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**Warriors and Warfare: Ideal and Reality in Early
Insular Texts**

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PhD

The University of Edinburgh

2011

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed by me and that the work is entirely my own. Furthermore, I declare that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Abstract

This thesis investigates several key aspects of warfare and its participants in the Viking Age insular world via a comparison of the image which warriors occupy in heroic literature to their concomitant depiction in sources which are primarily non-literary in character, such as histories, annalistic records, and law codes. Through this method, the thesis seeks to add to the scholarship regarding organized violence in this era in two principle manners. First, this study will depart from nearly all previous studies of warriors by moving beyond a single cultural milieu and treating them in a ‘pan-insular’ context. Second and perhaps more importantly, in choosing to address the heroic literature as a genre distinct from other contemporary texts, this thesis will allow progress beyond the bulk of pre-existing ‘warfare scholarship’ for this era, which tends to utilize any and all manner of sources as a reflection of historical reality. In considering the context of heroic poetry and sagas, the thesis will allow one to make conclusion regarding its likely authorship and intended audience, as well as the goals of the former and expectations of the latter.

Studies of warfare are always of particular relevance, due to their intersection with many areas of history long studied, such as constitutional and legal history, as well as those which have only recently received their due attention, such as questions of group cohesion, violence, and community. This thesis was largely inspired by the attempt by Stephen S. Evans to study the institution of the war-band in a cross-cultural reference in his 1997 book *Lords of Battle*. Evans provided a good analysis of this body in its fifth- through eighth-century Anglo-Saxon and British manifestation but failed to achieve his primary stated goal – a comparison of the image and reality of the war-band. His decision to limit his research to the Anglo-Saxon and Welsh cultural spheres in the era predating the first Viking invasions led him to omit much relevant Irish and Insular Norse material, as well as a great deal of later heroic literature. It was with these two shortcomings in mind that I set out to write a more thorough treatment of the war-band. Yet, what began initially as an attempt to remedy the shortcomings of *Lords of Battle* soon grew into a slightly more wide-ranging study that has moved beyond focussing solely upon the war-band to

look at attitudes about warfare and its participants amongst contemporary audiences and authors during the Viking age insular world.

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Abbreviations

AFM – *The Annals of the Four Masters*; references to specific entries are taken from *The Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, Vol. 1*, ed. and trans. by John O'Donovan (Dublin, 1848-51) and *The Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, Vol. 2*, ed. and trans. by John O'Donovan (Dublin, 1848-51)

AH – *Astudiaethau ar yr Hengerdd: Studies in Old Welsh Poetry*, ed. by Rachel Bromwich and R. Brinley Jones (Cardiff, 1978)

AI – *Annals of Innisfallen*; references to specific entries are taken from *The Annals of Innisfallen*, ed. and trans. by Seán Mac Airt (Dublin, 1951)

ASC – *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; references to specific entries are taken from *English Historical Documents, Volume I, c. 500 – 1042*, ed. and trans. by Dorothy Whitelock (London, 1968)

AT – *Annals of Tigernach*; references to specific entries are taken from *The Annals of Tigernach*, ed. and trans. by Gearóid Mac Niocaill, at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100002A.html>

AU – *Annals of Ulster*; references to specific entries are taken from *The Annals of Ulster AD 431-1201*, ed. and trans. by Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100001A/index.html>

Beowulf – *Beowulf*; references to specific passages are taken from *Beowulf, revised edition*, ed. and trans. by Michael Swanton (Manchester, 1997)

BWP – Ifor Williams, *The Beginnings of Welsh Poetry: Studies by Sir Ifor Williams*, 2nd edition, ed. by Rachel Bromwich (Cardiff, 1980)

CS – *Chronicon Scottorum*; references to specific entries are taken from *Chronicon Scottorum*, ed. and trans. By William H. Hennessy and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100016/index.html>

CT – *The Poems of Taliesin*, ed. and trans. by Ifor Williams, with the English version by J.E. Caerwyn Williams (Dublin, 1968)

CW – Nicholas Brooks, *Communities and Warfare, 700 – 1400* (London, 2001)

DOB – *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. by Colin Chase (Toronto, 1981)

EHD I – *English Historical Documents, Volume I, c.500-1042*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock (London, 1968)

EIMS – *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, ed. and trans. by Jeffrey Gantz (London, 1981)

EWP – *Early Welsh Poetry: Studies in the Book of Aneirin*, edited by Brynley F. Roberts (Aberystwyth, 1988)

EWSP – Jenny Rowland, *Early Welsh Saga Poetry: A Study and Edition of the Englynion* (Cambridge, 1990)

FA – *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*; references to specific entries are taken from *Fragmentary annals of Ireland* (Dublin, 1978)

GPC – *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: A Dictionary of the Welsh Language*, edited by R.J. Thomas, Gareth A. Bevan and Patrick J. Donovan (Caerdydd, 1950-2002)

HE – *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave (Oxford, 1991)

HPASP – Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon period: studies in honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr., ed. by Helen Damico and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo, 1993)

LMOASE – Richard P. Abels, Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England (London, 1988)

MWP – Medieval Welsh Poems, ed. and trans. by J.P. Clancy (Dublin, 2001)

TBC I – Táin Bó Cúailnge, Recension I; references to specific entries are taken from *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, ed. and trans. by Cecile O’Rahilly (Dublin, 1976)

TBDD – The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel, references to specific entries are taken from ‘The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel’, ed. and trans. by Whitely Stokes, in *Revue Celtique* 22 (1901), pp. 9-61, 165-215, 282-329, 390-437 and *Revue Celtique* 23 (1902), p. 88.

TBOM – The Battle of Maldon; references to specific passages are taken from ‘The Battle of Maldon’, edited and translated by Donald Scragg, in *TBOM991* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 1-36.

TBOM 991 - The Battle of Maldon, A.D. 991, edited by Donald Scragg (Oxford, 1991)

TNCMH II – The New Cambridge Medieval History, Volume II, c.700-c.900, ed. by Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge, 1995)

TTCOEL – The Cambridge Companion of Old English Literature, edited by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge, 1991)

ULIDIA – Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, edited by J.P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast, 1994)

VSEMW – Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West, edited by Guy Halsall
(Woodbridge, 1998)

WSBW – Guy Halsall, Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900
(Abingdon, 2003)

WWASE – Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England, ed. by Sonia Chadwick-
Hawkes (Oxford, 1989)

Y Gododdin - Jarman, A.O.H. (ed. and trans.), *Y Gododdin: Britain's Oldest Heroic
Poem* (Llandysul, 1988)

Chapter One – Introduction

Scholarly interest in early medieval Insular warfare has gradually increased over recent decades to reach its keenest pitch at the present time.¹ Regardless of their intended audience, most of these modern authors have attempted to sketch out a historical picture of the real-life practice of warfare in the early historic Insular world. Perhaps as a result of the rather scanty body of textual material surviving from that era, they typically do so through a synthesis of every available type of evidence – not only various textual sources (including annalistic and historical sources, heroic and religious literature), but also archaeological and anthropological material.

¹ For just some of the more well-received or influential recent works, see Richard Abels, *LMOASE* (London, 1988), Richard P. Abels, 'From Alfred to Harold II: the Military Failure of the Late Anglo-Saxon State', in Abels and Bachrach (eds.), *The Normans and their Adversaries at War, Essays in Memory of C. Warren Hollister*, pp. 15-30, Nick Aitchison, *The Picts and Scots at War* (Phoenix Mill, 2003), Leslie Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare among the Britons and Saxons* (Cardiff, 1987), Nicholas Brooks, 'Arms, Status, and Warfare in Late-Saxon England', in *CW*, pp. 138-61, Nicholas Brooks, 'The Development of Military Obligation in Eighth- and Ninth-Century England', in *CW*, pp. 32-47, Charles-Edwards, T.M., 'Irish Warfare before 1100', in Bartlett and Jeffery (eds.), *A Military History of Ireland*, pp. 26-51, Hilda Ellis Davidson, 'The Training of Warriors', in *WWASE*, pp. 11-24, Sean Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions, 633-1283* (Cardiff, 2004), R.H.C. Davis, 'Did the Anglo-Saxons have warhorses?', in *WWASE*, pp. 141-4, Kelly DeVries, 'Harold Godwinson in Wales: Military Legitimacy in Late Anglo-Saxon England', in Abels and Bachrach (eds.), *The Normans and their Adversaries at War: Essays in Memory of C. Warren Hollister*, pp. 65-85, Stephen S. Evans, *Lords of Battle: Image and Reality of the Comitatus in Dark-Age Britain* (Woodbridge, 1997), Marie Therese Flanagan, 'Irish and Anglo-Norman warfare in twelfth century Ireland', in Bartlett and Jeffery (eds.), *A Military History of Ireland*, pp. 52-75, Roberta Frank, 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the Battle of Maldon', in Wood and Lund (eds.), *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600*, pp. 95-106, Guy Halsall, 'Anthropology and the Study of Pre-Conquest Warfare and Society: The Ritual War in Anglo-Saxon England', in *WWASE*, pp. 155-77, Joseph Harris, 'Love and Death in the Männerbund: An Essay with Special Reference to the Bjarkamál and The Battle of Maldon', in Damico and Leyerle (eds.), *HPASP*, p. 77-114, John M. Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature* (Gainesville, 2000), John Hines, 'The Military Contexts of the adventus Saxonum: some continental evidence', in *WWASE*, pp. 25-48, Nicholas Hooper, 'The Anglo-Saxons at war', in *WWASE*, pp. 191-202, Nicholas Hooper, 'The Housecarls in England in the Eleventh Century', in Matthew Strickland (ed.), *Anglo-Norman Warfare*, pp. 1-16, Ryan Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 2010), Niels Lund, 'The Armies of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut: ledig or lið?', *ASE* 15 (1986), pp. 105-18, Kim McCone, 'Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair: hounds, heroes and hospitallers in early Irish myth and story', *Ériu* 35 (1984), pp. 1-30, Kim McCone, 'Werewolves, cyclops, díberga and fianna: juvenile delinquency in early Ireland', *CMCS* 12 (1986), pp. 1-22, Gerd Petterssen, *Finn and the Fian: Reflections of Ancient Celtic Myth and Institutions in Early and Medieval Ireland* (Göteborg, 1999), Jenny Rowland, 'Warfare and Horses in the Gododdin and the Problem of Catraeth', *CMCS* 30 (Winter 1995), 13-40, Katharine Simms, 'Gaelic warfare in the Middle Ages', in Bartlett and Jeffery (eds.), *A Military History of Ireland*, pp. 99-115, Gareth Williams, 'Military Institutions and Regal Power', in Brown and Farr (eds.), *Mercia, An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe*, pp. 295-309, David Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain and Ireland, 800-1200* (Leiden, 2009).

Unfortunately, there exists a tendency to treat the primary textual evidence as dumb records, essentially snap-shots that have captured the functioning of the society which produced the given source. Even sources which are quite clearly of a primarily literary nature suffer from this treatment – indeed, some scholars rely inordinately upon a particular class of evidence, heroic literature. In his discussion of the image of a lord’s military retinue in Old English literature, F.M. Stenton stated unequivocally that ‘There is no doubt that this literature represented real life’.² In a like manner, Ifor Williams took as granted the essentially factual nature of the Welsh collection of verse known as *The Gododdin*, writing that its poet gave an accurate description of the warriors commemorated within because ‘they were his kinsmen, his comrades, and he knew each one intimately’.³ Kenneth Jackson presented a similar argument for the historical usability of the heroic literature of the Ulster Cycle, which he proposed acted as a ‘window’ looking onto pre-Christian Iron Age Ireland.⁴

Throughout the discipline of history there has been a growing awareness of the various constraints (such as those of context, genre and style) which shape the creation of our textual sources. It would be disingenuous, however, to omit the work of several recent scholars who have questioned such an approach, as some of this thinking has permeated the study of early medieval Insular history. As a result, some of those investigating warfare in this context have come to recognize and even demonstrate the pitfalls of accepting literary evidence (and textual evidence in general) as proof of real-life events or social practices in general.⁵

² F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd Edition (Oxford, 1971), p. 302.

³ Ifor Williams, *BWP*, p. 77. See also pp. 46-9.

⁴ Kenneth Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 28-9, 42-3, 52-4.

⁵ We shall discuss most of these at some point during the thesis, but in general see: Wendy Davies, *Wales in the early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1982), pp. 68-70, Sean Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions, 633-1283*, 10-1, 23-4, David Dumville, ‘Early Welsh Poetry: Problems of Historicity’ in *EWP*, pp. 1-16, Stephen Fanning, ‘Tacitus, *Beowulf*, and the *Comitatus*’, *Haskins Society Journal* 9 (2001), pp. 17-38, Roberta Frank, ‘The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the Battle of Maldon’, in Wood and Lund (eds.), *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600*, pp. 95-106, Walter Goffart, ‘Conspicuously absent: martial heroism in the *Historiae* of Gregory of Tours and its likes’, in *Barbarians, Maps and Historiography, Studies on the Early Medieval West* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 95-120, Guy Halsall, *WSBW*, pp. 1-14, 120-3, 177-80, Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present* (Maynooth, 2000), Chapters 1 and 2, Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, ‘Heroic values and Christian ethics’, in *TCCOEL*, pp. 107-25, Donald Scragg, ‘The Battle of Maldon’, in *TBOM991*, pp. 1-36, Rosemary Woolf, ‘The ideal of men dying with their lord in the *Germania* and in *The Battle of Maldon*’, *ASE* 5 (1976), pp. 63-81.

Unfortunately, these researchers have concentrated primarily upon one cultural or linguistic milieu, a lone source, or a single aspect of warriors and/or warfare (such as warriors fighting to the death). Also, despite their efforts, many academics studying the early historic Insular world remain wedded to the use of saga, myth, heroic literature and panegyric as a straightforward historical source. As such, scholars frequently miss the opportunity to explore the context of the textual sources consulted and explore the reasoning behind a given author's choice to present warfare and its authors in a given manner. If we choose to treat the heroic literature as a separate class of evidence from the historical and legal writings of the same era, two questions emerge – 'Is the picture of fighting men that we find in heroic literature substantially different from that present in these other sources, and if so, why?' This brings us to the primary aim of this dissertation – to compare the image of warfare and warriors in heroic literature (including its adjuncts of praise poetry, panegyric, and saga) with the picture emerging from other textual sources (such as chronicles, annalistic material and hagiographical works), archaeology and anthropology.

This dissertation initially grew out of an attempt to expand upon Stephen S. Evans's intriguing book *Lords of Battle: Image and Reality of the Comitatus in Dark-Age Britain*. Evans set out to construct an image of the *comitatus* or war-band in early medieval Britain (roughly from the fifth to eighth centuries) which he could then contrast with its 'reality' (here defined as archaeological findings regarding this 'institution'); in the process, he also sought to bridge the gap frequently created by modern scholars between British (i.e. Welsh) and Anglo-Saxon society.⁶ While he succeeded in admirably in this latter task, he failed to completely fulfil his primary goal due to a tendency to combine the image of the war-band drawn from textual sources with archaeological and anthropological data to determine its real-life functioning.⁷ An additional criticism is his rather arbitrary imposition of a rather

⁶ Evans, *Lords of Battle: Image and Reality of the Comitatus in Dark-Age Britain* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 1-4.

⁷ He succumbs to the attraction of creating a historical reconstruction of his subject from all available evidence, including that of a literary nature. In addition to reading his text, see the relevant reviews of *Lords of Battle* by Howell Chickering (*Speculum*, 74/1 (Jan, 1999), pp. 158-60), Stephen Morillo (*The American Historical Review* 103/4 (Oct, 1998), pp. 1232-3), Patrick Wormald (*English Historical Review* 114/457 (Jun, 1999), pp. 672-3) and Barbara Yorke (*Albion*, 30/2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 253-4).

arbitrary end-point for his survey due to his firm view that the war-band faded into obscurity in Britain during the eighth century, with the ‘ideals and sentiments of heroic society’ found in such late works as ‘wholly anachronistic’.⁸ (Quote the review here). Not only has this sentiment for an earlier disappearance of the war-band weakened recently, but this decision also causes him to miss the opportunity to investigate a fuller corpus of heroic literature (such as the late-tenth or early-eleventh century *The Battle of Maldon*), even if only with an eye towards questioning its continued relevance as literature.⁹

As a result of these perceived shortcomings of Evans’s effort, this dissertation sought to fully realize this goal to compare the image of the war-band found in heroic literature with its ‘reality’. Additionally, the present work sought to expand upon Evans’s cross-cultural presentation of the source material to treat evidence from the rest of the Insular world, including Ireland, Dál Riata and Pictland, as well as the later Danelaw and kingdom of Alba. Finally, the evidence for the late survival of the war-band in the Insular world suggested moving the time period examined to the one subsequent to that chosen by Evans – the so-called Viking Age of the late eighth through late eleventh century. Not only is this époque one in which Scandinavian incomers likely changed the practice, pursuit, and/or notions of warfare in the Insular world but it was also the time in which most of our surviving heroic literary sources were committed to writing. (See the literature review)

Yet during the process of maturation, several factors caused this study to shift from a look at the war-band to a more general examination of warriors and warfare. As the thesis developed, however, the focus shifted from the image of the war-band to a more general one of warriors and warfare. One reason was an increasing

⁸ Evans, *Lords of Battle*, pp. 9-10 and fn. 3 on p. 58.

⁹ For arguments that the war-band survived into the ninth and tenth centuries (and beyond), see Richard Abels, *LMOASE*, pp. 146-50, 159-61, 170, 185-6, Nicholas Brooks, ‘Arms, Status and Warfare in Late-Saxon England’, in *CW*, pp. 138-161 (138-9, 152-55, 160), Sean Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, 633-1283 (Cardiff, 2004), pp. 14, 19, 26-8, Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the eve of the Norman Conquest*, p. 9-15, 18-9, C. Warren Hollister, *Military Organization of Norman England* (1965), pp. 174-5, Nicholas Hooper, ‘The Housecarls in England in the Eleventh Century’, in Matthew Strickland (ed.), *Anglo-Norman Warfare* (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 1-16 (10-2, 15-6), Judith Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, pp. 238-9, Gareth Williams, ‘Military Institutions and Regal Power’, in Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (ed.), *Mercia, An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (London, 2004), pp. 295-309 (297-300, 305, 308-9) and David Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain and Ireland, 800-1200* (Leiden, 2009). Patrick Wormald raises the point regarding the importance of *TBOM* and similar later works (*English Historical Review* 114/457 (Jun, 1999), p. 673).

uncertainty that the war-band was the sole or even primary 'institution' for military pursuits during the early Middle Ages. A second was a growing realization that the discoveries made during the development of the thesis were beginning to tie into more general concepts involving war and peace, such as the 'Truce of God'. The third reason was the influence of Guy Halsall's refreshing overview of warfare in early medieval Western Europe titled *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*.

In this work Halsall cogently recognized the problem with using textual sources at face value, despite embarking upon a quest to discover as much as possible about the real-life practice of warfare during early medieval Western Europe.¹⁰ Nevertheless, his observation that the *mentalité* of medieval authors and their readership differed significantly from modern researchers further inflamed me to undertake a comparison of the image of warriors and warfare as they appear in 'historical' and 'literary' sources. As Halsall ends his period of investigation around 900 and covers most of Western Europe, his text likewise reinforced my decision to concentrate upon a more specific region (the Insular world) and a slightly later epoch (the mid-eighth through late-eleventh century. At this juncture it became apparent that the end date for this dissertation roughly corresponded to a massive upsurge in the influx of Normans and Norman ideas into the Insular World. This only strengthened the choice of the end date for the period to be studied, as this resulting cultural blend opens the door to a number of additional questions which deserve their own in-depth exploration. As a side note, this observation led to the decision to extend the end-date for the period studied to the early 1170s in Ireland (the point when widespread Norman and English military involvement began in Ireland).

I. Heroic Literature

Several definitions of heroic literature, often accompanied by a list of relevant works, have appeared previously. Kenneth Jackson gave a brief

¹⁰ Halsall, *WSBW*, pp. 1-14, 120-3, 177-80.

summarization in which he drew upon the work of C.M. Bowra, the Chadwicks, and Ker:

It carries with it an implication of a social setting; a military aristocratic society, whether of a primitive or more highly developed kind, in which the real *raison d'être*, and the chief interest, of the nobility is warfare, and for which the accepted morality is courage and fierceness in war, generosity and liberality in peace, a longing for fame, a horror of disgrace, and a welcome for death in fight provided it leads to an immortal glory.¹¹

Joyce Hill provides a similar definition in the *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*:

Heroic poetry is the generic term for a tradition of narrative poetry in many ancient, medieval and modern cultures, which celebrates the mighty deeds of heroes, whose socially determined code of honour is tested in circumstances commonly involving physical risk. The tone is usually restrained, and exaggeration and the marvellous are kept within bounds.¹²

Jenny Rowland does not give a definition per se, but she includes much of the material I have utilized as such literature – *Beowulf*, the Battle of Maldon, the Saga Englynion, *The Gododdin* and the Ulster cycle.¹³

At this juncture, I would like to give a brief overview of the primary examples of heroic literature which will be used in this thesis. As a rule, I have primarily relied upon those very texts which previous historians and critics have used in their attempt to reconstruct the war-band. I have attempted to provide a summary of the current thinking on the context of each text, particularly in terms of dating, authorship and possible aims.

i. Anglo-Saxon Sources

Beowulf

¹¹ *GOSP*, p. 38.

¹² Joyce Hill, 'Heroic Poetry', in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 235-6.

¹³ *EWSP*, fn. 88 on p. 37.

Beowulf has generated far more controversy regarding its date of composition than any other surviving heroic literary creation from the pre-Norman Insular world, as we shall shortly observe. As we have it today, *Beowulf* survives as part of a manuscript securely dated by palaeographers to the late tenth or early eleventh century.¹⁴ The poem itself, however, remains the subject of fierce debate regarding its date of composition and social context – for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was usually placed in the period between the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to Christianity and the escalation of Viking attacks upon England in the mid ninth century.¹⁵ This unanimity of this opinion has collapsed during the last several decades, with a general recognition that a late ninth- to early eleventh-century genesis for *Beowulf* is quite possible due to the strong cultural, mercantile and political interaction between English and Danes during these centuries.¹⁶ A few scholars have persisted in defending the traditional early date for *Beowulf*, but these efforts have been mostly countered by those allowing for the possibility of a later date.¹⁷ A recognition has also emerged that *Beowulf* as we have it today may reflect several centuries of modification and elaboration.¹⁸

The Battle of Maldon

¹⁴ Add Colin Chase. Kevin S. Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (New Brunswick, 1981), pp. 13-14.

¹⁵ Colin Chase provides a useful summary in ‘Opinions on the Date of *Beowulf*’, in *DOB*, ed. by Colin Chase (Toronto, 1981), pp. 3-8. A Viking-age origin was seen as out of the question due to the assumption English audiences would not wish to hear a poem praising the same Danes attacking their country (Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, pp. 24-5).

¹⁶ See Roberta Frank, ‘Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*’, in *DOB*, pp. 123-39, Nicolas Jacobs, ‘Anglo-Danish Relations, Poetic Archaism, and the Date of *Beowulf*: A Reconsideration of the Evidence’, *Poetica* 8 (1977), p. 40, Robert L. Kellogg, ‘The Context for Epic in Later Anglo-Saxon England’, in *HPASP*, pp. 139-56, Alexander Callander Murray, ‘*Beowulf*, the Danish Invasions, and Royal Genealogy’, in *DOB*, pp. 101-12, and R.I. Page, ‘The Audience and the Vikings’, in *DOB*, pp. 113-22 (120-1).

¹⁷ For effective counters to the arguments by R.D. Fulk and Tom Shippey for an early date, see N.F. Blake, ‘Review of *A History of Old English Meter*’, *Modern Philology* 92/2 (1994), pp. 220-4, Walter Goffart, ‘The name ‘Merovingian’ and the Dating of *Beowulf*’, in *Barbarians, Maps and Historiography, Studies on the Early Medieval West* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 263-71 (266-70), and Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, p. xxv. Many recent arguments for an early *Beowulf* depend upon Fulk, including Evans in *Lords of Battle* (p. 143).

¹⁸ For a useful summary of such arguments in general, see John D. Niles, *Old English Heroic Poems and the Social Life of Texts* (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 2, 19-22.

The Battle of Maldon (TBOM) differs from most other heroic literature of the early medieval Insular world in that its subject matter allows us to establish a strict *terminus post quem* for its creation, the year 991.¹⁹ This proven late authorship has caused endless vexation for those historians and critics who propose that the war-band and its related heroic literature were phenomena belonging strictly to the pre-Viking insular world – most of these tend to dismiss *TBOM* as late aberration or purposeful attempt to evoke a long-disappeared way of life.²⁰ As Donald Scragg used the re-discovered Casley transcription for his edition, this study will use his translation from *The Battle of Maldon AD 991*.

Other Old English Sources

I will use several other examples of Old English heroic literature in this thesis, although none of these possesses the length or importance (at least to this thesis) of *Beowulf* and *TBOM*. These include the *Fight at Finnsburh* fragment, *Deor*, *Widsith* and the quasi-heroic *Judith*. The *Fight at Finnsburh* fragment is thus named because we only have the contents of a single loose manuscript folio, likely Lambeth Library MS 487, and long lost – like *TBOM*, the fragment of the poem as we have it survives from an early transcription, in this case one made by George Hickes in the late seventeenth century. Perhaps due to its connection to *Beowulf*, most critics have historically viewed *Fight at Finnsburh* as hailing from a similar era, although Hickes noted that the language was late. *Judith* survives in the same manuscript as *Beowulf*. Most of the remaining items above can be located in a late tenth-century codex known as the Exeter Book, a massive tome consisting of 131 leaves and described in 1050 as ‘mycel Englisc boc’. Several other non-heroic literary items to which we shall refer, such as the Exeter Book Riddles, *Maxims I*, *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B*, are also found in this text.

¹⁹ Per the date of this event in *ASC ACDE* 991.

²⁰ Evans dismisses *TBOM*’s relevance in a footnote, stating ‘it is clear’ that the ‘ideals and sentiments of a heroic society’ so overt in the poem were ‘wholly anachronistic’ by the tenth century (Evans, *Lords of Battle*, fn. 3 on p. 58). Scragg sees a continuing literary relevance for war-band’s image, despite his view that in real life it was anachronistic by this time (Scragg, ‘The Battle of Maldon’, pp. 1-36 (33)).

ii. Welsh (British) Sources

The Gododdin

The Gododdin survives in the manuscript *The Book of Aneirin* (assigned to the mid- or late thirteenth century) in two quite separate hands, resulting in the so-called ‘A –text’ of eighty-eight lines written in up-to-date Middle Welsh and the ‘B-text’ of forty-two lines which preserves a good deal of Old Welsh orthography.²¹ Most modern-day commentators ascribe the work to the poet Aneirin with the assumption that he composed it following the historical battle of Catraeth, in which the warriors from the kingdom of Gododdin nearly perished to a man in a disastrous fight against the English at Catraeth (modern-day Catterick).²² A few have suggested, however, that *The Gododdin* is a much later literary creation, albeit one based on a ‘slender thread’ of tradition from the Brittonic North of the sixth or seventh century. As Old Welsh was used well into the eleventh century before its replacement by Middle Welsh, the orthography of the B-text can only prove that its exemplar dated to before this time.²³ Some have noted the likelihood of accretion to the text, with Marged Haycock writing succinctly, ‘it seems more than likely that the Gododdin as we have it is the cumulative product of several centuries of poetic activity’.²⁴ A few researchers have even attacked the idea that *The Gododdin* commemorates a single event or even forms a coherent whole.²⁵

²¹ See Daniel Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts* (Cardiff, 2000), pp. 73-4. See also Jackson, *GOSP*, 41-4, 59-60, A.O.H. Jarman, *Y Gododdin: Britain's Oldest Poem*, pp. xiv-xvi, and J.T. Koch (ed. and trans.), *The Gododdin of Aneirin: Text and Context from Dark-Age North Britain* (Cardiff, 1997).

²² Ifor Williams, *BWP*, pp. 47-53. For others ascribing to such a view, see Charles-Edwards, ‘The Authenticity of the Gododdin’, pp. 44-71, Jackson, *GOSP*, pp. ix, 4, 60, 63-7, A.O.H. Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. xl-xlvi, Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin*, pp. ix-xii, l-li, Ceri W. Lewis, ‘The Historical Background of Early Welsh Verse’, in Jarman and Hughes (eds.), *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, Volume I, pp. 11-50 (33-5), Jenny Rowland, ‘Warfare and Horses in the Gododdin and the Problem of Catraeth’, *CMCS* 30 (Winter 1995), pp. 30-1.

²³ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. xvi, admits this possibility. Interestingly, Huws suggests the exemplars had passed from oral circulation and may not have been fully understood (Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, p. 74).

²⁴ Marged Haycock, ‘Metrical model for the poems in the Book of Taliesin’, in *EWP*, pp. 155-77 (155). Even Koch is forced to admit this possibility for the A-text (Koch, ‘When was Welsh Literature first written down?’, p. 52).

²⁵ See for instance Craig Cessford, ‘Northern England and the Gododdin Poem’, *Northern History* 33 (1997), pp. 218-22, Brendan O’Hehir, ‘What is the Gododdin?’, in *EWP*, pp. 57-95 (66-7), E.P. Hamp, ‘Catraeth’ in *BBCS* 40 (1993), p. 119.

We must keep in mind several caveats concerning modern editions of *The Gododdin*. Some modern editions reflect their creator's theories regarding the historical background for the poetry; for example, J.T. Koch notes that while the verse *rac bedin Ododin a Breen[elych]* translates to 'before the army of Gododin and Bernicia', both A.O.H. Jarman and Ifor Williams altered 'Ododin' (meaning Gododdin) to read 'Deivyr' (meaning Deira) as they thought it impossible that the men of Bernicia and Gododdin would fight as allies.²⁶ Additionally, when a verse from the A-text closely resembles one from the B-text most editors will combine the two or even discard the one they find less attractive.²⁷ J.P. Clancy and Kenneth Jackson tend to avoid this problem; for this reason, I will primarily use Clancy's version for this thesis (as it is more recent than Jackson's). As an aside, I have provided a useful table which converts between the nomenclature adopted by Ifor Williams and that used by J.P. Clancy, which can be found in the Appendix.

The 'Early' Taliesin Poems

The so-called 'early' Taliesin poems refer to twelve specific compositions from the *Canu Taliesin (Book of Taliesin)* deemed to be the genuine poetry of a historical sixth-century bard named Taliesin (with the assumption that the rest of the poems from *Canu Taliesin* were later medieval inventions).²⁸ The manuscript itself was written by a single, 'excellent' hand using a script which Daniel Huws dated to the first half of the fourteenth century.²⁹ A few individuals have questioned the received wisdom regarding the early date for the 'early' poems – David Dumville and David Greene both state there is no firm evidence in the poems themselves to date them to the end of the sixth century rather than, say, the ninth century.³⁰ Marged Haycock meanwhile dwells on the fact that the exemplars from which the scribe

²⁶ Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin*, p. xxxix.

²⁷ A problem addressed by Dumville in 'Early Welsh Poetry', p. 5.

²⁸ Andrew Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin, 1997), p. 8, Clancy, *MWP*, p. 13-6, A.O.H. Jarman, 'Taliesin', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, pp. 51-67 (52-5), John T. Koch, 'The Cynfeirdd Poetry and the Language of the Sixth Century', in *AH*, pp. 17-41 (38), Rowland, *EWSP*, p. 95.

²⁹ Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, p. 79.

³⁰ Dumville, 'Early Welsh Poetry', p. 3, David Greene, 'Linguistic Considerations in the Dating of Early Welsh Verse', p. 11.

worked featured poems already modernized from Old Welsh or never even written in it.³¹

The Englynion – Rheged, Llywarch Hen and Heledd

The Welsh *englyn* saga poetry that we shall examine includes the ‘Rheged’, Llywarch Hen and Heledd poetry (termed *Canu Urien*, *Canu Llywarch Hen* and *Canu Heledd* by Jenny Rowland). These appear in two manuscripts: the *Black Book of Carmarthen* and the *Red Book of Hergest*.³² Most modern palaeographers place the first squarely in the mid-thirteenth century and ascribe the latter, a comparatively large and impressive codex, to the scribe Hywel Fychan ap Hywel Goch of Buellt shortly after 1382.³³ As the *englyn* metre developed in its three line type (of which these poems are examples) by the eighth century at the latest and enjoyed a *floruit* lasting until the eleventh century, most commentators have seen them as dating to the earlier end of this time period.³⁴ While most are assumed to have originated as Old Welsh compositions, with few exceptions they only survive in a Middle Welsh guise.³⁵ All three collections possess a narrator – an unknown for the Rheged Englynion, the garrulous and lonely old man Llywarch Hen for the second collection, and the forlorn princess Heledd for the last set. A few literary critics have suggested a political motive for the Llywarch Hen ‘cycle’, although Jenny Rowland largely countered these claims.³⁶

Miscellaneous Poems

Finally, we have a number of miscellaneous Welsh poems which cannot be easily assigned to any of the above categories of poetry, three of which will be

³¹ Haycock, Marged (ed. and trans.), *The Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin* (Aberystwyth, 2007), pp. 7, 26.

³² *EWSP*, p. 403.

³³ Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, pp. 70-1. He suggests the former was a ‘slowly built-up work of love’ while the latter was an attempt to gather the ‘classics’ of Welsh literature into a single volume.

³⁴ Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature*, p. 22, J.E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Court Poet in Medieval Wales* (Lewiston, 1997), p. 7, Clancy, *MWP*, p. 17, *EWSP*, pp. 1-2, 75, 386-9, Williams, *CT*, p. lxvi.

³⁵ *EWSP*, p. 1-2.

³⁶ *EWSP*, pp. 8-10, 75, 386.

discussed at several points in the thesis and thus demand an explanation of their assumed dating – *Armes Prydein*, the *Juvenus Englynion* and *Marwnad Cynddyl*. The last of these eulogizes a warrior honoured in the Heledd *englyn* of the same name, but most reviewers see it as likely composed shortly after the title character's death in the seventh century.³⁷ The so-called *Juvenus Englynion* are two sets of verse added to the upper margins of Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.4.42 around the late ninth or early tenth centuries.³⁸ Most reviewers agree on the dating and context of *Armes Prydein* as well, seeing it as a reaction to the dominance of Britain by Athelstan of Wessex (924-939).³⁹

iii. Irish Sources

General Manuscript Information

Unlike most of the Old English and Welsh sources discussed thus far, Old Irish heroic tales and poems often survive in multiple recensions spread across several different manuscripts, with many found in one of three great surviving pre-Norman compendiums.⁴⁰ These consist of the late eleventh- or early twelfth-century *Leabhar na hUidhre* ('Book of the Dun Cow'), the early twelfth-century *Book of Glendalough* and the late twelfth-century *Leabar na Nuachongbála* (Book of Leinster).⁴¹

Táin Bó Cúailnge

The epic known as the *Tain Bo Cuailnge* (*TBC*) comes in three known recensions. The first of these, hereafter referred to as *TBC I*, can be found in four

³⁷ Clancy, *MWP*, p. 19, Jarman, 'The Later Cynfeirdd', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, pp. 98-122 (99), Lewis, 'The Historical Background of Early Welsh Verse', pp. 42-3, Caerwyn Williams, *The Court Poet in Medieval Wales*, p. 5.

