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ÞÆT WÆS GOD CYNING: READING 'HROTHGAR'S SERMON' AS AN AUGUSTINE-INSPIRED SPECULUM PRINCIPUM

The very concept of monarchy as a political institution whose principal foundations are righteousness, law and order is in its conceptual as well as practical sense a thoroughly male-dominated construction. Notwithstanding some clearly discernible differences with regard to the continuously evolving roles and responsibilities of kings – ancient, medieval or modern – it has, as a matter of fact, provided scholars with some of the most absorbing and multifaceted models of masculinity since the dawn of mankind. Over the centuries, royal sovereigns have performed the multiple functions of father-like figures, moral mentors, spiritual anchors, artistic patrons and, last but not least, military leaders who in times of both war and peace dutifully served their subjects, using their prerogatives for the realisation of the common good[1]. Needless to say, even today, when the natural male-female dichotomy is being more and more often challenged, most of the aforesaid roles remain almost exclusively within the realm of traditional male responsibilities determined by a variety of biological, psychological and cultural factors.

In northern Europe[2], where the numerous communal habits and practices of late-tribal societies seem to have lingered longer than in the south, the notion of

[1] There are obviously many, often truly horrendous, exceptions to this model of masculine leadership. However, since the present paper focuses primarily upon the *gode*, not *yfele cyningas*, it seems fitting to lay more emphasis – even at this early stage of writing – to those features that are generally regarded as laudable.

[2] Here, the term is used merely to distinguish the realms of predominantly Germanic customs and clan ethics from the far more Latinate culture of Europe's south-western territories.

kingship (or some other form of paternal overlordship) was relatively egalitarian, based on the mutual, though at that time still obviously unwritten, contract between the lord and his people. This may already be seen in the works of ancient historians. According to Tacitus, for the inhabitants of north-central Europe in the first century AD, *nec regibus infinita ac libera potestas* (*Germania* VII) "the power of kings is neither unlimited nor arbitrary" and might therefore be subject to some sort of judicial review of those who appoint them or legitimise their authority. The mutual dependence that must have naturally evolved between the lord and his men would gradually become a kind of emotional bond (in certain cases perhaps also a calculated and profit-orientated union) in which the generous sovereign would regularly provide his faithful followers with the gifts of rings, horses, swords and other items of personal war-gear.[3] It should be noted, however, that, regardless of the evident temporal remoteness between the writing of Tacitus' *Germania* (around 98 AD) and the composition of *Beowulf* (see below), the concept(s) of loyalty inevitably affected both sides with more or less equal proportions. Near suicidal obedience may have been tacitly expected in some particular cases, but in the long run it would be acutely counterproductive to assume that entire legions of free men would willingly sacrifice their lives solely for the sake of their lord's military reputation[4]. On the other side of the coin, the kings would also be expected to know their own, especially physical limitations as well as the numerous responsibilities they owed to the people they ruled. What was needed, then, was a certain roughly definable degree of moderation which was all too often lacking in most Germanic heroes, legendary as well as historical, from fame-thirsty ealdorman Byrhtnoth of *The Battle of Maldon* (late tenth c.) to gold-loving Sigurd in *The Saga of the Volsungs* (late thirteenth c.). It also appears to be fatally insufficient in the character of Beowulf, the renowned Geatish warrior who came to be immortalised by the anonymous Anglo-Saxon poet[5].

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[3] Numerous references – sometimes very detailed – to the custom of gift-giving in the early medieval world are to be found in many a text of Germanic provenance or association, perhaps most notably in Tacitus' *Germania* (chapter XIV), *Beowulf* (e.g. 1019–61, 2144–2196) and *The Battle of Maldon* (188). For more information on the munificence of the lords in Old English literature, see, for instance, D.H. Green, *Language and History in the Early Germanic World*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 67–8 and K. O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Heroic Values and Christian Ethics*, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. By M. Godden, M. Lapidge, Cambridge 1998, pp. 107–125.

[4] Some interesting remarks concerning the unwavering commitment of the *comitatus* in various literary works of particularly – though not exclusively – early medieval provenance may be found in Roberta Frank's excellent chapter on the heroic dimensions of *The Battle of Maldon and Heroic Literature*, [in:] *The Battle of Maldon AD 991*, ed. by D. Scragg, Oxford 1991, pp. 196–207.

[5] Here and elsewhere, the expressions such as "the anonymous poet" or "the *Beowulf* poet" are used to denote the assumed author(s) of the poem, particularly with regard to the later (post-oral) stages of its composition.

