogues and to see the similarities and differences between them and the story in Beowulf. The danger, however, is that scholars sometimes tend to act as though the poet had mistakenly deviated from the analogues, many of which are much later than Beowulf. For instance, in Pettitt's opinion, the analogue of Hrolf Saga Kraka explains why the hero's bear-like and berserk character make him strong in the first two fights while he is just a man in the third fight against the dragon. This interpretation shows an over-reliance on the analogue and failure to see it as a story, like Beowulf, based on an older, more widespread myth in its basic outlines.

A more rewarding approach, as argued here, is to determine how Indo-European myth informs Beowulf. Such an analysis sheds light on the way the poet interwove mythic themes with historical and religious concerns. The conflict between Beowulf and the monsters is, as has been
demonstrated, another treatment of an ancient theme. The combat between the sky-god and serpent-monster is more ancient than Zeus and Typhon, as old as Indra and Vritra, Marduk and Tiamat. It is this conflict which seems to supply the much discussed themes and type-scenes of *Beowulf*, the subject of the following chapter.
Notes


12 Hopper 207.

13 Klaeber xxv. Grimm argued that the "bee-wolf" (enemy of the bees) was the woodpecker, which he believed was sacred.


16 Theo Brown, "The Black Dog in English Folklore,"


21 Rank 10.


24 Hopper 204.

25 Newman 70.

26 The poet specifies that Cain killed Abel with a sword; he was Abel's ecgбанa (1262). H. L. Rogers, "Beowulf's Three Great Fights," RES n.s. 6 (1955): 345, has noticed this detail, which is not in the Bible and which he
was unable to trace elsewhere. Interestingly enough, Set kills his brother Osiris with a sword.


29 Clodd 131.


31 Elizabeth Martin-Clarke, *Culture in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1947) 61. See also Davidson, *Myths and Symbols* 79. Davidson discusses the bear and wolf as symbols of brave warriors.

32 Thomas Pettitt, "Beowulf: The Mark of the Beast and the Balance of Frenzy," *NM* 77 (1977): 533. Pettitt contends that Beowulf is a *berserkr* in the first part of the poem, especially in his fights with Grendel and his mother, but that he is transformed into "the steadfast hero" in his fight with the dragon 533-35.

33 Charles Hardwick, *Traditions, Superstitions, and Folk-Lore* (1872; New York: Arno, 1980) 46. According to Hardwick, the name "Geat" can be etymologically traced to
the Anglo-Saxon *geotan* and *geat*, "which imply a pouring forth."


35 Graves 222.

36 Cox 154.


38 Rank 63.

39 Tom B. Haber, *A Comparative Study of the Beowulf and the Aeneid* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1931) 25. Haber believes that the fact that Beowulf's name does not alliterate with those of his family indicates that he is not an historic king. Haber argues that Beowulf "is as unsubstantial as the dragon. . . ."

40 Davidson, *Myths and Symbols* 126.

41 Graves 410.


44 Chaney 107.

45 Chaney 14 and 2-3.
The concept of ritual sacrifice is even more plainly associated with King Hrothgar, who obviously has lost his heil and is no longer able to maintain the Danes' prosperity. He is, in fact, so ineffectual that it is necessary for a hero from outside the tribe to restore the Scyldings. The Beowulf audience may also have thought quite naturally of the possibility of sacrifice; perhaps this explains why the poet is careful to state that Hrothgar's people did not blame him. The poet seems to accentuate Hrothgar's loss of mana or heil when he describes the Danes' lapse into apostasy:

\[HwIlum hIe geh\text{-}\text{eton } \text{at hærgtrafum}\\
wigweorpunga, wordum bædon,\\
pat him gæstbona gēoce gefremede\\
wið pæodpræum. (175-178a)\]

Clearly, if the Danes are unfaithful to "Drihten God," Hrothgar would have been viewed as responsible. According to Chaney, "The role of the sacrificial king also continues in the capacity of the ruler as the purifier of his people. As the priest-king of heathenism had to change any imbalance
of nature and restore the 'luck' of the folk, so the Christian Anglo-Saxon king had to mediate for the sins of all his people." In fact, the belief in the necessity for sacrifice may have been strong enough that the poet was obliged to provide a substitute victim in the person of Aeschere. Apparently substitute victims were sometimes used in ritual king-slaying (Chaney 38).

50 Graves 144.


54 Hopper 204.

55 Branston 97.

56 Graves 111.


61 Gasque 106.


64 Niles 184.

65 Newman 229-30.

66 Rank 73.

67 Niles 17.


69 Rowland 39. Rowland cites King Arthur's being portrayed in a positive way as a boar as an example of the continuation of the boar as a powerful symbol 42. Although Rowland offers no explanation, it seems clear that the boar as a reincarnation of the god who slays the serpent
symbolically identifies the hero with which it is associated as a divine power for good and order against the evil and chaotic forces in the universe.

70 Cirlot 309. See also Rowland 94.

71 Graves 217.

72 Davidson, Myths and Symbols 56.


74 Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, The Road to Hel (New York: Greenwood, 1968) 62.


76 Chaney 105.


78 Tauno F. Mustanoja, "The Unnamed Woman's Song of Mourning over Beowulf and the Tradition of Ritual Lamentation," NM 68 (1967): 27. Mustanoja gives a comprehensive summary of relevant critical approaches appearing before his definitive article.

79 Weston 49.


81 Lethbridge 115.
82 Murray 113.
83 Irving, Reading 86.
85 Chaney 42.
87 McNamee 193.
88 Pettitt 532.
89 Pettitt 535.
CHAPTER V

THE RELATIONSHIP OF MYTH TO THEMES AND TYPE-SCENES

Claude Lévi-Strauss has advised, "If there is a meaning to be found in mythology, this cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined."¹ The same can be said of the mythic elements in Beowulf. Much critical attention has been devoted to proving that the Beowulf poet drew upon the techniques of oral-formulaic composition in composing his work. Many critics today agree that "the poet did not invent the story himself, but was indebted to some kind of source material" which "is clearly not to be found in the historical records which remain to us."² Thomas A. Shippey contends that while the Beowulf poet may have indeed been a literate artist, "he was clearly acquainted with and affected by the techniques of formulaic composition at a verbal level." And even though he was writing about heroic themes, "he could not entirely shake off the structure of his sources and models, any more than he could begin to compose in a poetic diction all of his own."³ The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the poet did not
intend to escape from the structure of the myth which found expression in the oral tradition upon which he drew. On the contrary, he fully exploited the themes and type scenes as well as the structure, plot, and characters of the myth.

According to the theory of oral-formulaic composition, epic poems are composed by recreating the smaller traditional units of formulas and themes. Milman Parry first identified a formula as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea." Albert Bates Lord was the first to define "theme" or "thematic formula" in oral poetry as "a subject-unit, a group of ideas, regularly employed by a singer, not merely in any given poem, but in the poetry as a whole." Attempting to refine Lord's definition, Donald K. Fry explains that a "theme" is "a recurring concatenation of details and ideas, not restricted to a specific event, verbatim repetition, or certain formulas, which forms an underlying structure for an action or description." This definition is operative in the ensuing discussion of the relationship between themes and the mythic tradition.