³⁸ Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature* p. 20, Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, p. 67. Ifor Williams favored an early ninth-century date (Williams, *Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry* (Dublin, 1944), p. 28).

³⁹ Lewis, 'The Historical Background of Early Welsh Verse', pp. 46-7.

⁴⁰ William O'Sullivan, 'Manuscripts and Palaeography', in *A New History of Ireland, Volume I, Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, edited by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, pp. 511-48 (545).

⁴¹ O'Sullivan, 'Manuscripts and Palaeography', pp. 545-6.

separate manuscripts, two of which, *The Lebor na hUidre* and the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, together contain the entire tale. For the purposes of this thesis, we will be concentrating upon *TBC I* as the earliest of the three. While some early researchers viewed the TBC as an essentially historic record of real life events dating to the time of Christ, Rudolf Thurneysen proposed what has since become the established model, that the epic was first written in the seventh century and TBC I is the conflation of two parallel ninth-century versions of the tale.⁴² More recently, scholars such as Donnchadh Ó Corráin and Hildegard Tristram view the existing work as a cumulative effort over the centuries, reaching its manuscript expression at the time of the oldest surviving manuscript around 1100.⁴³ For this thesis, we will be using Cecile O’Rahilly’s edition and translation of *TBC I*.

Togail Bruidne Da Derga

Like *TBC*, this epic is found in three different recensions, although in this case the second version is the most famous having benefited from two major editions, one by Joan Radner and the other by Whitley Stokes.⁴⁴ Like *TBC I* it survives in part in *Lebor na hUidre*, with only the beginning missing. A number of early scholars, including Hans Zimmer, Max Nettlau and Rudolf Thurneysen suggested that this version is a conflation of two or three independent sources, with Thurneysen’s model of two sources again dominating to the present day.⁴⁵ More recently, Máire West has made a strong case that the author drew from a much greater number of oral and written sources.⁴⁶ We will refer to the second version of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* in this thesis, primarily relying upon Whitley Stokes’s edition of the saga and hereafter referring to it as *TBDD*.

Fled Bricrenn

⁴² With minor modifications this includes N.B. Aitchison, Alan Bruford, James Carney and Cecile O’Rahilly. See Hildegard L.C. Tristram, ‘What is the Purpose of Táin Bó Cúailnge?’, in *Ulidia*, pp. 11-21 (16-8).

⁴³ Tristram, ‘What is the Purpose of Táin Bó Cúailnge?’, pp. 11-2, 18-9.

⁴⁴ Máire West, ‘The Genesis of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*: A Reappraisal of the ‘Two-Source’ Theory’, in *Celtica* 23 (1999), pp. 413-35 (413).

⁴⁵ West, ‘The Genesis of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*’, p. 414.

⁴⁶ West, ‘The Genesis of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*’, pp. 434-5.

A nearly full version of Fled Bricrenn can be found in *Lebor na hUidre*, although the end is unfortunately missing; while four other manuscripts contain at least part of the tale, only the manuscript Edinburgh MS. XL gives the missing conclusion.⁴⁷ The fullest treatment of this work, by George Henderson, uses the *Lebor na hUidre* version for the bulk of the text, only switching to the text from Edinburgh MS. XL for the finale of the tale.

iv. A Consideration of Late Transmission of Earlier Material

I believe in the preceding summary of the heroic literature I have demonstrated the preponderance of evidence that it was composed or created in its current form during the period under study here, the pre-Norman Insular world. As a final argument for the validity of the texts to our period, however, I would like to discuss the fact that even in the unlikely event that some of these sources pre-date the period studied here, their survival in texts most certainly ascribable to the late tenth through late twelfth centuries (with the exception of many of the Welsh exemplars, which actually originate even later) hints at a continuing importance in the Viking Age. While there is a chance that they may preserve their contents unchanged, their circulation would indicate that the goals of their authors and expectations of their audiences were still met. More likely, the texts have been manipulated throughout transmission with the addition and subtraction of material and wholesale reframing of their content – as shown in passing in our previous discussions.

At this point, I believe we have successfully set the stage for our discussion. We have identified the problem with the existing treatment of primary source material in studies of the war-band, in particular the failure to properly differentiate between heroic literature and other source material. We have also defined the war-band for the purpose of this thesis, and given a brief review of the sources chosen for our investigation. At this juncture we may now proceed to our primary task, the

⁴⁷ Henderson, pp. xxiv-xxx.

comparison of the heroic image and historical reality of the early medieval Insular war-band.

Chapter Two - The Size of Warrior Groups

The size of a group of combatants – the number of warriors who comprise it – offers a good place to begin a comparison between the image of such bodies within the heroic literature and other textual sources. The probability that the manpower of a real-life host would serve as one of the first things to strike contemporary observers (and thus perhaps find expression in the poetry and sagas of this era) gives a strong justification for our choice. Also, this chapter will allow us to perform a simple ‘test run’ of the method which will be utilized throughout this thesis.

As noted in the Introduction, many modern scholars tend to accept the basic historicity of the primary sources in their description of warfare and its participants during the early historical Insular world. The question of the size of military forces during this time is no exception.¹ For an example clearly illuminating such a tendency, we can look at the early scholarly treatment given to a group of Welsh poems known collectively as *The Gododdin*. Many of the various *awdl* constituting this work revolve around an expedition undertaken by a war-band numbering three hundred warriors to a place called Catraeth, where they nearly perished to a man in combat with a horde of enemies said to number in the thousands.²

The editor and translator of the first modern edition of this work, Sir Ifor Williams, saw absolutely no reason to view the tale as anything but an accurate record of a past event, in which a force of exactly 300 men launched an attack upon an army many times larger. This decision forced him to put forward several propositions to account for such a seemingly suicidal attack – in particular that the battle was one in which ‘a troop of picked and disciplined cavalry, well armoured in mail coats, doubtless vastly superior tactically’ sought to destroy ‘an ill-armed and

¹ For some scholars who do so with heroic literature and various forms of poetry, see H.M. Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation* (Cambridge, 1924), p. 152, Kenneth Jackson, *GOSP*, pp. 3-37, Sir Ifor Williams, *Canu Anierin*, pp. xlv ff (cited here through Jackson, *GOSP*, p. 14) and *BWP*, p. 66-7, 77. More recently, see H.E. Davidson, ‘The Training of Warriors’, in *WWASE*, pp. 11-23, Stephen S. Evans, *Lords of Battle: Image and Reality of the Comitatus in Dark-Age Britain*, pp. 29-30 and possibly Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present* (Maynooth, 2000), pp. 207, 209, and Richard Sharpe, ‘Hiberno-Latin Laicus, Irish Láech and the Devil’s Men’, *Ériu* 30 (1979), pp. 75-92 (84).

² Although note that a few verses give their numbers as 303 or 363, while the number of survivors is alternately given as 1 or 3.

ill-disciplined rabble of infantry'.³ Another result of this acceptance of the basic historicity of a Gododdin war-band of 300 men was his suggestion that this was the fixed size for all real-life early medieval Welsh *teulu*.⁴

More recently, some scholars have questioned the validity of this straightforward approach towards those numbers given for military forces in the 'heroic' literary sources. Leslie Alcock expressed some reservations about the number of combatants who rode to Catraeth according to *The Gododdin* and suggested that the number 300 likely reflected an early medieval 'fascination with the mystical number three seen repeatedly in poetry and literature'.⁵ Other historians and literary critics who remain leery of the historical accuracy for such enumerations of men by heroic literature have also proposed a poetic or 'mystical' consideration for the numbers chosen, although as a rule they resist the temptation to delve further into an in-depth discussion of this 'mystical' nature.⁶

Quite a few researchers studying the early medieval Insular world seem unwilling to entirely give up the promise of information held out by such texts, despite the aforementioned realization that these numbers do not necessarily give us an accurate record of the manpower of a military force. Returning to our example of *The Gododdin*, some academics have argued that the poet chose the number 300 as an accurate approximation of the number of men in the war-band.⁷ Others have seen

³ Williams, *Canu Anierin*, pp. xlvi ff (cited here through *GOSP*, p. 14).

⁴ Williams, *Canu Anierin*, pp. xlvi, particularly lv (cited here through *GOSP*, p. 16). In this same argument, Williams also refers to an early Welsh text, which refers to three royal dynasties in Southern Scotland, each with 300 warriors. Elsewhere Williams stated that the Gododdin band of 300 noble youths was 'the pattern for every retinue' (*BWP*, p. 66-7, 77).

⁵ Leslie Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare among the Britons and Saxons* (Cardiff, 1987), pp. 300-1.

⁶ Many also restrict such an assumption to the numbers three, four and twelve. See Rachel Bromwich (ed. and trans.), *Trioedd ynys Prydein: the triads of the island of Britain*, 3rd edition (Cardiff, 2006), p. liii, Sean Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions, 633-1283* (Cardiff, 2004), p. 23, Guy Halsall, *WSBW*, p. 121, and Brendan O'Hehir, 'What is the Gododdin?', in *EWP*, pp. 57-95 (72). Halsall notes the 'biblical and christological' significance of such figures (*WSBW*, p. 121), while Bromwich sees in the use of three a Celtic 'predilection for triple groupings' (Bromwich, *Trioedd ynys Prydein*, p. liii). Interestingly, L.M. Larson concluded that the poet who composed the *Fight at Finnsburh* arbitrarily chose to number of Hnaef's followers sixty without any historical, poetic or cultural considerations (Larson, *The King's Household in England Before the Norman Conquest* (Madison, 1904), fn. 86, p. 94).

⁷ Although Stephen S. Evans sees the number 300 as an ideal which elevated the Gododdin war-band as a truly legendary retinue that was far larger than any which the poem's real-life audience would have personally experienced (Evans, *Lords of Battle*, pp. 29-30), a result of his opinion that sixth- and seventh-century war-bands typically numbered in the dozens. See also Aitchison, *The Picts and The Scots at War*, pp. 27-8, 32-3.

a group which consisted of 300 chieftains, with the assumption that each brought his own small retinue, bringing the force's strength more in line with that of their enemy.⁸

An in-depth look into some of the numbers more commonly chosen to represent the strength of military bodies may go some way in

This continuing attachment for using heroic literature as a means to determine the size of real-life military bodies (coupled with a lack of investigation into other reasons why the authors of these sources chose to utilize certain numbers to represent these groups) demands a more in-depth look into the numerical presentation of such groups in our literary sources. First, however, we must address two other bodies of evidence – the arguments of those scholars who have attempted to gauge the size of such groups without reference to heroic literature, and those textual sources of a primarily historical or legal character that touch upon the same topic. Only after considering this evidence will we proceed to an in-depth look at the numbers within the heroic literary sources.

I. The size of warrior groups outside heroic literature

Those historians and literary critics who avoid using literary sources are forced to rely upon an even more select body of data than that mined by their colleagues who do so. Unfortunately, this has often caused a single piece of evidence or assertion by a previous researcher to be stretched over a wide chronological and spatial range. As an example one may consider the subsequent use of a hypothetical model for the size of the war-bands participating in the *adventus Saxonum* proposed by Sonia Chadwick Hawkes, in which the initial invasion fleets of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes numbered from eighty to two-hundred warriors.⁹ Several scholars have subsequently relied heavily upon this model in their arguments regarding the size of the real-life retinues and even armies in the Insular world as far afield as

⁸ This view was popularized by Kenneth Jackson in *GOSP*, pp. 13-8. Richard Abels usually concentrates upon historical and legal material but follows Jackson's proposal (*LMOASE*, p. 36).

⁹ Sonia Chadwick Hawkes, 'Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England: An Introduction', in *WWASE*, pp. 1-9 (3).

ninth-century southern Britain or twelfth-century Wales.¹⁰ Yet Chadwick Hawkes reached her estimate by assuming a notional crew of forty men per ship (based upon the ship excavated at Sutton Hoo) and then multiplying this figure by the two to five ships found in the *ASC* record of these invasions.¹¹ While Chadwick Hawkes's initial conclusion failed to consider the historicity of the fifth- and sixth-century entries in the *ASC* or the widely varying capacity of ships dating to the first millennium excavated in northern Europe, her followers have compounded these oversights by using her model war-band in entirely different milieus.¹²

i. Historical and legal sources - the size of war-bands

Exact numerical headcounts for a group of warriors are actually quite rare in the historical sources, perhaps resulting in the reliance upon other sources shown by scholars looking into this question. During our period of study the *ASC* and various Irish annalistic writings only provide real integers for six military forces:

1. The oft-quoted fight between King Cynewulf of Wessex and the ætheling Cyneheard found under the *ASC* entries for the years 755 and 786. These record how Cyneheard and his eighty-five followers fell upon Cynewulf and the 'small following' that had accompanied him on a visit to his mistress's house. The attackers slay Cynewulf and his guards but are themselves overwhelmed by the rest of Cynewulf's men who were staying nearby. A single man from each of the two massacred groups survives.¹³

¹⁰ For instance, S. Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, p. 23, Evans, *Lords of Battle*, p. 27. Abels writing a year before Chadwick Hawkes also held up these two to five ship fleets as proof that the small armies they transported remained believable to contemporaries up to Alfred's time (*LMOASE*, p. 35).

¹¹ Chadwick Hawkes, 'Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England', p. 3. See pp. 23-7, below, for more information on the average size of ships during this period.

¹² The accuracy of the earlier *ASC* entries has become the subject of debate in recent decades; for some good criticisms of the historicity of these early entries, see Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The settlement of England in Bede and the *Chronicle*', *ASE* 12 (1983), pp. 1-42, and Barbara Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1995), pp. 32-4, although questions have been raised by scholars as early as John Mitchell Kemble in 1849.

¹³ *ASC* 757, *ASC* 786. Some confusion exists over which force had eighty-five men as the entry for 786 is notoriously unclear – 'Here Cyneheard killed King Cynewulf, and he was killed there and 84

2. The *AU* entry for the year 868 reports that ‘Aed son of Niall won a battle ... against the Uí Néill of Brega, the Laigin, and a large force of foreigners, i.e. three hundred or more’.¹⁴ The *CS* entry agrees, and adds that Flann son of Conaing (the king of Brega) led 5,000 men, while Aed son of Niall only had 1,000.¹⁵
3. The *AU* entry for 1014 notes that when Brian Boru faced his enemies at Clontarf, he found ‘All the Laigin were assembled to meet him, and the foreigners of Áth Cliath, and a like number of the foreigners of Scandinavia, i.e. to the number of 1,000 breastplates’.¹⁶ The *CS* entry differs a bit, in that it numbers all of the foreigners at ‘a thousand *men in* breastplates’.¹⁷
4. The Uí Néill prince Aed ua Néill embarked on a raid in 1021 with twelve score warriors.¹⁸
5. The *AT* entry for 1067 notes that Aed son of Art ua Ruairc ravaged Connacht with ‘three score hundreds’; the *CS* entry for the same year agrees.¹⁹
6. In *AI* entry 1103.6, a king sets out to sea with a crew of twenty-five men.

From these admittedly sparse references we have figures which range from twenty-five to five thousand.

The Cynewulf and Cyneheard episode noted above has become quite important in arguments regarding the size of armies active in the early medieval Insular world, and indeed, throughout all of Europe during this period. Many view the number given for Cyneheard’s followers as particularly reliable due to its precise appearance, and see his nearly successful attempt to seize the kingship of Wessex with just eighty-five men as an indication that military forces in the early medieval

men with him’; most modern editors prefer to see the eighty-four slain men as Cyneheard’s followers. For an overview, see S.D. White, ‘Kinship and Lordship in Early Medieval England: The Story of Sigebert, Cynewulf, and Cyneheard’, *Viator* 20 (1989), pp. 1-18 (n. 17 on p. 3).

¹⁴ *AU* 868.4.

¹⁵ *CS* 868.

¹⁶ *AU* 1014.2.

¹⁷ *CS* 1014.

¹⁸ *AU* 1021.3.

¹⁹ *AT* 1067.5, *CS* 1067.

Insular world were small affairs.²⁰ Such a judgement overlooks the fact that Cyneheard only had to overcome a small proportion of Cynewulf's *personal* war-band in his initial attack (a 'small following' [*lytle werode*] of 'king's thegns' [*cyninges þegnas*] in the words of the annalist); the rest of Cynewulf's retinue, described as 'the king's thegns who had been left behind', had little difficulty quashing Cyneheard's men when it arrived the following day.²¹ While the story demonstrates that a war-band could number eighty-five men, it by no means precludes a larger one, nor does it rule out much larger military forces - one would expect Cynewulf to have gathered a much larger host consisting of his personal war-band surround by those of his nobles if he expected an attack.²²

Before moving onto a discussion of the casualty figures given by these same sources, I would like to briefly address another that likely pre-dates our period but which has also found its way into the armoury of those arguing for small armies during this period. Clause 13.1 from a law code attributed to the West Saxon king Ine states briefly 'We call up to seven men thieves; from seven to thirty-five a band; above that it is an army.'²³ The original words used for thieves, a band and an army are 'Peofas', 'hloð' and 'here' respectively.²⁴ While this source is usually dated to the period from 688-694, it only survives in an appendix to a body of laws which Alfred the Great promulgated in the late ninth century, indicating that it may have held a continuing relevance throughout the later first millennium.²⁵ A superficial reading of this law (assuming its continued relevance) certainly strengthens the case

²⁰ For secondary sources which utilize this episode in such a manner, see the following: Abels, *LMOASE*, pp. 35-6, Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare among the Britons and Saxons*, pp. 300-1, S. Davies, *Welsh Military Institution*, p. 23, Evans, *Lords of Battle*, pp. 26, 28.

²¹ ASC 757. See Janet Bately (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Vol. 3: MS. A* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 36-7, for the original text; the other versions are almost identical. *Werod* typically means either 'throng, company, band, multitude' or 'host, army, troop, legion'. Halsall also notes this problem with the prevailing interpretations of this event regarding army sizes (*WSBW*, p. 123).

²² Once again, Halsall anticipates my arguments in *WSBW*, p. 123.

²³ *The laws of Ine*, in *EHD I*, pp. 364-72 (366).

²⁴ F.L. Attenborough, *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 40-1.

²⁵ Whitelock, *EHD I*, p. 364; she suggests Alfred may have seen fit to edit Ine's laws when he included them with his own. Richard Abels reports that David Dumville stated in a paper his belief that Ine's laws were an interpolation dating almost wholly to Alfred's time or later, a point with which Abels disagrees heartily (*LMOASE*, pp. 208-9).

that all gatherings of warriors for our period were quite small affairs, and it has frequently been employed to bolster just such an argument.²⁶

Several more recent historians, however, have put forward a more plausible explanation for the law's definition of such a small group of men as an army. They have noted that clauses Ine 14 and Ine 15 decree various penalties for men who commit crimes as a member of one of the three groups defined by Ine 13.1.²⁷ Those actions committed while part of a band receive the lightest punishments, followed by offenses carried out while part of an army, with membership in a group of thieves bringing the harshest punishments.²⁸ Thus, it seems that clause 13.1 actually serves as part of a mechanism of social control devised to simultaneously deter 'secret' crimes and curtail overly-large private war-bands, rather than giving a purely accurate indication of the size of contemporary military bodies.²⁹

ii. Historical and legal sources - casualty figures

We are better served by our historical sources in the enumeration of men slain in battle, with well over eighty examples found, ranging from a 6 to 20,000 casualties.³⁰ Unfortunately, such material has proven difficult to use in attempts to

²⁶ Abels, *LMOASE*, p. 35, Leslie Alcock, 'Her ... gefeagt wid Walas: Aspects of the warfare of Saxons and Britons, *BBCS* 27 (November, 1977), pp. 413-424 (423), Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare among the Britons and Saxons*, pp. 300-1, S. Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, pp. 22-3, 26, P.H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, Second Edition (London, 1971), p. 123. Note, however, that Alcock later modified his views – as shall be seen shortly.

²⁷ Edward James, *Britain in the First Millennium* (London, 2001), p. 126, and Simon Keynes, 'England, c.700 – c.900', in *TNCMH II*, pp. 18-42 (26-7). Guy Halsall also admits this possibility (*WSBW*, p. 59).

²⁸ *Laws of Ine*, p. 366.

²⁹ Guy Halsall, *WSBW*, p. 59, James, *Britain in the First Millennium*, p. 126, and Simon Keynes, 'England, c.700 – c.900', pp. 26-7.

³⁰ Interestingly, a number of these figures can be seen to 'repeat' throughout these sources, an observation we shall return later in this chapter. For the relevant entries giving casualty figures, see *AU* 837.3 (*CS* 837), *AU* 847.4 (*CS* 847), *AU* 848.4 (*CS* 848), *AU* 848.5 (*CS* 848), *AU* 848.6 (*CS* 848), *AU* 848.7 (*CS* 848), *FA* 235 [852], *CS* 858, *FA* 260 [858], *AU* 866.4 (*CS* 866), *AU* 867.8, *AU* 868.4 (*CS* 868), *AFM* 876.12, *ASC* 878, *AFM* 888.6, *AFM* 891.15, *AFM* 892.9, *ASC* 896, *CS* 896, *AFM* 900.10, *CS* 904, *CS* 908 (*FA* 423 [908]), *CS* 910, *AU* 914.7, *AI* 917.1, *AU* 917.3 (*CS* 917), *AU* 924.1 (*CS* 924), *AU* 926.2 (*CS* 926), *CS* 926, *CS* 930, *CS* 933 (*AFM* 933.10), *AU* 933.1, *AU* 933.3 (*AFM* 931.12, *CS* 933), *CS* 939 (*AFM* 937.7), *AI* 941.1 (*CS* 941), *CS* 941 (*AFM* 939.10), *AFM* 941.8, *CS* 944 (*AFM* 945.4), *AU* 948.1 (*AFM* 946.8, *CS* 948), *AU* 950.5, *AFM* 960.14, *AFM* 961.11, *CS* 966 (*AFM* 964.7), *AFM* 972.11, *AI* 972.1, *AU* 986.2 (*AFM* 985.8), *AU* 987.1, *AU* 987.3 (*AFM* 986.7), *AFM* 989.4, *AU* 996.3 (*AFM* 995.7), *ASC* A 1001, *AFM* 1004.8, *AFM* 1005.5, *CS* 1005, *AU* 1013.5 (*AFM*

reconstruct the full size of a real-life host or army, as the researcher has to guess what percentage of the group was slain; Alcock has claimed a casualty rate of about 10% amongst participants in early medieval battles in northern Britain, but little agreement has been reached regarding such estimates.³¹ Making the task of estimating the size of such groups even more difficult, in many cases different witnesses give radically different sizes for the same force.

This disagreement between texts may be significant as it not only calls into question the historical validity of these numbers but also raises the question of why they differ. Was this difference due to scribal error, purposeful editing of accurate numbers or from the existence of completely independent informers for the same event? To provide just three examples of this phenomenon:

1. In a matching set of entries for 848 that record an Irish king's victory over the Norse 'in the oakwood of Dísert Do-Channa', the *CS* claims 'twelve score' [*da ficet dec*] Norse were slain, while the *AU* give the figure 'twelve hundred' [*da .c. deac*].³²
2. According to *AU* 926.2, Muirchertach son of Niall routed a group of foreigners, in which two hundred were beheaded [*ubi .cc. decollati sunt*]. The *CS* entry exaggerates the decapitated foreigners to eight hundred [*marbta ocht ccéd*], and names three of their leaders who also died.³³
3. The *AFM* recall that in a battle which occurred in 1146 'two hundred persons' [*dá chéd*] were slain, while the *CS* accounts specifies the number 'two hundred and thirty-five' [*.cc. & xxxu*].³⁴

1012.8), *CS* 1013, *AU* 1014.2 (*AFM* 1013.11, *CS* 1014), *AFM* 1024.7, *AU* 1025.5, *AU* 1032.2, *AFM* 1032.10, *AT* 1044.3, *AI* 1045.5 (*AFM* 1045.12), *AT* 1045.10, *AU* 1054.6, *AU* 1055.3 (*AFM* 1055.16), *AU* 1056.10, *AU* 1063.5, *AFM* 1076.10, *AI* 1084.2, *AI* 1088.2, *AT* 1088.3 (*CS* 1088), *AU* 1094.5 (*AFM* 1094.10), *AU* 1098.2 (*AFM* 1098.2), *AU* 1101.5 (*AFM* 1101.7), *AU* 1121.2, *AU* 1128.7, *AU* 1130.4, *AT* 1140.4, *AT* 1141.5, *AT* 1145.9 (*AFM* 1145.12), *CS* 1146 (*AFM* 1146.3), *AT* 1151.3, *AU* 1166.10 (*AT* 1166.3), *AU* 1167.5.

³¹ Cited by Jenny Rowland, 'Warfare and Horses in the Gododdin and the Problem of Catraeth', *CMCS* 30 (Winter 1995), pp. 30-1). Stenton appears to regard as likely casualty rates closer to 15%; when writing about a Viking defeat in 878, in which 800 men were slain, he suggests that a 'considerable part of the host' survived and that such groups probably numbered around 5,000 men (Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 243). Guy Halsall notes, probably correctly, that we can rarely be sure of casualty rates in early medieval clashes (*WSBW*, p. 212-3).

³² *AU* 848.6, *CS* 848.

³³ *AU* 926.2, *CS* 926.

³⁴ *AFM* 1146.3, *CS* 1146.

Such discrepancies are not limited to Irish sources – when the *ASC* describes a violent brawl between the followers of Eustace of Boulogne and the townsmen of Dover in 1051, the D and E versions report that he lost seven and nineteen companions respectively.³⁵ As a final observation regarding the annals in particular, the *AU* entries for 848 witness four separate enumerations for slain Norsemen, out of a total of six such tallies for the entirety of the ninth century.³⁶ The *CS* also records four in 848, one before, and three later in the century.³⁷ Was this merely the result of an annalist who took a particular interest in the number of men slain on the battlefield, or was he trying to make some sort of a point?

iii. Archaeological, anthropological and other data

Chadwick Hawkes was not alone in her attempts to derive the size of military forces in this era from a combination of historical enumerations of the number of ships in a fleet with the theoretical size of the average ship during the first and early second millennium. John Bannerman used a similar logic in his study of the *Senchus fer nAlban*, tenth-century Irish text that appears to list the obligation of military service for three divisions of the Dál Riata – Cenél nGabráin, Cenél Loairn and Cenél nÓengusa.³⁸ Much like the model proposed by Chadwick Hawkes, Bannerman's estimate greatly influenced subsequent academics. Leslie Alcock follows Bannerman in his assessment of Dál Riata military strength, and applies a similar logic to conclude the number of troops that the various British and Pictish

³⁵ *ASC* D 1052, *ASC* E 1048.

³⁶ See *AU* 866.4, *AU* 868.4, for the other two.

³⁷ See *CS* 847, *CS* 866, *CS* 868 and *CS* 896 for the others.

³⁸ John Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada* (Edinburgh, 1974), pp. 133-54 (esp. 140, 146-8 and 150-4). Bannerman also uses various Irish law tracts such as *Críth Gablach* and *Uraicecht Becc* to refine the basic information in the text. For instance, while he noted that the document itself assessed Cenél nGabrain 300 men, Cenél nÓengusa 500 men and Cenél Loairn 600 men (plus an additional 100 men from the Airgialla), he assumed that the first figure given must be in error due to his assumption the text dated to a time when Cenél nGabrain was the most powerful Dál Riata kindred. As a result, he used ship assessments later in the text to produce the assessments of 800, 600 and 600+100 men for the respective kindreds – numbers which he felt agreed with the size of a *túath* (700) in the law texts (pp. 147-8). Likewise, he assumed that the ships assessed by *Senchus fern Alban*, each described as a 'seven-bencher', had four rowers per bench and two steersmen, based upon later Norse ships (pp. 150-4).

kingdoms could muster.³⁹ For the Gododdin war-band he suggests a minimum of 800 men (to match the Irish royal hosting used by Bannerman) and a maximum of 2,000 men (approximately equal to the manpower available to Dál Riata).⁴⁰ Likewise, he equated each Pictish kingdom with a *tuath*, and thus capable of raising about the same number of combatants as any one of the three Dál Riatan kindreds.⁴¹ Nick Aitchison goes further, suggesting that each ship referred to in the *Senchus fer nAlban* could also carry up to two relief crews, which would effectively triple Dál Riata's naval levy (and thus military recruitment) to 6,345 warriors.⁴² As such a figure would imply a military obligation from seven to twenty times greater than Anglo-Saxon England, he concludes that it likely was achieved by making all 'free grades' of society liable for military service.⁴³

Similar efforts have focused upon the various Viking armies which are active throughout the Insular world during the ninth through eleventh centuries.⁴⁴ Like Chadwick Hawkes, most who attempt to estimate the size of Viking forces do so by combining the notional carrying capacity of a Scandinavian ship with the number of ships engaged in an expedition according to annalistic or chronicle evidence. Archaeological evidence suggests that such vessels could carry from thirty to forty men on average, with some evidence for larger ships which could transport up to sixty.⁴⁵ Unlike Richard Abels and Chadwick Hawkes, however, those studying these

³⁹ Leslie Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests* (Edinburgh, 2003), pp. 154-5.

⁴⁰ Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests*, p. 155.

⁴¹ Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests*, p. 156.

⁴² Aitchison, *The Picts and the Scots at War* (Stroud, 2003), pp. 16-7.

⁴³ Aitchison, *The Picts and the Scots at War*, pp. 17-8. The figure reached by Aitchison seems untenable, however, as it makes several unverifiable assumptions (relief crews, that all rowers were also warriors and that some of the basic statements in the *Senchus* itself are errors) and gives Dál Riata a level of military service that seems far too high. Indeed, Aitchison admits that this suggests that Dál Riata was 'unique in its ability to raise large armies'. He proceeds to apply this same conclusion to Dál Riata's Pictish neighbours.

⁴⁴ Gneuss, *Language and History in Early England*, pp. 117-37 (135-6), Paul Vinogradoff, *English Society in the Eleventh Century* (Oxford, 1908), p. 28. Against this one has P.H. Sawyer – while he saw the archaeological evidence as solid, he questioned the validity of the written sources (Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 2nd Edition (London, 1971), pp. 120-32).

⁴⁵ See Simon Coupland, 'The Vikings in Francia and Anglo-Saxon England to 911', in *TNCMH II*, pp. 190-201 (194), Halsall, *WSBW*, p. 123, Helen Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare*, p. 147, Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, p. 71, and Alex Woolf, 'An Interpolation in the Text of Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae*', in *Peritia* 16 (2002), pp. 161-7 (166). Woolf in turn cites John Haywood, *Dark Age naval power: a reassessment of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon seafaring activity* (London, 1991), p. 60. Coupland argues for a 'standard' size thirty man ship. Sawyer equivocates quite a bit, as he acknowledges the surviving evidence for sixty man ships, yet he remains wedded to the concept of

later fleets tend to view them as a composite military force of small war-bands (typically occupying a single or perhaps a few ships) rather than a monolithic one under the direct command of a single lord.⁴⁶ Thus they theorize a collection of small war-bands numbering thirty to sixty men which together comprise fleets reckoned in the hundreds or even thousands. As an aside, a few historians have warned against basing the ‘average’ ship on those few excavated in recent times although their own figures tend to remain in the same range.⁴⁷

Purely archaeological attempts to suggest the size of the early Insular war-band also suffer from many similar problems. For instance, John Hines suggested a size range for such groups in line with that proposed by Chadwick Hawkes, through his investigation of several weapon deposit sites in Denmark.⁴⁸ He assumed that these were ceremonial deposits of equipment looted from a defeated war-band, that the amount of shields and weapons sets indicated a defeated group of eighty to two hundred men before applying this same size range to Anglo-Saxon England. His conclusions have figured in more recent discussion of the war-band’s size yet Hines brushes aside the possibility that the bulk of a defeated war-band could have fled the field – while questionable, later medieval casualty rates would then suggest a force of 400 – 1000 men, with those proposed by Alcock pointing to an even greater 800-2000!⁴⁹

thirty man maximum crews. Nicholson proposes that while the ships in our period started out with a thirty to forty man capacity, they were much larger by the end of it.

⁴⁶ Niels Lund addresses this issue in his article ‘The Danish Perspective’. He notes that the *Annals of St Bertin* described how a Viking force under Weland divided into a number of *sodalitates* when it took winter quarters in 861 in the Seine region. He renders *sodalitates* as ‘warrior guilds’, and suggests these groups were equivalent to either the *liðs* found in later runic evidence or the crews of single ships. He also sees the organization of the Viking army of Ashdown as further evidence for such a composite force, with its division into two divisions, one led by two kings and the other by a number of earls. See Lund, ‘The Danish Perspective’, in *TBOM* 991, pp. 114-42 (114-5). Judith Jesch reaches similar conclusions regarding the Viking fleets (referred to as either *lið* or *leithangr*), which she sees as largely comprised of smaller groups of *lið* made up of close-knit *drengs* (warriors) (Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, pp. 186, 187-9, 195-203, 216-31, 237-9).

⁴⁷ Stenton warns against just this, although he uses the loss of 800 men from a Viking fleet of 23 ships to suggest a minimum of 36 men per ship with the possibility of a considerably higher capacity (Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, fn. 1 on p. 243).

⁴⁸ John Hines, ‘The Military Contexts of the *adventus Saxonum*: some continental evidence’, in *WWASE*, pp. 25-48 (35-38). He reached precisely the same figure, and Chadwick Hawkes used his estimates as a support for her similar conclusions (Chadwick Hawkes, ‘Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England’, p. 3).

⁴⁹ For instance, Sean Davies, above, and Evans, *Lords of Battle*, pp. 31-2, use these numbers.

Against Hines we have the excavations at Repton carried out by Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjolbye-Biddle which revealed the remains of at least 200 young men of a ‘massively robust non-local population type, parallels for which can be found in Scandinavia’ who were buried in a mass grave and showed almost no signs of a violent death.⁵⁰ The Biddles propose that based upon the context of remains that this burial took place in the winter of 873-4 upon the split up of the *micel here*, although it is uncertain if the bodies were those from non-battle deaths over the last several years or merely from that winter.⁵¹ If so, these remains come from an army rather than a single war-band, but it may give us an idea of scale.