Originally compiled probably in the eighth or early ninth century[6], the epic poem which came to be known as *Beowulf* offers a fascinating, though at the time of its ultimate composition noticeably antiquarian, insight into the complex world of political and personal ambitions in early medieval Scandinavia, the ancestral homeland of the Angles as well as the Jutes. Regardless of the three monster-slaying episodes that constitute its narrative backbone and, unsurprisingly, attract much of the attention of modern readers, the gripping tale of *Higelaces mæg* (*Beowulf* 407-8) "Hygelac's kinsman" who ultimately becomes the king of Geatland is filled with various references and allusions to the idea and practical realisation of the concept of kingship. The Beowulfian kings may be praised for their wisdom and foresight, munificence and hospitality[7]. They are extolled for their great deeds of valour and prowess[8], thanks to which they can continuously revive their reputation[9] and provide gifts for their faithful subjects[10]. Finally, characters like Hrothgar and Hygelac, the semi-historical kings of, respectively, the Danes and the Geats[11], are also celebrated for their non-military exploits such as erecting a large and splendid hall (Hrothgar's Heorot)[12] or marrying a wise and beautiful woman (Hrothgar's wife Wealhtheow)[13].

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[6] The poem's dating has been a matter of much academic dispute ever since it was originally published in 1815 by the Icelandic-Danish scholar Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin. Cf., for instance, Colin Chase's examination in *Opinions on the Date of Beowulf, 1815–1980*, [in:] *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. by C. Chase, Toronto 1986, pp. 3–8 and, especially the recently published book *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. by L. Neidorf, Cambridge 2014.

[7] Many a kind word of Hrothgar's thoughtfulness and generosity may be heard from Beowulf's own lips when the Geatish warrior recounts the events of his heroic exploits at Hygelac's court (1999–2151).

[8] *Hwæt we Gar-Dena in gear-dagum þeod-cyninga þrym gefrunon, hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon* (1–3) "Lo, we have heard tell of the glory of the kings of the people of the Spear-Danes, how those princes accomplished deeds of valour".

[9] *Him þæs Lif-frea, wuldres Wealend, worold-are forgeaf* (16–17) "To him the Lord of Life, the Heavenly Ruler granted honour in this world".

[10] *Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean, fromum feoh-giftum on fæder bearme, þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen wil-gesiþas, þonne wig cume, leode gelæsten* (20–24) "In this way a young man shall, through good deeds and splendid gifts – while still in the house of his father – make sure that afterwards, when he grows old, his dear companions will stand by him and serve him in time of war".

[11] The Geats were a North Germanic tribe or federation of tribes, first referred to in Ptolemy's *Geography*, whose memory survived in several works of especially early medieval literature including, amongst others, the Old English poems *Beowulf* and *Widsith*. For more information on the Geats see, the somewhat dated but still relevant book by J.A. Leake, *The Geats of Beowulf. A Study in the Geographical Mythology of the Middle Ages. Madison*, Milwaukee and London, 1967.

[12] *Him on mod bearnþæt healreced hatan wolde, medoærn micel, men gewyrceanþonne yldo bearn æfre gefrunon* (67–70) "It came into his [i.e. Hrothgar's] mind that he should construct a building, a mightier mead-hall than the children of men had ever known".

[13] Most importantly, perhaps, Hrothgar's wife also plays the role of a *friðusibb folca* (2017) "peace-pledge between the nations".

It appears, however, that as far as kingship is concerned, by far the most important passage in the poem is Hrothgar's *gid* (1723) "tale" (1700–1887), the moralising, homiletic-like (and so usually referred to as "sermon"[14]) speech where the suddenly reflective monarch warns his young benefactor of the many pitfalls of pride and fame, perhaps best understood as the unrestrained drive for earthly reputation which, as was the case with the Danish king Heremod[15], might often lead to one's exile and ultimate downfall. Despite its 'here-and-now' allusion to Beowulf's military exploits, Hrothgar's speech is in point of fact a Christian-coloured and highly universal, all-enveloping call to ponder on the sense of ethical commitment in every human being, heroes and kings included. Most importantly, however, it deals with the unrelenting transience of our earthly existence and the futility of the accomplishments that may have once seemed to be of prime importance in the world of early Germanic values (wealth, earthly power, prestige), but in the light of particularly Christian concept of afterlife they are indeed less than marginal and of practically no eternal consequence.

Hrothgar begins his speech with some words of lavish praise for the young Geatish warrior, a genuine *captatio benevolentiae* through which he attempts to bring his guest and benefactor to a more reflective mood. First he acknowledges Beowulf's widespread and, obviously, hard-earned reputation[16], then he enumerates some of the most distinctive and commendable attributes of his people's benefactor[17]. Having said that, Hrothgar turns to the aforementioned account of Heremod's wickedness and downfall (1709–1722), the moral foil to his emotional discourse. Perhaps to intensify the strength of his argument, this brief but captivating piece of ancient Germanic lore is instantly followed by a truly Christian oration in which the Danish king expresses his endless admiration for the righteous and just ways of the Almighty, how He *on lufan læteð hworfan monnes mod-geþonc mæran cynnes, seleð him on eþle eorþan wynne to healdanne, hleo-burh wera* (1728–1732) "allows the thoughts of the heart of the man of distinguished birth to follow its bent, grants him joys on this earth and a protective stronghold". Hrothgar then warns his valiant guest against the numerous downsides of worldly prosperity[18]

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[14] Cf., especially, E.T. Hansen, *Hrothgar's 'Sermon' in Beowulf as Parental Wisdom*, "Anglo-Saxon England" 10 (1981), pp. 53–67. The term "Hrothgar's sermon" is now widely used in *Beowulf* scholarship.