Interest in the conventional elements of Beowulf was heightened by Francis P. Magoun's application of the theories of Parry and Lord to the analysis of Old English poetry. Subsequently, the existence of themes in Anglo-Saxon narrative poetry has been amply documented. Among the
well-known examples of such themes are the Beasts of Battle and the Hero on the Beach. These two themes will be examined here for their relationship to the mythic layer of meaning in the poem.

Of the two, the Hero on the Beach theme is the most widely discussed and easily more significant in relation to Beowulf. The frequency with which it appears in this poem alone indicates an emphasis on the thematic concerns which it conveys. The essential elements of this theme as delineated by David Crowne, who first identified the theme, are: "(1) a hero on the beach (2) with his retainers (3) in the presence of a flashing light (4) as a journey is completed (or begun)." Further, the theme usually precedes a scene of carnage. Expanding the applications of this theme, Alain Renoir explains: "A beach is by definition the separation between two worlds—of the land and that of the waters—and the 'hero on the beach' necessarily stands at the juncture between the two." Thus, this theme could just as well be expressed by the hero standing by a door.

Sarah Higley has pointed out that the frequent appearance of this theme in Beowulf reflects a deep concern "with the 'liminal,' a term used in anthropology to describe 'threshold crossings.'" On the other side of the threshold invariably exists the Otherworld, the place of death or the threat of death. Noting the universality of this theme,
John Richardson suggests that the Hero on the Beach theme probably is not a literary convention but rather "the recognition of a situation intimately known to every individual." A more tenable position, however, may be that the oral-formulaic theme is a literary convention which reflects the reality of human existence, particularly the necessity of facing death.

The "Hero on the Beach" theme is especially dense in the final section of the poem, which deals with the death of the hero. It is present in Wiglaf's first glimpse of the dragon's hoard. Beowulf lies dying on the beach, and the retainers are hiding in the surrounding forest. The light is provided by the golden banner "of ðam læoma stōd," a strange and curiously emphatic description of the shining gold. The carnage which follows is, of course, the death of Beowulf. There are also, in the scene where the retainers come out of hiding to view their dead king, potentially all the ingredients for the Hero on the Beach theme. His retainers surround the dead hero lying on the wet sand, and very near them is the treasure hoard. But this time the poet not only fails to make any mention of a flashing light but seems to make an effort to suppress such an association. Although the hoard includes golden treasures, the poet focuses on those treasures which are corroded, "ōmige purhetone, swā hē wiđ eordan fæðm / pūsend wintra.
eardodon" (3049-50). Here the light accompanying the hero is gone, and there is perhaps no point in the usual function of the theme as predicting disaster since Beowulf is already dead.

In the final burial scene, however, the theme reappears. Beowulf, albeit in ashes, lies in the barrow on the beach, "æt brimes nosan" (2803b) surrounded by the circle of retainers. His barrow, as he commanded, is "beorhtne æfter bæle" (2803a). This phrase, "bright after the fire," seems to have a double meaning in this last instance of the theme of the Hero on the Beach. The poet indicates that Beowulf's spirit will be bright even after death, that the light of life will rise from the ashes of the dead hero. Thus, in death the hero has himself become the light, the beacon for sailors approaching the shore. The impending disaster, on a historical level, is of course the fall of the Geats. On the pagan mythological level, it is the certainty of the appearance of another dragon. This means, however, that another god-like hero will appear to destroy the dragon of chaos.

The essential element of the Hero on the Beach theme seems to be the light. This image is symbolically connected with crossing from one world into another. According to Mircea Eliade, fire rites were an important part of the new year ritual in numerous traditional cultures. "Fires are
extinguished and rekindled" precisely at the moment when the old year passes into the new. In this case, the light obviously signifies the necessity of death in the process of re-creation. An argument can be made for the same interpretation of the light in the Hero on the Beach theme. Although carnage usually follows the appearance of this formulaic theme, such destruction is necessary in order to effect regeneration. Of particular interest here is the Northern tradition in which "Thor, provoked by the giant Hrungnir, met him at the 'frontier' and conquered him in single combat." As Eliade points out, the mythical prototype of this tradition is "the slaying of a three-headed monster." Perhaps the phrase "beorhtne æfter bæle" is a signal that the hero, in Joseph Campbell's terms, has completed "the mythological round" which comprises the monomyth. One reward achieved by the hero at the end of the "supreme ordeal" is "his own divinization (apotheosis)," after which the hero must re-emerge from "the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection)." In the brightness after the fire, the poet may be signifying that Beowulf, while dead in an individual, historical sense, is not dead at all in cosmic, mythic time. In terms of Christian mythology as well, the disaster is thwarted by the resurrection of the dying god from the ashes of his grave.
In addition, this final appearance of the Hero on the Beach theme marks the completion of a structural cycle, since the opening section on Scyld introduces the theme. In his description of the burial of Scyld, the poet says that the hero's retainers set a "segen g(yl)denne / hēah ofer hēafod" (47b-48a) just before they let the sea bear him away on a journey to an unknown destination. Then when the poet first introduces the hero Beowulf, he shows him also on a beach preparing to cross the sea. After that, all mythically significant appearances of the hero show him on a "beach," a threshold or dividing line between two worlds. He stands on the beach at Denmark, on the banks of the mere, returns to the beach of Geatland after his great success in Denmark, and dies on the beach of Geatland. So it is appropriate that his ashes are buried on the beach from which his spirit makes the last great journey into the real Otherworld of death.

The theme of the Hero on the Beach, then, emphasizes Beowulf's function as a crosser of thresholds. Unlike the deer on the banks of the mere, which would rather give up its life to the hounds than enter the mere; unlike Hrothgar and all of humanity, Beowulf voluntarily crosses the threshold into the other world. Like Scyld and like every dying god, Beowulf must make journeys to the other world, must cross thresholds in order to effect the renewal by
which he is defined. The mythical archetype of the crossing of the threshold, the boundary between degeneration and creation, is the "cosmogonic moment of the fight between the god and the primordial dragon. . . ."\(^{17}\) In this paradigm are finally united the warrior god as dragon-slayer and the figure of the dying god.

Another theme closely related to the Hero on the Beach is the Traveller Recognizes His Goal. George Clark detects this theme in several scenes: Beowulf's arrival at the Danish coast (217-24a), Beowulf's arrival at Heorot (301-307a), Beowulf's return to land after the swimming match with Breca (568b-572a), Beowulf's return to his native land (1903b-13), and Grendel's approach to Heorot (702ff.). This theme, Clark notes, "often associates the traveller's arrival and dawn or a bright light radiating from the destination."\(^{18}\) It is significant that the details are those associated with the sun-king, the ancient fertility god. The sun rises, the dawn of a new day arrives, and the sea(water) is ever-present. Plainly, this theme is a natural consequence of the Hero on the Beach theme; the hero makes a journey and the traveller recognizes his goal. And, as Carol Jean Wolf remarks, "Almost invariably, the journey of the hero is either the prelude or the sequel to a triumph."\(^{19}\) The sun, therefore, is appropriately present.
The traveller and the hero are one and the same, the dying god.

An attentive reader might reasonably ask how Grendel's approach to Heorot fits into this interpretation. The answer involves a discussion of what might be called the Brother-Killing motif. Of course, the numerous instances of the slaying of brothers and kinsmen, especially in regard to Cain, have long been a subject of critical analysis. The motif has not, however, been extended to include Beowulf and his antagonists nor has it been analyzed in terms of its mythological significance.