The work of Leslie Alcock also shows how interpretations by an archaeologist can change over time. In a northern British context, he inclined early on towards figures roughly comparable to those cited by Abels, Davies and the like, adding to these his analysis of the floor space at the great hall at Yeavering, which could allow 120 to 150 people to feast with decent personal space.⁵² In this regard, he viewed a Gododdin war-band of three hundred and three warriors as perfectly believable, yet by his last publication he had radically altered his opinion. Instead of an elite force of 303 warriors, he suggested that the Gododdin host was more likely a conglomeration of multiple war-bands, with the nobles involved bringing along their own retainers, for a total strength somewhere in the neighbourhood of 800 – 2000 fighting men.⁵³ Finally, Chadwick Hawkes proposed the existence of a smaller, ‘sub-war-band’ based upon her experience in mock combat exercises with the re-enactment group *The Dark Age Society*. She concluded that such sub-divisions would number no more than nine or twelve men due to the need to recognize a companion from an enemy in the fog of war, as a group of this size could be ‘familiar with every detail of each other’s clothing, equipment and individual styles of fighting’.⁵⁴

So, from the admittedly sparse evidence we can conclude that the average war-band when enumerated by an annalist or chronicler ranged from 25 to 300 men,

⁵⁰ Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjolbye-Biddle, ‘Repton and the Vikings’, *Antiquity* 66:250 (1992), pp. 36-51 (42-5).

⁵¹ Biddle and Kjolbye-Biddle, ‘Repton and the Vikings’, pp. 45-8.

⁵² Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare among the Britons and Saxons*, pp. 300-1.

⁵³ Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare among the Britons and Saxons*, pp. 300-1, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests*, pp. 155-57.

⁵⁴ Chadwick Hawkes, ‘Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England’, pp. 4-5.

with an average of 137. Likewise, when these same writers give us casualty figures, we have between 196 and 254 men slain with 78 to 88 men killed per leader. More importantly, we have observed that even these ‘historical’ presentations of the size of the war-band demand a critical eye. Having summarized the existing secondary literature of note and performed my own brief analysis of the historical and legal sources, we may proceed to the heroic imagery of the war-band’s strength.

II. The Heroic Image of the Size of Warrior Groups

While the size of the war-band often finds a rather nebulous expression within the heroic literature of the Insular World with the authors frequently taking recourse in descriptive adjectives such as ‘meagre’, ‘small’, ‘great’, or ‘innumerable’ when they feel the need to give some idea of its numerical strength (a problem which could apply to their treatment of any military force). That said, we do possess enough instances in which the authors give a numerical head-count of a war-band to allow some discussion of the role that these integers may play. Such sums can occupy an extensive range from as low as a band of nine men to as high as the twenty-one hundred men who comprised each of the ‘Three Faithful and Faithless war-bands of Britain’, yet several numbers see particularly heavy service in the literature.⁵⁵ These include the integers three, nine, twelve, fifteen, twenty-seven, thirty, fifty, sixty, one hundred and fifty, three hundred, seven hundred and twenty-one hundred – all of which we shall examine in roughly ascending order. While several of these figures seem quite precise and ostensibly give us accurate information about the size of war-bands, we shall see that such a notion is likely erroneous.

i. Three, its square and cube

⁵⁵ For the lord and his sole follower, see ‘The Three Juvencus Englynion’, in *EWSP*, p. 510. For the twenty-one hundred men war-bands, see *Welsh Triads* by Bromwich. Note this does not include non war-bands, such as the 54,000 enemy warriors who fought the Gododdin war-band (*The Gododdin*, CA.xciv)!

The number three finds little usage in the heroic literature by itself but frequently serves as a multiplier for groups of warriors, such as three times fifty – we will examine this role shortly.⁵⁶ It also serves as the base number in a rather intriguing numerical construct found primarily within the Irish sagas, in which the author utilizes its square of nine and cube of twenty-seven.⁵⁷ We find an example using both of these integers at an early point in the epic *Tain Bo Cuailnge* (*TBC*) when the Ulster exile Fergus recounts Cú Chulainn's boyhood exploits to King Ailill and Queen Medb. In one of his early feats of prowess, the hero drove off a force of twenty seven marauders (the cube of three) who had attacked Ulster, killing nine of them (the square of three) in the process.⁵⁸ Our erstwhile hero encounters this number complex again in *The Wooing of Emer by Cú Chulainn*, when Emer tells him that to gain her in marriage he must slay 'three times nine men' with one blow.⁵⁹ Yet the canny princess adds that he must leave alive one man in the centre of each group of nine, thus sparing three men!⁶⁰

We find small retinues of nine men at several points in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (*TBDD*), typically in the service of several princes in attendance upon the great Irish king Conaire.⁶¹ In one particular case the author makes his mathematical method of reckoning quite clear, when he states that three visiting English princes each have two foster-brothers in tow, so that we have three groups of three comprising a total attendance of nine.⁶² The cube of three does appear once within this saga as well, when we read about the 'robber-band' of the three sons of Báithis of Britain which numbers three *enneads*, or three nines.⁶³ We see nine and twenty-seven in the *Death of Conchobar* and the *Death of Cet mac Mágach* respectively – in the first, the Connacht warriors Cet travels across the green of Emain with the heads

⁵⁶ Halsall notes its 'biblical and Christological significance' (*WSBW*, p. 121).

⁵⁷ Richard Sharpe does briefly note that the men engaged in *díberg* in Old Irish hagiographical works frequently appear in multiples of three, most commonly nine, suggesting a 'ritual background' (Sharpe, 'Hiberno-Latin Laicus, Irish Láech and the Devil's Men', *Ériu* 30 (1979), pp. 75-92 (84)).

⁵⁸ *TBC I*, p. 140.

⁵⁹ *The Wooing of Emer by Cú Chulainn*, 27, p. 150.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *TBDD*, pp. 175-6.

⁶² *TBDD*, 116, p. 291.

⁶³ *TBDD*, 137, pp. 310-1. Stokes uses the Greek word *ennead*, or group of nine, to render the same word in Irish.

of three Ulster warriors, while at the beginning of the latter work he has gathered the heads of ‘thrice nine men of Ulster’ in his foray.⁶⁴

The Irish tale *Fled Bricrenn* also makes use of such arithmetical exercises at a late point in its narration. In this story, three rival champions undergo a series of martial challenges to determine which of them deserves the *curadmír*, or champion’s cut of meat, from a feast held by the troublemaker Bricriu. As one such test, each man agrees to serve a single night’s guard duty over the fortress of Cú Roi, one of the judges of the event. The first two contenders fail in their endeavour while Cú Chulainn succeeds, slaying the nine foes who defeated his rivals – ‘three goblins, three ox-feeders and the three sons of a siren’ [*trí Glais Sescind Úairbeóil, ocus trí Búageltaig Breg ocus tri Maic Dornmair*].⁶⁵ These nine [*nónbur*] monsters obviously form ‘three threes’, but the author recounts that after they fell another nine shouted at Cú Chulainn, so that ‘In like manner he killed the three nines, making one cairn of them’.⁶⁶ The author again refers to ‘three nines’ when Cú Roi enters his stronghold the next day bearing ‘the standard of the “three nines”’ [*bratgaisced ná tri nónbor*] slain by Cú Chulainn.⁶⁷ While odd increase in Cú Chulainn’s foes may arise from scribal error or the conflation of two versions of this story, but in any case it also further demonstrates the clear manipulation involved in the generation of these numbers. We also find nine used once in *The Gododdin*, when we read that the hero Cynddilig attacked ‘before nine champions’.⁶⁸ Interestingly, with the exception of this and *TBDD*, all of the instances of this ‘three complex’ involve men who are antagonists – perhaps supporting Sharpe’s suggestion that it is attached to notions of *díberga*. An alternate origin may lay in Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*, wherein he explains the process of squaring and cubing numbers.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ *Death of Conchobar Version A and The Death of Cet mac Mágach*, in Kuno Meyer (ed.), *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes* (Dublin, 1906), pp. 6 and 37.

⁶⁵ *FB*, XV.83, pp. 104-7. Literally, ‘the three grey waste hour-mouth’, ‘the three ox-battle-pain-troop of the hill (or perhaps Brega or deceit)’ and ‘the three sons of the big fist’.

⁶⁶ *FB*, XV.84, pp. 106-7. He also kills a hapless sea serpent that wanders by later in the night, but this is obviously a separate challenge from the nine foes.

⁶⁷ *FB*, XV.89, p. 112-3.

⁶⁸ *The Gododdin*, CA.lxxx.

⁶⁹ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, III.vii.4 (p. 92).

ii. Twelve and fifteen

The next numbers I wish to look at, twelve and fifteen, appear more universally throughout the heroic literature of the Insular world. In *Beowulf* the eponymous hero sets out on his journey to Heorot with a small group of warriors, embarking ‘as one of fifteen’.⁷⁰ The size of Beowulf’s personal retinue changes surprisingly little throughout the storyline of the poem, despite the passage of years and an assumed change in the actual personnel. A single warrior perishes during the Grendel episode, leaving the hero as one of a group of fourteen men for the remainder of his time at Heorot. When an aged Beowulf sets out fifty years later to battle a dragon he decides to bring a mere twelve companions on his quest, for we read that he ‘went as one of twelve to view the dragon [...] The thirteenth man in that band was he who had been responsible for the beginning of that strife’.⁷¹ In the end, Beowulf and one loyal thegn manage to slay the dragon as the other eleven warriors flee in terror. A mortally wounded Beowulf dies, and the eleven cowards return, leaving Wiglaf as the new apparent leader of a group of twelve men.

A comparison between Beowulf during this last episode and Christ during the last supper and subsequent betrayal in the garden is almost impossible to avoid - just as Christ led twelve disciples and was betrayed by one of them, Beowulf has twelve thegns, one of whom leads to Beowulf’s death through his actions. This similarity has been noted before, but I do not believe it has been studied in the context of a cross-Insular phenomenon.⁷² Due to the rather ambivalent nature of the motif in Beowulf (in which the majority of his war-band desert their lord in a manner similar to the flight of the twelve disciples upon the arrest of Jesus) I favour a more direct adaptation from the New Testament. The popularity of this motif, in which a lord has twelve particularly loyal and formidable champions who surround him, has long been recognized in the *chansons de geste* and other continental literature.

The world of the *chansons de geste* may have had a greater impact in the motif of twelve warriors surrounding a lord as it appears in *FB*. As Bricriu prepares

⁷⁰ *Beowulf*, ll. 205-8, p. 45.

⁷¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 2401-7, p. 149.

⁷² Klaeber also saw this but incorrectly reported eleven followers – he forgot the thief (F. Klaeber (ed. and trans.), *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (3rd Edition; Boston, 1950), p. 217).

his hall for the feast at which he will host the Ulaid, he sets up a royal couch for his royal guest Conchobar the king of the Ulster above the rest of the hall, around which he arranges ‘twelve couches of the twelve heroes of Ulster’.⁷³ Apparently, this echoes the layout of Conchobar’s own hall in *The Wooing of Emer*, in which his bed was surrounded by ‘The twelve beds of the twelve chariot-chiefs’.⁷⁴ The imagery in *FB* and *The Wooing of Emer* lack the sense of betrayal present in *Beowulf*, more closely resembling that found for Charlemagne’s twelve peers in the *chansons* – particularly as the pre-eminent warriors Cú Chulainn could quite ably serve as an effective stand-in for Roland, Charlemagne’s greatest knight. The rather late date for the surviving manuscripts which contain this epic only adds to my inclination to such a view.

iii. Thirty and sixty

The number fifteen frequently finds use as its multiples of thirty and sixty. *Beowulf* itself enumerates three groups of warriors reckoned at thirty, double the number of Beowulf’s initial band. Two of these groups are the unfortunate members of Hrothgar’s war-band devoured by Grendel during his nightly forays to Heorot.⁷⁵ In the second instance the poet betrays his doubling of fifteen to reach the number thirty as he writes that Grendel ‘slew the companions of Hrothgar’s hearth in their sleep, devoured fifteen men [...] and as many others carried away’.⁷⁶ Beowulf ‘creates’ the third group of thirty men when he hacks his way free of a band of Frisian warriors following a disastrous raid and carries away the battle-gear of thirty enemies.⁷⁷

Within the Irish milieu several groups of thirty appear as well. We read in *The Destruction of Dind Ríg* that the Irish king Cobthach Coel was burnt alive in an

⁷³ *FB*, I.2, p. 5.

⁷⁴ *Wooing of Emer*, 2, p. 69.

⁷⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 120-4, pp. 41, 109-11.

⁷⁶ *Beowulf*, ll. 1579-84, pp. 109-11.

⁷⁷ *Beowulf*, ll. 2359-62, p. 147.

iron house with thirty kings and seven hundred warriors.⁷⁸ Groups of thirty men are quite noticeable in *TBC I*. Several of these may occur as part of a larger force, as the authors will claim this as the number of men defeated by Cú Chulainn in an encounter. For instance, when one of the sons of Ailill and Medb rides against the Ulaid, Cú Chulainn kills the prince and ‘thirty horsemen of his household were submerged in the water’.⁷⁹ Does this indicate that his household numbered thirty horsemen, all of whom perished with their leader, or did only thirty men from a much larger following suffer the same fate as their lord? Either option is possible, but we find several other points in the tale where Cú Chulainn slays thirty men without a specific indication of whether or not he slew an entire group or just a portion of one.⁸⁰ Several other groups are more precisely defined – two groups of thirty men led by Ulster heroes later attack the camp of Ailill and Medb, and a party of thirty horsemen accompany Lugaid mac Nóis uí Lomairc Allchomaig when he attempts to parley with Cú Chulainn.⁸¹ At one point we also read that the men of the Connachta army dare not leave camp at night except in groups of twenty or thirty for fear of Cú Chulainn.⁸²

We also see the number thirty itself occasionally doubled to create groups of sixty. *The Fight at Finnsburh* boasts that ‘sixty conquering fighters’ serve the lord Hnaef, while *TBC I* informs us that ‘Sixty warriors of Ailill’s household formed his company’.⁸³ In both cases, the leader of such a group is of noticeably greater stature than those men commanding thirty warriors. Perhaps the authors responsible for the literature used a scheme in which fifteen men followed a young prince or lord, thirty served a more established lord and sixty served a great lord or king. We find sixty at one other point in *TBC I*, during a battle in which the author reports that three score warriors fell on each side.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ *The Destruction of Dind Ríg*, Whitley Stokes (ed.), ‘The Destruction of Dind Ríg’ in *ZCP* 3 (1901), pp. 1-14 (13).

⁷⁹ *TBC I*, p. 157.

⁸⁰ *TBC I*, pp. 158-9. The author of this recension of *TBC* frequently presents the number of men slain in an action; as these are often armies, they have far bigger numbers!

⁸¹ *TBC I*, pp. 157, 214.

⁸² *TBC I*, p. 158.

⁸³ *Fight at Finnsburh*, ll. 36-9, in John R. Clark-Hall (ed. and trans.), *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment* (Revised Edition by C.L. Wrenn; London, 1950), p. 179, and *TBC I*, p. 166.

⁸⁴ *TBC I*, p. 193.

Looking to Biblical and Classical sources we find the number thirty has a certain prominence. In the Old Testament, King David is served by a cadre of thirty great captains; intriguingly, several warriors receive praise in heroic literature that echoes given to these biblical figures as we shall see in subsequent chapters.⁸⁵ I also found a pertinent example of its use by one of the Church fathers. Isidore of Seville, in his *etymologies*, states that a squadron consists of thirty horsemen, with ten drawn from each group of a hundred men making up the ‘three hundred Roman horsemen’ comprising ‘one tribe’.⁸⁶ While Isidore’s statement may have reflected late Roman military organization, his popularity in the early medieval Insular world may have created an appeal for using this particular number for small military forces in the literature.

iv. Fifty and thrice fifty

The Irish literary sources make extensive use of the sum three times fifty to number the warriors in a prince or nobleman’s retinue. Indeed, this sum appears throughout all forms of Irish literature composed or recorded during our period, not just that within the ‘heroic’ genre, yet it has hitherto received comparatively little attention beyond basic statements that it is a ‘curious’ method of counting.⁸⁷ From the manner in which the authors utilize thrice fifty, I suspect that this number may result from a multiplication of the base number fifty by the popular multiplier three, particularly as fifty itself occasionally appears in the same role within the literature. We have Fróech’s household from story *Tain Bo Fróech*, which consists of ‘Fifty kings’ sons’, who later accompany him ‘all richly dressed and equipped’ when he visits Aillil and Medb to win Findabair.⁸⁸ Turning once again to the Bible and the writings of the church fathers we find this sum re-appears. Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologies* notes the existence of an officer known as a *quinguagnarii*, so named

⁸⁵ II Samuel 23:13, 23:23-39 (although when enumerated, these men add up to thirty seven – a point specified in II Samuel 23:39).

⁸⁶ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, IX.iii.51, p. 202.

⁸⁷ Michael Richter, *Medieval Ireland, The Enduring Tradition*, with a foreword by Próinséas Ní Chatháin (Basingstoke, 1988), p. 15.

⁸⁸ *Táin Bó Fróech*: Jeffrey Gantz (ed. and trans.), *EIMS*, pp. 113-26 (114-5).

because he was ‘at the head of fifty soldiers’.⁸⁹ In the Old Testament one of King David’s sons gathered ‘fifty men to run before him’ when he planned to revolt against his father’s rule.⁹⁰ Isaiah 3:3 describes how God will take away from Jerusalem ‘the valiant and the strong’ and proceeds to list a number of such men, including ‘The captain over fifty’.⁹¹

Much as the *Beowulf* poet exhibited his creation of a thirty man war-band through the combination of two fifteen man ones, the Irish authors frequently portray a group of thrice-fifty men as one made up of three allied or related lords each with a retinue of fifty men. In *TBDD* the three sons of Donn-Desa, foster-brothers to the king, attracted the services of ‘thrice fifty men’ when they ‘took to marauding’.⁹² As there were three sons of Donn-Desa, one would assume that each commanded a third of the hundred and fifty men, or fifty apiece.⁹³ The author may have envisioned that these thrice fifty men merely formed the elite core for a much larger force as he later writes that they were arrested along with an uncounted number of ‘auxiliaries’, but his concentration upon this numerical construct remains firm; nowhere does he give the numbers of these ‘auxiliaries’, either from a lack of concern with non-noble warriors or a fixation with the number thrice fifty.⁹⁴ By their activity against their king, this reminds one of the fifty men led by David’s rebellious son. Fifty fulfils a similar role in *Deirdriu*, although here it applies to the protagonists of the piece when Naoise and his two brothers flee with Deirdriu over the sea. The author reports that ‘thrice fifty valiant champions sailed along with them, namely fifty with each of three brothers, Naoise, Ainle and Ardan.’⁹⁵

In other cases, a single prince or leader will have a following of thrice fifty. Such is the case for a ‘special household’ of ‘thrice fifty lads’ who surround Conaire’s young son Lé Fri Flaith; the hospitaller Dá Derga has ‘thrice fifty warriors’

⁸⁹ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, IX.iii.31, p. 201.

⁹⁰ I Kings 1:5.

⁹¹ Isaiah 3:3.

⁹² *TBDD*, pp. 29-30.

⁹³ Note however, that some versions and sections of *TBDD* give five sons of Donn Desa – although those referring to three are more common.

⁹⁴ *TBDD*, p. 30.

⁹⁵ *Déirdre*: Douglas Hyde (ed. and trans.), ‘Déirdre’ in *ZCP* 2 (1899) pp. 138-155 (155). *The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu* on the other hand states that the three brothers left with ‘three fifties of warriors and three fifties of women and three fifties of hounds and three fifties of servants and Derdriu’ (Jeffrey Gantz (ed. and trans.), *EIMS*, pp. 256-67 (261)).

when he greets Conaire and the latter's followers upon their arrival at his hostel, although Da Derga's role as a hosteller may call in to question the identity of his followers as a war-band.⁹⁶ The *TBC I* assigns 'thrice-fifty' men to the hero Fintan's company, but it also numbers a group of young boys of the Ulaid who attempt to defend their province as 'thrice-fifty'.⁹⁷ In *TBDD* the sum 'thrice fifty' is even pressed into service to number the ships which transport the sons of Donn Desa and their allies to Ireland for their final attack upon Conaire.⁹⁸

Interestingly, we find several important groups of one hundred and fifty warriors in sources from outside the Insular world, with the Old Testament again providing the key examples. The archetype of 'The captain over fifty' from Isaiah may later find employment in a narrative from II Kings 1:9-15. In these verses, king Ochozias of Israel sent a captain with fifty men to apprehend the prophet Elijah, only for the entire group to be consumed by fire from heaven. A second group of the same number of men suffered the same fate, whereupon the third captain dispatched fell upon his knees before Elijah and begged for his life. An angel then tells Elijah that as the men have submitted themselves to his authority, he can safely accompany these men to meet the king.⁹⁹ Not only does each war-band number fifty men, but the presence of three anticipates the three bands of fifty found in *TBDD* and *Deirdriu*.

v. Three hundred

Much like the prevalence of thrice fifty over fifty, the number three hundred finds a much wider circulation within the heroic literature than its base of one hundred. As noted earlier, *The Gododdin* frequently uses this number to describe the strength of the primary war-band within its *awdlau*, despite an occasional use of the alternatives of 303 or 363 men.¹⁰⁰ We have already noted that most existing

⁹⁶ *TBDD*, pp. 57, 283.

⁹⁷ *TBC I*, pp. 170-1 and 214 respectively.

⁹⁸ *TBDD*, p. 52.

⁹⁹ II Kings 1:9-15.

¹⁰⁰ Ten *awdlau* state that there were 300 men (*The Gododdin*, CA.xc, CA.lxi B, CA.x, CA.xliv A, CA.lx and CA.lxi A), while two refer to 300 warriors led by three lords for a total of 303 men, (see *The Gododdin*, CA.xci and CA.xviii). and two more claim that there were 363 (see *The Gododdin*,

scholarship ascribes the poet's choice of 300 for the number of men in the Gododdin war-band as an accurate report of the strength of a historical force, a realistic estimate or a largely poetic construct which utilizes the 'mystical' number three. The last suggestion acknowledges the common use of the number three as multiplier in many of these texts; indeed, as three warlords lead the three hundred men of the war-band one could easily conceive of them as three separate one hundred men war-bands, rather like the aforementioned instances of three separate fifty men war-bands combining to make one of thrice-fifty men. In contrast, the foes of the Gododdin are only enumerated in reference to the poet's protagonists. For instance, he boasts at one verse that the each of the mail-clad heroes of the Gododdin war-band faced nine-score enemy warriors, while elsewhere he recounts that they slew 'seven times their sum of Lloegr men'.¹⁰¹

The Old English material does not use this number even once, but we find it again within the Irish sagas. The ruler Oengus brought 300 men with him to assist King Aillil and Queen Medb on their cattle-raid to Cuailnge.¹⁰² At the beginning of *TBC I* we find that the hero Cormac Conn Longas was 'billeted with his three hundred men in Connacht'.¹⁰³ At a later point in the story Cú Chulainn slays 100 men a night with his sling for three successive nights, adding up to 300 casualties.¹⁰⁴ In the Irish context we could consider the use of *gematria*, a practice by which an author uses the mechanism of the dual system found in Hebrew, Greek and Latin (in which letters bear a numeric value), to render names as numbers or vice versa.¹⁰⁵ David Howlett, has explored this phenomenon at length in its use by Irish authors, primarily in the context of religious literature composed in Latin and noted that in the system of dual values the Greek letter *Tau* serves as a sign for the Cross, possesses a numeric value of 300.¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately, the context in which the Irish heroic literature uses 300 does not seem particularly connected to a Christian motif.

CA.xxi and the appropriate section in the Gorchan of Cynfelyn (this last from Kenneth Jackson, *The Gododdin, Scotland's Oldest Poem*, p. 156)).

¹⁰¹ *The Gododdin*, CA.xciv and CA.lviii respectively.

¹⁰² *The Dream of Oengus*: Jeffrey Gantz (ed. and trans.), *EIMS*, pp. 107-12 (112).

¹⁰³ *TBC I*, p. 126.

¹⁰⁴ *TBC I*, p. 159.

¹⁰⁵ David Howlett, 'Early Insular Latin Poetry', *Peritia* 17/18 (2003-4), pp. 61-120 (79). See also 'Hellenic learning in Insular Latin: an essay on supported claims', *Peritia* 12 (1998), pp. 54-78.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

W.F. Skene attempted to connect the events described in *The Gododdin* with a battle described in the hagiographical work *Vita Columbae*, in which the Dal Riata king Aedan Mac Gabran wins a hard-fought victory over the Miathi at the cost of 303 of his own men.¹⁰⁷ Skene took the similarity in head-count (in combination with the poor translations available for *The Gododdin* at the time) as evidence that the battle against the Miathi and that fought by the Gododdin war-band were one and the same. Skene's view was later refuted by Ifor Williams and others, but it does suggest that this number possessed a resonance throughout the early medieval Insular world leading to its appearance in both hagiography and heroic literature.

Pursuing this line of thought, we find several possible biblical and classical exemplars for its use in both sources. First, we have previously seen that Isidore of Seville suggested that 300 'Roman horsemen' made up 'one tribe' comprised of ten squadrons of 30 each.¹⁰⁸ Could this not suggest to a Gododdin author well-versed in the Etymologies that the force of a 'tribe' on the Roman model would number 300 warriors? I certainly find this a more satisfactory explanation for its use in heroic literature – typically as the war-band of a king or an entire people – than the poetic explanation or *gematria*. I was also struck by the parallels between *The Gododdin* and Herodotus' account of the 300 Spartans who nearly fell to a man at Thermopylae against a Persian horde. While the Greek force included several thousand Greek warriors in addition to the Spartans, Herodotus concentrates heavily upon the actions and deeds of the band from Sparta, and like most accounts of the Gododdin war-band, only one man survived to take away the story of the heroic conduct of his comrades.

Two biblical references also demand attention as possible inspirations for the literary war-band of 300 men. The first of these occurs when King David asks three of his great captains to infiltrate the camp of the Philistines to fetch him a drink of water. We read that one of these, Abisai the brother of Joab: 'was chief of three, and he lifted up his spear against three hundred whom he slew, and he was renowned among the three'.¹⁰⁹ This possibility becomes even more attractive when one

¹⁰⁷ Adomnan, *Life of Columba*, I.8: Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (eds. and trans.), Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (rev.), *Adomnan's Life of Columba* (London, 1991).

¹⁰⁸ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, IX.iii.51, p. 202.

¹⁰⁹ I Chronicles, 11:20.

considers the prevalence of drink within *The Gododdin* (as discussed in Chapter 6) and the wording of several verses from awdl A.64, 'With his shield on his shoulder he'd lift a spear / Like a glass of sparkling wine.'¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, *The Gododdin* describes its heroes as the 300 while Abisai slew 300 enemies, weakening the possibility that this was the direct source.

The other reference from Judges looks far more promising, particularly as a source for the Gododdin war-band. Here, the judge Gideon sets out against Madian with a massive Israelite army, at which point God tells Gideon to reduce his army as the Israelites will otherwise ascribe the upcoming victory to their great numbers rather than divine favour. Even after sending home those men who do not wish for battle Gideon has too many warriors, at which point God commands Gideon to lead his men to water so that they may drink. Upon reaching the bank, most of the men kneeled to drink but a few lapped the water with their hands:

And the number of them that had lapped water; casting it with the hand to their mouth, was three hundred men: and all the rest of the multitude had drunk kneeling.

And the Lord said to Gideon: By the three hundred men, that lapped water, I will save you, and deliver Madian into thy hand: but let all the rest of the people return to their place.¹¹¹

These three hundred men attack the camp of the Madianites at night, each man blowing a trumpet, shouting, banging together pitchers and holding lamps. This impression of a massive attacking force caused the Madianites to break and flee, pursued by the victorious Israelites.

While the Gododdin war-band ultimately fails, the elite nature of its members as well as frequent references to warriors drinking before the battle suggests a strong degree of inspiration from this tale. The possibility that the number 300 was chosen from a biblical or classical antecedent, or perhaps through *gematria*, may receive further support for other alleged groups of warriors numbering 300 found outside of the Insular world. In a story about the early Norman duke William Longsword, three

¹¹⁰ *The Gododdin*, CA.lxy, ll. 7-8.

¹¹¹ Judges 7:6-7.

hundred of his followers swear to accompany their lord and fight and die by his side.¹¹²

vi. Seven hundred and twenty one hundred

Gematria may have also played a role in the choice of 700 and 2100, the two largest numbers commonly encountered in our texts. The first of these finds prominent use within *The Lament for Cynddylan*, when it ascribes to its eponymous prince ‘Seven hundred picked men in his war-host’.¹¹³ Jenny Rowland’s translation leaves this interpretation less certain, as she renders the same line as ‘Seven hundred lords were under his hospitality’; this latter rendering allows the possibility that these men were all of his nobles, not just those in his war-band (although it could also mean those who lived with him and accepted his provender).¹¹⁴ Like Cynddylan, the Irish king Cobthach Coel led a band of ‘seven hundred followers’ along with the thirty kings with whom he met his fate in the iron house of *The Destruction of Dind Ríg*.¹¹⁵ While one could certainly arrive at 700 by multiplying the base number 100 by seven (like three an important multiplier), in *gematria* the Greek letters of the popular Christogram Chi-Rho possess the numerical value of 700.

We may see a trebling of this number to reach the twenty-one hundred men ascribed to the *Three Faithful War-Bands of the Island of Britain* and *Three Faithless / Disloyal War-Bands of the Island of Britain* in the Welsh triads.¹¹⁶ The most recent editor of this text, Rachel Bromwich, has observed what she describes as the ‘artificial nature’ of these numbers, which she ascribes as a simple multiplication of the ‘usual’ (in her words) three hundred men of the Welsh *teulu* by seven.¹¹⁷ In such a hypothesis, she clearly follows Ifor Williams’s early view that the *teulu* always consisted of 300 warriors, but if one realizes the rather arbitrary manner in which Williams made his conclusion, the mechanism of three times the Chi-Rho value of

¹¹² Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages*, pp. 67, 85.

¹¹³ *Marwnad Cynddylan*, l. 28, *MWP*, p. 98-9 (98).

¹¹⁴ *Marwnad Cynddylan*, l. 27, *EWSP*, p. 174-9 (177).

¹¹⁵ Stokes (ed.), ‘The Destruction of Dind Ríg’ in *ZCP* 3 (1901), p. 13.

¹¹⁶ Triads 29 and 30A in *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain*, Third Edition, edited by Rachel Bromwich (Cardiff, 2006), pp. 62, 66.

¹¹⁷ Bromwich (ed.), *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 65.

700 could have just as easily created the number for these mythical war-bands.¹¹⁸ In either case, her point that the sum of twenty-one hundred is an artificial one arrived at through the multiplication of given number for a war-band's strength by a symbolic number seems quite likely – I think she only misses out on the likelihood that the 'initial' war-band strength was not a real-life fixed one of 300, but rather a symbolic one of 700.

In *The Training of Cú Chulainn*, we receive a description of the warrior-woman Scáthach's bower:

...and thus was that bower; with seven huge doors, to it, and seven windows between every two of the doors, and seven rooms between every two windows, and thrice fifty girls in each of those room, with purple mantles and blue. And there were thrice fifty like-aged boys, and thrice fifty great-deeded boys, and thrice fifty champions, hardy and bold, opposite each of those doors, outside and inside, learning valour and feats of knighthood with Scáthach.¹¹⁹

This would by my reckoning give us a total of 2100 members of each group (assuming that there were 150 of each group both outside and inside (so 300 total) opposite each of the 7 doors) – the same number as the head-count given for each of the three faithful and three disloyal war-band of Britain. The author builds each of these using numbers already discussed – a group of one hundred and fifty is doubled to create a group of three hundred, which is then multiplied by seven to reach the final enumeration.

It seems, looking at the popular numbers from the heroic literature, that these were chosen primarily for their connections to Old Testament or Roman military forces. I believe we can also rule out the likelihood that these figures were chosen because they were considered accurate historical information or believable for the audience. In this regard, we can discern a gap between medieval and modern approaches to counting, particularly in a military context, with the former focussed upon its use in identifying the nature of the enumerated subject. Essentially, describing a war-band in the numerical terms of a Roman unit places it in the classical Roman tradition, drawing an analogy between its lord and Roman authority.

¹¹⁸ She cites Ifor Williams (ed. and trans.), *Canu Aneirin*, pp. liii-lviii.

¹¹⁹ Whitley Stokes, 'The Training of Cúchulainn', *Revue Celtique* 29 (1908), pp. 109–147 (119).

Likewise, the use of Old Testament exemplars points to legitimate authority. Why? Before we answer this question, I think a brief return to the historical data will point the way to our answer.

III. Comparison of the Heroic Image to 'Reality'

Having provided evidence for a primarily symbolic use of numbers in describing the size of a war-band within heroic literature, we may pay a last visit to those the numbers given for military forces in our historical and legal sources. A new look at these texts quickly reveals the presence of the very same numbers we have encountered in heroic literature - thirty and its multiples (particularly sixty and two hundred forty), fifty, and three hundred. We may recall Guthrum as one of thirty men, Aed ua Néill and his twelve score warriors and the three hundred or so Norse who fought Aed son of Niall in 868. We have already encountered thirty and three hundred, while the twelve score men above forms a force four times the size of Hnaef's band, and twelve times that led by Beowulf. Indeed, a source immediately post-dating our period, the *Vita Ædwardi Regis*, describes a ship gifted by Earl Godwine to Edward on his accession which held fittings for 'a hundred and twice ten menacing heroes' – twice the number of Hnaef's men, six times the number of Beowulf's men, and half the size of Aed's following.¹²⁰ Oddly, the numbers nine and twenty-seven do not appear at all within these sources.

The various enumerations of the slain give us even more examples of numbers which enjoy a strong popularity in the heroic literature, with two death tolls of 50 men, one of 60, two of 120, one of 150, two of 240, and four counts of 300 men.¹²¹ We also find nine instances in which 200 men are killed in a battle. Several

¹²⁰ *The Life of King Edward who rests at Westminster*. Frank Barlow (ed. and trans.), *The Life of King Edward who rests at Westminster* (2nd edition; Oxford, 1992), p. 21. This work dates to the years immediately following the conquest, and as it was commissioned by Edward's widow, it may be a relevant source for the late Anglo-Saxon period. Interestingly, John of Worcester mentions the same gift, although he assigns the ship 80 'picked soldiers' (John of Worcester, *Chronicon ex chronicis*, 1041: *The Chronicle of John of Worcester, Volume II: The Annals from 450 to 1066*, edited by R.R. Darlington and P. McGurk, translated by Jennifer Bray and P. McGurk (Oxford, 1995), p. 531).