[15] Heremod was a legendary king of the Danes who, according to the *Beowulf* poet, was banished for the *wælfealle ond* [...] *deaðcwalum* (1711–2) "death and destruction" he brought to his own people.

[16] *Blæd is aræred geond wid-wegas, wine min Beowulf, ðin ofer þeoda gehwylce* (1703–5) "Your glory is extolled far and wide, my friend Beowulf, over each nation".

[17] *Eal þu hit geþyldum healdest, mægen mid modes snyttrum* (1705–6) "You hold it all with patience and prudence of mind".

[18] *Bebeorh þe ðone bealo-nið, Beowulf leofa, secg betsta, ond þe þæt selre geceos, ece rædas* (1758–60) "Beware of this grievous affliction, dear Beowulf, the best of warriors, and choose the better reward, the eternal gains".

and arrogance[19], the menacing curse of many an earthly ruler. Finally, he caps his speech with a relation of his own long reign[20], concluding with an invitation to the feast and a promise of royal munificence.

It would be incorrect, of course, to interpret the words of Hrothgar as a confirmation of the vices and weaknesses in his own or his guest's character. What appears to cut through his emotional but sombre rhetoric is an authentic concern for the Geatish hero, the wish to somehow avert the hubristic tendencies in Beowulf, which, in some measure, evince themselves in the young man's longing for recognition and excessive concern for praise, as was evidently the case with his swimming match with Breca (506–606), and the preventable, though in the long run unintentionally advantageous, magnanimity that made him face the man-eating ogre Grendel unprotected and with bare hands (677–687). As may be expected, Beowulf listens patiently, knowing well that for a strong-minded and ambitious man like him there is no better guidance than the wisdom of an aging king. It appears, though, that despite Hrothgar's explicit warning that arrogance often *weaxeð ond wridað* (1741) "grows and flourishes" utterly unnoticed, the future ruler of the Geats ultimately fails to remember one of his principal duties as a king when, several years later, he refuses to be aided in his duel with the fire-breathing dragon (2510–2537) and in this way needlessly exposes his people to a serious risk of being deprived of a strong and, above all, experienced leader[21].

All this leads to unavoidable speculation on whether the said passage or, perhaps, its later revision, was thought of as some sort of an instruction – perhaps in the mould of Carolingian *specula principum*[22] – for the prospective rulers who, by identifying themselves with the legendary kings of the past, could more or less consciously profit from the few but unfortunately consequence-laden errors of

[19] *Ofer-hyda ne gym* (1760) "Pay no attention to pride".

[20] Although Hrothgar assures Beowulf that he has ruled his kingdom justly for fifty years, he does not hide the fact that, being at the peak of his earthly power, he, erroneously, *ænigne under swegles begong gesacan ne tealde* (1772–3) "came to believe he had no longer any foes under the sky".

[21] Before he faces the *lig-draca* (2333) "fire-dragon" in what turns out to be his ultimate battle, Beowulf boldly declares that it is solely his responsibility *þæt he wið aglæcean eofoðo dæle* (2534) "that he should match his strength with the terrible fiend".

[22] The *speculum principum*, or 'mirror for princes' is a literary genre, popular especially in the Middle Ages, whose aim was to provide sons of kings or some lesser rulers with more or less direct instructions on how to rule the country. Despite the fact that they sometimes differed considerably with regard to their compositional and stylistic qualities, the *specula* usually featured the characters of two monarchs, the successful one and the indolent one, to serve as images for, respectively, imitation and avoidance. For more information on the origins and development of the genre, see, for instance, J.P. Genet, *L'évolution du genre des miroirs des princes en Occident au Moyen Âge, Religion et mentalités au Moyen Âge. Mélanges en l'honeur d'Hervé Martin*, ed. by S. Cassagnes-Brouquet et al., Rennes 2003, pp. 531–541 and W. Fałkowski., *Karolińskie zwierciadło władcy – powstanie gatunku*, [in:] *Europa barbarica, Europa christiana. Studia mediaevalia Carolo Modzelewski dedicata*, ed. by R. Michałowski et al., Warszawa 2008, pp. 59–74.

Beowulf. The poem's distinct lack of generic integrity, with its shifts in emphasis and not infrequent inclusion of various illustrative digressions, suggests a longer course of composition – almost certainly involving a number of successive *scopas*, some of them probably adding, deleting and reimagining individual episodes and asides – prior to its being ultimately recorded in what came to be known as the Nowell Codex (late tenth or early eleventh c.), the only manuscript that contains the epic tale of the Geatish hero. One of the last, if not the last, links in the chain of *Beowulf*'s compositional history may have been some antiquarian-minded scribe who not only deemed *Hinieldus* (or, rather, his Geatish counterpart) a legitimate literary hero that, at least potentially, had something to do *cum Christo*[23], but also, decided to use (part of) the narrative to promote his own didactic message. Of course the odds that the above hypothesis could ever be verified as accurate (or even partially accurate) are very slim, yet there seems to be no reason why it should be excluded from the poem's hermeneutical scope, especially since its plausibility is believed to rest upon relatively good cultural-historical foundations.