The many similarities between Beowulf and his monstrous antagonists, especially Grendel, are quite obvious. Physically, both Beowulf and Grendel are huge and bear-like, killing opponents with their powerful grip. Like Grendel, who always fights alone, "āna wið eallum" (145a), Beowulf fights his opponents single-handedly, both monsters and men. Significantly, both the hero and the monster are threshold figures. Grendel crosses the threshold of Heorot in order to destroy, while Beowulf crosses the same threshold in order to restore. Thus, Beowulf and Grendel seem to be positive and negative of the same structure. Grendel can, in fact, be seen as Beowulf's double. A possible source for this motif may be found in Indo-European myth. In a survey of comparative mythology, Jaan Puhvel discusses the theme of
"Twin and Brother" as it appears in the mythologies of various Indo-European cultures. Among the examples he cites are the Germanic Tuisto ("Twin") and Mannus ("Man"), the Vedic Yama ("Twin") and Manu ("Man"). In this mythic motif, the Twin has to die "as part of the act of creation," and Man "stays behind to get history going." There are countless other examples of Brother-Killing in the mythologies of many cultures. Horus slays Set, who is in fact his mythological double. Titias, god of the waning year, is killed by Hercules, god of the waxing year, at the winter solstice. It is particularly interesting that Titias is "identical with the giant Tityus whom Zeus killed and consigned to Tartarus," considering Grendel's connection with the race of giants. Martin Puhvel notes Cuchulainn's slaying of his mythic Fer Daid as "obviously a question of one sun-deity slaying his double or twin with the lightning-weapon" and suggests this story as a possible source for the Beowulf poet's description of Beowulf's killing of Grendel. It is more likely that the Cuchulainn myth is yet another story in the same broad tradition of Indo-European myth which includes the theme of Brother-Killing.

It might also be worthwhile to consider the possible manifestation of this theme in Beowulf's fight with the dragon. Robert Graves says that Python, the Serpent, is the sun-god's tanist, his darker self. As the "Demon of the
Waning Year," he must be killed by the sun-god, who is of course symbolic of the waxing year. Similarities between Beowulf and the dragon have been discussed at the end of Chapter III. While it is risky to state unequivocably that the dragon is also Beowulf's double, the poet's description of the two in very much the same terms is surely meaningful. As John D. Niles says, "There is something fitting about the twin deaths of the two aged antagonists, as if two enormous sources of energy were to meet and cancel each other, leaving only timid survivors to dispose of the dead." In this last fight, the opponent is not the man-like Grendel or his woman-like mother. It is a dragon, the ancient, potent symbol of evil and chaos which even gods must battle. Beowulf is, like the sun-god who combats the dragon in Indo-European myth, the symbol of creative, ordering energy; the dragon in Beowulf is the same as the ancient enemy of the gods—the destructive force of chaos and death.

This same notion of death and destruction versus life and renewal is found elsewhere. In "The Theme of the Beasts of Battle in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," Francis P. Magoun identifies the mention of a wolf, an eagle, and/or a raven at a scene of carnage as a theme. He convincingly describes the existence of this element in Anglo-Saxon poetry, and the implication is that the theme existed in the oral tradition of narrative poetry upon which the Beowulf
poet drew. However, as in other studies of themes and type-scenes, there is no attempt to decipher the ultimate origin and function of the Beasts of Battle. It is obvious that the three beasts are exactly those associated with the Northern god Odin (Anglo-Saxon Woden). It is logical to inquire about the significance of this fact. First, considering the strength of the cult of Woden in Anglo-Saxon England "seen from the way in which the beliefs and customs associated with it continue through the centuries," it is hard to believe that the poet's audience could have heard wolf/eagle/raven references without being reminded of the central god of their pre-Christian religion.

The swallowing of Odin by wolves, a common motif in Northern European mythology and art, was familiar to the Beowulf poet's audience, as is attested to by numerous representations, including Anglo-Saxon. At the end of the world, according to the Voluspa, the bound monsters escape: "the wolf breaks loose from his chain, the serpent emerges from the depths where Thor placed it..." Also, the cause of the Great Winter which precedes Ragnarok is said to be "the swallowing of the sun by the wolf on the one hand, and the overthrow of the gods who brought the assurance of repeated harvests to men on the other." Thus the appearance of the wolf would have had connotations of the end of an ordered world in which the sun rose again, the
land came to life after the cold darkness of winter, and another heroic warrior-king came to replace a slain or aging leader. So that in *Beowulf*, when the poet says that the "wulf wæl réafode" (3027), he is introducing a powerfully connotative symbol.

This one appearance of the theme of the Beasts of Battle in *Beowulf* is placed in Wiglaf's speech just after Beowulf's death. Furthermore, it occurs immediately after a passage which could very well have reminded the poet's audience of Balder, a dying god whose story was known to them:

Forðon sceall gār wesan

`monig morgencealð mundum bewunden,`

`hæfen on handa, (3021b-3023a)`

This eighth-century audience would have known, just as the poet clearly did, that Balder died when a shaft of mistletoe was hurled at him. The morning is cold, no sun appears, and the wolf ranges free on the battlefield because the priest-king, heroic warrior and god-like hero has died. The Great Winter is plainly at hand for the Geats.

The raven is also closely associated with myth. It has been noticed before that the raven is depicted in two apparently very different roles in *Beowulf*. It is the corpse-eater joyfully devouring the dead son's hanging body
in the father's lament (2448) and the "wonna hrefn" which
fūs ofer fǣgum fela reordian,
earne secgan, hū him ðt ðte spēow,
þenden hē wið wulf wēl rēafode. (3025-27)

In these instances, it is the typical raven of the Beasts of Battle theme. As a messenger of death, it tells the eagle, primarily a symbol of the sky-god, of its meal of corpses. In northern European mythology, it is known as "a source of wisdom and prophetic knowledge" as well as an eater of the dead.³¹ It may, then, have been understood as a prophetic sign of the end of the heroic world.

In addition, it is also the blithe-hearted "hrefn blaca" which "heofones wynne / blīðheort bodode" (1801-1802a) just before the arrival of the bright morning. As Martin Puhvel says, "in Indo-European mythic tradition the raven repeatedly appears as the associate, mostly herald, of a sun-deity, at times serving as a harbinger of happiness or bearer of good tidings..."³² Puhvel explains the two different roles of the raven as befitting "the intimate of Odin in one of the God's capacities--in one instance as the god of war, in the other as a solar deity." The raven is also associated with Freya, best known as a fertility goddess. In the face of the evidence given, it seems logical to agree with Puhvel's conclusion that the Beowulf
poet "has here selectively and effectively utilized a tradition known to him." 33

The Beasts of Battle theme, then, is clearly related to the mythic level of the poem in which the functions of the warrior sky-god and the dying sun-god play so great a part. It should be remembered that in Scandinavian tradition Odin and Freya were responsible for the spirits of fallen warriors; both god and goddess are fertility figures as well as patrons of warriors. 34 Although Magoun contends that the theme of the Beasts of Battle is "an ornamental rather than an essential theme," 35 its function as allusion to the mythic elements preclude its being called simply ornamental. Further, in its function as enhancing the revelation of the meaning of the poem, it is far from non-essential.