¹²¹ See fn. 30.

of these are comprised of simply multiplying a base number by a multiplier, typically two or three, as the following show:

1. In *AU* 837.3 two 60 ship strong fleets of Vikings joined forces to plunder the plains of Life and Brega, only to encounter defeat at the hands of the men of Brega who left six score of the raiders dead on the field of battle. Here the artificial nature of the sum is clear – not only does the number of casualties match the number of ships, but the annalists clearly double sixty to get one hundred and twenty – just as each sixty ship force consists of 2 thirty man groups or 4 fifteen man ones.¹²²
2. *AT* 1145.9 reports that the men of Breifne were crushed by Murchad Ua Mael Sechlainn and Cairbre Ó Ciardha in a battle in which 300 fell including three notables.¹²³

We also find a lone match for one of the alternative figures for the Gododdin war-band's strength. In 987, we read of a slaughter of the Danes who plundered Iona, with 'three score and three hundred' amongst them dying.¹²⁴

I believe we have uncovered the existence of a similar practice in our historical sources, albeit one that appears tempered, in which factual numbers remain secondary to classically and religiously derived ones. I would like to finish this re-assessment of the treatment of numbers by our historical sources with the famous encounter between Cynewulf and Cyneheard in the *ASC* so key to many arguments about the size of early medieval armies. As previously noted, Cyneheard possessed a following of eighty-five men, of whom only one survived the subsequent events. A look at the Old Testament uncovers a specific instance in which a leader and the exact same number of men die, with one survivor. This occurs when Saul decides to slay Abimelech and the other priests whom he feels have chosen to support David against him:

¹²² *AU* 837.3.

¹²³ *AT* 1145.9.

¹²⁴ *AU* 987.3.

And the king said to the messengers that stood about him: Turn, and kill the priests of the Lord, for their hand is with David, because they knew that he was fled, and they told it not to me. And the king's servants would not put forth their hands against the priests of the Lord.

And the king said to Doeg: Turn thou, and fall upon the priests. And Doeg, the Edomite, turned, and fell upon the priests, and slew in that day eighty-five men that wore the linen ephod.¹²⁵

The biblical narrative which follows describes how a single priest, Abiathar the son of Achimelech, escaped the massacre and fled to David.¹²⁶

Could the author of the ASC entry have sought to draw a connection between Cyneheard and Abrimlech on one hand, and Cynewulf and Saul on the other? Both of the latter sought to drive out rivals, and the followers of each initially balked at slaying their kinsmen (those of Saul refused in the end, while those of Cynewulf did not).

Such a reading would certainly challenge a recent historical theory that the chronicler used this entry to display the sanctity of a king properly elected by the *witan* or community of the realm, as well as the illegality of Cyneheard's attack upon such a king.¹²⁷ Just as this line of argument tends to draw attention to the importance of the *witan* in elevating Cynewulf to the kingship, one may recall that Saul was chosen as king by Samuel because the people of Israel demanded that Samuel give them a king despite God's reluctance. If the association of Cynewulf with Saul and Cyneheard with Abrimlech is correct it would point towards exactly the opposite message to that popularly theorized – that God, not the people, determine who is a rightful king.

I do not wish to push this connection too far, as important differences do remain. For one thing, Saul survives the killing of Abrimlech, while Cynewulf perishes near the beginning of the ASC narrative. Additionally, Cyneheard and his followers are hardly priests, Jewish or Christian. Yet I do think we may see at least

¹²⁵ I Samuel, 22:17-18.

¹²⁶ I Samuel, 22:20-21.

¹²⁷ For example, see Barbara Yorke, 'The Representation of Early West Saxon History in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', in Alice Jorgensen (ed.), *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Language, Literature, History* (Turnhout, 2010), pp. 141-160 (143-6). Alice Sheppard expresses a similar view regarding Cynewulf's accession, but she also views the focus of the contest as remaining upon the ideal lordship of both contestants (Sheppard, *Families of the King: Writing Identity in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto, 2004), pp. 34-5).

an echo in this later tale of the Old Testament story, particularly as others have suggested that it may have served to denigrate all pre-Ecgbert branches of the House of Wessex.¹²⁸ The possibility that Ecgbert, as a stand in for King David, fled Wessex around this time may only add to such a notion.¹²⁹

IV. Conclusion

So what has our investigation of the numbers of the war-band in the vernacular literature on one hand, and in the historical sources, aided by secondary research, revealed? While the numbers provided by the heroic poems and sagas often fit into the general range provided by historical and legal sources, their authors repeatedly chose to utilize a toolkit of several very specific numbers. These integers appear to derive in large part from three separate origins. The first of these involved arithmetical games in which an author would either multiply a base sum by a factor of two or three, or use the square and cube of the number three. These practices seem particularly prevalent in the Irish material, and may betray the influence of Isidore of Seville's section on mathematics in his *Etymologies*. The second influence could also have arisen from the *Etymologies*, particularly when it describes the headcounts of the various Roman military units, three of which are frequently used in the heroic literature for the forces of equivalent commanders in the early medieval Insular world. A third origin would be the influence of the Bible, and in particular the Old Testament. By using the same numbers as those ascribed to the famous biblical protagonists and villains, an author could create an immediate connection or reverberation for his subject.

¹²⁸ The possibility that the annal entry for 755 sought to delegitimize rival branches of the royal line has been advanced by several historians. In particular, see Harald Kleinschmidt, 'The Old English annal for 757 and West Saxon dynastic strife', in *Journal of Medieval History* 22:3 (September, 1996), pp. 209-24 (224). Barbara Yorke reached a similar conclusion regarding this entry, but for different reasons, in her article, 'The Representation of Early West Saxon History', pp. 148-9.

¹²⁹ D.P. Kirby suggested that Cynewulf was Ecgbert's protector (Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings, revised edition* (London, 2000), pp. 139-40). Such an assumption seems quite speculative, although the ASC does state retrospectively that Cynewulf's successor, Beorhtric, helped his father-in-law Offa to expel Ecgbert from England. Note, however, that Offa seems to have been the primary antagonist, Ecgbert was expelled not only from Wessex but rather all of England, and this could only have taken place after Beorhtric's marriage to Offa's daughter in 789 – three years after his accession (ASC 789 and ASC ABC 839).

The frequent use of such numbers could become self-perpetuating, as contemporary audiences may have come to use certain numbers as a shorthand to refer to specific types of war-bands. In such a case, fifty might come to stand for a 'prince' or 'young nobleman's' retinue, while 300 may indicate the war-band of a mighty king or confederation. Such a system could quite easily become self-perpetuating. Just like real-life numbers, however, any of these poetic, symbolic or shorthand numbers would allow any listener 'in the know' to correctly predict the outcome of any contest based upon the numeric strength of the various protagonists. The only difference is that the nuances contained in each number may predict the winner, in addition to the absolute numbers a modern audience would rely upon.

In all of these cases, however, the number chosen recalls a legitimate military force from the past – either those sanctioned by God in the Old Testament or those representing Imperial Rome in the works of the Church Fathers and Classical historians. Those war-bands appearing in the Insular heroic literature and assigned the same headcount as these antique forces could subconsciously evoke the same sense that they served a legitimate power in their violent conduct. Such a presentation ties into the concept of just war, which typically requires a legitimating power to countenance such action. We will return to this theme of just war several times in the next section where we discuss the social origins of the war-band member in heroic literature.

Chapter Three – The Social Status of Warriors

As our comparison of the image and reality of the size of the groups of warriors yielded valuable information, we shall extend our exercise in this chapter to address discrepancies between the heroic literature and other sources regarding the social class of the primary participants in warfare. This will prove a more difficult subject to study than the previous one, however, due to the amount of existing scholarly opinion written on the nature of military organization and the identity of warriors in the early historic Insular world. This plethora of secondary material likely derives in large part from the importance of who fights in determining the very shape or complexion of society.

I. Previous and Current Thoughts on the Warrior's Social Class

While most modern-day scholars countenance the basic existence of individuals who wage war during this period, one searching for any further scholarly consensus over more specific aspects of just exactly who fought will encounter sore disappointment as a great deal of disagreement surrounds such ideas. The number of terms used to describe bodies of fighting men in contemporary sources can alone seem bewildering – *comes*, *díberga*, *fianna*, *gosgordd*, *here*, *housecarls*, *lið*, *micel here*, *milites*, *teulu* and *penteulu*.¹ Later scholars have only added to this plethora of names with the addition of such terms as ‘aristocratic retinue’, *comitatus* (from Tacitus’s book *Germania*), *familia*, *Gefolgschaft*, ‘royal household’ and *Mannerbund*.²

¹ See for instance T.M. Charles-Edwards, ‘The Authenticity of The Gododdin: An Historian’s View’, in *AH*, pp. 44-71 (45).

² Although some of these can have other meanings as well – particularly ‘royal household’! For just a few examples, see Nick Aitchison, *The Picts and the Scots at War* (Phoenix Mill, 2003), pp. 24-31, Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p. xiii, Evans, *Lords of Battle*, pp. 1-2, Hans-Werner Goetz, ‘Social and Military Institutions’, in *TNCMH II*, pp. 452-80 (471), Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, pp. 9-10, and Ó Corráin, ‘Ireland, Scotland and Wales’, pp. 50-1. Larson in particular explored the connections between military power, service and government in Anglo-Saxon England in his book *The King’s Household in England before the Norman Conquest*.

A primary point of contention amongst modern academics centres around the question of just how limited the privilege or right of fighting was in early medieval Insular society. By the late nineteenth century, the view that the Anglo-Saxon *fyrð* or army was composed of free peasant farmers who defended their country as the ‘nation-in-arms’ had emerged as the dominant one.³ Scholars studying early Irish and Welsh society arrived at a similar conclusion, although the subject received scant attention amongst the former. Most Irish historians were simply content to state that most fighting was undertaken by the entire *tuath* or tribe, perhaps with the nobles leading the affair. This societal model, in which the majority of combatants were only part-time warriors who served due to an obligation arising from status or ethnic identity, continues to exert an influence into the present day, as can be seen from several recent publications.

A number of researchers have seen in their reading of the ninth-century document the *Burghal Hidage*, combined with their own archaeological excavations at a number of fortified sites in southern Britain, clear proof of a system of extensive military conscription throughout Anglo-Saxon society during the late-ninth and early-tenth centuries, in which a fifth or even a quarter of all able-bodied adult males provided military service on a full- or part-time basis.⁴ Several Scottish historians have used the source known as the *Senchus fer nAlban* to propose a similar widespread participation in military activities amongst all levels of society in the seventh-century kingdom of Dál Riata and its neighbours.⁵ Some recent Irish historians, while admitting that an early medieval Irish king could indeed support ‘a small group of household warriors’, have likewise stressed the connection between free status and an obligation to fight that they find in their reading of the Irish law

³ See note 1.

⁴ Note the tribal hidages guys, abels, and so forth. Nicholas Brooks suggests that the garrisons specified by the *Burghal Hidage* would have included one in every five able-bodied adult males – and this is besides those men who served in the mobile armies of the time Brooks, ‘England in the Ninth Century: The Crucible of Defeat’, in *CW*, pp. 48-68 (65-6). Later, he asks “Should we therefore suppose that Alfred and his son had succeeded in committing a larger proportion of their subjects to permanent military duties than any subsequent English ruler before the twentieth century?” (Brooks, ‘The Administrative Background to the Burghal Hidage’, in *CW*, pp. 114-37 (114-5).

⁵ See John Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada* (Edinburgh, 1974), pp. 133-54, Nick Aitchison, *The Picts and the Scots at War* (Stroud 2003), pp. 15-20, Leslie Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests* (Edinburgh, 2003), pp. 154-5. Interestingly, the last two also envision the more exclusive *comitatus* as an important element in military campaigns of the time, as shall be seen.

codes and annals of the time.⁶ From this, they also speculate that most of those who participated in warfare did so in a part-time fashion.⁷

Since the early twentieth century, however, this societal model has had to compete with another that conceives of warfare in the early Insular world as a privilege enjoyed primarily or even solely by an elite class defined by birth or through their service to a lord. H.M. Chadwick popularized this notion in his book *Origin of the English Nation*, in which he argued that nearly all military matters in early Anglo-Saxon England were the province of the king's aristocratic retainers and their own bands of military followers.⁸ Additionally, Chadwick proposed that such war-bands (whether serving the king himself or one of his retainers) would include junior warriors who were in constant attendance upon their lord, as well as senior warriors who held either official positions and/or lands from their lord; in either case, such service was wholly personal and centred upon the lord.⁹ Chadwick's argument gained a number of followers during the twentieth century, particularly amongst those who studied Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Scandinavian society, eventually forming an alternative to the viewpoint espoused by Stubbs and his followers.¹⁰

Many of these later scholars stressed the descent of these later war-bands from the Germanic *comitatus* described by the Roman historian Tacitus.¹¹ For

⁶ See for instance T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Irish Warfare before 1100', in *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 26-51 (26), in which he writes that fighting remained 'an obligation of status not the job of a profession', so that 'if someone was a layman and free – still more if he was noble – he was expected to fight.' Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, sees evidence for the use of military levies of freemen in both the *Senchus Fer nAlbann* which he dates to the early 700s, and the Irish annals written around the year 1000 (*Early Medieval Ireland: 400-1200* (London, 1995), pp. 274-5). Marie Therese Flanagan also suggests that while Irish kings certainly possessed 'select retinues of household troops' serving the Irish kings, they could also call upon levies from all classes of society – 'military obligations of the aristocracy were rendered in the form of personal military service, more especially offensive warfare, while military service from all inhabitants may have been demanded for defensive purposes and in the case of the lower ranks of society was rendered in the form of labour services' (Flanagan, 'Warfare in twelfth-century Ireland', in *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 52-75 (57-8, 64-6).

⁷ T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Irish Warfare before 1100', p. 26, and Marie Therese Flanagan, 'Warfare in twelfth-century Ireland', pp. 57-8, 64-6.

⁸ Chadwick, *Origin of the English Nation*, pp. 157-60.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See for instance, Richard Abels, *LMOASE*, pp. 58-60, 65-6, Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, pp. 219-20, 226, Eric John, *Orbis Britanniae and other studies* (Leicester, 1966), pp. 135-41. Both Abels and John conceive of the *fyrð* as a collection of war bands led by aristocrats or local thegns.

¹¹ For some examples beyond the three which follow in the main text, see Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 4-5, Evans, *Lords of Battle*, p. 1-3 54-6, Harris, in 'Love and Death in the *Männerbund*', pp. 78, 83, 96, John M. Hill, *The Cultural World of Beowulf*, pp. 15-6, Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late*

instance, F.M. Stenton describes the ‘king’s military household’ in the following manner:

The phrases in which Tacitus describes the retinue of a first-century chief can be applied to the companions of King Cynewulf of Wessex in the eighth-century and to those of Earl Byrhtnoth of Essex in the tenth.¹²

Furthermore, Stenton sees this group at the centre of all major military engagements, as the body around which ‘all early fighting centred’, and as the later pool from which potential ealdormen of the eighth and ninth century were drawn.¹³ C. Warren Hollister argues that most of the military groups active in late Anglo-Saxon England were essentially war-bands, including household troops, the members of a lord’s *familia* or retinue, and *housecarles*, as the war-band; he furthermore views all of them ultimately deriving from ‘various forms of the old Germanic *comitatus*’.¹⁴

The popularity of this model, in which war-bands descended from the *comitatus* acted as the principal military participants in conflicts of the time, soon spread amongst those studying other cultures in the Insular world. Ifor Williams anticipated such thinking when he referred to the Welsh *teulu* or ‘royal body-guard’ in connection to *The Gododdin* as a body composed entirely of ‘noble youths’.¹⁵ T.M. Charles-Edwards subsequently used the term *comitatus* to refer to this same *teulu*, before writing more generally that ‘the persons celebrated in early medieval heroic poetry are the leaders and members of various *comitatus*’.¹⁶ Stephen Evans extends the existence of the *comitatus* across Anglo-Saxon and Welsh society, while

Viking Age, pp. 219-20, 226, Larson, *The King’s Household in England before the Norman Conquest*, pp. 76-7, 83, 103, and Lindow, *Comitatus, Individual and Honor*, pp. 10-2, J.F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages*, pp. 67-8. Donald G. Scragg uses the word *comitatus* to refer to the ‘pervasive’ literary phenomenon of ‘a body of men who vow total loyalty to a lord in return for rich gifts’ found in OE verse, although it is less clear that he believes it possessed a real-life existence – see Scragg, ‘The Battle of Maldon’, in *TBOM* 991, pp. 1-36 (33), and D.G. Scragg, ‘The nature of Old English verse’, in *TCCOEL*, p. 55-70 (65-6).

¹² Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 302.

¹³ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 299, 302.

¹⁴ Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Norman Conquest* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 9-10.

¹⁵ *BWP*, pp. 48, 64.

¹⁶ Charles-Edwards, ‘The Authenticity of The Gododdin’, in *AH*, pp. 44-71 (45-7, 65). Unlike Williams he describes this group as a *gosgordd* rather than a *teulu*. It seems unclear whether he altered his view of early medieval Insular society over time to that expressed in his later article in *A Military History of Ireland*, or simply sees the societies of Ireland and Wales as quite distinct from one another in this regard.

Morfydd E. Owen marshals the term to refer to the ‘young warriors’ who surround those princes depicted in ‘heroic age’ literature worldwide before concentrating upon this phenomenon in its Welsh context.¹⁷ Donnchadh Ó Corráin tied the *comitatus* into his refinement of a social model of clientage earlier proposed by D.A. Binchy.¹⁸ In Ó Corráin’s view, an Irish lord offered two forms of clientage – free clientship (*sóerrath*) and base clientship (*gíallnae*). Ó Corráin believed that ‘Free clientship like the *comitatus*, enabled lords to recruit a military following, ambitious aristocrats and freemen, for raiding and political in-fighting. Their reward: a share of the spoils.’ Base clientship, on the other hand, involved a lord granting land to his client, and the client providing a render and work service – not military service – in return for the land and protection by the lord.¹⁹

As noted earlier, this war-band model of military service was applied to early Norse society from an early date. More recently, Niels Lund defined the Scandinavian *lið* (including groups variously referred to as ‘housecarles, fellows, brothers, *hempæger*, *sweins*, *thegns*, *drengs*, etc.’) as ‘a private military body which served a king or anybody who could afford it’, small in size (occupying at most a few ships) but which could combine with other such groups to create the great armies occasionally seen in historic sources.²⁰ Richard Abels arrays the various Viking invaders of the British Isles in a similar organizational make-up, speaking of ‘Viking chieftains and their warbands’.²¹ He describes the *micel here* or ‘great heathen army’ which terrorized the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms from the mid-860s to the mid-870s as ‘an amalgamation of independent companies’ led by multiple confederates.²² Ó Corráin describes the various Scandinavian groups active in Ireland in much the same manner, writing about ‘roving Viking war-bands’ of ‘foot-loose warlords and

¹⁷ Evans, *Lords of Battle*, p. 1, Morfydd E. Owen, ‘Hwn Yw E Gododin. Aneirin Ae Cant’, in *AH*, pp. 123-50 (130-1).

¹⁸ Binchy argued from the early law tracts that in pre- and early Christian Ireland the ‘aristocracy were the warrior class’ and non-noble freemen gave a food-render and labour service to a nearby nobleman for limited protection against attack by other nobles (D.A. Binchy, ‘Secular Institutions’, in Myles Dillon (ed.), *Early Irish Society* (Dublin, 1954), pp. 52-65 (57-8)).

¹⁹ Ó Corráin, ‘Ireland, Scotland and Wales’, pp. 50-1.

²⁰ Niels Lund, ‘The Armies of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut: *leding* or *lið*?’, *ASE* 15 (1986), pp. 105-18 (110-2).

²¹ Richard Abels, ‘King Alfred’s Peace-Making Strategies with the Vikings’, *The Haskins Society Journal* 3 (1991), pp. 23-34 (25).

²² Abels, ‘King Alfred’s Peace-Making Strategies with the Vikings’, p. 23. Abels sees the initial commanders as four or more kings and a number of earls, with the later ‘great summer army’ of 871 led by three more Danish kings.

their followers' and Gall-Goídil 'war-bands' from Viking Scotland 'aristocratically led' by men of mixed Scottish and Viking descent.²³

Some of those scholars who prefer the *comitatus*-model of military service have also sought to chart the upbringing and training of a warrior. T.M. Charles-Edwards argues that across the Insular world young noblemen left fosterage at the age of fourteen to enter service in a king's *comitatus*, an assertion for which he relies upon the age of homage found in both contemporary Irish law and much later Welsh law, as well as a reference found in Bede's *Historia Abbatum*.²⁴ Hilda Ellis Davidson and Guy Halsall likewise discuss the possible training of such men, drawing upon anthropological evidence from the modern world in addition to archaeology and textual sources.²⁵

At the present time, the prevailing view (if there is one) seems to be an attempt to reconcile the two previously described extremes – a society which demands military service of free men and which also has space for lordly retinues. Two particularly influential works in this regard are C. Warren Hollister's *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Norman Conquest* and Richard Abels's *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England*. Hollister theorized that three separate military forces were active in late Anglo-Saxon England – the aforementioned war-bands ultimately deriving from the Germanic *comitatus*, the 'Select Fyrd' of semi-professional warriors levied on the basis of one for every five hides of land, and the 'Great Fyrd' of every able-bodied freeman.²⁶ In this scheme, the aristocratic and mercenary war-bands served as the elite spearpoint of the fyrd in any military engagement, with the 'Select Fyrd' usually providing the bulk of the troops. Only in times of extreme emergency would the Anglo-Saxon kings call out the 'Great Fyrd'.

Abels diverges from Hollister in seeing all military service as ultimately levied through either land-holding or bonds of lordship. According to Abels, when the Anglo-Saxon kings introduced military service as one of the three 'common burdens' incumbent upon the holding of bookland (land granted to its holder by

²³ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'The Vikings in Scotland and Ireland in the Ninth Century', *Peritia* 12 (1998), pp. 296-339 (326-7).

²⁴ Charles-Edwards, 'The Authenticity of the Gododdin', pp. 45-6, 57-8.

²⁵ H.E. Davidson, 'The Training of Warriors', in *WWASE*, pp. 11-23.

²⁶ Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, pp. 6-8, 9-19, 25-37.

charter and which could be inherited) it resulted in a situation where the holders of such a piece of land could still be considered ‘in some sense king’s men’.²⁷ Indeed, Abels conceives of the shire forces which made up the royal host after the spread of bookland as still essentially comprised of ‘small war bands’, each led by its local *thegn* who held bookland.²⁸ Likewise, Abels sees the *fyrð* as unaffected in its fundamental composition by Alfred’s reforms, remaining a collection of ‘nobles and their lesser born followers’.²⁹ In particular he attacks the theory that Alfred allowed the men attending the *fyrð* to spend two months at home for every month they attended him so that they could perform agricultural duties – if it was a peasant army, one would expect exemptions for sowing, harvesting and such tasks rather than an arbitrary length of service.³⁰ In short, Abels theorizes that most military bodies active in the Anglo-Saxon world from the eighth through the mid-eleventh century were war-bands, but war-bands which frequently coalesced through obligations to one’s lord or for land one held.

Abels’ work has informed a number of subsequent historians and literary critics. Gareth Williams viewed the advent of bookland in mid-eighth century Mercia as providing the king with a legal means of ensuring military service, resulting in the continuing importance of royal and aristocratic war-bands in the same kingdom throughout the eighth and ninth centuries.³¹ Ann Williams follows a slightly different tack, viewing the two forms of service – personal and land-based – as quite complementary. She advances the view that while the basis of military obligation became increasingly territorial from the eighth century onward, personal service in the war-band maintained a continuing importance throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, whether its members were retained within the king’s household itself or endowed with grants of land.³² She sees the destruction of the war-band only completed when William the Conqueror swept away the ‘old’ English order in 1071 to avoid overmighty ducal figures backed by ‘retinues of thegns and huscarls’.³³

²⁷ *LMOASE*, p. 60.

²⁸ *LMOASE*, pp. 58-9.

²⁹ *LMOASE*, p. 65.

³⁰ *LMOASE*, pp. 65-6.

³¹ Williams, ‘Military Institutions and Regal Power’, pp. 295-309 (especially 297-8, 300, 305, 308-9).

³² Ann Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 38-9.

³³ David Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300* (London, 1992), p. 57.

For the societies of early historic northern Britain, Nick Aitchison and Leslie Alcock seem to have some difficulties reconciling their support for the validity of the *Senchus fer nAlban* on one hand, and the importance of the war-band or *comitatus* in. Alcock does so by envisioning the *Senchus fer nAlban* in a similar manner to that proposed by Abels for fyrd-service in Anglo-Saxon England – that the men recruited in this manner were the non-noble freemen and peasants who owed allegiance to a noble.³⁴ In contrast, the war-band or royal body-guard was composed of younger sons of the nobility, dispossessed men of royal and noble stock and exiles – men who were full-time combatants and served as ‘the most immediate companions of the king on the battle-field’.³⁵ Applying the theme of this type of war-band more widely, he identified it with Bede’s *tutores* and the British *teulu* or *teilu*, and concluded that such a royal bodyguard was the core of a much larger force.³⁶

Aitchison suggested that the core of any army in early medieval Britain, including those found amongst the Picts and Scots, consisted of the combined personal retinues or bodyguards of a king and his nobles which together formed a ‘military and social élite of well-armed and mounted professional warriors’.³⁷ Unlike Alcock, however, he has difficulty deciding the nature of the rest of the army – at one point he describes the groups of thirty soldiers levied from every twenty houses by the *Senchus fer nAlban* as each forming a *comitatus* that served their lord.³⁸ Yet later he describes these levies as quite distinct from those retinues surrounding kings and nobles, and consisting of freemen and peasants who normally engaged in non-military roles such as agriculture or craft activity.³⁹

³⁴ Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests*, p. 157.

³⁵ Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests*, pp. 56, 156-9. At an earlier date, Alcock viewed the war-band of the early medieval period in Britain as a cross-cultural institution which echoed the *comitatus* as described by Tacitus in Germania, even going so far as to identifying the force described in *The Gododdin* as a *comitatus* (Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare among the Britons and Saxons* (Cardiff, 1987), p. 302). Later he modified this view and questioned the connection between the Insular war-band of the early middle ages and the *comitatus*, although he continued to view the war-band as a distinct military unit (Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests*, pp. 56).

³⁶ Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests*, p. 56. Despite the lack of direct evidence for such groups among the Picts and the Dál Riata, Alcock wrote ‘It is impossible, however, to believe that they did not exist’.

³⁷ Aitchison, *The Picts and the Scots at War*, p. 31.

³⁸ Aitchison, *The Picts and the Scots at War*, p. 27.

³⁹ Aitchison, *The Picts and the Scots at War*, pp. 27, 31.

T.M. Charles Edwards also sought to combine the two systems in early Christian Ireland, suggesting that there were essentially two forms of war-band. The first of these was more common and consisted of a lord's clients who served from legal obligation, and included both dedicated and part-time warriors. The bands of men known as *fíán* formed the other type of war-band, which Charles-Edwards framed as an Irish version of the *comitatus*. Thus while Donnchadh Ó Corráin saw an Irish *comitatus* as central to military operations, Charles-Edwards viewed it as quite unlike those men serving due to clientage relationships, and thus quite peripheral to mainstream Irish society for most of the early Middle Ages.⁴⁰

As a final note, some secondary scholarship has suggested that the means of raising an army, and thus the identity of those who fought, changed during our period. For instance, a number of researchers have argued for the gradual replacement of the *comitatus*-style war-band with armies composed of either quasi-feudal nobles who owed service based on land tenure (through the holding of bookland), or national levies drawn by legal means from the whole population of free males.⁴¹ Some of these may, however, suggest the continuing cultural and literary importance of the war-band despite a belief that it perished long before the turn of the millennium.⁴² Interestingly, several other writers have seen the war-band as vanishing and reappearing throughout time. L.M. Larson on the other hand conceived of the *comitatus* as suffering a slow death in the early historic period of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms before experiencing a revival during the Viking invasions.⁴³ Similarly, Verbruggen, while concentrating on the *comitatus* as it appears in *Germania* and Merovingian France, wrote that this 'same custom' was found in Beowulf and the Norse sagas, and reappeared in tenth-century Normandy and eleventh-century

⁴⁰ Charles-Edwards arguments can be found in Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 113, 222, 228-9, 464-7.

⁴¹ See for instance Michael Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 4-5 (who wrote, he wrote that the 'way of thinking and doing' found in Beowulf (and by extension, the *comitatus* as an institution) was already fading into the 'primordial past' in late-eighth or early-ninth century England), Stephen S. Evans, *Lords of Battle*, pp. 1-2, 9-10, Benjamin Hudson, 'The Practical Hero', in Michael Richter and Jean-Michel Picard (eds.), *Ogma: Essays in Celtic Studies* (Dublin, 2002), pp. 141-64 (155-8), Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, pp. 274-5, and Donald Scragg, 'The Battle of Maldon', in *TBOM* 991, p. 33. T.M. Charles-Edwards sees the *fíán* as the Irish version of the *comitatus*, which becomes peripheral after the seventh century (Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 113, 464).

⁴² Scragg.

⁴³ Larson, *The King's Household in England before the Norman Conquest*, fn. 16 on p. 83.

England.⁴⁴ Goetz maintains that the warrior retinue retained its character as a public organization in some areas into the Viking age, with Viking expeditions comprised of *lið* or ‘warrior retinues’ analogous to the *comitatus*.⁴⁵ Also, he argues that during the eighth and ninth centuries that the ‘form and content as well as the personal affinity’ of the *Gefolgschaft* remained important through its transference to other institutions, particularly those often termed feudal institutions.⁴⁶

A few even remain undecided about exactly who participated in warfare. Wendy Davies concluded that the war-band ‘surely’ existed in early medieval Wales but remained uncertain about what proportion of the nobility was connected with such groups, whether the companions and warriors serving the king even formed an elite class.⁴⁷ Additionally, she argued strenuously that low status individuals such as bondsmen also took part in such activities.⁴⁸ To summarize, it seems that most current-day scholars countenance the existence of a full-time or even professional military caste, but differ in the importance and commonality they ascribe to part-time military service by those who follow another primary occupation, such as merchant, cultivator, etc. As Edward James recently wrote of early medieval Britain and Ireland, current consensus regards early medieval armies as mostly (but not entirely) comprised of ‘kings, their aristocrats and their retinues’.⁴⁹

I. The Social Class of Warriors outside Heroic Literature

i. Relevant early historical sources

Four oft-cited pieces of this historical puzzle actually pre-date our period of study, but they nonetheless demand our attention due to their frequent employment by those studying the warfare throughout the Insular world for the entire pre-Norman period. The first of these is a story recounted by Bede about the travails of a Northumbrian warrior named Imma who was struck unconscious during the battle of

⁴⁴ Verbruggen, *The art of warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages*, pp. 67-8.

⁴⁵ Apparently, this included the British Isles as well (Goetz, ‘Social and Military Institutions’, p. 473).

⁴⁶ Goetz, ‘Social and Military Institutions’, pp. 472.

⁴⁷ Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 68-70, 81.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Edward James, *Britain in the First Millennium* (London, 2001), p. 126.

Trent in 679. For this reason he survived the defeat of his army, but he was subsequently captured by enemy soldiers while wandering the battlefield and brought before their Mercian lord. Fearful that this man would slay him as an enemy combatant, Imma quickly concocted the story that he was simply a married peasant farmer who was charged with bringing supplies to the Northumbrian army. The Mercian noble believed his prisoner, and swore to spare his life, but subsequently ferreted out Imma's true identity from his prisoner's bearing, speech and behaviour. The Mercian was angered and stated that he would have killed Imma if he knew his true identity, but that as he had promised to spare him he would instead sell him into slavery (a fate from which Imma eventually escaped through the prayers of his brother).⁵⁰

Most commentators have argued that this tale demonstrates that warfare was the preserve of a military aristocracy which was quite distinct from a non-combatant peasantry.⁵¹ A closer reading of this story, however, highlights that Bede only suggests that one could discern a man of noble background from a married peasant, and that such a man would not typically fight in battles. Imma did not assume the guise of just any commoner, but rather that of a *married peasant* who was *delivering goods* to the army; this does not necessarily rule out the participation by other lower class men in warfare. As such, while identity as a noble on the battlefield could automatically indicate one was a warrior, identity as a commoner would not necessarily indicate the opposite.⁵²

⁵⁰ All the previous taken from Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, IV.22.

⁵¹ Chadwick stated his satisfaction with such an interpretation at an early date in *The Origin of the English Nation*, p. 150. Subsequently, see Charles-Edwards, 'The Authenticity of the Gododdon', pp. 45-6, N.J. Higham, *An English Empire: Bede and the early Anglo-Saxon kings* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 225-6, Edward James, *Britain in the First Millennium* (London, 2001), p. 127, John, *Orbis Britanniae*, pp. 136-7, H.R. Loyn, 'Gesiths and Thegns in Anglo-Saxon England from the Seventh to the Tenth Century', in *EHR* 277 (October, 1955), pp. 529-49 (543), Ann Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 38-9 and Patrick Wormald, 'Bede, Beowulf and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England: Papers in honour of the 1300th anniversary of the birth of Bede, given at Cornell University in 1973 and 1974*, edited by Robert T. Farrell (Oxford, 1978), pp. 32-95 (35).

⁵² I am not the first to notice this possibility. Richard Abels, *LMOASE*, pp. 25-6 and Nicholas Brooks, 'The Development of Military Obligation in Eighth- and Ninth-Century England', in *Communities and Warfare, 700-1400* (London, 2000), pp. 32-47 (37, n. 34), both stress the financial and marital status claimed by Imma in addition to his profession to be a commoner. See also Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England*, pp. 38-9.

Another frequently cited source is a letter written by Bede to bishop Egbert of York. In this missive Bede laments the ‘false monasteries’ which had spread virulently throughout Northumbria over the previous thirty years, and which were controlled by men who remained in secular life or failed to maintain proper monastic discipline.⁵³ As part of his tirade against such places, Bede argued that they would diminish the kingdom’s military forces:

...there is nowhere that sons of the nobles or retired soldiers can take possession of [...] and in consequence they either leave their homeland for which they ought to be fighting in order to go overseas or, with even greater wickedness and lack of shame ... they give themselves up to indulgence and fornication.⁵⁴

The excerpt above has been seen as further proof that warrior status was primarily open to those from a military or aristocratic origin in Bede’s day.⁵⁵ Bede’s less frequently cited *Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* accords with this view in its portrayal of the pre-religious life of Benedict Biscop and his cousin Eosterwine. Benedict, later the founder of Wearmouth-Jarrow Priory, descended from a ‘noble Angle lineage’, served as one of king Oswiu’s thegns, and received ‘the amount of land due to his rank’ around the age of twenty-five.⁵⁶ We read less of Eosterwine’s life before he laid down his arms and became a monk at the age of twenty four, but he served as one of king Egfrith of Northumbria’s thegns for a time.⁵⁷

The final piece of early evidence, clause 51 from Ine’s law code, has more often found use in arguments which seek to deny any intrinsic restriction of military service in Anglo-Saxon England to the aristocracy. It reads in full:

If a nobleman who holds land [*gesithcund mon landagenda*] neglects military service [*forsitte fierd*], he shall pay 120 shillings and forfeit his land; [a

⁵³ *Bede’s Letter to Egbert*, in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited with an introduction and notes by Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford, 1994), pp. 350-2.

⁵⁴ *Bede’s Letter to Egbert*, p. 351. A look at the original Latin shows that Bede means the sons of the nobles and the sons of retired soldiers (rather than retired soldiers and the sons of the nobles).