The idea that in its post-oral stage the epic poem of *Beowulf* may have been once intended – in part rather than as a whole – as a quasi-didactic textbook to be read in some royal or princely milieu has over the years been explored by a number of scholars. Of particular interest here are the notes of John Earle in *The Deeds of Beowulf*[24] and the article by Levin L. Schücking "Das Königsideal im *Beowulf*" which first appeared in 1929 in the annual *Bulletin of the Modern Humanities Research Association*[25]. Both texts point especially to the idealistic and somewhat unfeasible components of the heathen warrior ethos, which may have been a result of the poet's wish to illustrate and perhaps even accentuate the most significant principles of leadership in pre- or early Christian societies. Not surprisingly, some of these views were further elaborated on in the works of later scholars including J.M. Wallace-Hadrill[26] and, especially, Scott Gwara[27], the latter of whom differs from Schücking in that he, for instance, reads Hrothgar's "sermon" as an exploration – rather than a wide-ranging affirmation – of the ideal Christian kingship (34ff.).

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[23] The above-quoted words obviously come from the famous remonstrance of Alcuin, *quid Hinieldus cum Christo* "What has Ingeld to do with Christ" (itself probably an imitation of 2 Corinthians 6:15), by means of which the Anglo-Saxon scholar evidently tried to express his reservation about the widespread interest of his contemporaries in heroic poetry, often at the expense of the Word of God.

[24] J. Earle, *The Deeds of Beowulf: An English Epic of the Eight Century Done into Modern Prose*, Oxford 1892.

[25] L.L. Schücking, *'Das Königsideal im Beowulf'*, "Bulletin of the Modern Humanities Research Assocition" (1929), pp. 143–154.

[26] J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*, *The Ford Lectures delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary Term 1970*, Oxford 1971.

[27] S. Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf*, Leiden, Boston 2008.

In addition to that, there has also been much scholarly interest in the general patristic as well as homiletic influence on the poem, some of which is succinctly summarised in Andy Orchard's *A Critical Companion toBeowulf*[28]. Amongst these are, for instance, the works of Thomas D. Hill, who has frequently argued in favour of the wide-ranging impact of the writings of the Early Church Fathers on Old English poetry[29]. Several valuable arguments and observations could also be found in the works of Margaret E. Goldsmith, particularly in her book *The Mode and Meaning ofBeowulf*[30], where she tries to attribute some of the Christian-related themes in the earliest English verse to the influence – both direct and indirect – of Latin patristic and homiletic texts.

Yet, regardless of the actual sources for Hrothgar's words and the place where the poem was given its final shape, it is, I believe, possible to look at the crux of the said 'sermon' through the prism of the works which are said to have inspired the composition of some of the earliest known *specula*, such as the indubitable cornerstone of all Christian philosophy, Saint Augustine's *De civitate Dei* "The City of God" (early fifth c.). It may or may not have been known to the *Beowulf* poet, but, given the fact that the teachings of the bishop of Hippo Regius (354–430) were exceptionally popular and, in one way or another, continued to live (with some minor alterations and additions) in the works of Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), Hincmar of Rheims (806-82) and other leading theologians of the early Middle Ages, there is much possibility that at least some of the essence of Augustinian rhetoric could somehow find its way into the Anglo-Saxon poem[31]. We shall therefore consider some of the most significant ideas contained in *The City of God* which directly pertain to the subject of kingship and weigh them against the pertinent words of Hrothgar.

In book V of his work, Saint Augustine argues that genuine happiness could only be attained by those who *iuste imperant* (chapter 24) "rule justly" and *inter linguas sublimiter honorantium et obsequia nimis humiliter salutantium non extolluntur* (chapter 24) "are not inspired by the praises of those who pay them sublime honours and the obsequiousness of those who salute them with excessive

[28] A. Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 151–162.

[29] Th.D. Hill, *Two Notes on Patristic Allusion in Andreas*, "Anglia" 84 (1966), pp. 156–162; Idem., *The Christian Language and Theme of Beowulf*, [in:] *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. by H. Aertsen and R. Hendrik Bremmer, Amsterdam 1994, pp. 63–77.

[30] M.E. Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf*, London 2014 (originally published in 1970).

[31] Saint Augustine's works (including, of course, *De civitate Dei*) are known to have been widely read in the scholarly milieu of early medieval England. See, for instance, the attempts to reconstruct – through various inventories and references in the existing manuscripts – the catalogues of pre-Norman book collections in Michael Lapidge's book *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, Oxford 2008. Besides, as is observed by Marie Padgett Hamilton, Augustine's book was often quoted or referred to by a number of "Anglo-Latin writers from Aldhelm to Alcuin" (1946, p. 312).

humility". In other words, they are morally obliged *se homines esse meminerunt* (chapter 24) "to remember that they are human", not divine or in any way better than other mortals. This, of course, in large measure, runs counter to the final words of the *Beowulf* poet who maintains that in spite of Hrothgar's moral guidance, the much-lamented leader of the Geats continued to be *lofgeornost* (*Beowulf* 3182) "most eager for fame". Indeed, as observed by Roberta Frank, despite the fact that the expression was probably meant to be semantically harmonised with the other three Christian-flavoured superlatives that appear in the poem's last two lines (*mildust* "mildest", *mon-ðwærust* "kindest", *liðost* "gentlest"), it is otherwise found in Old English poetry "only in a bad sense meaning 'ostentatious, boastful'"[32].