The influence of myth can also be discovered in type-scenes. The type-scene, a smaller unit of formulaic composition, may be defined as "a recurring stereotyped presentation of conventional details used to describe a certain narrative event, requiring neither verbatim repetition nor a specific formula content." 36 "Motif," a more familiar term from literary analysis, is sometimes used interchangeably with "type-scene." Examples of type-scenes or motifs are banquets, battles, and sea voyages. Of special relevance to the present discussion is the type-scene of single combat. Clark contends that the three
examples of the single combat scene in *Beowulf* and the one in *Judith* provide support for the theory that such a type-scene was known to Anglo-Saxon poets. It was an ancient part of the oral tradition.

The motif of single-combat in the oral tradition seems patently derived from myth. As mentioned earlier, "One of the oldest battles in literature must be the fight between the sun-god and a monster deity," a myth pattern extant in numerous civilizations. Lord also discusses this pattern as one of "two discrete narrative patterns that are found fairly widely in Indo-European epic or story tradition."

The other pattern is that of "absence, devastation, and return," which involves the restoration of the devastated land. Lord finds that "The interlocking of these two patterns from the deep past of the story . . . provides a mythic base both for the triumph of *Beowulf* over the evil generations of Cain and for the inevitable death of the hero in old age, still fighting against destructive forces."

Applying the theories of Joseph Campbell as well as the ritual study of Jessie Weston, Carl Meigs concludes that the structure of *Beowulf* follows "the growth pattern in the development of the hero." It "outlines the mythical progress of a world hero" from initiation, to combat with "the last and greatest threat of all to the health of his land," to death. Here the warrior sky-god tradition is
clearly united with that of the sacral dying god. But Meigs views Wiglaf as "an emergent hero" who will do for Beowulf what Beowulf did for Hrothgar, as a "re-emergent saviour."

It is difficult to believe that any reader would see Wiglaf as another Beowulf. He does not save Beowulf as Beowulf saved Hrothgar. Although Beowulf bequeaths his armor to Wiglaf, he does not accept him as a son as Hrothgar accepted Beowulf after the defeat of Grendel's mother. In fact, Beowulf pointedly laments his lack of a son and successor:

\[ 'Nū ic suna mīnum sylan wolde gūðgewædu, þær mē gifēðe swā. Ænig yrfeweard (2729-2731a). \]

Based on the foregoing discussion, it can safely be assumed that the Beowulf poet skillfully maintains a thematic relevance in the use of formulaic elements. Further, this relevance of composition and theme is sustained by the mythic tradition from which the formulas are derived.

William Whallon says that "the old poetic formulas gave the oral tradition a religious continuity not easily broken." This may indeed be so, in the sense that ritual repetition can be the basis for religious experience. But the real significance of these poetic formulas lies in the theme which they transmit and which truly does give the oral
tradition a religious continuity. And it is the myth which provides the structure and substance of the theme.

W. P. Ker charges that "The plot of Beowulf is not more serious than that of a thousand easy-going romances of chivalry, and of fairy tales beyond all number." On the contrary, the plot of Beowulf is that of so many romances and fairy tales precisely because of the seriousness of the theme underlying these stories. Rhys Carpenter believes that "the real theme of the seemingly foolish folk tale" of the Bear's Son is "Death in the midst of life, and some hope of life even after the crushing calamity of death." The universality of this theme "explains why such a story could keep itself unchanged through centuries and captivate an Ionic epic poet in archaic Greece equally with a heroic singer in Denmark or Northumberland or a storyteller in the distant sagaworld of Iceland."

Working from an entirely different perspective, Robert Graves also finds that "story-tellers did not invent their plots and characters but continually retold the same traditional tales. . . ." But he goes further in connecting these traditional tales with myth: "Almost all were explanations of ritual or religious theory overlaid with history. . . ." Graves argues that there is only one true theme of poetry: "the life, death, and resurrection of the Spirit of the Year, the Goddess' son and lover." As
Graves explains, the mother goddess had a lover who was the Serpent and a son who was the Star of Life. This son "was reborn every year, grew up as the year advanced, destroyed the Serpent, and won the Goddess' love." He further contends that this theme was appropriated and transformed by Christianity; in the process, the serpent became the devil. It is tempting to follow Graves into this labyrinth and devise a way to work out Grendel in the role of Serpent, his mother as the Goddess, and Beowulf as the Star Son. Such a path to understanding, while intriguing and quite possibly profitable, is unnecessarily circuitous.

This myth can be readily interpreted as a representation of the cyclic pattern of life and death, order and chaos, which is a fact of human existence. As James Frazer, Joseph Campbell, and Robert Graves have demonstrated with an overwhelming number of examples, this mythic pattern is disseminated throughout the world. The pattern of Hindu myths has been described as "the resolution of chaos into order and its dissolution back into chaos." According to Davidson, these words "might be taken as the leitmotif of the poem Voluspa," in which "the major gods are represented as creating, arranging, separating and controlling the universe, but progress can only come through conflict." Obviously, all of this could just as well be said of Beowulf.
The search for the sources of the main plot and central characters has long held a primary place in Beowulf criticism. This area has been particularly fertile in the identification of analogues. The existence of common features in Beowulf and certain Icelandic sagas has been noted and fully discussed. Many scholars have devoted their efforts to the detection of possible Scandinavian influences on Beowulf. Particular attention has been given to the Grettis Saga because it contains monster fights similar to Beowulf’s first two struggles. Scholars have also discovered parallels between Beowulf and the Volsungasaga. Such similarities lead to the reasonable assumption that, as William C. Johnson points out, "a common tradition existed," despite the fact that "no known source for Beowulf exists." Accepting the premise that the relatively late Scandinavian sagas "contain material of considerable though unspecifiable antiquity," many scholars, including Johnson, have found the common tradition to be Germanic.

Others, however, have noted parallels between Beowulf and narrative poetry outside the Germanic tradition. In his close study of the resemblances between Beowulf and the Aeneid, Tom Haber concludes that "there is indeed a closer connection between the two poems than has heretofore been credited; even though it must always be admitted that any
specific point referred to may find its explanation in unadulterated Germanic tradition. The connection between Beowulf and Greek narrative poetry as well as the parallels in Germanic tradition may be explained by one common source ultimately located in Indo-European origins. Noting several close parallels between Beowulf and the Odyssey, Rhys Carpenter wonders what could possibly explain these similarities since "On no possible score could Beowulf have been derived from Homer." Carpenter argues that the folktale of the Bear's Son identified by Panzer as the ultimate source of the plot of Beowulf is "the same story which has inspired both the Greek and the Old English epic, two poems separated by at least thirteen centuries of time and obvious disparities of language and culture." Lord agrees that Beowulf and the Odyssey "both belonged to an Indo-European oral epic narrative tradition" in which the story patterns are "very old, amazingly stable, surprisingly alive. . . ."

Beowulf scholars have only begun to consider searching for the sources of themes and type-scenes. Higley suggests that "it is conceivable that the theme of the Hero on the Beach is not simply a quirk of oral composition but may indeed have its origin in Germanic myth (as may all notable thematic formulas)." Renoir has discussed the appearance of the Hero on the Beach theme in the Nibelungenlied and
has quite recently argued that "a similar paradigm occurs in the Homeric poems." Such parallels, as he reasons, indicate that "the origin of the theme may possibly go back to Indo-European times." He cites the "common origin of Greek and Germanic verse" and the "vestigal resemblance" of Old-English meters "to the current notion of what Indo-European verse may conceivably have been like" as support for this possibility. It is, in fact, probable that all themes and motifs in Anglo-Saxon formulaic poetry can be identified in Indo-European mythic traditions.