⁵⁵ Higham, *An English Empire*, p. 225.

⁵⁶ *Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, Chapter 1, translated by D.H. Farmer, in *The Age of Bede*, translated by J.F. Welsh, edited with an introduction by D.H. Farmer (London, 1988), p. 185.

⁵⁷ *Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, Chapter 8, in *The Age of Bede*, pp. 192-3.

nobleman] who holds no land [*unlandagende*] shall pay 60 shillings; a cierlisc man shall pay 30 shillings as penalty for neglecting the fyrd [*to fierdwite*].⁵⁸

A quick reading certainly provides an impression that both nobles and *ceorls* rendered military service to the king of Wessex, with the concomitant assumption men from either group could be found in other military groupings.⁵⁹ Yet the law uses a different word to describe the service avoided by the nobleman and *ceorl*, ‘military service’ as opposed to ‘the fyrd’. This leaves some room for various interpretations, ranging from the argument that the service specified for the *ceorl* amounts to no more than the provisioning of aristocratic troops on expedition in a manner reminiscent to the Imma story, to the proposition that the *ceorl* merely suffered a lesser fine than the nobleman when neglecting military service.⁶⁰

I believe our overview of these early sources has shown some of the problems with prevailing interpretations and their focus on such a small pool of informants. We can make perhaps a few conclusions, however, while keeping in mind that such knowledge may apply more to the period from which these items survive rather than the subsequent period under study here. It seems quite likely that in the early seventh century that aristocrats were indeed expected to fulfill a military role if they remained in secular life and that married poor commoners may have only acted in ‘support’ roles. Unfortunately, we cannot determine here if unmarried free commoners, particularly those of greater physical prowess or from the ‘better classes’, served militarily or in other ways.

ii. Historical and annalistic sources

⁵⁸ Quoted from Abels, *LMOASE*, p. 13.

⁵⁹ A number of researchers have concentrated on what this means for the *fyrð* as a ‘nation in arms’ rather than its implications for the war-band; Stenton suggests that it certainly indicates that the *ceorl* served in the *fyrð*, but that the war-band was likely an aristocratic force (*Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 290, 302-3). For a good overview of this interpretation, see Abel’s criticism of this notion in *LMOASE*, pp. 14-5. For those who apply it to the war-band, see Nicholas Brooks, ‘The Development of Military Obligation’, p. 33.

⁶⁰ For the former, see John, *Orbis Britanniae*, pp. 135-6; for the latter, see Abels, *LMOASE*, p. 16, and Williams, in *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England*, pp. 36-7. Abels bases his suggestion on the fact that this law fails to state who is liable for such a muster, just giving penalties for those who fail to fulfil their obligation.

Advancing to our period of study to the period of the eighth through twelfth centuries, we find several historical references to the status held by those who participate in warfare. The *ASC* provides strong evidence countering the popular view that king Alfred's military reforms of the late ninth-century transformed the *fyrð* of Wessex from a conglomeration of aristocratic retainers to a body of all able-bodied free men serving as the 'nation in arms'.⁶¹ First, the *ASC* consistently depicts the Wessex *fyrð* riding from place to place, implying that each warrior was provided with or owned a horse (a valuable animal in ninth- and tenth-century England and likely beyond the means of most of its inhabitants).⁶² Secondly, as pointed out by several critics the frequent campaigning undertaken by the *fyrð* left the harvest unaffected, indicating that its members could not have been the same men who tilled the soil. As a result of these observations, several historians have concluded that the Alfredian *fyrð* was essentially composed of nobles and their lesser-born military followers.⁶³

In my own investigation of this source, I found several relevant clues located under the entry for the year 755. Prior to the famous Cynewulf and Cyneheard story we read that the exiled West Saxon king Sigeberht murdered his last faithful retainer, the ealdorman Cumbra, for which a swineherd [*swan*] stabbed the deposed king to death in vengeance.⁶⁴ While some reviewers believe this character served to show that Sigeberht had fallen so low that a mere commoner could kill him with impunity, Richard Abels thought that the swineherd likely held land from Cumbra and was thus bound to him by ties of lordship.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, we do not have enough evidence to make more than a speculative guess. In the Cynewulf and Cyneheard affair, however, the chronicler does draw attention to the fact that some of the men serving

⁶¹ For such views, see Chapter 1, notes 48-51.

⁶² John, *Orbis Britanniae*, p. 137, notes this problem, as does Abels, *LMOASE*, p. 65. R.H.C. Davis viewed these animals as a cut above the typical horse used as 'packhorses or peasant workhorses', and indeed suggests that towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period that most mounted warriors had at least two horses based on evidence from laws and wills (Davis, 'Did the Anglo-Saxons have warhorses?', in *WWASE*, pp. 141-4 (141-2)).

⁶³ Abels, *LMOASE*, p. 65, John, *Orbis Britanniae*, p. 137.

⁶⁴ *ASC* 757 (755). While *swan* typically means 'herd', 'herdsman, particularly a swineherd', or 'peasant', it can also indicate a 'swain, youth, a man, warrior'. Æthelweard refers to the killer as *uno subulco* in Latin (*The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. by A. Campbell (London: 1962), III.17, pp. 21-2).

⁶⁵ *LMOASE*, p. 18, fn. 29. S.D. White argues that it merely shows 'the final degradation of a bad lord', in White 'Kinship and Lordship in Early Medieval England: The Story of Sigeberht, Cynewulf, and Cyneheard', *Viator* 20 (1989), pp. 1-18 (9).

each lord are related to one another – leading to the supposition that they occupied the same echelon in society.⁶⁶

The ASC may later give some reinforcement to a notion of largely aristocratic warfare in a late-ninth century entry which describes how a Viking force captured a half-constructed fortress with no difficulty as there were only a ‘few peasants’ (*feawa cirlice men*) within.⁶⁷ This latter reference has received a small amount of scrutiny, with opinions split on its meaning. Eric John argued that these men were essentially a work-gang building the fortress and possessed no combat role – as such, he uses it as further evidence that nobles in Anglo-Saxon England fought, and other freemen laboured.⁶⁸ In contrast, Abels believes that as the men were *sæton* (a term usually meaning ‘sitting’ but which could also mean ‘ensconced’ or ‘garrisoning’) in the fortress, they were likely a garrison of the sort hinted at in the *Burghal Hidage*.⁶⁹ Finally, we have the record of Eustace’s rampage in Dover in 1051, in which the divergent style of the D and E versions of the ASC lead to an entirely different impression of the two antagonists. The E version reports that Eustace and his men donned their mailcoats before riding into Dover, where they tried to requisition quarters. One of Eustace’s men wounded a ‘householder’, who in turn slew the interloper, at which point Eustace and his men mounted their horses and killed the householder. They then proceeded to kill twenty of the ‘townsmen’ inside and outside of Dover, although they lost nineteen men and suffered an unknown number of wounded in the process.⁷⁰ The D version presents a more formidable opposition encountered by the Frenchmen, in which just one ‘man from the market-town’ slew seven of Eustace’s companions in a melee in which ‘great harm was done on either side with horse and also with weapons’.⁷¹ While the E version presents the entire affair as the depredation of mounted foreign nobles upon a group of non-military town inhabitants, the D version hints that Eustace either encountered townsmen who had military experience, or perhaps more likely, a local military force.

⁶⁶ ASC 757 (755).

⁶⁷ ASC 892.

⁶⁸ Eric John, *Orbis Britanniae*, p. 137.

⁶⁹ *LMOASE*, p. 239.

⁷⁰ ASC E 1048.

⁷¹ ASC D 1052[1051].

With the exception of Marie Therese Flanagan, few academics have studied the Irish annalistic sources for evidence of the social status held by the men who fought and died in the battles of the time. Flanagan concentrates upon Irish warfare during the twelfth century up to the Norman Invasion of 1169, and concludes that warfare at that time was largely restricted to the nobility.⁷² I find her assertion sound in general; for instance, the descriptions for some battles provide a list of named personages killed in the fight, followed by a phrase equivalent to ‘and many other nobles were slain’.⁷³ There do exist, however, several hints of possible non-noble military activity. For instance, *FA* 278 boasts that when the men of Munster smashed a Norse force ‘only two of their noblemen escaped, and a small number with them’.⁷⁴ Could the two noblemen have been the leaders of separate war-bands, with the ‘small number’ who escaped with them their surviving non-noble retainers? The *AU* gives an account of a battle of between the Ulaid and Cenél Eógain in 1004 in which there was a slaughter of ‘both noble and base’ elements of the Ulaid army.⁷⁵ These exceptions aside, we also have examples of wholly aristocratic forces, such as the small force that consisted entirely of ‘a few nobles of Mael Sechnaill’s household’ which met its doom in 1013 in the drunken pursuit of a party of raiders.⁷⁶

In contrast to the Irish material, the Welsh historical corpus suffers from a dearth of evidence, although several late sources give us a few hints. David Crouch stated outright that ‘the *teulu* had little aristocratic cachet, it was very much a mixed bag’ from his observation based upon in *The Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan* that the war-bands led by Gruffudd ap Cynan in Glamorgan and Gwynedd in the eleventh century contained a large Irish contingent and Normans respectively.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, I believe that Crouch’s evidence fails to support his argument – a foreign origin for some members of a *teulu* in no way disbars the possibility of their aristocratic origin, a point also made by Sean Davies.⁷⁸

⁷² Marie Therese Flanagan, ‘Irish and Anglo-Norman warfare in twelfth century Ireland’, in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (ed.), *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 52-75.

⁷³ See for instance *AT* 1034.4, *AU* 818.9, *AU* 910.1, *AU* 917.3 and *AU* 919.3 for some pertinent examples.

⁷⁴ *FA* 278.

⁷⁵ *AU* 1004.5.

⁷⁶ *AU* 1013.2.

⁷⁷ David Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300*, p. 160.

⁷⁸ Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, pp. 31.

iii. Legal, Charter and Will Evidence

We have already noted the use of early law codes to make suppositions about connections between nobility and military service in Anglo-Saxon society. Some scholars such as Stenton have extended the application of this seventh- and eighth-century material down to the Norman Conquest – in Stenton’s case he took the wergilds due thegns and ceorls as maintaining relevance in the late Anglo-Saxon period, with the average retainer of the ninth and later centuries a man of ‘noble birth’ with a hereditary rank.⁷⁹ In the area of law, Irish historians and critics have felt more at ease making pronouncements connecting social status to military activity. Historians such as D.A. Binchy and Donnchadh Ó Corráin used the early laws of Ireland to stipulate the existence of an aristocratic ‘warrior class’, with free clientship additionally serving as a form of ‘aristocracy by service’ in which a lord formed a war-band which included not only aristocrats but also military followers and ambitious freemen.⁸⁰ In Ó Corráin’s refinement of Binchy’s social model of clientage for pre-Norman Ireland view, an Irish lord offered two forms of clientage – free clientship (*sóerrath*) and base clientship (*gíallnae*).⁸¹ Ó Corráin believed that ‘Free clientship like the *comitatus*, enabled lords to recruit a military following, ambitious aristocrats and freemen, for raiding and political in-fighting. Their reward: a share of the spoils.’⁸² Base clientship, on the other hand, involved a lord granting land to his client, and the client providing a render and work service – not military service – in return for the land and protection by the lord.⁸³ T.M. Charles Edwards diverged from Ó Corráin in his belief that an Irish lord’s military following could

⁷⁹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 486-9.

⁸⁰ D.A. Binchy, ‘Secular Institutions’, in Myles Dillon (ed.), *Early Irish Society* (Dublin, 1954), pp. 53-65 (57-8), and Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Ireland, Scotland and Wales, c. 700 to the early eleventh century’, in *TNCMH II*, pp. 43-63 (50-1). Binchy argued from the early law tracts that in pre- and early Christian Ireland the ‘aristocracy were the warrior class’ and non-noble freemen gave a food-render and labour service to a nearby nobleman for limited protection against attack by other nobles.

⁸¹ Ó Corráin, ‘Ireland, Scotland and Wales’, pp. 50-1.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

include base clients who were not dedicated warriors, and that only the specialized *fīan* resembled an Irish version of the *comitatus*.⁸⁴

Sean Davies reaches most of his conclusions regarding the social class of the war-band's members in Wales principally through his study of the Welsh law codes of Hywel Dda and the Llandaff Charters, with the occasional look to the Anglo-Saxon source material for comparative purposes.⁸⁵ In sum, he concludes that the war-band or *teulu* was primarily composed of and staffed by members of the aristocracy, including the *bonheddig*, or 'gentry' class, although he also hypothesizes that the 'strongest and most military able' youths from the unfree classes could be recruited to make up any shortfall in a lord's war-band – although he admits he has little real evidence of such a practice.⁸⁶ T.M. Charles-Edwards, however, assumes that the *bonheddig* referred to a man of nobility who had not yet inherited his family land.

Wendy Davies applies the two forms of clientship proposed by Binchy to pre-Norman Welsh society, but diverges from Ó Corráin in speculating that Welsh peasant tenants in the pre-Norman period would indeed fight on behalf of their lord as needed, in contrast to men of a similar class in most of Western Europe in the same era.⁸⁷ She becomes far more uncertain, however, when discussing the war-band itself, as she follows those who see it transformed in England and on the continent during the seventh and eighth centuries into the 'developed territorialized apparatus of vassalage, homage, and fief'.⁸⁸ Eventually she concludes that the war-band 'surely' existed but she does remain uncertain about what proportion of the nobility were connected with such groups, or whether the companions and warriors serving the king even formed an elite.⁸⁹

iv. Archaeological and Anthropological Evidence

⁸⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 113, 222, 228-9, 464-7.

⁸⁵ Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, pp. 15-6, 26-9.

⁸⁶ Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, pp. 17, 27-9.

⁸⁷ Wendy Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1982), p. 68.

⁸⁸ Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 68-70, 81.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Those frustrated with written sources have frequently turned to archaeological data in an attempt to discover more information about the personnel of the war-band, with early Anglo-Saxon graves furnished with weapons receiving a good deal of attention. Leslie Alcock noted the divergent evidence in Britain, with such burials scarce in Northumbria and far more common in southern England.⁹⁰ Additionally, the Northumbrian graves were as a rule far richer and possessed better weapons. This led him to propose that in Anglo-Saxon Bernicia the ‘personal war-band’ represented the layer immediately beneath the royal ‘stock’ in a highly stratified society, where status as a warrior practically equated to that of a nobleman.⁹¹ In the former southern English kingdoms the more numerous but poorer graves led him to suppose communities in which a numerous warrior peasantry supported a relatively small warrior aristocracy.⁹²

Edward James made a similar argument for the whole of Anglo-Saxon Britain by combining two separate findings from archaeological work – first, that human remains from the Anglo-Saxon period possessed a greater physical stature than those from the Romano-British period, and second, that the average male buried with weapon(s) in the Anglo-Saxon period was 2-5 cm taller than those interred without such grave furnishings.⁹³ This led James to suggest that ethnicity and profession were tied together and that identification as a warrior also determined that one was also upper-class and an Anglo-Saxon (as opposed to British and a peasant).⁹⁴ Patrick Wormald also gives archeological evidence credence in his argument for the existence and importance of a ‘class of wealthy specialized warriors’.⁹⁵

For a time, recourse to anthropological studies became a popular technique employed by historians, and several attempted to marshal such evidence to better understand the war-band’s membership. Hilda Ellis Davidson cited in particular evidence collected from tribal societies of ‘various African people, Polynesians and Melanesians in the Pacific Islands and the North American Indians’, although she

⁹⁰ Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare*, p. 245, 292.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ James, *Britain in the First Millennium* (London, 2001), pp. 113-4.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Patrick Wormald, ‘Bede, “Beowulf” and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy’, in Robert T. Farrell (ed.), *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England: Papers in honour of the 1300th anniversary of the birth of Bede, given at Cornell University in 1973 and 1974* (London, 1978), pp. 32-95 (35-6).

then attempted to mix this with the information gleaned from several Irish and Norse literary sources.⁹⁶ She found that the ‘warrior groups’ in the above non-western societies apparently were only open to the sons of men of some standing within the community – ‘boys of good family’ – a finding which she then applies to Anglo-Saxon England and the early medieval Insular world as a whole.⁹⁷ Guy Halsall draws upon much the same evidence as Davidson, but surprisingly reaches a slightly different conclusion – that *unlike* many other ‘early’ societies, warfare in Anglo-Saxon England was usually the exclusive business of males occupying the upper strata in society.⁹⁸ Later in the same article, however, he notes that the existence of both small-scale ritual warfare and large-scale ‘secular warfare’ removes the need to make an argument across the board regarding which social classes in pre-Conquest England had the right to fight.⁹⁹

Gareth Williams adapts the findings of Timothy Reuter in the realm of Carolingian military organization under Charlemagne to determine the nature of the military force wielded by the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia during the eighth and ninth centuries. Reuter hypothesized a two-fold division of warfare in which aggressive warfare largely remained the bailiwick of a small aristocratic elite that was well-armed and horsed, and whose wealth and position enabled them to campaign for long periods. In contrast, Reuter believed defensive warfare relied heavily upon legal obligations of military service upon all or at least various categories of free men.¹⁰⁰ Williams combined this scheme with Richard Abels’s summarization of pre-Alfredian Anglo-Saxon warfare as dominated by a military elite consisting of ‘kings, those held land of the kings, and also those to whom they granted land in turn, together with the household followers of all three groups’.¹⁰¹ From these two historians, Williams argued for a war-band of particular use in aggressive or civil war and made up from a lord’s personal followers who constituted a very definite elite in society.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Davidson, ‘The Training of Warriors’, pp. 11-24.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Halsall, ‘Anthropology and the Study of Pre-Conquest Warfare and Society’, p. 172-3.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Gareth Williams, ‘Military Institutions and Royal Power’ in *Mercia, An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe*, edited by Brown and Farr (London, 2001), pp. 295-309 (298-9).

¹⁰¹ Williams, ‘Military Institutions and Royal Power’, p. 297.

¹⁰² Williams, ‘Military Institutions and Royal Power’, pp. 297, 300, 305 and 308-9.

II. The Heroic Image of the Warrior's Social Class

i. Aristocratic status, landholders and heirs

Let us begin with the early Irish sources, in which we quickly find overtones of nobility attached at the very least to a lord's retinue. The Irish tale *TBF* assigns the eponymous youth Fróech a household composed of the 'sons of kings' who later accompany him 'all richly dressed and equipped' when he visits Aillil and Medb to win Findabair.¹⁰³ Likewise, when Conaire's villainous foster-brothers embark upon a career of brigandage in *TBDD*, they do so accompanied by a group of followers drawn from amongst 'the sons of the lords of the men of Erin'.¹⁰⁴ Later these upper-class youths ally with what the author describes as 'a troop of still haughtier heroes, namely, the seven sons of Ailill and Medb, each of whom was called "Manè"'.¹⁰⁵ Conaire himself has a number of royal heirs and noble youths present in his own retinue.¹⁰⁶

Warriors further down the social ladder are not entirely absent from heroic literature, however, as seen from these same texts. As we noted earlier, when the sons of Donn Desa were arrested by Conaire their following included not only the sons of the lords of the men of Erin, but also this latter group's unnumbered 'auxiliaries'.¹⁰⁷ The arrest of these 'auxiliaries' suggests that they were not mere non-combatant servants, camp-followers or family members. Indeed, when the sons leave Ireland in exile they are accompanied by 500 followers 'besides what underlings were with them'.¹⁰⁸ We may receive a final clue as to the identity of these

¹⁰³ *EIMS*, pp. 114-5.

¹⁰⁴ *TBDD*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁰⁵ *TBDD*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁶ See for instance Mál son of Telbard, Muinremur son of Gerrgend, and Birrdeg son of Rúad (translated as 'three crown-princes' by Stokes), and Oswald, Osbrit Longhand and Lindas (translated as 'three crown-princes of England who are with the king' by Stokes) (*TBDD*, pp. 198, 291).

¹⁰⁷ *TBDD*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁸ *TBDD*, p. 44. This section is rather unclear – the author could refer twice to the war-band of the sons of Donn Desa, or the second statement could apply to the followers of another warrior who allies with the sons.

‘auxiliaries’ and ‘underlings’ toward the end of the saga, when we read that during Conaire's reign ‘a third of the men of Ireland were reavers’.¹⁰⁹ Obviously, such a number is sheer hyperbole, but it also could reflect the author’s notion that a war-band could include numerous members from the lower classes of society, important in real combat but supernumeraries for an author. This would uphold the notion first mooted in the last chapter that the creator of *TBDD* preferred to depict the ideal war-band as an aristocratic elite. It is also interesting that the villains of this story lead such men into battle – does Conaire’s also do so?

Within Conaire’s household we find a number of men whose primary occupation lies outside the realm of warfare yet we read at one point in the tale that each will engage the attackers of the hostel in combat and slay several foes before escaping the place.¹¹⁰ Yet a keen division does exist within Conaire’s household between the members of his war-band and the various functionaries who fulfil other roles in his household – a situation possibly resembling the gradation between the nobles and commoners following the sons of Donn Desa. While most of Conaire’s servants will act as warriors if needed, his warriors are loath to act as servants. During the siege of Dá Derga’s hostel, Conaire is overcome by a great desire for drink and orders his champion Macc Cecht to fetch him a drink. Macc Cecht complains bitterly, stating:

This is not the order that I have hitherto had from thee, to give thee a drink. There are spencers and cupbearers who bring drink to thee. The order I have hitherto had from thee is to protect thee when the champions of the men of Erin and Alba may be attacking thee around the Hostel. Thou wilt go safe from them, and no spear shall enter thy body. Ask a drink of thy spencers and thy cupbearers.¹¹¹

Perhaps the writer of this saga viewed every male as a potential warrior, but that those who were specifically aristocratic warriors conceived of their service in wholly military terms with other tasks beneath their dignity. Could this be just one of many ways in which the members of the war-band defined themselves, at least in

¹⁰⁹ *TBDD*, p. 45.

¹¹⁰ *TBDD*, p. 284.

¹¹¹ *TBDD*, p. 316.

literature? Also, could the author be reinforcing the idea that in a proper household, warriors fight and servants serve other roles?

The view that only the champions, nobles and such require enumeration reappears in *TBC I*. During one fight between Cú Chulainn and the army of Ireland, the author reports of the latter that ‘Their number is not known nor is it possible to count how many of the common soldiery fell there, but their leaders alone have been reckoned.’¹¹² We then find a list of these notables followed by a more general claim:

Seven score and ten kings did Cú Chulainn slay in the battle of Breslech Mór in Mag Muirthemne, and a countless number besides of hounds and horses, of women and boys and children, and of the common folk. For not one man in three of the men of Ireland escaped without his thigh-bone or the side of his head or one eye being broken or without being marked for life.¹¹³

This force sounds very mixed indeed, with possible camp-followers, families, animals and numerous non-warriors. Once again, we receive the impression that while membership in the upper classes was not necessary for military service, it was for being noteworthy in the literary world of the Ulster Cycle.

Cú Chulainn’s recollection of his own youth during *The Wooing of Emer* brings further attention to the character of the war-band as it appears within the heroic literature, as he stresses the differences between his upbringing and that of a non-aristocrat, particularly a non-warrior:

Not as a churl [*aithcan*] looks to the heritage of his children, not between flag-stone and kneading-trough, nor from the fire to the wall, nor on the floor of the one larder (?) have I been brought up by Conchobor, but among chariot-chiefs [*erridib*] and champions [*anradaib*], among jesters and druids, among poets [*filiduib*] and learned men [*fisidib*], among the lords of land [*brugadoib*] and farmers [*biatachaoip*] of Ulster have I been reared, so that I have all their manners and gifts.¹¹⁴

¹¹² *TBC I*, p. 189.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Wooing of Emer*, 21: Kuno Meyer, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, in *Archaeological Review* 1 (1888), pp. 68-75, 150-5, 231-5, and 298-307 (74). Original Irish from Kuno Meyer, ‘Tochmarc Emire la Coinculaind (Harleian 5280, fo. 27a)’, in *ZCP* 3 (1901), pp. 229-263 (235). The last two terms are a bit problematic. *bíatach* could refer to a supplier of goods, a victualler, a farmer or even a base client.

The entourage surrounding Conchobar, ‘chariot-chiefs and champions’, ‘poets and learned men’ and ‘lords of the land’ all imply a highly aristocratic or upper-class environ, although the last term is bit problematic – the original Irish actually means something closer to ‘hospitaller’.¹¹⁵ Cú Chulainn later displays an extreme touchiness about his status in the tale *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuí* *Dermaid*, during which he becomes horribly insulted when mistaken for Conchobar’s steward by two groups of artisans, whom he proceeds to slaughter in a rage.¹¹⁶

We find further references to the aristocratic cachet of those Ulster warriors closest to their king in other sagas. When Conchobar attends the feast of the smith Culann, he sets off ‘together with fifty chariot-warriors, the noblest and most illustrious of the heroes’ – a group later referred to as ‘his household’.¹¹⁷ When this same ruler’s ‘retinue of valiant Ulster heroes’ accompanies him to Bricriu’s feast in *FB*, we read that every ‘king, prince, noble, yeoman, and young brave’ occupied his respective couch in the half of the palace reserved for Conchobar and his retinue (the other half of the palace was reserved for their ladies).¹¹⁸ Such a reading would indicate that Conchobar’s retinue comprised men from the upper-classes, as even ‘yeomen’ and ‘young braves’ would be relatively patrician when considered in Irish society as a whole.

At other points in the Ulster Cycle we receive hints that Conchobar’s war-band may possess kinship ties to their king, and like the men who followed Cynewulf and Cyneheard, to each other. For instance Conchobar is Cú Chulainn’s uncle. During the final battle of *TBC I*, the author has Fergus foretell what will happen when Conchobar’s grandson Erc enters battle:

¹¹⁵ *Brugadoib* likely derives from *Brugaid*, which would usually refer to a hospitaller rather than a noble. Likewise, the term which Meyer renders as ‘farmers’ seems to derive from *bíattach*, which has the definition of ‘supplier of food, victualler; farmer; of a land- holder or tenant whose duty it was to use his land to provide for the refectation of a lord and his attendants when travelling through the country’ (See the Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language, at <http://www.dil.ie/results-list.asp?Fuzzy=0&cv=1&searchtext=%28id%20contains%20B%29%20and%20%28column%20contains%2097%29&sortField=ID&sortDIR=65602&respage=0&resperpage=10&bhcp=1> and at <http://www.dil.ie/results-list.asp?Fuzzy=0&cv=1&searchtext=%28id%20contains%20B%29%20and%20%28column%20contains%20194%29&sortField=ID&sortDIR=65602&respage=0&resperpage=10&bhcp=1>).

¹¹⁶ Taken from Kaarina Hollo, ‘A Context for *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuí* *Dermaid*’, in *Ulidia*, pp. 91-8 (92).

¹¹⁷ *TBC I*, pp. 140-1.

¹¹⁸ *FB*, II.12, p. 13.

Bravely will the warriors of Ulster roar as they hew down the army before them, rushing to rescue their beloved lad. They will all feel the ties of kinship when they see the boy in that great conflict [...] Mindful of their kinship with the boy, the warriors of Ulster will attack the vast (enemy) host.¹¹⁹

Indeed, when we read about the Ulstermen in this saga, it seems that the author certainly means to imply the elite group at the centre of the kingdom's life and society, in a manner reminiscent to how the *TBDD* author may have viewed only the aristocracy as important or comprising 'the people'. At one point Mac Roth offers terms to Cú Chulainn on behalf of Ailill and Medb, which include allowing the 'Ulstermen' to retain their base-born women and milch cows. Cú Chulainn responded that he would agree to no such bargain, as 'The Ulstermen will take their base born women to bed and base offspring will be born to them, and they will use their milch cows for meat in the winter.'¹²⁰ Obviously, the 'Ulstermen' in this instance do not include any commoners!

We may receive a similar impression towards the end of *TBC I*, in a section titled 'The Muster of the Ulstermen', in which Conchobar instructs his son to summon a long list of named individuals but finds 'all of the province of Conchobar, every lord among them' already assembled and waiting for his orders.¹²¹ From the choice of title, it seems that once again the author means the warrior aristocracy of the Ulaid, the war-band of Conchobar, when he writes of the Ulstermen. Of course, other interpretations remain possible – the Ulstermen in the title could refer to the summoned lords and their individual war-bands, or even a general levy of the population, with the nobles merely the most prominent amongst those assembled to do battle.

The Irish heroic literature provides us with a setting in which the war-band surrounding the king or ruler is indeed drawn from the aristocratic and even royal ranks of society, but that warfare as such also includes great numbers of men who are either lower-class warriors or even just part-time fighters. Also, while the author may admit to the presence of lower-class warriors on the battlefield, these men are largely

¹¹⁹ *TBC I*, p. 228.

¹²⁰ *TBC I*, p. 160.

¹²¹ *TBC I*, p. 219.

superfluous to the story, except as cannon-fodder to those who matter – the heroes and nobles.

Perhaps surprisingly, we do not find as many specifications of a warrior's social class in the early Welsh heroic poetry, with the exception of *The Gododdin* which once again is an outlier to the rest of the genre. Those poems attributed to Taliesin restrict their praises of splendour and regality exclusively to the war-band's lord, with a few exceptions. In *The Battle of Gwen Ystrad*, the author recounts 'I saw splendid men [*ran reodic*] around Urien'; Ifor Williams suggests *ran* would mean 'party, host, company' and *reodic* would likely mean 'fine, splendid, noble'.¹²² In *The War-Band's Return*, a description of Urien's retinue brings to mind notions of wealth and exclusivity:

A host of singers, a throng around spits,
Torques round their heads [*a pen ffuneu*], their places honoured [*Ae tec gwyduaeu*].
Each went on campaign, eager for combat,¹²³

The three exceptions found within the elegy *In Praise of Gwallawg* contain the most explicit image of a noble war-band found in the Taliesin poems. Early in this poem, the Taliesin poet praises his subject's war-band as 'a rich retinue' [*goludawc ydrefynt*] of 'savage war-loving lords' [*rieu ryfelgar gewheruawc*].¹²⁴ Later he again writes about lords in the war-band, although he may be picking out certain members for specific praise at this juncture:

Of lords [*gwyr a digawn godei gwarthegawc*] faultless in warfare:
Haearddur and Hyfaidd and Gwallawg,
And Owain of Mon, true to Maelgwn' line,

¹²² *The Battle of Gwen Ystrad*, l. 28, and *CT*, II, l. 28, p. 2. For Williams's suggested translation of these two words, see *CT*, p. 40.

¹²³ *The War-Band's Return*, ll. 3-5, and *CT*, V, ll. 3-5, p. 5. Ifor Williams reads 'chaplets' or 'headbands' for *pen ffuneu*, and place or seat of honour for *gwyduaeu*. Interestingly, the latter term can also mean 'burial mound' or 'burial place' (*CT*, pp. 61-2).

¹²⁴ *In Praise of Gwallawg*, ll. 1 and 4, in *The Triumph Tree*, p. 91. For original words, see *CT*, XI, ll. 1 and 4 (p. 12). Ifor Williams states that *goludawc* means 'wealthy' and suggests that *ydrefynt* has the same meaning as *nifer* – a 'troop, retinue' (*CT*, p. 118). He also translates *rieu* as 'king' or 'kings', and suggests that *gewheruawc* may mean to read *gwochwerwawc*, which later became *gochwerw*, meaning 'somewhat bitter; hateful, angry' (*CT*, p. 119, and *GPC*, p. 2731). The word *ryfelgar* should likely be read as *rhyfelgar*, which has connotations of 'warlike', 'belligerent', 'military' and so forth (*GPC*, p. 5432).

Who lays marauders [*peithwyr*] low.¹²⁵

In the non-*englyn* *Marwnad Cynddylan*, the prince possesses a war-host of ‘seven hundred lords [*rhiallu*]’.¹²⁶ This certainly argues for a bit of selection here, that these men stood apart from your common field labourer or shepherd, perhaps even above a rank-and-file warrior.

The Llywarch Hen poet has recourse to images of youth and aristocracy in several poems. In one of these, the eponymous narrator recalls his twenty-four sons who have fallen in battle and conceives of them as a ‘golden-torqued band’, a ‘golden-torqued host’ and as ‘golden-torqued princely noblemen’, before concluding that there were ‘Four and twenty sons in Llywarch’s household, / Brave men, fierce in combat’.¹²⁷ The references to his sons as a ‘host’ and being in his ‘household’ merely strengthen this imagery of a very exclusive war-band not only delineated by wealth and ancestry, but indeed comprised of a very close kin group – a notion we earlier observed in the Irish context. In another poem from this corpus Llywarch attempts to convince his son Maenwyn to emulate his own youth in choosing active warfare over service as a steward:

Maenwyn, consider with care:
Need of counsel’s neglected.
Let Maelgwn seek another steward [*uaer*].

My choice, a warrior wearing
Armour, sharp as a thorn:
No vain effort, whetting Maen.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ *In Praise of Gwallawg*, ll. 34-7, in *The Triumph Tree*, p. 92. While *gwyr* can mean ‘men’ it is also imbued with the sense ‘valiant warriors’, ‘brave men’ or ‘heroes’ (*GPC*, pp. 1693-4). According to *CT*, *digawn* is a miswritten form of *digon*, meaning ‘to make or do’, while *godei* means ‘cow-houses’ or ‘byres’ (*CT*, p. 127). The word *gwarthegawc* likely equates to *gwarthegau*, meaning ‘cattle’ (*GPC*, p. 3020). While the whole line thus more accurately recalls a successful cattle raid, it does refer to the perpetrators as men with overtones of nobility and military excellence. According to *GPC*, *peithwyr* can mean the people the Peithwyr or ‘destroyer, despoiler’ (*GPC*, p. 4847). A number of scholars, most recently J.T. Koch, have suggested that *Peithwyr* refers to the Picts (Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Volume I (Santa Barbara, 2006), p. 355).

¹²⁶ *Marwnad Cynddylan*, l. 25-7, in *EWSP*, pp. 176-7. The word *rhiallu* usually means ‘champion’ - see Jarman, *YG*, p. 194.

¹²⁷ *Lament for Gwên*, ll. 28-38, *MWP*. Rowland reaches a similar translation for this refrain, as ‘gold-wearing, princely’ (*EWSP*, p. 470).

¹²⁸ *Exhortation to Maenwyn*, ll. 13-8. Rowland sees *uaer* as *maer* and deriving from Latin *maior*, meaning ‘steward’, rather like the cognate mayor found in Carolingian sources (*EWSP*, p. 531).