It is doubtlessly for this reason, Beowulf's inner drive to confirm his enduring valour, that in the second part of the poem the then elderly[33] king decides to send away the eleven hearth-companions that have followed him on the way to the dragon's den prior to his ultimate combat with the untimely awakened dragon. He explicitly informs them that he *wylle* [...] *fæhðe secan* (*Beowulf* 2512–3) "wishes to seek the feud" with the fiery beast, so that he could in this way *mærðu fremman* (2514) "achieve renown". Hence, despite the fact that, at the same time, he rather pompously calls himself *frod folces weard* (2513) "old guardian of the people", Beowulf appears to be much more interested in solidifying his own reputation as a monster-slayer than in the long-term security and wellbeing of his own people, thus rather manifestly confirming that the erstwhile concerns of Hrothgar were regrettably not groundless. In other words, the aging king of the Geats fails to remember the fundamental principles of vertical loyalty (in this case his responsibility downwards), namely that the king should first and foremost protect his subjects.

The words of the aged Danish ruler thus seem to mirror those of Saint Augustine, who in *The City of God* maintains that what is first and foremost expected from the king is not his love of himself, but the love of his realm and the folk who inhabit it (chapter 24). The protagonist might, of course, be emphatically described as being *leodum liðost* (*Beowulf* 3182) "gentlest to [his] people", but it barely obscures the fact that his evident recklessness prior to the combat with the dragon[34] in effect deprives the Geats of their experienced, if obviously aging, leader with the effect that they end up living in relentless fear of what the future

[32] R. Frank, *Skaldic Verse and the Date of Beowulf*, [in:] *The Beowulf Reader*, ed. by P.S. Baker, New York and London 2000, p. 166. Likewise, its Old Norse equivalent *lofgjarn* may also be translated as "eager for praise or renown" (G.T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, Toronto 2004, p. 277).

[33] According to the majority of scholars, at the time of his death, after *fiftig wintra* (2733) "fifty winters" on the throne, the Geatish hero must have been at least seventy, seventy-five years old.

[34] Cf., for instance, some of Beowulf's final words before he goes on to face the dragon: *Nis þæt eower sið, ne gemet mannes, nefne min anes þæt he wið aglæcean eofoðo dæle, eorlscype*

might hold. Here the anxieties of the lamenting Geatish woman are perfectly clear – they *heregeongas hearde ondrede*[*n*] *wælfylla worn, werudes egesan, hynðo ond hæftnyd* (3153-5) "greatly feared the coming of foreign armies, masses of slaughter, terror of their foes, humiliation and captivity"[35]. The enormous significance of these words may be somewhat obscured by the obvious grandeur of Beowulf's funeral. Nonetheless, they are indisputably a deeply concerned voice of the suddenly leaderless people and, perhaps, the poet's skilfully disguised critique of the hero's excessive haughtiness, a renewed warning against the pitfalls of what Hrothgar refers to as *ofer-hygd* (1740) "pride, arrogance", perhaps best understood in terms of the Geat's unrestrained wish to excel.

The pursuit of earthly glory, against which Saint Augustine warns particularly in chapters 18–20[36], is of course a major flow of character in many a hero – Greek, Roman, Germanic, or other. Ostensibly irremediable (or so it often seems) elements of selfishness, egoism and vanity may be easily detected in numerous works that deal with the early medieval ideals of war, from Tacitus' *Germania*, where it appears to be camouflaged behind the warriors' wish *fortia facta gloriae* [*eum*, i.e. *principem*] *assignare* (XIV) "to attribute their glorious deeds to their lord's reputation", to *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Song of Roland* (late eleventh c.), where the poems' central characters, respectively, Æthelred's ealdorman and Charlemagne's paladin (after whom the latter poem is titled), choose to place their men at unnecessary risk in order not to stain their hitherto irreproachable military reputation with any suspicion of cowardice. With his decision to send the companions away, so that he could *mærðu fremman* (*Beowulf* 2514) "achieve renown", Beowulf demonstrates that his affiliation with the most famous heroes of early medieval lore is regrettably not limited to the poem's temporal dimensions, but, most importantly, evinces itself in the protagonist's nearly archetypal self-centredness and limited consideration for others. In other words, the Geatish king is more inclined to take delight in what Saint Augustine calls *gloria humanae* (*De civitate Dei*, book V, chapter 19) "human glory", which Beowulf – a "good heathen" though he may be – every now and then chooses to place above the only profound exaltation that, according to the bishop of Hippo Regius (and Hroth-

efne (2532–5) "Neither is it your undertaking, nor is it expected of any man but me to measure his strength against the monster, perform the warrior's deed".