The more one learns about the similarities of the beliefs of all Indo-European cultures, the easier it is to imagine that the Anglo-Saxon poet was familiar with these mythic traditions. There is early evidence that the religious beliefs of Britain were similar to those of far-flung Indo-European cultures. In Pliny's day, the Britons "celebrated magic rites with so many similar ceremonies that one might suppose them to have been instructed therein by the Persians." The Mithraic cult of the sun was "prevalent in later Roman Britain." The Germanic peoples who came to inhabit Britain, including the Anglo-Saxons, evidently preserved strong cultural affinities with their Indo-European forebears. In an examination of pre-Christian runic inscriptions on burial urns, C. L. Wrenn finds "echoes of prehistoric Indo-European religious cults inherited
through Germanic culture by pagan Anglo-Saxons. . . .”

According to Georges Dumézil's theory of comparative Indo-European mythology, Germanic religion is basically the religion of the Indo-Europeans. Although the names and specific personalities of the gods are transformed somewhat, their functional attributes remain the same.65 Dumézil, Udo Strutynski says, has shown that "the link between the Indo-European and the various national traditions was not merely typological but genetic."66

Whether or not these shared traditions are in fact genetic, they are undoubtedly deep-seated and thus not easily disposed of. "For a believing society," Dumézil states, "a myth or an entire mythology is not a gratuitous product of fancy, but the repository of traditional wisdom. . . ."67 In light of the pervasive nature of the pre-Christian religion and its myths and gods in eighth-century Anglo-Saxon England, it seems reasonable to admit the likelihood of the use of this body of tradition by the Beowulf poet. Undeniably, there were beliefs and ideas in the minds of his audience which were touched by certain elements in the poem, including the themes and type-scenes which are undoubtedly closely related to the mythic tradition.

The genius of the Beowulf poet does not, however, lie in his knowledge of myth or in the fact that he used myth.
The formulaic themes and type-scenes were inherited forms of composition; the basic plot and characters also came from the rich mythic tradition, pagan and Christian, in which his culture was steeped. It is the way in which he used these mythological elements which sets him apart. He did not compose a Judith or a Guthlac or a Battle of Brunanburg; he produced Beowulf, the centerpiece of Old English narrative poetry. His accomplishment, his "originality," is to be found in the careful interweaving of myth and history. Thus, although myth is not the key to Beowulf, it is, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, a significant structural and thematic key.
Notes


6 Donald K. Fry, "Old English Formulaic Themes and Type-Scenes," *Neophilologus* 52 (1968): 53.


9 David Crowne, "The Hero on the Beach: An Example of Composition by Theme," *NM* 61 (1960): 368.

10 Alain Renoir, "Oral-Formulaic Theme Survival: A Possible Instance in the 'Nibelungenlied,'" *NM* 78 (1977): 73. Support for Renoir's insight is presented by James D. Johnson, "A Note on the Substitution of 'Door' for 'Beach'
in a Formulaic Theme," *Neophilologus* 67 (1983): 596-98. See Chapter 7 of Renoir's *A Key to Old Poems* for a detailed examination of the occurrences of the Hero on the Beach theme before the fight with Grendel 112-28. Renoir also looks at this theme in relation to the fights with Grendel's mother and the dragon 129-30.


12 John Richardson, "The Critic on the Beach," *Neophilologus* 71 (1987): 118. This article includes a comprehensive review of treatments of the Hero on the Beach theme.


20 I had come to this conclusion independently, but see Renoir, Key 116-17, for a characteristically impressive discussion of the relationship between the visits of Beowulf and Grendel to the Hero on the Beach theme.


24 Graves 393.


28 See A. Margarent Arent, "The Heroic Pattern: Old Germanic Helmets, Beowulf, and Grettis Saga," Old Norse

29 Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1988) 190.

30 Davidson, Myths and Symbols 191.

31 Davidson, Myths and Symbols 91.


33 Martin Puhvel, "Blithe-Hearted Morning Raven" 246-47.


35 Magoun, "Beasts of Battle" 83.


38 Paul Newman, The Hill of the Dragon (Totowa, NJ: Rowman, 1980) 23. Newman favors the interpretation that these encounters reflect "clashes between old and new religious factions," between the female Mother Goddess and
the male sky-god." He contends, for example, that Indra's slaying of Vrita "indicates the displacement of the Goddess-worshipping cult of ancient India by the Aryan invaders from the steppes who began to occupy this part of the world in the second millennium B.C." Thus, the dragon descends from "age-old deities that were submerged and deposed by a new order of sky-gods" 24-25.


40 Lord, "Interlocking Patterns" 141.


45 Graves 60.

46 Graves 422.
47 Graves 387-389.

48 Davidson, Myths and Symbols 226.


51 The most recent and complete discussion of these parallels is by Larry Benson, "The Originality of Beowulf," The Interpretation of Narrative, Harvard English Series, I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1970) 1-43.


53 William C. Johnson 42.


57 Lord, "Beowulf and Odysseus" 91.

58 Higley 346.

59 Renoir, "Oral-Formulaic Theme Survival: A Possible Instance in the 'Nibelungenlied,'" *NM* 65 (1964): 73.

60 Alain Renoir, "The Hero on the Beach: Germanic Theme and Indo-European Origin," *NM* 90 (1989): 111-16. This article appeared after the first draft of this chapter had been written.

61 Renoir, "The Hero on the Beach" 115.


63 Wrenn, "Anglo-Saxon Cult Symbols" 54.

64 Wrenn, "Anglo-Saxon Cult Symbols" 52.


It was once a generally accepted and orthodox view that the subject matter of Beowulf was originally mythical and symbolic of forces of nature. This theory was, however, discarded because scholars found clear evidence for the origin of the main subject matter in folktales. "The mythological theory," as J. R. Hulbert states, "though still urged in studies of Arthurian origins, has proved to be inadaptable to Beowulf."¹ This opinion, expressed over forty years ago, seems to be shared by the majority of Beowulf scholars: this perhaps explains why relatively few have approached the poem from the viewpoint of myth. Nevertheless, as shown in the previous chapter, the fact that the main story in Beowulf is echoed by stories in folktale and legend does not exclude its mythological elements. On the contrary, its inclusion of folklore motifs provides further evidence for the importance of the mythological basis of the story which is the poem's central plot. The fact is that the mythological layer or level is every bit as significant to a complete understanding of the poem as the Christian level or the individual/historical level. That the poet meant these layers of meaning to be
complementary is evident in the way he carefully interwove the mythological (both pre-Christian and Christian) and historical elements in such a way that they all fit together like pieces in a masterfully wrought puzzle to produce the effect made on the reader by the poem as a whole.

The rationale for emphasizing the mythological level is not that it is more meaningful or inherently more valuable but rather that it is not as readily accepted or apprehended by twentieth-century readers of the poem as it was by the poet's eighth-century audience. Certainly twentieth-century readers can and do appreciate Beowulf without knowledge of the eighth-century poet's pre-Christian religious background. It is, however, impossible to fully appreciate what the poet meant to convey or what his audience found in the poem without apprehending the connotative value of its various elements. It is understandably difficult for a twentieth-century audience, including learned critics, to automatically understand the emotional force of the monsters or of the references to gods which had recently become devils for the eighth-century audience.