The oldster sees non-military service in a similar light to Cú Chulainn and Macc Cecht, and expects his son to choose an active role in the fighting rather than a more administrative position.¹²⁹

Much as it stood head and shoulders above the other examples of Welsh heroic poetry in its use of numbers, so too does *The Gododdin* stand out in its ascriptions of nobility and wealth to the war-band's members. Between eleven and fourteen warriors are individually described as lords within the *The Gododdin*, while *awdl* CA.xliv A describes the entire Gododdin force as 'three hundred lords' [*trychant unben*].¹³⁰ Other members of the Gododdin war-band receive descriptions which leaves their social status in little doubt. For example, the poet describes the warrior Tudfwlch as a 'foremost leader' and 'great man' [*mawr*] who arrived for the expedition 'from his land and homesteads' [*ech ei dir a'i drefydd*], while the warrior named Merin fab Madaiaín is also described as 'ruler, leader' [*rector, rhwyfiadur*] and happens to possess his own stronghold [*garth*].¹³¹ A few warriors in particular attract a great deal of praise centred upon their social rank. Two *awdlau* commemorate Gorthyn Hir the son of Urfai, 'the son of a rightful king' [*mab teyrn/brenin teithiog*], the 'lord of Gwynedd's men, of Cilydd the merciful's blood'

¹²⁹ *Exhortation to Maenwyn*, l. 15. Jenny Rowland thinks that the first set of verses may refer to an entirely different story in which Maen was involved in intrigue in Maelgwn's court (*EWSP*, p. 40).

¹³⁰ For the *awdlau* describing individual lords, see *The Gododdin*, CA.xxv, CA.xxvi A, CA.xxxvi, CA.xlii, CA.xlix, CA.lvi, CA.xxxvii, CA.lxi, CA.lxxii, CA.lxxv A, CA.lxxvii, CA.lxxxvii B and CA.lxx B, *MWP*; for that which describes the entire force, see *The Gododdin*, CA.xliv A, l. 4, and Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. 30-1 – according to Jarman, *unben* means more properly 'chieftain' (Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. 198). The confusion over the number of individual lords stems from the failure of three such claims to name their subject, leaving open the possibility that they could refer to the same lord named elsewhere rather than a completely different individual.

¹³¹ For Tudfwlch, see *The Gododdin*, CA.xiii, ll. 6, 11 and CA.lxiii D, l. 10; for CA.lxiii D I have used Jarman's translation which more correctly evokes the sense of the original meaning. For the original text, see Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. 10-1 and 40-1. For Merin, see *The Gododdin*, CA.lxiii B and CA.lxiii C, l. 10; for the original, see Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. 38-9 and 40-1 – note that he combines CA.lxiii A and CA.lxiii B but the line quoted here is the same for both. Jarman renders *mawr* as 'great man' or 'great warrior' (Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. 187). The words *dir* and *drefydd* are less certain – the former has many definitions, most of which relate to words such as 'sure', 'certain', 'compulsion', 'constraint' and 'urgent' (*GPC*, p. 2044). It seems likely that Clancy viewed *dir* in this instance as a form of *tir*, which means 'land', 'estate', 'domain' or even 'the earth' (*GPC*, pp. 5972-3). Even if the former reading is used, the word *drefydd* certainly has connotations of lordship, as it is a plural form of *tref*, meaning 'towns', 'homesteads', 'houses' and the like (*GPC*, p. 6064). The words *rector* and *rhwyfiadur* mean literally 'ruler' and 'leader, lord' respectively (Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. 193-4). The word *garth* simply means 'stronghold' (p. 177) – while Jackson rendered it as 'battle-square', Williams and Jarman saw it as referring to a location (Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. 119).

[*udd gwyndyd, gwaed Cilydd Gwardog*], and the sort of man whom ‘any lady and maiden and noble’ could safely approach.¹³²

Gwenabwy fab Gwen occupies a comparatively high position as well. Not only does this ‘warlord’ [*ddraig*] ride forth from his own court and lands but he has two other named warriors from the Gododdin war-band serving as his ‘right hand’ – Bradwen and Morien.¹³³ These latter two men are hardly non-entities; Morien himself receives praise for his ‘lordly’ ways, and we discover that he is also the ‘heir of Caradawg’ [*ail Caradog*], ‘Fferog’s son’ [*mab Fferog*] and ‘Mynyddog’s man’ [*aillt Mynyddog*].¹³⁴ The poet describes several other warriors as the heirs of a given lord or king – a characterization which certainly points to aristocratic status. One such man, Heinif ab Nwython, is a man ‘of the noblest name’ and an ‘heir’.¹³⁵

We find several exceptional verses which give the impression that one did not necessarily have to hail from the highest echelons of the nobility to join the war-band. Urfaï, described as ‘Eidyn’s lord’, was the son of Golystan who we read was ‘no high lord’.¹³⁶ This last example may hint at a popular mental image that a man of noble origin could rise to a higher position through service. Whatever the manner in which a warrior became ‘noble’ or aristocratic, however, these were the type of men who rode to Catraeth in the poet and his audience’s minds: ‘When noblemen came from Din Eidyn, a band / Of picked men from each provident region’.¹³⁷

In the Anglo-Saxon Context, *The Battle of Maldon* has previously received some notice for its choice of background for many of its characters – although many scholars believed the protagonists were real-life personages who took part in the

¹³² *The Gododdin*, CA.lxxxvii A, ll. 15-9, CA.lxxxvii B, ll. 15-9. Original, Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. 56-7. The original version in CA.lxxxvii A reads *teym*, ‘prince, king’ while CA.lxxxvii B reads *brenin*, ‘king’ (Jarman, *YG*, pp. 140, 179, 196). For the rest, *mab* is ‘son’, *teithiog* is ‘rightful’, *udd* is ‘lord’ and *gwaed* is ‘blood’ (Jarman, *YG*, pp. 162, 179, 196, 198). Finally, *gwardog* can be a location (the interpretation preferred by Ifor Williams and Jarman) or an adjective meaning ‘merciful, tender or gentle’ (the interpretation favoured by *GPC* and Kenneth Jackson) (Jarman, *YG*, p. 141).

¹³³ *The Gododdin*, CA.xxv, ll. 3-6, CA.xliii B, ll. 7-8, CA.xliv B, ll. 10-1. For original text of CA.xxv, see Jarman, *YG*, pp. 20-1; Jarman notes that *draig* and *dragon* literally meant ‘dragon’ but were commonly used to refer to a ‘chieftain, prince’ (p. 97).

¹³⁴ *The Gododdin*, CA.xxxv, ll. 2, 4, 10. See Jarman, *YG*, pp. 26-7 for original text. He follows Jackson in rendering *aillt* as ‘liegeman’ (p. 102). Note also that *ail Caradog* could mean ‘in the manner of Caradog’ or ‘a worthy successor of Caradog’ rather than an heir in the traditional sense (p. 102); *ail* itself can mean ‘second, other; like, similar; worthy of’ or ‘son’ (p. 159).

¹³⁵ *The Gododdin*, CA.xcviii, l. 4.

¹³⁶ *The Gododdin*, CA.c.

¹³⁷ *The Gododdin*, CA.xciv.

historic battle of Maldon, with one researcher even making an attempt to locate as many as possible in their historical context of late tenth-century East Anglia and Essex.¹³⁸ The eighteen named followers of Byrhtnoth span the spectrum socially from a *ceorl* to the grandson of an ealdorman.¹³⁹

While only one of Byrhtnoth's followers dwells at length upon his status – Ælfwine, who boasts that he hails from the 'noble lineage' of a great Mercian family and that one of his grandfathers served as an ealdorman – the poet has left various clues to the status of others.¹⁴⁰ In several cases, we read that a particular man held a position or title of some kind within the earldorman's household, such as the *thegn* Offa and the *cniht* Wulfmaer the Younger. Elsewhere we discover evidence that some families contributed numerous members to the war-band or military service, for Wulfstan 'an experienced soldier' was 'as bold in war as were many of his family'.¹⁴¹

Family again plays a role in the patronymics given to various men or in the references to a named kinsman.¹⁴² Perhaps these relatives receive mention because they were noteworthy or of some importance. Alternately, these named individuals could in some cases be relatives of the audience of the poem, patrons of the poet or benefactors of the house that produced it (or all three) – a point explored by Ute Schawb.¹⁴³ Kinship ties certainly exist between some of the men at Maldon, rather like the men in Cynewulf and Cyneheard's war-bands. One fellow, Wulfmaer, is Byrhtnoth's nephew, while the two brothers Oswald and Eadwold 'encouraged the troops, / in speeches to their friends and kinsmen'.¹⁴⁴

Thus, the overwhelming feeling in this work is once again aristocratic, although several commentators have stressed the presence of Dunnere, 'a simple yeoman' (*ceorl*).¹⁴⁵ A number have seen his participation in the battle as an

¹³⁸ Margaret A.L. Locherbie-Cameron, 'The Men Named in the Poem', in *TBOM* 991, pp. 238-49.

¹³⁹ *TBOM*, see ll. 256 and 216-19 for the former two instances, and 152, and 310-7 for the latter two.

¹⁴⁰ *TBOM*, ll. 216-9.

¹⁴¹ *TBOM*, ll. 75-6.

¹⁴² *TBOM*, ll. 152-3, 186-7, 191-2, 265-6, 282, 287, 298-300 and 320-1.

¹⁴³ Ute Schawb, 'The Battle of Maldon: A Memorial Poem', in *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact* (London, 1993), pp. 63-86 (76, 80-5).

¹⁴⁴ *TBOM*, ll. 115, 305-6.

¹⁴⁵ See for instance, D.G. Scragg, 'The Battle of Maldon', in *TBOM* 991, pp. 1-36 (33-4) – who takes it as evidence that the *comitatus* in the poem was symbolic, not literal – or Richard Abels, who views it as evidence that aristocratic retinues included men from all ranks of society (Abels, *LMOASE*, p.

indication that the historical war-band and/or military forces of late Anglo-Saxon were not wholly aristocratic in complexion – a point which has not gone completely uncontested.¹⁴⁶ In *The Finnesburh Fragment*, the poet leaves little doubt as to the social class and wealth of Hnaef's warriors as he recounts their reaction to attack: 'Then arose many a thane [*ðegn*], bedight with gold, and girded on his sword'.¹⁴⁷ Later, he describes how 'two noble warriors' [*drihtlice cempan*] guarded one of the doors into the hall, one of whom describes himself as a 'prince of the Secgan, a well-known rover' [*Secgena leod, wreccea wide cuð*].¹⁴⁸ Beowulf himself ascribes high status to Hnaef's men in his summarization of the Fight at Finnsburh, when he notes that due to Finn's treacherous attack 'many a prince [*æpeling*] destroyed by wounds; notable men had fallen in the slaughter'.¹⁴⁹

Those men who surround Hrothgar in Heorot hail from the same class, as the poet alternately describes the men who sleep nightly in Heorot as 'a band of noblemen' (*æpelinga gedriht*), 'noblemen' (*dryhtguman*), or 'princes' (*æpelinga* or *æpelinges*).¹⁵⁰ During the celebrations following Grendel's defeat, we read that 'men of high renown [*blædagande*] sat at the benches, rejoiced in the feast' at Heorot.¹⁵¹ The term *thegn* finds extensive use throughout the length of the poem as a synonym for war-band member, with the few exceptions typically resorting to some form of

161). Margaret A.L. Locherbie-Cameron viewed Dunnere as 'the socially lowest of the warriors to speak', and while noting that the *ceorl* could include tenant or yeoman farmers, placed Dunnere 'at the bottom of the social ladder' (Locherbie-Cameron, 'The Men Named in the Poem', in *TBOM* 991, pp. 238-49 (243). Magennis noted Dunnere's social status as well as his presence as the sole *ceorl* to feature in heroic poetry, but makes no further conclusions regarding his appearance in *TBOM* (Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 36).

¹⁴⁶ Eric John and D.G. Scragg, both considered the possibility of Dunnere's identity as a warrior hailing from a low social class as problematic. John used his presence to argue for a wide range of social status for the *ceorl*, with Dunnere as one of those who thrive and came to resemble a *thegn* (John, *Orbis Britanniae*, p. 138), while Scragg saw the incompatibility of his social rank with the *comitatus* as proof that the war-band in the poem was symbolic in character rather than literal (Scragg, 'The Battle of Maldon', in *TBOM* 991, pp. 1-36 (33-4). Richard Abels, who views it as evidence that aristocratic retinues included men from all ranks of society (Abels, *LMOASE*, p. 161).

¹⁴⁷ *Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment*, l. 13, p. 178.

¹⁴⁸ *Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment*, ll. 13-5 and 24-5, p. 178. *Leod* is fairly easy to render as 'lord'; *wreccea* is a bit more difficult but likely stands for *wrecca*, which usually means 'exile, adventurer, hero' (From Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the First at Finnsburg*, 3rd Edition (Boston, 1950), pp. 246, 429).

¹⁴⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 1110-3, p. 87. The term which Swanton renders as 'notable men' is actually *sume*, which typically means simply 'certain' or 'some other' (*Beowulf*, ll. 1110-3, p. 86).

¹⁵⁰ *Beowulf*, ll. 118-20, 1230-1, 1243-6, 1294-5, pp. 39-41, 93, 93-5 and 97.

¹⁵¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 1013-4, p. 83.

qualifying prefix to create a compound such as ‘hall-thegn’.¹⁵² The poet describes Hrothgar’s ‘chief’ thegn Æschere as ‘the most beloved of heroes between the seas, having the rank of companion [*gesiðes*], a powerful shield-fighter, a man of great renown [*blædfæstne*’].¹⁵³ Hrothgar later delivers a particularly fulsome eulogy describing the man as

“Æschere is dead – the eldest brother of Yrmenlaf, my confidant and my councillor, closest comrade when we defended our heads in the fray, when troops clashed. Whatever a warrior should be, a prince of proven merit, that Æschere was”.¹⁵⁴

Following Beowulf’s death, we find thegn once again displays this meaning. First, Wiglaf speaks of Beowulf acting as ‘prince to his thanes’ when he distributed gifts to the members of his retinue in the hall.¹⁵⁵ Later ‘seven men from the king’s bodyguard of thanes, the noblest [*selestan*]’ help Wiglaf carry the dragon’s hoard from the barrow.¹⁵⁶ The war-band which accompanies Beowulf on his journey to fight the dragon at the end of the poem receives a similar description when we read that (excepting the thief) his companions were the ‘sons of princes [*æðelinga bearn*]’.¹⁵⁷ The author gives a bit more information about the background of the one true member of this entourage when he refers to Wiglaf as a thegn, the ‘son of Weohstan [...] a prince [*leod*] of the Scylflings’ and a ‘young thegn’ (*magopēgn*).¹⁵⁸

We may see some shades of the Imma story when Beowulf first arrives in Denmark, for the coast-guard who sights Beowulf reports “That is no mere serving-

¹⁵² For examples of the former use, see the coast-guard’s reference to his young warriors (*Beowulf*, p. 49). I was only able to find one instance in which a thegn gives an act of non-military service without being described with some form of prefix – this occurs when Beowulf and his war-band are first seated in Heorot: ‘The thane [*Pegn*] who carried in his hands the decorated ale-cup did his duty, poured out the sweet drink’ (*Beowulf*, ll. 494-6, pp. 56-7).

¹⁵³ *Beowulf*, ll. 1296-9, p. 97.

¹⁵⁴ *Beowulf*, ll. 1324-9, p. 97.

¹⁵⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 2864-73, p. 171.

¹⁵⁶ *Beowulf*, ll. 3120-2, p. 183. *Selestan* can indicate a rather wide range of positive superlatives, including greatest, most excellent, noblest, most honourable.

¹⁵⁷ *Beowulf*, ll. 2596-8, p. 159

¹⁵⁸ *Beowulf*, ll. 2602-4, 2708-9, 2720-3, 2756-7, pp. 159, 163, 165, 167. *Leod* can mean ‘man’ or ‘country-man’, but it can also mean ‘chief, prince or king’.

man decked out with weapons, unless his appearance and unique form belie him.”¹⁵⁹ Beowulf’s war-band throughout the poem receives praise for its nobility. When Wulfgar informs his lord Hrothgar of the arrival of Beowulf’s war-band, he notes that “...from their fighting-gear they seem worthy of the respect of warriors; at any rate the chief who has led these warlike men is valiant”.¹⁶⁰ Prior to ushering Beowulf and his men into Heorot, Wulfgar tells them: “My victorious leader, the chief of the East Danes, has bidden me tell you that he knows of your lineage, and you are welcome to him here, brave-hearted men from across the surging sea.”¹⁶¹ We may even see the possibility of a war-band of men drawn from a group of interrelated upper-class families (as pictured in the Llywarch Hen poetry), for when Grendel spies upon them in Heorot he sees ‘a band of kinsmen [*sibbegedriht*] sleeping, a troop of young warriors [*magorinca heap*] all together’.¹⁶²

ii. Wealth, splendour and luxury

Beyond mere titles, descent and lordship, *The Gododdin* also presents an environment for the war-band reminiscent of the Ulster Cycle, in which the protagonists live a splendid life of plenty, riches and luxury when not engaged in warfare. In *The Gododdin*, awdl CA.xvi, the poet describes the warrior Blaen:

Blaen, on down pillows, would pass around
 The drinking-horn in his opulent hall.
 The first brew of bragget was his.
 Blaen took delight in gold and purple;
 First pick of sleek steeds raced beneath him:¹⁶³

Later Cynon is described as a ‘jewel-decked lord’.¹⁶⁴ As an aside, Alcock also thought that the surviving archaeological evidence suggested that the poet of *The*

¹⁵⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 249-50, p. 47. Yet note that the word Swanton renders as ‘serving-man’, *seldguma*, actually may mean retainer

¹⁶⁰ *Beowulf*, ll. 368-70, p. 51.

¹⁶¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 391-4, p. 53.

¹⁶² *Beowulf*, ll. 728-30, p. 69. *Sibbegedriht* probably means either ‘related band’ or ‘peaceful host’, *magorinca* means ‘young warriors’ and *heap* generally has connotations of a ‘crowd, group, band, troop or host’.

¹⁶³ *The Gododdin*, CA.xvi.

Gododdin greatly exaggerated the wealth and rich possessions of his subjects, as well as the sumptuousness of the feast.¹⁶⁵

In several places the accoutrements and habits of the men at Maldon point to their membership of the upper classes. Prior to the battle, the unnamed kinsman of Offa sent his ‘much loved’ hawk off to the woods (‘he made the much loved creature fly from his wrist, / his hawk off to the wood’), while Byrhtnoth ordered ‘each of the warriors’ to abandon his horse.¹⁶⁶ Gale R. Owen-Crocker noted these same motifs within the poem and demonstrated the role of hawking and falconry in aristocratic life in tenth-century Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁶⁷ As such, she argues that the hawk borne by Offa’s kinsmen is ‘an evocation of the traditional Germanic heroic world and simultaneously an authentic reflection of fashionable, upper-class life in the late tenth century’.¹⁶⁸ Likewise, just as we may remember that prior to the battle Byrhtnoth had made the gift of many a horse to the cowardly Godric, Owen-Crocker noted the high status held by mounted warriors as well as the possible status implications of richly-decorated horse-trappings from the era, citing evidence from *Maxims I* and Anglo-Saxon wills, as well as the poet’s displeasure at Godric’s appropriation of Byrhtnoth’s horse-trappings.¹⁶⁹

One particular aspect of *Beowulf* which has frequently caught the imagination of its commentators is the frequent appearance of gold rings and arm-bands, often in the form of a gift given by a lord to members of his war-band. Apparently, most modern-day critics view this as a pagan or early Germanic custom or hold-over, long disused by the time of the surviving copy of *Beowulf*. Yet evidence exists to the contrary; Nicholas Brooks noted that most tenth- and eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon wills suggest that it was often the custom to pay the gold mancuses due as heriot in the form of *beagas*, or ‘rings or armlets’; additionally, gold payments are reckoned in

¹⁶⁴ *The Gododdin*, CA.xxxvi, l. 3.

¹⁶⁵ Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare*, pp. 247-8.

¹⁶⁶ See *TBOM*, ll. 2-10, p. 19.

¹⁶⁷ Gale R. Owen-Crocker, ‘Hawks and Horse-Trappings: the Insignia of Rank’, in *TBOM 991*, pp. 220-37 (221-9). In particular, she cites evidence from *Asser’s Life of Alfred*, correspondence between St. Boniface and several Anglo-Saxon kings, as well as ecclesiastical complaints about clerics engaging in what was seen as an aristocratic and secular leisure activity.

¹⁶⁸ Owen-Crocker, ‘Hawks and Horse-Trappings’, p. 222.

¹⁶⁹ Owen-Crocker, ‘Hawks and Horse-Trappings’, pp. 229-33.

rings in several late-eighth and ninth-century charters.¹⁷⁰ A number of gold and silver arm-rings have been found in both an Anglo-Saxon and Hiberno-Norse context and dating anywhere from the late-ninth to late-tenth centuries.¹⁷¹ Based on the differing heriots assigned to men, Brooks supposes that such gold arm-bands indicated noble status, with a greater number of such items indicating higher social rank.¹⁷² This could serve as a rough indicator of the number of dependents, although from Brooks's in-depth look at II Cnut and the corpus of Anglo-Saxon wills it seems any such correlation was vague and notional rather than specific.¹⁷³ For instance, as an earl has four times the mancuses due as heriot as a king's thegn, as well as four times the number of helmets and byrnie, one could assume that he likewise had roughly four times the number of dependents – although such a conclusion would be far from certain.¹⁷⁴

III. Conclusions – Warrior Identity and the 'Three Orders'

I believe that our comparison between heroic literary sources and so-called historical ones strongly suggests that the former genre took pains to emphasize a connection between the participation in warfare (and more particularly, membership in the war-band) and status as a member of the aristocracy, and to a lesser extent, as a young man. Non-nobles and aged veterans typically occupy the periphery or supporting roles when they appear at all within the heroic poems and tales. Within the non-literary sources, however, the less frequent nature of references to class and age combined with the clear presence of both older and lower class warriors engaged in military actions raises the likelihood that what we are seeing in fact is an active manipulation of presentations of class and age within heroic literature.

Lest one think this assessment hasty, I would raise the question: would this be any different from the later post-Norman literature and French Romances of the early

¹⁷⁰ Brooks, 'Arms, Status, and Warfare in Late-Saxon England', p. 146.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Brooks, 'Arms, Status and Warfare in Late-Saxon England', pp. 144-7.

¹⁷³ Brooks, 'Arms, Status and Warfare in Late-Saxon England', pp. 144-51. Note, however, that Brooks seems to see it as a fairly accurate measure of the number of men, both noble and *ceorlisc*, that a lord had to bring with him to court (see pp. 144-6, 150-1 especially).

¹⁷⁴ Brooks, 'Arms, Status and Warfare in Late-Saxon England', pp. 144-51.

second millennium, which also concentrate upon the deeds and exploits of noble knights and lords – often leaving the mercenaries and levies of the period unmentioned? What is worrying is that nearly all of the secondary authors have based much of their argument regarding the social caste of the warrior upon the literature – imagine if those studying the fifteenth century based their suppositions upon Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*.

What motivation could have caused such an attempt on the part of the authors of this literature to portray the war-band as an essentially aristocratic endeavour? While the chance certainly exists that the authors are reporting the reality of their situation, our evidence from other sources clearly indicates that this is doubtful. Perhaps such presentations were merely an attempt by the poets and writers responsible for this material to curry favour with the audience, particularly if it included war-band members or their relatives? Even if the war-band did not include all of the nobles under a given lord’s rule, or included commoners amongst its ranks, one would assume its personnel would likely enjoy viewing themselves as part of the nobility or at the very least as an elite group set aside from the rest of society. While such a possibility could form one factor in such an editorial decision, particularly for those verses or tales which quite clearly extol a patron, I believe that a more influential factor may be found in a political philosophy which seems to have blossomed in north-western Europe during the last several centuries of the first millennium – the so-called ‘Three Orders’ of Society.

Within an Insular context, this famous tri-partite division of society first finds expression by King Alfred of Wessex in his *OE* translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, in which he divides his people into the *bellatores* (those who fight), the *laboratores* (those who work) and the *oratores* (those who pray) – in this gloss, all three are important as together they hold up the throne, rather like a tripod.¹⁷⁵ As argued by Georges Duby and Richard Abels, this scheme became quite popular in the later Anglo-Saxon period, being restated in roughly similar terms in the early eleventh century by the famous writers Ælfric of Eynsham and archbishop

¹⁷⁵ Alfred the Great, *Translation of Boethius’s ‘Consolation of Philosophy’*, XVII, p. 131. Interestingly, Larson viewed this model as a ‘fossil’ of Germanic society, rather than a biblically or classically inspired innovation (Larson, *The King’s Household in England Before the Norman Conquest*, p. 78).

Wulfstan of York.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, Abels views the very popularity of this construct as deriving from the essential truth of its picture, in that those who utilized it recognized that the warrior class was quite distinct from the peasant class.¹⁷⁷ The popularity of this concept certainly seems to have subsequently extended across much of the Insular world, as we find an Irish restatement of it in an early twelfth-century work written by bishop Gilbert of Limerick, which Marie Therese Flanagan cites as evidence for the scheme's appeal in pre-Norman Ireland.¹⁷⁸

Timothy Powell has provided additional information on the development of this concept in Irish society. While several earlier scholars such as Dumézil, Neil McLeod and Daniel Dubuisson sought its origins as a survival from Ireland's dim Indo-European past, Powell ably demonstrated several problems with their use of the evidence.¹⁷⁹ Rather, Powell utilizes previous arguments by T.M. Charles-Edwards and Fergus Kelly that the primary cleavage in early Irish society was two-fold rather than three, whether between the free and unfree or *nemed* and common.¹⁸⁰ He follows those continental academics who view the medieval version of this tri-partite division as an elaboration on Isidore of Seville's summary of the initial division of Roman society into three tribes (*tribus*) of 'senators, soldiers and the common

¹⁷⁶ Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, with a foreword by Thomas N. Bisson (Chicago and London, 1980), pp. 100-7, Abels, *LMOASE*, p. 66.

¹⁷⁷ Two of those who used this source in the former role were Richard Abels and Nicholas Brooks. Abels uses it as further evidence that the *fyrð* of Alfred's time was not the 'nation in arms', as it would not include peasants who engaged in agricultural labour half the year (*LMOASE*, p. 66). Brooks likewise argues that it must have been valid due to its 'attractiveness' to contemporaries, and that it belied the widening social gap existing between the 'fully armed soldier' from the military aristocracy and the 'lightly-armed' *ceorl* from 'the bulk of the population who had earlier had greater military significance' (Brooks, 'Arms, Status, and Warfare in Late-Saxon England', pp. 138-9, 141-2, 155).

¹⁷⁸ Marie Therese Flanagan, 'Irish and Anglo-Norman warfare in twelfth century Ireland', p. 68

¹⁷⁹ Timothy E. Powell, 'The idea of the three orders of society and social stratification in early medieval Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies* 29/116 (November 1995), pp. 475-89 (475-83). George Dumézil elaborates his arguments regarding a tripartite division of Indo-European society in his works *L'idéologie tripartite des indo-européens* (Brussels, 1958) and *Mythe et épopée, I: L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens* (2nd edition; Paris, 1974). For McLeod's arguments, see his two-part article 'Interpreting early Irish law: status and currency', which appeared in *ZCP*, xli (1986), pp. 46-65 and xlii (1987), pp. 41-115. Daniel Dubuisson admitted the theme was not spelled out in any Irish texts before Alfred's edition of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, but tried to demonstrate evidence for the concept in early Irish literature and law tracts; see 'L'Irlande et la théorie médiévale des "trois orders"', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, clxxxviii (1975), pp. 35-63.

¹⁸⁰ Powell, 'The idea of the three orders of society', pp. 485-9. See also Charles-Edwards, 'Críth Gablach & the law of status', *Peritia* 5 (1986), pp. 53-73 (especially p. 54), and Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988), p. 9.

people', noting that the etymologies appeared in Ireland within twenty years of its creation.¹⁸¹

While Abels and Flanagan are right to point out the popularity of this concept, they have failed to consider an inverse possibility – that it was an ideal, which did not reflect reality but rather sought to influence and order an imperfect society. Georges Duby reaches this very conclusion in a work primarily concerned with the concept of the Three Orders in its French incarnation, particularly as he followed the model of Anglo-Saxon society during the age of King Alfred as one in which the same freemen who fought also tilled the soil.¹⁸² Rather than a simple idealization, however, Duby concludes that it reflects an attempt to achieve real-life goals such as the stabilization and strengthening of royal authority, and elimination of abuses.¹⁸³

In the latter instance, he notes that the first two uses of the Three Orders by Ælfric dwelt upon the problem of members of the clergy bearing weapons and even engaging in combat, acting as *bellatores* when they should behave as proper *oratores*.¹⁸⁴ In the third instance of Ælfric's use of the Three Orders, as well as Wulfstan's recourse to it in his *Institutes of Polity*, the authors use the model to stress the appropriate duties and role of each group within society – in both of these, we return to the Alfredian stress on the need for all Three Orders to form strong and stable supports for the throne.¹⁸⁵ When discussing Ælfric's third use of this model, however, Duby caught an important distinction which will lead us to the next step in our discussion – that Ælfric rendered those who fought as *cniht* in OE.¹⁸⁶

Duby recognizes that this word, an antecedent for the later word knight, may refer to men who in the early eleventh century served as mounted warriors with superior arms and equipment, rather like the emerging French chevalier of the same

¹⁸¹ Powell, 'The idea of the three orders of society', p. 483.

¹⁸² Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, with a foreword by Thomas N. Bisson (Chicago and London, 1980), pp. 100-1.

¹⁸³ Duby, *The Three Orders*, p. 107. See also Timothy E. Powell, who apparently interprets Duby as actually not emphasizing this aspect enough in 'The "Three Orders" of Society in Anglo-Saxon England, *ASE* 23 (1994), pp. 103-32 (130-1).

¹⁸⁴ Duby, *The Three Orders*, pp. 103-4.

¹⁸⁵ Duby, *The Three Orders*, pp. 103-5.

¹⁸⁶ Duby, *The Three Orders*, p. 105.

period.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, one of the Frenchmen who use this model, Adalbero, surmises that the nobility and commoners were from different lineages, with the former defined by descent as much as by function as members of the *bellatores*.¹⁸⁸ Unfortunately, he failed to pursue this discovery, at least in regards the Insular world. As we have seen from the work of Abels, Brooks and others, the term *cniht* does indeed imply a warrior with superior equipment and possibly hailing from a higher social background than the bulk of the populace. Thus, we may see in the writings of Ælfric and Wulfstan an attempt to limit fighting to not only those whose profession is warfare, but indeed the members of a new class defined by its exclusive right to dispense violence.

In such a case, two possible motivations suggest themselves. According to Halsall, during the period of state formation the right to fight frequently becomes limited to certain classes within society.¹⁸⁹ Such a philosophy would also neatly dovetail with more general ecclesiastical concerns expressed by the church during this time period (and indeed, throughout the whole of the middle ages) with limiting the effects of warfare, particularly upon the civilian or innocent classes of society. We may see an early shadow of this sort of thinking in Adomnan's *Lex Innocentium* of the late seventh century, in which he defined the innocent or harmless groups of society and attempted to limit their participation in and suffering from warfare, while the 'peace of God' movement sweeping the continent during our period showed contemporary concerns over the same issues.¹⁹⁰

As such, the mobilization of this concept in our heroic literature may have been part of a wider programme to clearly define the sole class within society which should engage in just war as needed, with the rest of society (the *laboratores* and *oratores*) classed as non-combatants. One wonders if the use of three hundred previously mentioned supports this model - Isidore's division of Roman society into three tribes appears almost immediately after summarization of Roman military units

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Duby, *The Three Orders*, p. 45.

¹⁸⁹ A point later carried forward by Halsall, 'Anthropology and the Study of Pre-Conquest Warfare and Society', in *WWASE*, pp. 167.

¹⁹⁰ Interestingly, Duby saw the Peace of God movement as competing with the Three Orders model, albeit with the same goal – dealing with the problem of an out of control warrior class which preyed upon the 'civilian' elements of society (Duby, *The Three Orders*, p. 108).

including the tribe of ‘three hundred horsemen’.¹⁹¹ The insistence by the authors of our heroic literary sources that those engaged in proper or heroic warfare hailed without exception from a military aristocracy betrayed their views of the proper organization of society, particularly in regards to determining who should deal in violence. The view that only the proper individual should fight is a feature of the medieval concept of just war and its application, a subject we will encounter more fully in the next chapter.

¹⁹¹ These appear respectively in *Etymologies*, IX.iii.51 and IX.iv.7 (pp. 202-3).

Chapter Four - The Warrior as the Defender of Society

I. Just War

Far from a blanket condemnation of all violence, the early church fathers – men such as Ambrose, Augustine and Isidore – had formulated the concept of a just war in the Christian context during late antiquity. By the early fifth century Saint Augustine could accept that a just ruler may have to engage in warfare due to the initiation of violence by his enemies; while warfare itself remained deplorable, the just ruler's sin was lessened in the matter as his hand was forced.¹ Several centuries later Isidore of Seville divided warfare into four different types: just, unjust, civil and private. His description of just war resembled that earlier proposed by Augustine, although expanding the justification for such violence: 'A just war is that which is waged in accordance with a formal declaration and is waged for the sake of recovering property seized or of driving off the enemy.'² Isidore also pointedly included 'the repulsion of violence by force' as an instance of natural law.³

The influence of such writings becomes quite apparent in the later development of just war in the late eighth- and ninth-century, at which time we find churchmen reassuring warriors, lords and kings that violence waged to protect Christians, keep the peace or even on behalf of a legitimate authority was justified and forgivable.⁴ In the Carolingian Empire and later West Francia we begin to see a conceptual division between warfare waged by the public authority or a legitimate

¹ For a good summary of the development of 'just war' in early Christianity, see Guy Halsall, *WSBW*, pp. 16-8, Janet Nelson, 'Violence in the Carolingian world and the ritualization of ninth-century warfare', in *VSEMW*, pp. 90-107, J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'War and peace in the early Middle Ages', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, 25 (1975), pp. 157-74 (161-2).

² Isidore, *Etymologies*, XVIII.i.2: Stephen A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, Oliver Berghof (eds. and trans.), Muriel Hall (coll.), *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge, 2010).

³ Isidore, *Etymologies*, V.iv.