[35] Her fears are not groundless, as the leaderless Geats are now bound to be drawn again into their long-standing conflict with the Swedes. Cf. the words of the unnamed messenger: *Þæt ys sio fæhðo ond se feondscipe, wæl-nið wera, ðæs ðe ic wen hafo, þe us seceað to Sweona leoda* (2999–3001) "That is the feud and the enmity, the mortal hatred between men, which I expect shall come to us from the Swedish people".

[36] Cf., for instance, *Et ideo virtutes habenti magna virtus est contemnere gloriam, quia contemptus eius in conspectu Dei est, iudicio autem non aperitur humano* (XIX) "And to him who possesses virtues, a great virtue it is to scorn glory, for the contempt of it is seen by God, though it may not be manifest to human judgement".

gar[37]), ought to be realised through one's pious deeds *propter vitam aeternam* (chapter 25) "for the sake of eternal life".

All this inevitably leads to the confrontation of two apparently irreconcilable conceptual models: the old pagan principles of "heroic ideal" and the far more restrained doctrines of Christianity (even if only implied rather than genuine in the character of Hrothgar). Being an exemplary warrior in the pre-Christian milieu of early medieval Scandinavia, Beowulf does not necessarily meet all the criteria commonly required from the somewhat later *reges iusti et probi* of Anglo-Saxon England. Despite the fact that the lacking qualities are dexterously supplied (often in abundance) by the anonymous poet, the Geatish hero is still, at best, only a wishful compromise between what the ninth- or tenth-century Anglo-Saxon audiences probably imagined as an archetypal warrior of the past and the ideal Christian ruler of the subsequent centuries[38]. Accordingly, the character of Beowulf turns out to be full of cultural peculiarities and paradoxes, as is evidently the case when, ironic as it may seem, the aging *folces weard* (*Beowulf* 2513) "guardian of the people" chooses to face the dragon solely on his own, and in this way exposes his people to the danger of being faced with what seems to be a looming breach of continuity in the royal line[39].

Yet another markedly homiletic feature, one which is particularly detectable in the words of Hrothgar and would have probably been lacking in the earlier, perhaps even pre-scriptural phases of the poem's existence, is the explicit and recurrent references to the Almighty God along with His purpose and intent for the worldly rulers. It cannot obviously be argued that the general character of the old king's rhetoric is by and large Christian. However, this evidently anachronistic aspect of the Anglo-Saxon epic is in all likelihood a result of its later colouring or even complete reworking which could only have been possible in the theologically-informed circles of early English kingdoms[40]. If such had really been the case, it seems quite improbable that the anonymous poet (or at least his presumably monastic brethren with whom he would doubtlessly sometimes converse on

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[37] Cf. the words of Hrothgar who advises Beowulf that, instead of being satisfied with the mundane pleasures and concerns, he *selre geceos*[*e*], *ece rædas* (1759–1760) "should choose the better reward, the eternal gains".

[38] L.L. Schücking, *Das Königsideal im Beowulf*…, pp. 143–154; Th.D. Hill, *Scyld Scefing and the 'Stirps Regia': Pagan Myth and Christian Kingship in Beowulf*, [in:] *Magister Regis: Studies in Honor of Robert Earl Kaske*, ed. by A. Groos, New York 1986, pp. 37–47; Hill J.M., *The Cultural World of Beowulf*, Toronto 1995, pp. 85–107.

[39] One could also add, following Tolkien's line of reasoning, that of the two men, Hrothgar, in his visible monotheism, appears to be far more "Christian", whereas his Geatish benefactor is still submerged in the pagan way of thinking (2006:40).

[40] F.C. Robinson, *Beowulf*, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. by M. Godden, M. Lapidge. Cambridge 1998, pp. 150–152; Th.D. Hill, *The Christian Language*…, pp. 63–77; A. Orchard, *A Critical Companion*…, pp. 130–168

the matters of religion) would have been entirely ignorant of the essence of Saint Augustine's teachings, whether it be *The City of God* itself or its not-so-distant reverberations in the works of later theologians of the early Middle Ages[41].

In his efforts to instruct Beowulf on the principles of *gumcyste* (*Beowulf* 1723) 'manly virtues' Hrothgar reveals to his young friend and benefactor the real nature of all victory and success in this fleeting life. It is of course the spirit and practice of Christian piety, for it is no other than the *mihtig God* (1716, 1725) "mighty God" Himself who *manna cynne þurh sidne sefan syttru bryttað, eard ond eorlscipe* (1725-7) "in His magnanimous spirit apportions unto mankind wisdom, land and lordship". Hrothgar does not obviously provide the young Geatish hero with ready answers and solutions. Nor does he specify any follow-up steps of Christian-like initiation and growth. His spiritual guidance is far more implicit, deeply embedded in the logic of his argument, as he spells out the innumerable dangers that may befall a reckless king ere his *lichoma læne gedreoseð* (1754) "transitory bodily-home [i.e. the body] in age declines". In doing this, he seems to put the bulk of his faith in Beowulf's intellectual and moral faculties, leaving him with free rein *selre geceos*[*an*]*, ece rædas* (1759–60) "to choose [for himself] the better option, the eternal gain" in the Kingdom of Heaven.