This somewhat submerged layer of meaning is, without specific knowledge of pre-Christian religion and its gods, rather alien to many modern readers and therefore inaccesible without elucidation. It would not have been so for an Anglo-Saxon audience. The historical level of the
poem offers some of the same limitations, and scholars have painstakingly tried to piece together the history revealed in *Beowulf*. These efforts are generally appreciated. Likewise, the school of criticism devoted to the revelation of Christian elements has attracted much respectful attention. Because the author was a Christian, this layer is closer to the surface of the poem, easily admissible as "real," just as the historical elements, while removed in time, are easily understood in the context of the reader's experience in everyday life. Somehow, the possibility of another layer of meaning, deeper than and outside conscious human experience and based on historically and culturally remote sources, raises suspicion at best and derision at worst.

Nevertheless, there is still value in approaching *Beowulf* from the perspective of myth. It is well to heed Edward B. Irving's words:

> while it is no longer possible for us to give serious attention to the theories of Mullenhoff and the other enthusiasts for the Solar myth, we should remember that they were after all giving their attention to a symbolic pattern that was clearly there in the poem, however distorted or narrow their final interpretation of it may have been.
The operative words here are "distorted" and "narrow." The rather too brave reference to Beowulf as a sun-god in Chapter IV perhaps requires qualification. The epithet of sun-god, not only in this paper but also in the myth itself, functions as a sort of shorthand for the symbolic connotations of this mythic figure. The terms of this myth and the interrelationship of the dying god and the sun-god are nicely stated by Peter Lum, who believes that the stories of gods and heroes struggling against monsters "are in essence the story of the sun-god attacking darkness." In time this story symbolized not only the conflict between night and day, moon and sun, but also "the contrast between summer and winter, between life and death, and between good and evil as well." Moreover,

The sun-god and all the innumerable heroes who descended from him became symbolic not only of the actual, shining, visible sun, but of all that was good and fruitful in life; the hideous monster that he destroyed was no longer simple darkness but the very soul of evil and of death.³

The myth, however symbolically complex, is not the poem. Neither is the poem a myth.

The poem is the complex work of a poet who was surely responsive to tradition but who also amplified the traditional elements. "Characteristically," Larry Benson
points out, "the eighth-century poet depended on his source only for a bare kernel of traditional narrative fact . . . which he then expanded for his own poetic ends. . . ." The excellence of *Beowulf* partly lies in the ingenious way in which the poet combined the essential elements of the rich mythic tradition of his culture with its historical and Christian components in order to convey a theme which cannot fail to touch the human mind and heart. Just as in myth it is the function of the sun-god to fight the monster, in heroic society it is the function of the sacral king (and his warriors) to protect his land and people by fighting the monster, whatever form it takes, and thus to preserve order in a chaotic world.

The combination of historical and mythic elements is not at all foreign to the traditional functions of the poet. Morton Bloomfield states, "One of the major functions of the scop was to be the historian of early traditions." He was supposed to "preserve in metrical form . . . the religious legends and early history, half historical, half mythical, of the community." As such, the poet had to be familiar with these traditions. Deor and Widsith, Bloomfield comments, "possess extensive historical and mythical information, not confined to Anglo-Saxon lore." Another example is the scop mentioned in Altfred's life of St.
Liudger, who "sang of the acts of the ancients and the rivalries of kings." This is what the Beowulf poet does.

If the function of the Anglo-Saxon scop is primarily that of historian and preserver of tradition, one might well wonder why most of the historical matter in the poem seems to be at its edges and not at its center. The relationship between the historical passages and the central narrative has been so problematic that they have been called "digressions." Alistair Campbell says that "the Beowulf poet . . . gave the Germanic heroic legend, which he had rejected as a source for his main plot, a considerable part in his poem by means of background and episode." Perhaps the poet did not so much reject the heroic stories as perceive them to be historical illustrations of the universal truth of human existence as revealed by the mythic pattern which provides the "deep structure" for his main plot. As earthly repetitions of the cosmic pattern, the historical elements would logically be subsidiary to the pattern in one sense and at the same time part of it. As Campbell notes, the poet is obviously using heroic lays as sources for the passages on Breca, Finn, Hygelac, Ongentheow, Onela, Ingeld and Offa, and Sigmund. Campbell further argues for the cyclic nature of these lays in Germanic heroic legendary tradition. If he is right, the cyclic nature of the historical legends would have been even
more clearly seen by the *Beowulf* poet as reflections of the cyclic nature of all existence.

An understanding of the way in which history and myth are interwoven in the poem is enhanced by consideration of the theory of history proposed by Mircea Eliade. Traditional man, Eliade explains, views history as cyclic, a temporal period with a beginning and an end. At the juncture between end and beginning is conflict, which is necessary for regeneration. Eliade notes that this "periodic regeneration of time . . . presupposes, in more or less explicit form--and especially in the historical civilizations--a new Creation, that is, a repetition of the cosmogonic act." In other words, human history is symbolically abolished at the instant of regeneration. For example, in the passage from the old to the New Year "there is a repetition of the mythical moment of the passage from chaos to cosmos," from dissolution to re-creation. "The cosmogonic moment of the fight between the god and the primordial dragon," Eliade suggests, is a paradigm of this ending of existing forms "in order to make room for the birth of a new form. . . ." This mythical combat is thus related to the passing from one world into another, from the old into the new year.

Such passage into a death-state is unavoidable. Eliade explains:
The death of the individual and the death of humanity are alike necessary for their regeneration. Any form whatever, by the mere fact that it exists as such and endures, necessarily loses vigor and becomes worn; to recover vigor it must be reabsorbed into the formless if only for an instant; it must be restored to the primordial unity from which it issued; in other words, it must return to "chaos.". . . 12

This conception of history guides the Beowulf poet's handling of historical events and helps to explain why they are interwoven with the mythical level of meaning. For him, and for his audience, history was not arbitrary. Whether it "was governed by the movements of the heavenly bodies or purely and simply by the cosmic process, . . . whether, again, it was subject to the will of God, . . . the result was the same." Everything that happened was necessary.13 Perhaps the poet had seen that, even with the advent of his new religion, the pattern of existence continued to appear as it had always done, controlled by a cycle which included destruction and death as well as creation and life. As Eliade points out, Christianity did translate "the periodic regeneration of the world into a regeneration of the human individual."14 Nevertheless, in the world of time, the
individual, pagan or Christian, must die, a fact which the
Beowulf poet seems supremely aware of.

The significant relationship between myth and history
is also explained by Eliade. "The historical event in
itself," he says, "however important, does not remain in the
popular memory, nor does its recollection kindle the poetic
imagination save insofar as the particular historical event
closely approaches a mythical model." Thus, the Beowulf
poet's juxtaposition of historical events which were in some
way analogous to the mythical main story may have served to
rekindle the memory of the historical and legendary so
important to Anglo-Saxon culture. By hearing these stories
interlaced into the main plot which held so much mythic
significance, the audience may well have shared the
imaginative insight of the Beowulf poet. In addition, the
"real" stories would acquire greater significance. As
Eliade suggests, the myth makes "the real story yield a
deeper and richer meaning. . . ." By association with the
mythic, archetypal pattern, the individual and historical
stories must have acquired a higher significance as
repetitions of the archetypal pattern. Considering the
poet's use of the historical materials as repetitions of a
paradigm which reflected the nature of existence, these
materials must be viewed as essential elements in the poem.
The historical allusions and stories, therefore, can hardly be called digressions.