⁴ Janet L. Nelson, 'Violence in the Carolingian world and the ritualization of ninth-century warfare', in *VSEMW*, pp. 90-107 (91). She examines a number of texts written during this era (mostly French) which call for kings and emperors to engage in warfare to defend the church and the weak, as well as texts which justified prayers for warriors killed in war conducted at royal behest to support peace for the kingdom.

ruler (*bellum*) and private conflict (*werra*).⁵ Janet Nelson demonstrated how these various strands belie a new concept of just war:

The ideology of just war was subtended by a clearly etched cosmology: within the earthly empire God-directed rulers maintained peace in and for the church; outside it, war was waged to defend the Christian people, and to extend the church's sway.⁶

This same new thinking on just war propagated throughout the Insular world around the same time period. As suggested previously, the ideal that only legitimate combatants may engage in warfare may have influenced the depiction of the leading actors in the heroic literature of the period as the members of an aristocratic and military elite. In fact, Ælfric of Eynsham divides war into four separate categories in the same text in which he first discussed the three orders of society, splitting it into four separate categories – just, unjust, war between ‘citizens’ and war between relatives.⁷ These last three are all vilified with unjust war described as ‘that which comes from anger’. Just war, on the other hand, includes ‘war against the cruel seamen or others who wish to destroy [our] land’.⁸ As Leslie Alcock saw matters, Christian teaching did not act as a major brake upon warfare within northern Britain during the early middle ages (with kings of the era identified with the Old Testament ‘warrior-kings’), but rather praised ‘just war’ in support of the defence of the realm while condemning attacks upon innocent civilians and clergy.⁹ Unfortunately, most critics of heroic literature have ignored or overlooked the popularity of such notions, with the occasional exception such as the argument put forward by J.E. Cross that certain passages found within Old English heroic poetry point to a working knowledge of the canonical doctrines of ‘just war’.¹⁰

The question of just war remains a central one in considering the depiction of warriors within both the literary and historical texts of the early Insular Middle Ages.

⁵ Nelson, ‘Violence in the Carolingian world’, pp. 91-3.

⁶ Nelson, ‘Violence in the Carolingian world’, p. 92.

⁷ Ælfric, *Lives of the Saints*, ll. 705-14, Skeat (ed.), pp. 113, 115.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Leslie Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests*, p. 126.

¹⁰ J.E. Cross, ‘The Ethic of War in Old English’, *England before the Conquest, Studies in Primary Sources, Presented by Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. by P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (1971), pp. 269-82. See also James Campbell, ‘England c. 991’, in Janet Cooper (ed.), *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact* (Hambledon, 1993), pp. 1-17 (16).

This may derive in part from the warrior's rather unique position in the Insular world of the late-eighth through mid-eleventh centuries – while certainly not the only person to engage in violence within this milieu, his 'dedication' to a career of military service, coupled with his allegiance and proximity to a given lord, gave him a pre-eminent role in the dispensation of force and violence during this time. Perhaps one of our best considerations of the concept of just war *vis a vis* warriors during this time comes from a source pre-dating our period but which remained quite popular throughout it and beyond – the *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* of Gildas. In a particularly colourful passage the author sets up a number of instances of the ideal behaviour of kings and their military followers, only to destroy each with its real-life practice by his own contemporaries:

Britain has kings, but they are tyrants; she has judges, but they are wicked. They often plunder and terrorize – the innocent; they defend and protect – the guilty and thieving; they have many wives – whores and adulteresses; they constantly swear – false oaths; they make vows – but almost at once tell lies; they wage wars – civil and unjust; they chase thieves energetically all over the country – but love and reward the thieves who sit with them at table; they distribute alms profusely – but pile up an immense mountain of crime for all to see; they take their seats as judges – but rarely seek out the rules of right judgement; they despise the harmless and humble, but exalt to the stars, so far as they can, their military companions, bloody, proud and murderous men, adulterous and enemies of God – if chance, as they say, so allows: men who should have been rooted out vigorously, name and all; they keep many prisoners in their jails, who are more often loaded with chafing chains because of intrigue than because they deserve punishment. They hang around the altars swearing oaths – then shortly afterwards scorn them as though they were dirty stones.¹¹

From Gildas's diatribe, I would like to examine two concepts in detail in this chapter:

1. The ideal that legitimate combatants must defend the Church and Christianity, along with the negative image provided by Gildas that these men are 'enemies of God'.

¹¹ Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 27.1.

2. The ideal that warriors should defend the people and land from external and internal foes, along with its inverse, that they ‘despise the harmless and humble’ and are the primary law-breakers.

Keeping the concept of Christian ‘just war’ in mind, we may now proceed to extend our exercise of the comparison of the literary image of the warrior versus its ‘reality’ as found in the historical, legal, and other ecclesiastically directed works. Do warriors limit their violent actions to ‘war against the cruel seamen or others who wish to destroy our land’ in the heroic literature? What about in reality? At this point I would like to begin our investigation of such questions, starting with a more in-depth look at the depiction of the relationship between the warrior and the church.

II. Defender of the Church

i. Image in heroic literature

While most of the Irish and Old English heroic literature occurs in a pre-Christian setting, the bulk of the Welsh material occurs in a distinctly Christian context; the Norse material related to the Insular world occupies a nebulous middle ground during the process of Christianization. As such, I would like to begin our survey with the Welsh material. In the *The Gododdin* we find a hero engaged in just war as defined by Ælfric as he fights against ‘pagans [*gynt*] and Gaels and Picts’.¹² While it remains unclear whether the ‘pagans’ here are intended to represent the native British, Anglo-Saxons from across the North Sea or even Scandinavians, their paganism has marked them out as enemies on par with the Gaels and Picts, at least by the tenets of just war. The second of these *awdlau*, apparently dedicated to the warrior Morien, also contains the odd verses ‘Who tugs a wolf’s mane without spear

¹² Either Bradwen or Morien – see *The Gododdin*, CA.xliii B and CA.xliv B. Jarman suggests that the word *gynt*, meaning ‘heathen’, likely refers to the English but does not think these lines refer to any specific battle (*Y Gododdin*, p. 109).

in hand / Needs a brave heart under his cloak'.¹³ The placement of this gnostic-looking phrase seems rather odd, but Ifor Williams interpreted it as simply a boast by the poet that his subject once killed a wolf with his bare hands.¹⁴ A nearly identical metaphor appears in another *awdl* dedicated to either the hero Bradwen or the men of the Gododdin war-band as a whole (both appear in the verses in question); this one reads: 'Who would seize a wolf's mane without sword in hand / Needs a bold heart under his cloak'.¹⁵ These verses may, however, find inspiration not in the exploits of the named warriors against a real-life wolf, but rather Old Testament imagery. Here the term 'wolves' frequently finds use as the descriptor for ravaging and rapacious secular princes and warriors.¹⁶ Such an image may have proved tantalizing to the authors of the early medieval Insular world, particularly when one considers the often wolf-like and pagan characteristics ascribed to medieval brigands and outlaws like the *berserkr*, *díbergaig* and *fianna* (groups we shall discuss shortly).¹⁷

The Battle of Maldon may also evoke the image of the war-band as the defenders of the church and a Christian people from pagan aggressors when it refers to Byrhtnoth's Viking enemies as 'heathens', a 'hateful race' and 'fiends', reinforcing a notion that the hero and his men are prosecuting just war.¹⁸ The alliterative verse entry in the *ASC* for the year 942 exults in Edmund's liberation of the now Christian Danes of Mercia from the 'bonds of captivity to the heathens' [*hæpenra hæfteclommum*] (with the heathens here being the Norsemen).¹⁹ While not specifying the defence of the church per se, it certainly condemns his foes as pagan. Even those stories set in a pre-Christian era can sometimes use this sentiment to glorify their subjects. In the Ulster Cycle saga *Aided Conchobar*, the Ulster king

¹³ *The Gododdin*, CA.xliv B, ll. 6-9. Ifor Williams translates it as 'cudgel' rather than 'spear' (*BWP*, p. 61).

¹⁴ Rachel Bromwich reported Williams's assertion in *BWP*, p. 77; see also his *Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry* (Dublin, 1944), p. 69. Jackson (*GOSP*, p. 56) seems to agree with him.

¹⁵ *The Gododdin*, CA.xliv A, ll. 5-6.

¹⁶ See for instance Jeremiah 5:6, Ezekiel 22:27, Zephaniah 3:3.

¹⁷ For a good overview of this ascription of wolflike characteristics to such men, see Hilda Ellis Davidson, 'The Training of Warriors', in *WWASE*, pp. 11-24, Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present* (Maynooth, 2000), pp. 213-4, Máire West, 'The Genesis of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*: A Reappraisal of the 'Two-Source' Theory', *Celtica* 23 (1999), pp. 413-35, and David Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain and Ireland, 800-1200* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 73-5, 86, 113.

¹⁸ *TBOM*, ll. 55, 181, pp. 21, 25.

¹⁹ *ASC* C (A, B, D) 942. Literally, 'heathen fetters'. Original from Janet Bately (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Vol. 3: MS. A* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 73, and G.P. Cubbin (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Vol. 6: MS. D* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 43.

Conchobar becomes filled with righteous anger when he hears about the crucifixion of Christ from one of his druids. One version of the tale gives more detail:

“A thousand armed men shall by me in the rescue of Christ.” Thereupon he sprang towards his two lances and brandished them stoutly so that they broke in his hand; and then he took his sword in his hand and attacked the wood around him so that he made a plain of the wood, even Mag Lámraige in the land of the men of the Rosses. And he said this: “Tis thus I should avenge Christ upon the Jews and upon those that crucified Him, if I could reach them.”²⁰

His anger becomes so great that he dislodges a petrified brain lodged in his skull and causes one of his arteries to burst, the blood spurting forth serving as his baptism and guaranteeing his place in Heaven. Here Conchobar displays a desire to pursue that most just of wars in attacking those who persecute Christ. He also seeks revenge on behalf of Christ, a point we will study further in Chapter 5. While the *Beowulf* author chose pre-Christian Denmark as the setting for the first part of his poem, he explicitly describes the villain Grendel as the scion of the biblical Cain, so that in slaying him, Beowulf dispatches an enemy of God.²¹

We also find use of the word *bedydd*, meaning ‘the baptized’ but often translated more generally as ‘Christendom’, in some Welsh poetry.²² While this may simply indicate it was composed in a Christian society, some of the claims made by the poets may tie the subject of their praises into a role as the defender of such society. For instance, in the early Taliesin poetry king Urien is the ‘true leader of Christendom’ whose reign renders ‘Christendom’s poets’ joyful.²³ In *The Gododdin* we read that the warrior Neirthiad possessed ‘the most merciless blades in

²⁰ *Death of Conchobar Version A*: Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), in *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes* (Dublin, 1906), pp. 4-11 (10-1). Note that this quote comes from the version in Ed. XL; the others are either more terse or were difficult for Meyer to translate.

²¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 104-14, p. 39.

²² See Rachel Bromwich, Jenny Rowland and A.O.H. Jarman in *CT*, p. 30, *EWSP*, p. 561, *Y Gododdin*, p. 85 respectively. See also Wendy Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1982), p. 185.

²³ *The Battle of Gwen Ystrad*, l. 5, and *In Praise of Urien*, l. 4. In the former instance, Ifor Williams argued that the original *rwyf bedydd* meant ‘leader of Christendom’, based on contemporary use of the word *bedydd*, normally meaning ‘baptism’ to also mean ‘Christendom’ (and hence the world) (*CT*, pp. 2, 30). Likewise, he sees the original words from the second instance, *beird bedyd*, as meaning bards or poets of ‘Christendom’ (*CT*, pp. 3, 45). See also *GPC*, pp. 682-3.

Christendom'.²⁴ The poem *Rhun* from the Rheged *englynion* speaks of the distress of Christian military forces at Rhun's death:

Friday I saw the great
Sorrow of Christendom's war-hosts,
Like a swarm that lacks a queen.²⁵

As an aside, one may wonder if this term 'Christendom' could have dating implications for the verses in which it appears.

As an aside, *The Gododdin* also makes reference to several elements of a Christian lifestyle in connection to the activities of its war-band, including those of church attendance, shriving, penance, and communion. Oddly, most of the relevant verses are rather ambiguous, in that they could be translated in a positive or negative sense. For instance, while Clancy translates two lines in a particular *awdl* as stating that the Gododdin warriors 'go to churches for shriving', Jackson renders the same lines as 'Though they should go to churches to do penance'.²⁶ In both cases, however, the poet writes that the warriors were still confronted by death despite their choice.²⁷ Penance appears again in the *awdl* reading 'Fine tribute to Lloegr-men's war-bands. /

²⁴ *The Gododdin*, CA.xii, l. 4. This rendering is actually slightly problematic, as the original line reads *Â llafnawr llawn annawdd ym medydd*. The first part of this translates fairly easily into 'With blades full of cruelty' but *ym medydd* is problematic. Apparently, Williams seemed to think the word could mean 'in baptism'; Jarman notes that the last word could also, however, mean 'Christendom' or 'the world', and translates the whole as 'With blades full of cruelty in the world'. This certainly seems a better translation than the alternative. Yet *GPC* gives no entry for *medydd* – the closest is *meddyd*, meaning 'mead'. If this is correct, it may tie into themes more fully discussed in Chapter 6. See Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. 8, 85, and *GPC*, pp. 682-3.

²⁵ *Fall of Rheged*, 6, ll. 1-3, in *MWP*, p. 79. Once again, the original is a version of *bedydd* (here *bedit*) – Jenny Rowland gives it a similar meaning as Ifor Williams, that it derived from the word for 'baptism' but came to also mean 'the baptized', 'Christendom', the 'Christian world' and by extension 'the world' in general. Interestingly, she translates it into English with the final meaning 'the armies of the world' (*EWSP*, pp. 423-4, 480, 561).

²⁶ *The Gododdin*, CA.vi, ll. 5-7, CA.vii, ll. 5-6. Jackson's translation can be found in *GOSP*, pp. 117-8. The original lines, *Cyd elwynt lannau I benydiaw* and *Cyd elwynt lannau I benydu*, do not seem to contain the sense that they men 'should go to churches' but rather simply states that they did (Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. 7).

²⁷ The original reads *Dadl ddiau angau i eu treiddu (treiddaw)*, or literally, 'The certain meeting of death came to them'. See Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. 6-7, 82-3. Interestingly, some versions renderings of these *awdlau* may indicate that the warriors did penance following a misdeed, rather than prior to battle, but were still killed in revenge: 'The son of Bodgad, the deeds of his hand wrought vengeance. / Though they went to churches to do penance, / Old and young, powerful and lowly, / The certain meeting with death came to them.' (CA.vi according to Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. 6).

Too great penance [*rhy benyd*] while they're let live.'²⁸ We are also told that Rhufon Hir would 'give gold to the altar [*allawr*]', although the next line abruptly adds 'and rewards and rich gifts to the singer.'²⁹ While Rhufon Hir may have indeed given gold to the Church, could the poet have used this as a metaphor for his action in the following line in which he showers gifts upon his bards? A more fascinating possibility, however, would involve the poet equating the granting of gifts to a poet or singer with gold left on the altar.

Continuing our discussion in this general vein, we read that Tudfwlch Hir would slay Saxons 'every seventh day' [*seithfed dydd*] – rather as often as one would attend church.³⁰ Could this be a dark parody, with Tudfwlch Hir killing instead of praying on the sacred day? Perhaps, but if so it would have been one likely lost on a primarily secular audience prior to the mid-eleventh century as regular church attendance remained fairly rare for the Welsh laity before that time.³¹ An alternative possibility was that the composer of this section was hearkening to the Old Testament, when the Israelites were told that it would take a week for them to become cleansed after their victory of the Midianites.³² Perhaps he killed enemies on Monday, so that he could attend church on Sunday. In this last case it would seem more a case of equivocation.

Several of these references require a more in-depth discussion in later chapters. These include two nearly matching *awdlau* which differ primarily in the last word in one of their verses, with one reading 'Glory come to you, for you would not sin' and the other 'Heaven's home be yours, because you would not flee'; we will discuss these further in Chapter 5.³³ In two *awdlau*, the Gododdin poet states that 'Cibno will not say, after battle's furor, / though he took communion [*cymun*], that he had his due.'³⁴ Unfortunately, this is a somewhat problematic line, as the phrase which Ifor Williams and later scholars render as *cyfai cymun iddo* or 'Though

²⁸ *The Gododdin*, CA.lxxiii, ll. 5-6. For original, see Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. 49. Jarman recognizes this as a metaphorical use of the word for penance (*Y Gododdin*, pp. lvi, 130).

²⁹ *The Gododdin*, CA.xxxiii, ll. 7-8. For the original text, see Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. 25.

³⁰ *The Gododdin*, CA.xiii, 11-2. Clancy renders this as 'at least once a week', while Jackson translates it as 'every seventh day'. Jarman notes that the original, *seithfed dydd*, does indeed mean 'every seventh day', but takes this expression to mean 'regularly' (Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. 10-1, 86).

³¹ Wendy Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1982), pp. 184-5.

³² Numbers 19:11 – 19:17.

³³ *The Gododdin*, CA.xx A, ll. 4-6, CA.xx B, ll. 3, 7-8.

³⁴ *The Gododdin*, CA.lxiv A, ll. 7-8, CA.xliv B, ll. 7-8.

he took communion’ actually reads *ket bei kymun* and *ceuei cimon idau* in the original manuscript.³⁵ Williams admitted that *kymun/cimun* may also mean *cyfun*, ‘friend, comrade’ (Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. 121). Assuming *kymun/cimun* means ‘communion’, I cannot see a connection with the communion offered by the church in this *awdl*; rather this appears to be a sly indication that Cibno in fact partook of ‘mead in the hall’, perhaps as part of his agreement to fight on behalf of Mynyddog – we will discuss this concept of ‘paying for mead’ in full detail in Chapter 6.³⁶

Jackson touches on the Christian aspect with *The Gododdin* in his introduction to his edition of the poem, although in his view there is no direct mention of God.³⁷ Joseph Clancy concluded that the works ascribed to Aneirin and Taliesin were very much Christian works, with their references to confession, communion and the hereafter.³⁸ A final possible reference to the war-band defending the church and its personnel appears towards the end of the poem *Lament for Cynddylan*, when the poet describes a raid:

The wretched archbishop in his four-edged cloak,
No book-grasping monks protected him.
Of those who fell on the fine prince’s field
Came not clear from his fray brother to sister.³⁹

These lines of verse have proven difficult to interpret, primarily due to the fact that the poem simultaneously rejoices in Cynddylan’s exploits and laments his death. Several lines preceding the quoted section above appear quite exultant in tone, with an enumeration of the great amount of loot which the hero Morial seized near Lichfield, yet the lines following begin the lamentation for Cynddylan. The identity of those who ‘fell on the fine prince’s field’ remains quite uncertain; were they Cynddylan’s friends or foes? Similarly, was the archbishop an ally of Cynddylan or an enemy? If an ally, the poet shows the fate that awaits the church upon

³⁵ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. 42-3, 121.

³⁶ John T. Koch reached a similar conclusion, although he based it upon a theorized derivation of *kymun/cimun* directly from its pre-Christian Latin sense of ‘sharing, mutual participation’, rather than a innovation from the Christian sense of the word as a Christian sacrament (Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin: Text and Context from Dark-Age North Britain* (Cardiff, 1997), pp. 24, 152).

³⁷ *GOSP*, p. 37.

³⁸ *MWP*, p. 20

³⁹ *Marwnad Cynddylan*, ll. 57-60.

Cynddylan's death. Jenny Rowland discusses several possible meanings for these lines, two of which she particularly favours: that the poet was mocking the Northumbrian army as overly self-righteous, or the Northumbrian clerics as ineffective spiritual protectors of Cynddylan's enemies.⁴⁰

From the heroic literature here considered, one could easily reach the impression that the war-band protects the church, its people and its property by warding off the attacks of pagans and the like. While we shall shortly compare this to the historical 'reality', I think it would be even more illuminating to look first at the war-band in hagiographical literature from the same period.

ii. Image in hagiographical writing

Two hagiographical sources provide good examples of the negative image of military men in relation to the church, one which seems so absent in the heroic literature. The first of these, the *Life of St. Cadog*, discusses a fifth-century saint but most likely dates to the tail end of the eleventh century. It gives several examples of the dangers that a group of warriors, even one serving a legitimate king, could pose to the church and its people.⁴¹ Early in the *Life*, we read that at the time of St. Cadog's birth his father King Gwynllyw had some brigands in his following, for he was 'very partial to thieves, and used to instigate them somewhat often to robberies'. One day, a group of these rogues came upon a religious Irish hermit and 'vilely' stole his only possession, a milk cow which supplied the hermit and his twelve minsters with sustenance. King Gwynllyw hears of this crime and justly restores the milk cow to the hermit; here, he acts as the protector of the church in the face of his military followers who injure it.⁴²

When St. Cadog reaches adulthood he has several encounters with men of a similar character. In the first such instance, a chief named Sawyl and his

⁴⁰ *EWSP*, pp. 133-5, 172.

⁴¹ John Reuben Davies refers to the same episodes from the *Life* found here (although he discusses them more briefly) in his article, 'Church, Property, and Conflict in Wales, AD 600 – 1100', in *Welsh History Review* 18, pp. 387-406 (esp. 403).

⁴² *Life of St. Cadog*, I, in A.W. Wade-Evans (ed. and trans.), *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae* (Cardiff, 1944), pp. 24-141 (31).

‘accomplices’ pay a visit to St. Cadog’s monastery where they ‘violently took food and drink, while the clerics groaned’, eventually falling asleep from overindulgence. At this point the clerics gain their revenge by shaving their oppressors’ heads and the ‘halfpart’ of their beards; when the brigands wake they are still too drunk to notice what has happened so they ride off none the wiser. Cadog, however, warns his followers that these men will return for vengeance when they become aware of how the clerics have shamed them. When the villains finally become cognizant of the insult the clerics have paid them, they gallop back to slaughter the monks. As they charge Cadog and his monks the earth opens up and swallows the ‘tyrant’ and his men.⁴³

This motif recurs a second time during a later chapter of the hagiography. One day fifty soldiers under the command of man named Illtud (who in turn served ‘a certain regulus, to wit, Paul’) set out without their commander to requisition provision from Cadog ‘willy-nilly’. They encounter St. Cadog while he was teaching, at which point the unperturbed holy man willingly supplied the men with a great quantity of food and beer. They proceeded to transport these supplies to a nearby clearing, where they prepared for a feast and awaited the arrival of Illtud. Just as he returned, the ground opens up and swallows all of his ‘comrades’, at which point the *Life* quotes the biblical account of the swallowing of Dathan by the earth – perhaps the origin of both instances of this particular image in this work.⁴⁴

St. Cadog also encounters difficulties with war-bands serving the king of Gwynedd on several occasions. On one occasion a group of men out of Gwynedd raided the region and seized the daughter of one of one of Cadog’s officers from her house, in response to which some of Gwynllyw’s men give pursuit and slay a few men from the enemy war-band. When news of this affront reaches the ears of Maelgwn the king of Gwynedd, he becomes enraged and prepares to plunder the whole country, only to be halted by Cadog himself.⁴⁵ Some time later one of Maelgwn’s sons named Rhun led a great company to ‘rob the possessions and treasures of the southern Britons and [...] lay waste to the land’, but heeding his father’s warning he orders his warriors to give Saint Cadog’s monastery a wide

⁴³ *Life of St. Cadog*, 16, p. 59.

⁴⁴ *Life of St. Cadog*, 19, p. 63-5.

⁴⁵ *Life of St. Cadog*, 23, p. 73.

berth. Unfortunately for Rhun, twelve of his men disobey his orders when they become thirsty and ride to the monastery for a drink of milk. When the saint refuses their request they become angry and attempt to burn down his barn – an action which results in miraculous blinding of Rhun until he makes amends to the saint.⁴⁶

Some of this behaviour in the *Life of St. Cadog* has come to the notice of earlier reviewers and historians. Sean Davies referred to the episode concerning Rhun ap Maelgwn Gwynedd in this *vitae*, although he primarily used it as a witness for the typical accoutrements of a warrior during the early middle ages in Wales.⁴⁷ A.D. Carr, however, ties the actions of Maelgwn and Rhun's war-bands into a general argument for a strong strain of ecclesiastical ambivalence towards the war-band due to its behaviour, as will be further explained very shortly.⁴⁸ John Reuben Davies envisions a more complex and nuanced view of warriors from the clergy, and suggests that while the church could indeed be victimized by the military followers of both foreign and 'sacrilegious' local rulers, other warriors serving friendly noblemen and kings frequently defended it.⁴⁹

The Irish Saints' Lives are also a rich source for the examples of the possible depredations a war-band could inflict upon the Church, but for the sake of concision I will concentrate upon a single *vita* referred to by both Sharpe and McCone in their discussion of *díbergaig* (diabolical brigandage which we will discuss very shortly) – *Immram Curaig Úa Corra*.⁵⁰ In this tale, a childless man and woman fast against the devil in order to have children and give the resulting three sons a 'pagan baptism'.⁵¹ The three quickly grow to adulthood, at which point 'the people of the house' tell the young men that their only flaw was their 'baptism into the Devil's possession'. Upon

⁴⁶ *Life of St. Cadog*, 24, p. 75.

⁴⁷ Sean Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, p. 143.

⁴⁸ A.D. Carr, 'Teulu and Penteulu', in T.M. Charles-Edwards, Morfydd E. Owen and Paul Russell (eds.), *The Welsh King and his Court*, pp. 63-81 (74).

⁴⁹ Reuben Davies, 'Church, Property, and Conflict in Wales', pp. 405-6.

⁵⁰ McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 219. See also those used by Sharpe, including Vita S. Lugidi c.31, Vita S. Cainnechi, c.44, Vita S. Colmani c.5 and Vita S. Fintani, cc.14-5 (Sharpe, pp. 81-2).

⁵¹ For more on the early Irish practice of legal fasting (*troscud*) against a higher-ranking adversary to achieve proper recompense or justice, and its frequent transformation into an act by saints to receive a boon from God, see Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988), pp. 182-3, and Máire Johnson, "'Vengeance is Mine: Saintly Retribution in Medieval Ireland'", in Susanna A. Throop and Paul R. Hyams (eds.), *Vengeance in the Middle Ages: Emotion, Religion and Feud* (Farnham, 2010), pp. 5-50 (12-4). Here it seems that the parents-to-be are inverting a traditional Christian action, just as they give their sons a 'pagan' baptism.

hearing this, the three youths state that if the Devil is their king then it is hard for them 'not to rob and plunder and persecute his enemies that is to kill clerics and to burn and wreck churches'.⁵²

We read that they proceeded to take up arms, attacked Tuam and left the place 'wrecked and burnt', after which they:

...committed robbery and outrageous brigandage [*díbhéarg*] throughout the province of Connaught upon churches and clerics, so that the evil and horror of their robbery was heard of throughout the four quarters of Ireland altogether.⁵³

After a full year they had destroyed 'more than half of the churches of Connaught'.⁵⁴ The three then decided that they should slay their mother's father, a priest, and burn his church down upon his corpse. Their grandfather guesses their intention and gives them a friendly greeting and food upon their arrival, as a result of which they delay their plans for a night. That evening, however, one of the sons has a dream showing him the horrors of hell and the glory of heaven. The following morning all three determine to repent their former evil ways and seek out the cleric Findén for spiritual enlightenment, but their approach causes Findén's followers to flee until the youths cast aside their 'states' and the remains of their weapons, and genuflect to the cleric. They reject their earlier service with the Devil and instead serve God, and begin penance for all of their earlier acts.⁵⁵

While more of a religious prose tale rather than 'heroic' literature, this tale taken with some of those involving St. Cadog comprises a valuable counterpoint to the image we have discussed up to this point, in which warriors act as the defender of the church. Here they have become the greatest threat to the continued existence of the church and its personnel. We will be returning to brigands and *díbergaig* in our look at the 'reality' of the war-band's relationship with churchmen.

⁵² *The Voyage of the Hui Corra*, 2-7.

⁵³ *The Voyage of the Hui Corra*, 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *The Voyage of the Hui Corra*, 9-28.

iii. The historical 'reality'

Due to the amount of scholarly discussion generated over the question of the role of the real-life war-band as an attacker of church property and personnel in Ireland, we shall begin our look at the 'reality' of this aspect of the war-band with this particular topic. At one time received opinion held that churches and monasteries were sacrosanct locations immune from violent attacks by native Irish military forces before the Viking age. This view was perhaps best elaborated by D.A. Binchy and Kathleen Hughes, who argued that sacred sites such as church property were off-limits to warfare, and that non-combatant freemen could simply flee to the sanctuary of the nearest church or monastic site to avoid violence; likewise, they believed that the person and property of the *aes dano* (the poet, artist and craftsman) were similarly exempt from organized violence.⁵⁶ According to Binchy and Hughes, any early exceptions to this general rule were aberrations caused by the bad influence of the Norse, with such attacks only becoming a common activity by native Irish war-bands with the gradual breakdown of traditional Irish culture as Viking attacks continued decade after decade.⁵⁷

This interpretation has come under increasing pressure from the late 1960s onward, particularly after the publication of the article 'The plundering and burning of churches in Ireland, 7th to 16th century' by A.T. Lucas in 1967.⁵⁸ Lucas compared Irish and Scandinavian attacks on Irish church settlements and found that the native Irish war-bands were just as culpable of attacking church settlements, even before the advent of the Vikings.⁵⁹ A fair number of subsequent scholars have followed Lucas's assertions; for instance, Donnchadh Ó Corráin writes that 'the burning of churches

⁵⁶ D.A. Binchy, 'Secular Institutions', in Myles Dillon (ed.), *Early Irish Society*, ed. Myles Dillon (Dublin, 1954), pp. 52- 65 (64-5), D.A. Binchy, 'The Passing of the Old Order', in Brian Ó Cuiv (ed.), *The Impact of Scandinavian Invasions on the Celtic-speaking Peoples, c. 800-1000 A.D.* (Dublin, 1975), pp. 119-32 (esp. 128-9).

⁵⁷ Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 158-9.

⁵⁸ A.T. Lucas, 'The plundering and burning of churches in Ireland, 7th to 16th century', in Etienne Rynne (ed.), *North Munster Studies* (Limerick, 1967), pp. 172-229. Note that Eleanor Hull advanced such a view as early as 1907/8 in her article 'The Gael and the Gall: notes on the social condition of Ireland during the Norse period'.

⁵⁹ Lucas, 'The plundering and burning of churches in Ireland', pp. 174, 213-4.

was an integral part of warfare' even before the first Viking forays.⁶⁰ Thus, in his view, the secular war-band could most certainly pose a threat to the church and its people. Additionally, Ó Corráin and Charles-Edwards also drew attention to the fact that such establishments were themselves not always *innocentes*, as evidenced by the great monastic battles of the eighth century which often involved hundreds of participants; Charles-Edwards concluded that monasteries, rather than the 'sacred, demilitarized frontier zone' previously imagined, frequently formed a 'borderland fought over by rival *familia*'.⁶¹ This new interpretation has found its way into some more general works on medieval military history, such as Sean McGlynn's *By Sword and Fire*.⁶²

One native Irish group which has received a good deal of attention due to its relationship with the Church are the aforementioned *díbergaig*, also referred to as *fianna*. As defined by modern historians, this was an early Irish institution with pagan antecedents which was largely peopled by young unmarried nobles who roamed the wilds and lived by hunting and looting. They could be identified by their 'tonsure', the 'devilish tokens' they wore and the fact that they would take a vow to kill one or more person.⁶³ The Irish historical and legal sources reinforce the negative stereotype of the native *díbergaig* which we previously encountered in the *Immram Curaig Úa Corra*. Richard Sharpe has argued that due to their practice of brigandage and resistance to Christianity, the *díbergaig* were 'naturally' loathed by the church and its personnel.⁶⁴ Furthermore Sharpe concluded that a definite distinction existed between 'honourable warfare' and *díberg* in the minds of contemporary churchmen, with the 'diabolic brigandage' something beyond the

⁶⁰ Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin, 1972), pp. 85-6. See also Colmán Etchingham's comprehensive review of Viking and Irish attacks on church settlements, *Viking raids on Irish church settlements in the ninth century: a reconsideration of the annals* (Maynooth, 1996).

⁶¹ Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, pp. 86-7, and Charles-Edwards, 'Irish Warfare before 1100', in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery, *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 26-51 (39).

⁶² Sean McGlynn, *By Sword and Fire: Cruelty and Atrocity in Medieval Warfare* (London, 2008), p. 73.

⁶³ This definition is taken from Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, p. 207, Gerd Petterssen, *Finn and the Fíán: Reflections of Ancient Celtic Myth and Institutions in Early and Medieval Ireland* (Göteborg, 1999), p. 18, Richard Sharpe, 'Hiberno-Latin laicus, Irish láech and the Devil's Men', in *Ériu*, 30 (1979), pp. 75-92 (esp. 84-6, 90-1),

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

natural level of raiding in early medieval Irish society.⁶⁵ I would put forward that the distinction which we see is actually that between just and unjust war, with the *díbergaig* as clear practitioners of the latter in their predilection to prey upon ecclesiastical foundations and people.

McCone may unknowingly recognize this division, as he speculates that while the *díberga* and *fianna* were essentially comprised of the same types of warriors, the clerical authors chose to use *díberga* to focus on a ‘particularly nasty aspect’ of the activities of these men.⁶⁶ Due to the composition of these bands – many young nobles and royalty temporarily belonged to such groups – McCone believes that most rulers had a background in this institution before re-joining society at large. As a result, the church and its authors could not blot out the reality of the *fíán* – that service in its ranks may precede rule, that certain roles within its ranks were important, as well as its usefulness to military training and as a partial relief on lack of inheritance.⁶⁷ He concludes that the warrior (as a class) is not always dependable as ‘the defender and servant of his lord and community’, but may rather place his own desire for conflict and warfare above his duty and cause harm to those he normally would protect.⁶⁸ This results in a rather ambiguous figure in the early Irish ‘tradition’, a Jekyll and Hyde figure that could either protect or turn on his people.⁶⁹

We may find an echo of the *díberga* within the Irish annals in several events dated to the 840s and 850s. In the year 847 we read that:

Mael Sechnaill destroyed the Island of Loch Muinremor, overcoming there a large band of wicked men of Luigni and Gailenga, who had been plundering the territories in the manner of the heathens.⁷⁰

In the original Irish, the phrase translated as ‘a large band of wicked men’ reads ‘fíanlach mar di maccaibh bais’.⁷¹ As *macc bais* frequently finds use as a descriptor

⁶⁵ Sharpe, ‘Hiberno-Latin laicus, Irish láech’, pp. 86, 90.

⁶⁶ Kim McCone, ‘Werewolves, cyclops, *díberga* and *fianna*: juvenile delinquency in early Ireland’, *CMCS* 12 (1986), pp. 1-22 (6).

⁶⁷ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, p. 223.

⁶⁸ Kim McCone, ‘*Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair*: hounds, heroes and hospitallers in early Irish myth and story’, *Ériu* 35 (1984), pp. 1-30 (16).

⁶⁹ McCone, ‘*Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair*’, pp. 20-1.