All this naturally bears a strong, if not immediately perceptible, resemblance to the words of Saint Augustine, who maintains that true contentment in the Lord could only be found by those who *suam potestatem ad Dei cultum maxime dilatandum maiestati eius famulam faciunt* (*De civitate Dei*, book V, chapter 24) "put their power at the service of His majesty by using it for the greatest possible extension of His veneration". Perhaps the most lucid rhetorical association, however, between the words of Hrothgar and those of the bishop of Hippo Regius is to be seen in the latter's remark that eternal felicity could never come through *inanis gloriae* (chapter 24) "empty glory" or what William Shakespeare would later call "bubble reputation [...] in the cannon's mouth" (*As You Like It* II.7.155-6). The vivid illustration of man's moral depravity which the Danish king provides in his dramatic account of Heremod's decline and eventual downfall (*Beowulf* 1713–17)[42] is therefore a perfect illustration of Saint Augustine's argument, whether directly inspired by the anonymous poet's acquaintance with *The City of God*, its resonance in the works of later theologians or simply stemming from his common sense and independent examination of the fallible nature of man is a matter of separate discussion.

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[41] M.P. Hamilton, *The Religious Principle in Beowulf*, [in:] *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* LXI, 1946, p. 312; M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, p. 125ff.

[42] *Breat bolgen-mod beod-geneatas, eaxl-gesteallan, oþþæt he ana hwearf, mære þeoden, mon-dreamum from, ðeah þe hine mihtig God mægenes wynnum, eafeþum stepte, ofer ealle men forð gefremede* (1713-8) "Swollen with rage, he slew his table-companions, the comrades at his side, until, in his loneliness, he turned away from the human joys, the famous lord, although the Mighty God had set him up over all men, raised him in the joys of strength".

The ultimate question which remains unanswered is whether 'Hrothgar's sermon' (or, at least, its existing version) was originally intended as a piece of didactic literature, the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the *speculum principum* genre. And if so, could it be that the words that were once put in the mouth of the Danish king were inspired, directly or not, by the Augustinian concepts of a moral and just ruler? There is, of course, not much chance that our curiosity with regard to this particular matter could ever be fully (or even partly) satisfied. Nevertheless, the poem's numerous references to both the ideals and the flaws of kingship, often in line with the concepts of royal authority and its practical realisation that were put forth by Saint Augustine in his *De civitate Dei* – and/or the works that were more or less directly inspired by it – point to a strong possibility that in some cases the intentions may have been predominantly or at least largely didactic, especially since the passages in which the issue is brought to the surface are regularly embedded with clearly discernible Christian colourings, and so may be assumed to be later, post-oral interpolations[43].

This way or the other, *Beowulf* exposes two extremes of the same spectrum – the (unfortunately) real and the expected models of royal (and, by extension, masculine) conduct. As for its protagonist, the disparities are not as wide as they may initially seem. After all, the Geatish hero is neither a faultless sovereign of purely selfless dedication, nor a brainless swashbuckler interested only in the augmentation and prolongation of his earthly glory. Under the later layers of Christian meanings and associations there may have once been a portrait of a strong but noble heathen ruler whose numerous exploits were once praised, perhaps even far and wide, in the pre-Christian realms of Anglo-Saxon England. It may therefore be that by beginning and ending the poem with vivid accounts of the funerary rites performed in honour of, first, the legendary Danish king Scyld Scefing (*Beowulf* 26–52) and then the dragon-slaying ruler of Geatland the poet might have wished to accentuate the continuity of certain ideals and values that were once of foremost significance in the often harsh world of pre-Christian Europe. In this way, the rather universal approval of Scyld's long and glorious reign (despite his being no more than a "good heathen") – perfectly recapitulated in the short but highly expressive phrase *þæt wæs god cyning* (11) "that was a good king" – could have been in some way meant to be extrapolated onto the character of Beowulf.

If such indeed had been the case, the only vital ingredient that would later turn out to be lacking in this rich mosaic of cultural patterns and values was a discernibly Christian dimension of kingship and rule. Whether it was directly inspired by the works of Saint Augustine or not is, as has been observed, no longer pos-

[43] Over the past few decades much has been written about the origins of *Beowulf*'s Christian implications and undertones. A useful summary, including footnoted lists of books and articles that touch upon the subject, might be found, for instance, in the fifth chapter ("Religion and Learning") of A. Orchard's *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (130–168).

sible (or, it is at least very difficult) to determine. However, given the intriguing parallels and similarities that, as we have seen, certainly do exist – at the general semantic, rather than lexical level – between the aforementioned passages in *The City of God* and the words of advice that the "Christian" Hrothgar gives to the "pagan" Beowulf after the latter has returned to Heorot (1700–1887), there is a not-too-implausible likelihood that the form that the poem ultimately assumed in the Nowell Codex (or earlier) had indeed something to do with the poet's acquaintance with *De civitate Dei* and/or its more or less direct reverberations in the writings of some later Christian scholars, continental as well as insular.