Structure and theme, then, reflect the cyclic nature of existence. These elements refute Irving's contention that Beowulf contains "no cyclic or recurring reenactment of significant events, so important in myth properly defined. . . ." Irving argues that "The historical nature of the events and characters in itself takes the story out of any cyclic pattern."17 This statement can as easily be refuted by the common-sense realization that history repeats itself as by an examination of the textual elements of the poem. In any case, the purpose here is not to say that Beowulf is myth. It is a poem, crafted by a poet who was aware of the shape and meaning of the myth and who clearly perceived its deepest implications and its intimate relationship to the history and religion of his culture.

The rich complexity of the meaning of Beowulf is the product of this careful interweaving of complementary levels of narrative and thematic development. On the historical level, the theme is surely the death of peoples, especially the Geatish people, and of their leaders. On the Christian level, the theme is quite possibly the inevitable end of man in time and the futility of his actions in this world. On the mythic level the theme of shining order versus dark chaos, creation versus dissolution is easily discernible.
In all these, the common thread of cyclic movement is easily seen. From both the Christian and mythological vantage points, resurrection and rebirth are not only possible but necessary.

The cyclical nature of the history of peoples echoes this same pattern of death and rebirth. The poem begins with the leaderless Scyldings and ends with the leaderless Geats. Just as Scyld came out of nowhere to save the Danish people, Beowulf comes from across the sea to save them again in the next downward cycle of their history. In spite of these efforts, the poet is careful to foretell their destruction, just as the destruction of the Geats inevitably follows the long period of Beowulf's reign during which they were unchallenged. A succession of peoples follows the invariable pattern of rising and falling, creating order and returning to chaos. Within this historical cycle, the poet shows the rise and fall of individuals—of Scyld, Hrothgar, Hygelac, Onela, Ongentheow—and, most conspicuously, Beowulf the ideal warrior and king.

The character of Beowulf, then, serves as a paradigm, an exemplary model, on all three levels. On the historical level, he is indeed an ideal Germanic warrior, brave and furious in battle, unmindful of his death. As the model sacral king, he sacrifices himself in order to save his people. From a Christian perspective, he is a Christ-like
figure, the "mildest and gentlest of men, kindest to people." Like the Christian God, he is "most eager for praise." Beowulf's functions on the historical and Christian levels seem to be contradictory; on the face of it the fury-filled warrior has little to do with the "manna mildust". These two types, however, unite in reference to Beowulf's mythological role as dragon-slayer, the archetypal figure of the god who must die in order to defeat chaos and usher in the ordering, creating phase. Eliade states, "Insofar as he repeats the archetypal sacrifice, the sacrificer, in full ceremonial action, abandons the profane world of mortals and introduces himself into the divine world of the immortals." On all three levels, Beowulf sacrifices himself: as sacral king, as a type of Christ, and as the dying god-like hero. Furthermore, sacrifice is "an archetypal gesture," and "any repetition of an archetypal gesture, suspends duration, abolishes profane time, and participates in mythical time." In Beowulf's death, therefore, history is momentarily suspended. Time stands still and the audience has an intimation of mythical time.

Because of the overlay of the Christian, historical, and mythic levels, categorically defining the meaning of the end of Beowulf is virtually impossible. By ignoring selected facts, it is of course possible to "prove" that Beowulf's death is symbolic of the tragic end of a people,
that it is symbolic of the inevitable return of chaos, or even that it is a symbolic victory in the Christian sense. Such exclusive selection seems not only to betray a lack of intellectual energy but also to deny the poem its rich complexity. It is only by comprehending the careful interweaving of Christian, historical, and mythic elements and their implications that an understanding of the poem's complete meaning may be reached. From this vantage point, Beowulf's death has many meanings.

The poem seems to end on a note of ambiguity. Although Beowulf is supposed to be joining his God, the tone is elegaic. All readers, Christian and non-Christian alike, surely respond with the same sadness the Christian poet expresses at Beowulf's passing.\textsuperscript{20} Beowulf is dead, and although Wiglaf lives, "\textit{endelaf Ùsses cynnes, / Wægmundinga}" (2813-2814a), he is no Beowulf. In spite of what some critics try to make of this "War-leftover," the poem ends with a world seemingly empty of heroes. Chaos returns because that is how life is. Even so, this is not to say that there will never be another hero. Surely the listener or reader will remember that the poem begins with a hero, Scyld Sceafing, who arrives out of nowhere. In this memory lies the possibility, even the inevitability, of another return of the archetypal hero. Because of the cyclical nature of existence, by definition this hero must
die, as all men must and even gods do, to be replaced by other heroes, other men, and other manifestations of the dying god.

It is a mistake to see the ending as solely mythological, as the death of a dying god. This view would wrongly deny the individual and historical/heroic aspects of the characterization of Beowulf. W. P. Ker contends that "The characters in Beowulf are not much more than types." They are in fact "archetypes" in the pre-Jungian sense of "exemplary model" or "paradigm." In this way they become much more than individual characters could be, however fully drawn. William Righter complains that one of the presuppositions "that give substance to the uses of myth . . . is that character has ceased to matter." This is simply not so. The individuals in a piece of literature do not cease to affect the reader just because they have mythic overtones. Nor did the Beowulf poet intend Beowulf the man, the ideal warrior, to be less important than Beowulf the god-like hero. On the contrary, he ends his poem with the Geatish people, Beowulf's hearth-companions, lamenting the death of their leader's fall:

\[\text{cwædon pæt hē wære wyruldcyning[a]}\]
\[\text{manna mildust ond mon(Ōw)ærust,}\]
\[\text{lēodum līðost ond lofgeornost.} \ (3180-82)\]
Whatever allusions these words contain to the Christ figure, certainly they elicit sadness, not because a god has died or because the death of this king portends the loss of an entire people, but rather because a man more worthy than most has died. The reader, like the Geats, mourns for Beowulf the man. Quite possibly grief for the death of all people may have something to do with the reader's depth of feeling at the end of Beowulf. But most of all, like Gerard Manley Hopkin's Margaret, the reader grieves at the reflection of his own mortality.

For the modern reader who has been conditioned by the twentieth-century world view, this kind of seemingly ambiguous, open ending is undoubtedly powerful and symbolic of man's ultimate inability to know. For the Anglo-Saxon poet and his audience, however, this ending possibly meant something quite different. Jeffrey Helterman may be correct in his belief that "The movement of Beowulf becomes a dialectic between the Mediterranean (Christian) and Norse Mythologies." But it is difficult to agree with his conclusion that the triumph of the hero represents the triumph of Christian mythology, which is essentially based on the Pagan Mediterranean mythology stressing rebirth. The ending does not seem to reveal such a satisfactorily clear conclusion. After all, even on a mythological level
the hero dies in the killing of his monster, just as Thor and the serpent destroy each other at Ragnarok.

This is not to say that the poet has purposefully created an ambiguous ending. If there is any such ambiguity at all, it may reside in human certainty of death versus uncertainty of renewal and regeneration. The poet's intention is rather to dramatize his realization of the cyclic nature of human existence. On the historical, individual level, Beowulf the man is as dead as Hygelac and Ongentheow. The Beowulf poet could, after all, perceive the cyclical pattern not only in the continuous rise and fall of peoples in his historical environment but also in the advent of a new religion which included recurring characters and themes familiar to him from the pre-Christian religion which had held sway much longer than Christianity and was still very much alive. It seems, then, that he clearly structured his poem to reflect the cyclical nature of all human existence, which has both positive and negative implications. The interlacing of Christian, historical and mythic elements suggests the impossibility of extricating the individual and collective historical manifestations from the cosmic imperative of this cycle. The poet perhaps saw in the ancient myths which permeated his cultural traditions the basis and meaning of all human existence.
Notes


3 Peter Lum, *Fabulous Beasts* (New York: Pantheon, 1951) 96-97.

4 Larry Benson, "The Originality of Beowulf," *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*, Harvard English Studies, I. ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970) 7. Benson believes that the "Sandhaugr episode" in the *Grettis saga* is the one identifiable source; it provided the "tale of a hero who meets and defeats two monsters, of opposite sex, one a hall-hunting monster, the other a water-dwelling monster" 30. Everything else in the main plot of the poem, including the dragon episode, can be attributed to the originality of the poet.


8 Alistair Campbell 289. See this article for a detailed discussion of the way these lays are used in the poem.


17 Irving, *Reading* 86. Irving withdraws somewhat from this indefensible position just one page later, where he admits that "the poem may include certain cyclic aspects."


20 See Charles Moorman, "The Essential Paganism of Beowulf," *MLQ* 28 (1967): 4, for a revealing comparison of...
the closing passages of *Judith* and *Andreas*, which reflect a strong Christian assurance in death, and the end of *Beowulf*, which does not express so strong an assurance.


CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

After having gained so much inspiration and information from Robert Graves' academically formidable and emotionally charged study of The White Goddess, I must respectfully challenge his judgment that Beowulf is not true poetry. This death sentence is based on his observation that "The Anglo-Saxons had no sacrosanct master-poets, but only gleemen..." and thus were faithless to the single grand mythic theme.  

In the first place, the investigation conducted in this study has demonstrated that the Beowulf poet was much concerned with this theme. Secondly, there is evidence that Anglo-Saxon poets were indeed sacrosanct in the sense of being considered sacred and holy. If the purpose of reciting traditional myths is to transfer "knowledge of the world and life from those who have it to those who do not," the poet's function is definitely religious. Morton W. Bloomfield applies the following definition of early bards to the Beowulf poet: "The bards... were the authors of each new nation's holy book, the repositories of the highest truths in which men believed, and they were revered for their priesthood." Beowulf serves as such a repository. The ancient myth which
reveals these truths is the same myth which informs the
characters, plot, structure, and theme of Beowulf. The
symbols, themes and motifs also resonate with allusions to
the single grand cycle of life and death. Thus, the mythic
sub-structure or layer of meaning not only enriches the
narrative but, in its universality and antiquity, lends an
extraordinary power of attraction. The pull of this myth,
reverberating down the ages and into the far reaches of the
Indo-European world, may be one key to answering the old
question of why Beowulf continues to affect twentieth-
century readers whose world is so seemingly different from
that of the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon audience.

The conclusions drawn here have ramifications
particularly for the study of formulaic elements.
Certainly, it should be clear that themes in traditional
poetry are probably never exclusively ornamental, whether or
not they advance the main action.\textsuperscript{4} In any case, at least
some themes are connotatively complex and contribute to
thematic development as well as enhance the narrative and
dramatic aspects of a poem. It is also obvious that the
function of a particular theme or type-scene cannot be fully
appreciated without a knowledge of its provenance. As has
been shown, Indo-European myth is a promising source of
information regarding the origins of these elements.
This paper hardly exhausts the discussion of the function of mythic elements and their relationship to structure and theme. These findings are only suggestive of the fruitfulness of a study of Indo-European comparative mythology and comparative literature. Such a study may yield more answers to still unsolved questions concerning motifs in *Beowulf*. For example, F. H. Whitman has isolated the motif of corrosive blood of monsters. He admits that the origin of this motif is unclear and that "there is no reason to think that it is peculiarly Germanic." Another motif is that of feast followed by sleep. It is quite possible that the origin of at least some of these motifs may exist within the body of Indo-European mythic tradition. The discovery of the origins of these formulaic elements must of course be accompanied by an interpretation of their function in the poetry.

Other motifs already apparent in Indo-European myth and *Beowulf* beg to be interpreted. One such example is the mother-son motif, which has its origins in the myth of the moon/earth goddess and her son and which appears frequently in *Beowulf*, especially in the characterizations of Grendel and his mother and Wealhtheow and her sons. The motif of the aging king, also known as the lame king or fisher king in ritual sources, also bears closer scrutiny; its appearance in *Beowulf* has not been fully explained.
There is also work to be done in attempting to identify
and explain the use of the Indo-European mythic tradition in
non-narrative Old English poetry. The mythic elements, at
least the themes and type-scenes, discussed in this study
seem to have found their way into Beowulf via the tradition
underlying the oral-formulaic method of composition.
Nevertheless, even poems which are not the product of oral
composition were created by authors who undoubtedly were
familiar with the pre-Christian traditions surviving in
Anglo-Saxon culture. In any case, critics such as Larry
Benson, Arthur C. Brodeur, and Robert D. Stevick have
established that lettered poets did use formulaic style.\textsuperscript{7}
The elegaic poems, for example, seem to be particularly
fertile ground for interpretation and elucidation from a
mythological point of view. Such studies are important
because uncertainty concerning the full implications for
poet and audience of certain words, phrases and larger
elements (including plot, character, and structure)
undeniably hinders an understanding of Old English poetry.

A fully developed system of mythological elements would
also be valuable. This could perhaps be done by comparing
Beowulf with other Old English poetry in the same way as has
been done for verbal formulas. It would undoubtedly be
fruitful to extend such an investigation to Indo-European
literature, and chances are that an examination of
literatures outside the Indo-European tradition would have rewarding results. The creation of such an organized system of mythic elements could only be accomplished by drawing on the findings of fields as diverse as history, archaeology, anthropology, comparative religion and, more specifically, Indo-European studies. Such collaboration might even bring forth answers to superficially non-literary questions. For instance, it might be possible to describe with greater certainty the extent to which common European or even world elements exist in the pre-Christian religion of Anglo-Saxon England.

Before any significant headway can be made towards a complete understanding of the relationship of myth to Old English poetry (as well as to Indo-European poetry), Beowulf scholars must be open-minded. They need to be able to forgive the excesses of genuine attempts to elucidate the poem through a comparison with myth and to benefit from the real, though small, discoveries. It seems inevitable that such open-mindedness, coupled with collaboration with scholars in other related fields, will one day produce another critical commonplace. It will be generally accepted that the mythic elements of Beowulf provide a basic, timeless level of meaning, possibly apprehended at times only subconsciously, and yet undoubtedly related to the
historical/individual and Christian levels of meaning in a
fundamental way.

William Righter, whose rigorous comments on the
problems inherent in myth criticism exerted a much-needed
corrective force on this study, states: "Through myth
criticism a certain kind of romantic sensibility has
endeavored to find its voice."⁸ I cannot disclaim a
romantic sensibility. Even if Righter's assumption
concerning the sensibilities of myth critics is correct, the
contents of this paper perhaps show that there is a place in
Beowulf criticism for romanticism, as long as it is grounded
in a careful consideration of fact.
Notes


4 Robert E. Diamond, "Theme as Ornament in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," PMLA 76 (1961): 461-68, argues that themes in traditional poetry do not contribute to the advancement of the main action and are therefore essentially ornamental.


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