This, of course, does not automatically rule out the possibility that the said passages of didactic reflection had not been there before some scribe finally decided to provide them with a more explicit Christian face. After all various instructional elements and attitudes might be found in a number of earlier texts, sometimes dating back to as early as the first and second millennia BC[44]. In a less distant past, some clearly discernible didactic (or gnomic) features would also find their way into the earliest works of Germanic literature, some of which are thought to be of partly or even predominantly pre-Christian origin[45]. It appears, however, that attributing the instructional nature of Hrothgar's speech, particularly in the light of the numerous Christian allusions that seem to have provided a theoretical underpinning for the old king's words of advice, to some of the earlier, "unhallowed" (though not necessarily meaning pre-596[46]), stages of *Beowulf*'s development (or, as for that matter, any tale of Beowulf that predated the poem whose only surviving version came to be recorded in the Nowell Codex) would not only be incorrect, but also, in the first place, flawed in its conceptual foundations.

Of course in its entirety, the poem may have never been intended to serve predominantly didactic purposes. Given its indisputable entertaining quality as well as the recurrent references to storytelling and the art of poetic performance (much as in, for instance, Homer's *Odyssey*)[47], one can conclude that *Beowulf* was, first

[44] R.J. Clifford, *Introduction*, [in:] *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*, ed. by Richard J. Clifford, Atlanta 2007, pp. XI–XIII.

[45] Perhaps the most illustrative example of a didactic work in Old Germanic literature (or, at least, one interwoven with gnomic reflections) is the eddic poem *Hávamál* "Sayings of the High One" which, in its evidently composite form, contains various instructions and pieces of advice that appear to have once been useful in the north of Europe. Despite some plausible Christian (and other) reverberations (Larrington C., *Hávamál and Sources outside Scandinavia*, "Saga Book of the Viking Society" 23 (1992), pp. 141–157), it appears that the poem's didactic framework is of predominantly heathen nature.

[46] The earliest mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons was initiated by Pope Gregory the Great in 596. Within less than a century practically all of England was, at least nominally Christianised.

[47] There are numerous references to the art of poetic performance in *Beowulf*, perhaps the best known one being the passage in which we are told of the *hearpan sweg* (89) "sound of the harp" and *swutol sang scopes* (90) "clear song of the poet" that would often be heard in Hrothgar's hall prior to the coming of Grendel.

and foremost, meant to be performed to delight the audience with a gripping tale of heroism and fate. However, if one should approach the poem with a greater interpretative flexibility, it might turn out that, it is just as much concerned with the more serious themes of mortality, corruption and monarchic decay. Being in all likelihood one of the most notable literary achievements of the period, the tale of Beowulf's heroic exploits would almost certainly have been known in the royal and princely milieux of Anglo-Saxon England where, sitting at the feet of their fathers, with bated breath and flushed cheeks, highborn lads listened attentively to the spellbinding accounts of legendary heroes and exemplary kings, the heroes and kings that, one day, they doubtlessly wished to be themselves. Whether they ultimately did become *gode cyningas* or *yfelan* would obviously largely depend upon their self-critical faculties, the shaping of which must have been a complex and often life-long process. It was, however, a process in which the didactic endeavours of Anglo-Saxon poets, with recurrent digressions and extra-narrative episodes concerning good and bad kings of the early medieval world (pagan and Christian alike), may have played no small part.

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ÞÆT WÆS GOD CYNING: PRÓBA ODCZYTANIA TZW. MOWY HROTHGARA JAKO SWOISTEGO ZWIERCIADŁA WŁADCY W ŚWIETLE FILOZOFII ŚWIĘTEGO AUGUSTYNA

Streszczenie

Adresowane do głównego bohatera poematu moralizatorskie słowa legendarnego króla Hrothgara z pewnością stanowią jeden z najbardziej intrygujących (nie tylko pod względem kulturowo-historycznym) passusów staroangielskiego *Beowulfa*. Zarówno sam charakter wypowiedzi starego monarchy, jak też okoliczności, jakie towarzyszą jego mowie, zdają się sugerować, iż źródłem inspiracji – niekoniecznie bezpośrednim – anonimowego poety mogły być tzw. zwierciadła władcy, średniowieczne traktaty o charakterze parenetycznym, kreślące idealne wzorce osobowe dla przyszłych władców. Jednym z takich tekstów (naturalnie nie w sensie wyłącznym) jest historiozoficzne dzieło świętego Augustyna *Państwo Boże*, którego echa wydają się pobrzmiewać właśnie w słowach Hrothgara. Opublikowany w niniejszym tomie tekst ma na celu identyfikację pewnych cech wspólnych dla obu tekstów w kreśleniu obrazu powinności przykładnego monarchy.