⁷⁰ *AU* 847.3.

for the *díbergaig*, it seems the annalist sees some sort of connection between the two groups, either in their actual identity or in their behaviour. McCone has already noted this similarity, and based upon the choice of name, the traditional behaviour ascribed to the *díberga*, and this group's possible pagan associations, argues that we see a survival of an early Irish institution.⁷² David Wyatt believes that the entry suggests that such groups remained 'a very real and very dangerous phenomenon'; furthermore, he sees the comparison to Norse pagans as the annalists recognition that such groups had 'pagan associations' and a 'ritualistic nature'.⁷³

Entries from the *FA* give the impression that these men emulated Viking behaviour:

Although Máel Sechlainn did not make this expedition to take the kingship of Munster for himself, it was worth coming in order to kill those Gall-Gaedil who were slain there, for they were men who had forsaken their baptism, and they used to be called Norsemen, for they had the customs of the Norse, and had been fostered by them, and though the original Norsemen were evil to the churches, these were much worse, these people, wherever in Ireland they were.⁷⁴

Could the *FA* annalist have become confused regarding the actual origin for such behaviour, ascribing it to Norse influence rather than native practices? Or did the *AU* annalist err, retroactively framing the new phenomena of the *Gall-Gaedil* in a social context that he could understand, the *díbergaig*? Opinion is split; while McCone and others have suggested that we see in this annal the survival of an early Irish institution, at least a few scholars see these 'sons of death' as raised or influenced by the Norse.⁷⁵ We can, however, clearly recognize the implication that these defeated war-bands had been waging war in a manner regarded as unjust and often directed at ecclesiastical foundations. By this same logic, Máel Sechlainn and his war-band(s)

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 219.

⁷³ David Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain and Ireland, 800-1200* (Leiden, 2009), p. 70.

⁷⁴ *FA* 260. Radner views the Gaill-Gaedil were adult apostates attracted to the Viking way of life (rather than *díbergaig* unrelated to the Norse) (*FA*, p. 99)

⁷⁵ For the former view, see not only McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 219, but also T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (2000), p. 464 and Katharine Simms, 'Gaelic warfare in the Middle Ages', in *A Military History of Ireland*, pp. 99-115 (101-2). For the latter view, see Radner who views the Gaill-Gaedil as adult apostates attracted to the Viking way of life (*FA*, p. 99).

engaged in just war by destroying such pagan despoilers of church property, and fulfilling Ælfric's ideal in defending the church.

When a band of Vikings wished to plunder Ard Macha in 943 they refrained from doing so until after they had defeated and slain Muirchertach, the king of Ailech, in battle, likely indicating that they could or would not proceed against the monastery while Muirchertach and his war-band (or army) remained active in the field nearby.⁷⁶ Muirchertach's sobriquet in the annals, 'the Hector of the western world' only gives further credence to his role as a protector – did the annalist purposefully select another hero slain defending his city against attack, with Ard Macha standing in for Troy? Even when too late on the scene, a king could still act as a protector for the clergy in rescuing or ransoming them from capture, as Niall ua Eruilb did in 946 when he ransomed almost all of the clerics captured by the Vikings from Cell Dara.⁷⁷ One must remember, however, that kings may have acted out this role for political needs as opposed to piety – Charles-Edwards argues for such a motivation for the Cenél nEógain kings' defence of the honour of Patrick in 809, as it was a 'requirement' of their close alliance with the church of Armagh.⁷⁸

As we can see, the Irish historical evidence, at least as taken from the annalistic sources, depicts a slightly more complex picture of the relationship between the war-band and the church than that found in the 'heroic' literature. Here, the alliance of the war-band and its leaders with various churches becomes the most important determinant of level of threat which a given church faces from a given war-band. Even those war-bands commanded by seemingly 'foreign' Norse could show some deference to particular churches or cleric groups, even when they failed to act as its outright protector. For instance, Gothrith grandson of Ímar attacked Ard Macha in 921, but the annalist hastily adds that he spared 'the prayer-houses with the complement of culdees and sick [...] and the monastery' from damage.⁷⁹ While Gothfrith's showed mercy and some degree of partiality to the culdees on this

⁷⁶ AU 943.2.

⁷⁷ AU 964.6.

⁷⁸ Charles-Edwards, 'Irish Warfare before 1100', in *A Military History of Ireland*, p. 34.

⁷⁹ AU 928.1.

occasion, his overall behaviour still resulted in his epitaph of ‘a most cruel king’ when he died thirteen years later.⁸⁰

In some cases, later histories imbued the native war-band with a more overt role as the defender of the church, as may be seen in the pervasive influence of the early twelfth-century work *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*. Ó Corráin argues that the text is a very obvious piece of Dál Cais propaganda, far divorced from the original annalistic record and highlighting the inefficiency of the Uí Néill as ‘defenders of the Church and of the country’ in comparison to Brian Boruma, who prevails over the Viking invader and shows concern for the church.⁸¹ The work certainly reviles the followers of the Viking-lord Turgesius as the anti-thesis of defenders of the Church. Instead, Turgesius conquers half of Ireland, ejects the rightful abbot of Armagh so he can assume the role himself, and installs his ‘pagan sea-wife’ Ota at Clonmacnoise where she ‘gave oracles from the high altar’.⁸² In his role as the defender of the Church, Brian and his native war-band reverse the Norse inroads into Ireland and prevent such future attacks upon the dignity, property and people of the Church.

The later entries from the Irish annals tend to provide a more intense criticism of the violence perpetrated by war-bands (and possibly other military forces) upon the church, with some rulers described as particularly loathsome in their behaviour towards the church.⁸³ An entry in the AU for 1117 records an attack by Aed ua Ruairc and the Uí Briúin upon Cenannas during one of its vigils, in which they kill the coarb Mael Brigte and slaughter much of his community; the entry ends with a quote from Psalms deploring those committing such sins.⁸⁴ Several years later an army led by Conchobar ua Lochlainn, in concert with the Cenel Eogan, Dál Araide and the Airgialla, attacked Brega, and in the words of the annalist ‘committed a great crime before God and men, i.e. the burning of Áth Truim with its churches and a number [of people] suffered martyrdom there.’⁸⁵ The Uí Briúin is singled out for a particularly harsh sentence in an entry from the same year:

⁸⁰ AU 934.1.

⁸¹ Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, pp. 91-2.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ AU 1035.6, AU 1080.6, AU 1084.1, AU 1117.3.

⁸⁴ AU 1117.3.

⁸⁵ AU 1128.8.

A detestable and unprecedented deed of evil consequence, that merited the curse of the men of Ireland, both laity and clergy ... was committed by Tigernán ua Ruairc and the Uí Briúin, i.e. the successor of Patrick was insulted to his face, that is, his company was robbed and some of them killed, and a young cleric of his own household that was in a cuilebadh was killed there. The aftermath that came of that misdeed is that there exists in Ireland no protection that is secure for anyone henceforth until that evil deed is avenged by God and man.⁸⁶

In this case the amount of violence seems less than some meted out to various smaller monasteries, but the status of the insulted – the Bishop of Armagh – producing the tone of horror present in the entry.

In a similar vein, the *ASC* records that during the Danish sack of Canterbury in 1011 the invaders seized numerous ‘ecclesiastics’ as well as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Ælfheah, perhaps with the intention of holding them for ransom.⁸⁷ The chronicler laments ‘He was then a captive who had been head of the English people and of Christendom.’⁸⁸ Unfortunately, matters only grew worse:

Then on Saturday the army became greatly incensed against the bishop because he would not promise them any money, but forbade that anything should be paid for him. They were also very drunk, for wine from the south had been brought there. They seized the bishop, and brought him to their assembly on the eve of the Sunday of the octave of Easter, which was 19 April, and shamefully put him to death there: they pelted him with bones and with ox-heads, and one of them struck him on the head with the back of the axe, that he sank down with the blow, and his holy blood fell on the ground, and so he sent his holy soul to God’s kingdom.⁸⁹

Much of the outrage may have occurred due to the status of Canterbury as the arch-Episcopal seat for England. Nowhere in the Irish reality did we find a crime of this gravity committed against the person of the most influential bishops.

Elsewhere one version of the *ASC* recounts the damage which King Eadred inflicted upon Northumbria when they chose a certain Eric for their king, during which ‘and in that ravaging the glorious minster at Ripon, which St Wilfrid had built,

⁸⁶ *AU* 1128.5.

⁸⁷ *ASC* C (D,E) 1011.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ASC* C (D, E) 1012.

was burnt down'.⁹⁰ While the chronicler fails to note whether this was an intentional event on the part of Eadred, or if some of his warriors simply committed this act on their own initiative, it clearly resulted from the king's decision to take vengeance on the Northumbrians. Four years later the king ordered Wulfstan, archbishop of York, 'to be taken into the fortress of *Iudanbyrig*' due to frequent accusations made against the prelate; once again, an archbishop was placed in chains, although Wulfstan fared far better than Ælfheah as he was restored to his diocese following Eadred's take over of Northumbria.⁹¹ One would assume members of Eadred's war-band or army likely carried out the order, particularly if Wulfstan was well-entrenched in Northumbria.

We have little direct historical evidence (as opposed to that of a purely literary or hagiographical character) of the warrior's relationship with the church in Welsh sources during our period. The narrations preserved in the *Llandaff Charters* (a series of Welsh charters ostensibly dating from the fifth to twelfth centuries) may, however, shed some light on the subject. Wendy Davies made an in-depth study of these charters, and concluded that they revealed ninth- through eleventh-century Wales was a society in which secular landowners increasingly engaged in violence towards the church.⁹² Davies admitted that some of the 'long narrations' providing this information may not be original, but thought that the tenth- and eleventh-century examples (which include all of those cited below) likely derived from contemporary records and thus may be original and/or contain authentic facts.⁹³ A reading of these charters finds a number of incidents which read like a much smaller scale version of the various attacks upon the church in the Irish Annals.

Five of these charters record instances of violation of the sanctuary offered by a church, one of which concern a deacon guilty of murder taking refuge in the

⁹⁰ ASC D 948.

⁹¹ ASC D 952, from *EHD I*, on p. 204.

⁹² Wendy Davies, *An Early Welsh Microcosm, Studies in the Llandaff Charters* (London, 1978), pp. 112, 133.

⁹³ Wendy Davies, *An Early Welsh Microcosm*, p. 105. K.L. Maund completely disagreed, viewing many of these narrations as the result of late ecclesiastical additions fitting into a menu or paradigm, but she seems rather arbitrary in her choice of what is original and what is not (Maund, *Ireland, Wales and England in the Eleventh Century* (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 183-206. In general, most Welsh scholars seem to accept Wendy Davies's argument for the validity of these charters – see John Reuben Davies, *The Book of Llandaff and the Norman Church in Wales* (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 3-5 for a useful summary of scholarly opinion.

church, and two of which concern the abduction of the unnamed wife of Seisyll by King Meurig and his retinue which resulted in the wounding of a member of the bishop's *familia*.⁹⁴ In the former instance, four of the king's military followers were handed over afterwards to the bishop – a certain Idwallon ap Morudd, and the three sons of Ceredig, named Gwynon, Jonathan and Wilfrith.⁹⁵ Fighting between a bishop's *familia* and the retinue of a local king or lord appear in another three charters; once again, these affairs resulted in the wounding of a person in the bishop's *familia*.⁹⁶ Two more record fighting between aristocrats and/or their retinues, once at Llandaff and the other time at the bishop's court, the second again resulting in an injury.⁹⁷

The remaining offenses defy easy categorization – in one charter, we read that a King Tewdwr stole the bishop's foodrent, while around 1025 Rhiwallon ap Tudfwlch 'attacked St. Maughan's with his following'.⁹⁸ A final charter records the rape of a nun named Ourdilaf by two warriors in the service of the local lord Iestyn ap Gwrgan (indeed, one was his nephew).⁹⁹ As a result of their perusal of the charters, as well as the aforementioned *Life of St. Cadog*, both Carr and Wendy Davies envisioned that pre-Norman warriors in Wales could 'very easily get out of control' and damage the property and personnel of the church, even if they were sometimes compelled to make restitution.¹⁰⁰ As an aside, John Reuben Davies later found justification for Wendy Davies's picture of violence against the church in early Wales (both by foreign and native combatants) in his survey of various stone inscriptions, annalistic sources and Saints' Lives.¹⁰¹

As we have seen from our evidence, the war-band in real life could quite easily act as the protector or despoiler of the church, its people and its property. Naturally, the ecclesiastical authors for the surviving texts took pains to extol the

⁹⁴ See Charters 217, 218, 239, 259 and 261, in Wendy Davies (ed.), *The Llandaff Charters* (Aberystwyth, 1979), pp. 120, 125, 127-8.

⁹⁵ Charter 218, in *The Llandaff Charters*, p. 120.

⁹⁶ Charters 225, 249b, 257, in *The Llandaff Charters*, pp. 121, 125, 127.

⁹⁷ Charters 233 and 263, in *The Llandaff Charters*, pp. 123, 128.

⁹⁸ Charters 237b and 264b, in *The Llandaff Charters*, pp. 123, 128.

⁹⁹ Charter 272, in *The Llandaff Charters*, p. 129.

¹⁰⁰ A.D. Carr, 'Teulu and Penteulu' in *The Welsh King and his Court*, pp. 63-81 (65, 74), Wendy Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 126.

¹⁰¹ John Reuben Davies, 'Church, property and conflict in Wales, AD 600-1100', in *Welsh History Review* 28 (1997), pp. 387-406.

former and condemn the latter, particularly as their writings became more verbose towards the end of our period. As such, it is noteworthy that attacks upon the church are largely absent from heroic literature. While the generally pre-Christian setting of much of this material may explain this presentation in part, the poems and stories set within a Christian milieu takes pains to add the occasional Christian reference, create an allusion between its subject and an Old Testament figure and portray the war-band fighting pagans and miscreants. Additionally, those works set in a pre-Christian world often present their heroes as ‘good pagans’, even to the point of placing anachronistic songs or speeches in their mouths. It seems clear to me that the authors of this literature have taken pains to use these references to paint their subject as military men who are also practitioners of just war.

III. Defender of the People and *Innocentes*

i. The heroic image

We have already touched upon the role of *The Gododdin* war-band as a defender of its land from external armies when discussing its presentation of warriors who fought ‘pagans and Gaels and Picts’. *The Gododdin* seems to express a similar ideal at various other points during its length. In one particular *awdl*, the poet describes the warrior Cynon as ‘Briton’s defender’, and elsewhere he praises Tudfwlch for acting as the ‘wall’ for all of his ‘countrymen’ and Gwyddien for ‘fiercely’ defending ‘A planner, a tiller, its owner’ with his spear.¹⁰² The poet calls Cadfannan the ‘border’s fleet defender’¹⁰³

Returning to the rest of *The Gododdin*, we find several references to the war-band as a whole, rather than individual heroes, acting as the defender against foreign

¹⁰² *The Gododdin*, CA.xliii A, ll. 5-6, CA.xcvii, l. 5 and CA.lxiii E, l. 11. Jackson translates the relevant section of CA.xcvii as ‘the opponent among the Britons’ (*GOSP*, p. 107). Note that while the identity of the warrior in CA.xliii A seems to be Gwyddien, the warriors Morien, Bradwen and Gwenabwy fab Gwen are also mentioned in this *awdl*. Also, Isaac translates the same section of *awdl* CA.lxiii E as ‘wall of every community’ (G.R. Isaac, ‘Reading in the History and Transmission of the *Gododdin*’, in *CMCS* 37 (1999), pp. 55-78 (61-2).

¹⁰³ *The Gododdin*, CA.xlii, l. 4.

encroachment. Unlike some of the *awdlau* we reviewed in the previous section, these make no claim that the enemy are pagans. Two similar sets of verses from *The Gododdin* read as follows:

Season of storm,
Foreign ships, foreign war-band,
Treacherous war-band.
Splendid ranks, swift before a champion.
From Din Dywyd...¹⁰⁴

Standing stone on cleared ground, on cleared ground a hill
On Gododdin's border [...]
Foreign ship, foreign war-band
[...]
[...] motley war-band
From Din Dywyd
Came upon us.¹⁰⁵

The war-band from Din Dywyd is here described as 'foreign', 'treacherous', and 'motley'. The *awdl* referring to 'Splendid ranks, swift before a champion' may not make much sense in such a setting – unless it refers to the local war-band, defending against the attack of these outsiders. The claim that the foreign war-band has embarked to attack the narrator's land by ship further implies the antagonists' foreign-ness. It also recalls the sea-borne raids of the Vikings, supposedly so much later than the events of *The Gododdin*. One cannot be too quick to take this as further proof of a post-Viking genesis for *The Gododdin*, however, as Gildas certainly writes of amphibious assaults by the Picts and Irish upon the Britons prior to his own time. In any case, the Gododdin war-band here performs that very service which Ælfric cites as an example of just war.

A longer *awdl* from *The Gododdin* may provide further images of the war-band defending the land and people – but it is not certain due to disagreements in the translation. Clancy translates these lines as:

It is told, of the region of Catraeth,

¹⁰⁴ *The Gododdin*, CA.li C, ll. 5-9.

¹⁰⁵ *The Gododdin*, CA.li B, ll. 1-7. Jackson does not give a full translation of this line, but merely states that it is similar to CA.li C and gives several excerpts.

Men fall, long was the grief for them.
Through thick, through thin, they fought for the land,
The sons of Godebawg, a loyal people.
Long biers bore men drenched in blood.¹⁰⁶

While Jackson translates them as:

Whether with hardship or with ease, they used to defend their land against the
sons of Godebog, a wicked folk. Long biers carried off bloodstained men.¹⁰⁷

This last presentation raises the spectre of an entirely different sense of defense. What does ‘land’ stand for in this context – its inhabitants including non-combatants and clergy, or the warrior class’s own prerogatives and honour? In the latter case, apparent praise may actually hold veiled scorn for the aristocrats who were more concerned with the defence of their own rights, privileges and leisure than with that of the church or the *innocentes*. Another set of verses in *The Gododdin* contain a similar notion of what is important to defend: we hear of how the retinue or picked-men of Gododdin defend the woodlands and mead [*called a medd*] of Eidyn.¹⁰⁸ Some critics have seen this as evidence that the warriors were defending their *patria* or homeland, but it is fascinating that the author chose to focus specifically on the forests (hunting-preserves?) and intoxicating drink that the Gododdin war-band protects.¹⁰⁹ A later *awdl* goes further, stating ‘Fighting for enemies’ fertile land [*Yn amwyn tywysen gorddiroad*], / Of right we were called outstanding, noteworthy men.’¹¹⁰ For now the evidence from these particular *awdl* remain useful in that they may demonstrate a poet giving an ambivalent view of the war-band, with such lop-sided compliments perhaps ascribing selfish motivation to part or all of the war-band; we will examine the further implications of this piece of verse in connection to feasting and the war-band in Chapter 6.

¹⁰⁶ CA.xv, l. 109.

¹⁰⁷ CA.xv, in *GOSP*, pp. 121-2.

¹⁰⁸ CA.xcv, ll. 1-4. Also in *GOSP*, p. 106. For original, see Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. 61. As will be seen in chapter 6, *medd* in Welsh usually refers to mead.

¹⁰⁹ For an example of this former view, see Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. xlvi-xlvii.

¹¹⁰ CA.xlvi, ll. 2-3. The first line reads literally, seizing (or perhaps defending) the ‘ear of corn’ [*tywysen*] of the enemy (or perhaps borderland); most critics take *tywysen* to here refer symbolically to ‘land’ (Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. 32-3, 110).

Part of the dominant paradigm of *The Gododdin* created by Jackson and Williams and mentioned in previous chapters focuses upon the role of the Gododdin war-band in defending the native British populace against the encroachment of Angles from Bernicia and Deira.¹¹¹ For instance, Thomas Clancy writes that the battle of Catraeth, which he sees as the focus of *The Gododdin*, was ‘symbolic of the heroic attempt to halt the English’¹¹²; while he may be correct, I think it may be an anachronistic view influenced by our knowledge of subsequent English-Welsh relations – perhaps one reason for its later appeal in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Wales. Some authors have certainly treated the theory that *The Gododdin* represents a real-life crusade by the Celts against incoming English with scepticism.¹¹³ While an element of protection for non-combatants certainly exists within *The Gododdin*, the references to such activity tend to cluster around certain *awdlau*.

The Taliesin poetry has often been seen to depict the lord in a more protective relationship with his people outside of the war-band.¹¹⁴ Jarman in particular sees the Taliesin poetry as an important ‘step forward’ from that found in *The Gododdin* in terms of maturity, with not only the king’s attributes as a warrior receiving praise, but also his role as the protector of his community and the insurer of its general well-being.¹¹⁵ Such a statement certainly captures much of the idea of defence, land, and foreign attack that we have thus far seen, without relying upon a black and white view of Welsh vs. English. In *The Battle of Gwen Ystrad*, the poet recounts the successful defence of Gwen Ystrad by Urien’s war-band – a ‘thin rampart’ manned by ‘lone weary men’ [*gwyr llawr lludedic*] – who have defeated enemies variously described as ‘savage men in war-bands’ [*wyr gwychyr yn lluyd*], ‘hordes of invaders’

¹¹¹ Nora Chadwick, *The British Heroic Age* (Cardiff, 1976), pp. 105-7, Clancy, *MWP*, p. 13, A.O.H. Jarman, *The Cynfeirdd, Early Welsh Poets and Poetry* (Cardiff, 1981), p. 39, Sir Ifor Williams, *BWP*, pp. 67-8, 77.

¹¹² T.O. Clancy (ed.), *Triumph Tree*, p. 46.

¹¹³ See for instance Craig Cessford, ‘Relations between the Britons of Southern Scotland and Anglo-Saxon Northumbria’, in Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills (eds.), *Northumbria’s Golden Age* (Stroud, 1999), pp. 150-60 (152), Eric P. Hamp, ‘Lloegr: The Welsh Name for England’, *CMCS* 4 (Winter 1982), pp. 83-5 (85), J.T. Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin: Text and Context from Dark-Age North Britain* (Cardiff, 1997), Jenny Rowland, ‘Warfare and Horses in The Gododdin and the Problem of Catraeth’, in *CMCS* 30 (1995), pp. 13-40 (30, 32, 37-9).

¹¹⁴ See also Clancy, *MWP*, p. 13, and Jarman, ‘Taliesin’, in A.O.H. Jarman and Gwilym Rees Hughes (eds.), *A Guide to Welsh Literature I* (Cardiff, 1992), p. 58.

¹¹⁵ A.O.H. Jarman, *The Cynfeirdd*, p. 26, Jarman, ‘Taliesin’, p. 58.

[*twrwf teirffin*] and ‘pillaging men’ [*wyr gospeithic*].¹¹⁶ In this poem and several others the poet also grants Urien the sobriquets ‘Rheged’s defender’, ‘defender of land’, ‘land’s defender’ and ‘land’s anchor’.¹¹⁷ The references to ‘pillaging men’ and the like suggest that Urien is engaged in just war as he is defending his people against external attack, while those accolades regarding his defence of the land are more open-ended – ‘Rheged’ and the ‘land’ could be short-hand for its people. One of the later *englynion* from the Rheged cycle laments the passing of Urien with the verses ‘Raider [*kyrchynat*] in every region, / in the wake of Llofan Llaw Ddifro.’¹¹⁸ Once again, Urien and his war-band were clearly forced to engage in just war, as with his death the *innocentes* suffer from the depredations of outsiders.

Moving on from *The Gododdin*, we continue to find an interest in the warrior and war-band’s role with defending land and borders within some of the *Llywarch Hen* poetry. In the *Exhortation to Maenwyn*, the old grognard Llywarch urges his son Maenwyn to action by boasting of his own deeds when young:

No foot would trample my mantle,
 None would plough my land without bloodshed.
 [...]
 No foe would break through my border.¹¹⁹

Unlike Urien and the *Gododdin* heroes who defend the common people, Llywarch boasts of his youthful maintenance of his own prerogatives and honour through defending his land and his border. This is not just war – the line ‘no foot would trample my mantle’ gives the impression that Llywarch considers behaviour in terms of his personal repute. Such a notion echoes those verses in *The Gododdin* which

¹¹⁶ *The Battle of Gwen Ystrad*, ll. 11, 13, 15-6 and 23. The original text is taken from *CT*, p. 2. Interestingly, Williams believes that *gwyr llawr* means ‘champions’ in the sense of ‘men fighting on their own (in the van)’ rather than simply ‘lone men’ (*CT*, p. 34). The section *wyr gwydyr yn lluyd* translates in a fairly straightforward manner to ‘fierce (or brave) men in hosts (or armies)’. Ifor Williams believes that *twrwf teirffin* translates roughly to a ‘throng’ or ‘host’ from ‘over the border’ (*CT*, p. 33). The last term is perhaps the most ambiguous – Williams notes that *gospeithic* probably means ‘pillaging’ or ‘plundering’, but that it could also carry a sense of ‘haggard’ or ‘desolate’ as well (*CT*, p. 39).

¹¹⁷ *The Battle of Gwen Ystrad*, l. 9, *In Praise of Urien*, l. 14, and *The Court of Urien*, l. 15-6.

¹¹⁸ *Fall of Rheged* 10, ll. 7-9. Rowland, in *EWSP*, renders *kyrchynat* as ‘attacker’ (*EWSP*, pp. 426, 481), which may make more sense considering its derivation from the verb *cyrchu*, ‘to attack’ (Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. 131).

¹¹⁹ *Exhortation to Maenwyn*, ll. 2-3, l. 6. Rowland argues in *EWSP* that Llywarch quite clearly emphasizes the sense of ‘my mantle’ and ‘my land’ here (p. 529).

concentrate upon the war-band's defence of its lifestyle and territory rather than its people. The author of the *Heledd* poems may have his narrator ascribe a similar behaviour to her brother Cynddylan through the boast that 'princes did not trample on Cynddylan's nest.'¹²⁰

As we investigate deeper, however, we find that the Llywarch corpus may not actually display such a one-sided view of the lord and his war-band's role in defence. For instance, in the poem *Llywarch and Gwên* we learn that Llywarch's family guards the ford at Rhodwydd Forlas against 'England's warriors'.¹²¹ While Llywarch does mention honour in this poem, he does so merely as part of an exhortation against flight (a theme to which we will return in our next chapter). Another poem from this group, *Lament for Pyll*, takes this theme a step further. The poet laments that with Pyll slain by 'a horde from England [which] came to Wales', 'the weak man's left defenceless'.¹²² This led Patrick K. Ford to conclude that the *Llywarch Hen* poems (as well as *The Gododdin* and those works ascribed to Taliesin) 'mourn the passing of the lord, and with him, the loss of valour, protection and generosity'.¹²³

Before moving onto the warrior's role in maintaining internal law and order, I would like to glance briefly at a final work which Ifor Williams dates to the eleventh century, *Echrys Ynys*. This poem has several relevant lines:

Strong in the press of furious fighting: he was no pirate.
[...]
In the presence of a victorious youth, refuge of Welshmen [*kymry dinas*], it
was delightful to dwell.
Dragonlike heirs, rightful lord in Britain.
[...]
After Llywy who will forbid [*gwahardwy*], who will bring order [*attrefna*]?
After Aeddon who will guard Môn, (with its) plenteous wealth?¹²⁴

¹²⁰ *EWSP*, p. 492.

¹²¹ *Llywarch and Gwên*, ll. 3, 11, 17 and 34.

¹²² *Lament for Pyll*, ll. 21, 30. Note that the horde may have included Welshmen as well – see *EWSP*, pp. 410, 471 and 529. Rowland finds the second *englyn* quoted above as likely corrupt, with a possible alternate meaning of 'one is made a weakling without him' (either Pyll or an enemy warrior) or 'the feeble are caused to be without it [refuge]' (*EWSP*, p. 528). The word which Clancy renders 'horde' is *elyflu*, meaning a 'great host, vast multitude or throng'; Rowland translates it as 'host'.

¹²³ Patrick K. Ford, *The Poetry of Llywarch Hen* (Berkeley, 1974), p. 37.

¹²⁴ *Echrys Ynys*, in *BWP*, ll. 13, 19-20, 26-7, p. 173, 178. The words *kymry dinas*, *gwahardwy*, *attrefnaall* translate fairly easily, but the words that Williams renders as 'pirate' (*bu werthuar*) seem far more difficult.

Before continuing, I should note that Williams believes that while *aeddōn* refers to the subject of this poem, he sees it used here as a descriptive term (the word usually means ‘lord’) rather than a proper name; by similar logic, he believes *llywy* (which as an adjective possesses meanings such as ‘beautiful’, ‘white’, and ‘splendid’, and as a noun usually means ‘maiden’ or a ‘female ruler’) refers to the subject’s wife.¹²⁵

Some of these references concern borders and the lord’s role as the protector of his people (‘refuge of Welshmen’), the poet also questions ‘who will forbid, who bring order’ with the rightful lord gone. This will serve as a good place to move on to our look at the war-band’s role in keeping the internal peace and maintaining law and order in our heroic literature. The statement that the poem’s subject was ‘no pirate’ may also make us aware before proceeding that not all lords were worthy of such a claim and in fact did just the opposite (a possibility of which Gildas also made us aware).

To return briefly to the ‘early’ Taliesin poetry, we read that Urien both ‘slays’ [*lad*] and ‘hangs’ [*gryc*], and all of Llwyfenydd’s people, ‘the great and the small’, entreat him ‘with a single voice’ in *The Court of Urien*.¹²⁶ While the war-band could mete out hanging to captured external enemies, it would seem a punishment more likely reserved for criminals and other internal law-breakers – perhaps even independent war-bands acting as brigands.¹²⁷ In one of the Taliesin *englynion* the narrator laments Urien’s death because he was the ‘the old folks’ bulwark’.¹²⁸ This could certainly point to Urien’s role in defending his people from external foes, but it could also speak of his protection of the weak or helpless from internal threats. Another of the Taliesin *englynion*, *Rhun*, declares that the prince Rhun ‘curbed those with wicked ways’ and placed ‘shackles on the steeds of the wicked’.¹²⁹ Like the earlier references in the Urien poetry, these lines imply that Rhun is dealing with

¹²⁵ BWP, p. 180. If Williams is correct in this second assertion, line 26 could have interesting relevance to the subject of ‘The Lady with a Mead Cup’ discussed in Chapter 6.

¹²⁶ *The Court of Urien*, ll. 9, 21-2. Note that Ifor Williams suspected that *slay* here meant slaughtering animals for the feast, although he proceeded to suppose that the words rendered ‘he supplies’ and ‘provides’ that occur later in the same line refer to Urien preparing and supplying food for an eagle, hence killing foes. (CT, pp. 53-4). translation of the rest of the two lines containing these words

¹²⁷ Such as the thieves described in Ine 13.1. Although Alfred did hang some Viking invaders, as noted earlier in this chapter.

¹²⁸ *The Fall of Rheged*, 2, l. 18.

¹²⁹ *The Fall of Rheged*, 6, ll. 10-2.

criminals or perhaps even his own rowdy followers; Jenny Rowland's translation of the first of the two lines above perhaps favours the latter interpretation; she admits that it is a difficult line, but feels that the best rendering is 'he straightened those of wicked lives'.¹³⁰

To continue with this imagery of the war-band as enforcer of peace within the lands of the king or its lord, several *awdl* in *The Gododdin* may hint at such a role.

J.P. Clancy translates one of the *awdl* as:

Wrathful slayer of a raider band [*llu herw*].
He was not hid from sight and outlawed [*chyherw*];
Erf was not a bitter-sweet fellow-drinker.
Grey horses snorted under his protection [*helw*];¹³¹

There seems to be nothing special here – Erf is defending his land from raiders. Jackson's translation of this same *awdl*, however, differs a bit from that of Clancy, describing Erf as 'the black slayer of a host of brigands, he was not without repute nor an outlaw, he was not a ... bitter-sweet drinking companion; grey horses neighed under his protection';¹³² The term 'brigands', like the image of Urien hanging men, implies law enforcement, rather than enemies from outside the kingdom; the poet also declares that Erf himself is not such an outlaw. Looking to the original Welsh text, we find that *llu herw* translates fairly directly to a 'pillaging band' – this would seem to favour Clancy's interpretation over Jackson's, with Erf's victims being external foes.¹³³ This could be important, as the poet may be equivocating here – he specifically states that Erf was not an outlaw; does this mean that many war-bands were comprised of outlaws?

There is less ambiguity about the criticism that the great prince Heinif son of Nwython attracts for his earlier lifestyle:

Of the noblest name,
He slew a great host
To gain renown.

¹³⁰ *EWSP*, p. 480. She agrees with Clancy on the rendering of the second.

¹³¹ *The Gododdin*, CA.lxxv B, ll. 2-4.

¹³² *The Gododdin*, CA.lxxv B, in *GOSP*, p. 111.

¹³³ See Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. 48-9, for original text.

He slew, son of Nwython,
 Of gold-torqued warriors
 A hundred princes
 That he might be praised.
 He was better when he went
 With the men to Catraeth...¹³⁴

Here, Heinif's quest for glory, while not outright condemned, certainly remains less praiseworthy than his decision to turn against the true, external enemy (whoever that might be) and ride to Catraeth to do battle. Finally, we have Heilyn, who would 'set his sword against wrong-doing' [*Goddolai gleddyf i garedd*].¹³⁵ Writing of *The Gododdin* as a whole, T.M. Charles-Edwards believed that the 'A version' of the work focused on courtliness or gentleness at home in addition to ferocity in battle, while the B version concentrated solely upon the latter.¹³⁶ Finally, the *Heledd* poet claims that the 'Wretched [*diheid*], disinherited, / and deprived of patronymy' sought out her nephew Caranfael as a judge [*ynat*].¹³⁷ Rowland suggests that the word *diheid* could also mean '*di+heid*', meaning 'without a warband'; in either case, those who sought out Caranfael as a judge clearly lacked power or armed might.¹³⁸ As such, Heledd's nephew appears as a very different warlord from those wicked judges decried by Gildas.

In the later *englynion* about Urien, we have several verses in which the poet pairs off a series of antagonists (possibly led by Unhwch, who appears elsewhere in these poems) with their counterparts who are defending Yrechwydd:

Dunawd was bent, slaughter's horseman,
 On making corpses in Yrechwydd,
 Facing the onslaught of Owain.

Unhwch was bent, region's lord,
 On wrecking carnage in Yrechwydd,
 Facing the onslaught of Pasgen.

Gwallawg was bent, strife's horseman,

¹³⁴ *The Gododdin*, CA.xcviii, ll. 4-12.

¹³⁵ *The Gododdin*, CA.I, l. 2. Literally, 'He apportioned the sword for transgression (or crime)' (Jarman, pp. 34-5, 112).

¹³⁶ Charles-Edwards, 'The Authenticity of The Gododdin: An Historian's View', in *AH*, pp. 58-9.

¹³⁷ *Caranfael*, l. 95, in *EWSP*, p. 492. See *EWSP*, p. 442, for the original text.

¹³⁸ *EWSP*, p. 608.

On making carcasses in Yrechwydd,
Facing the onslaught of Elphin.

Bran fab Ymellyrn was bent
On banishing me, on burning my hearths,
Wolf who'd yelp at a gap.

Morgant was bent, he and his men,
On banishing me, on burning my land,
Shrew who'd scrape at a crag.¹³⁹

While we cannot state with certainty that the 'corpses' [*kelein*] and 'carcasses' [*dynin*] which Dunawd and Gwallawg sought to make were not the defending war-band, the goals of Bran fab Ymellyrn and Morgant, 'burning my hearths' [*llosgi vy ffyrn*] and 'burning my land' [*llosgi vyn tymyr*] would seemingly imply wide-scale ravaging.¹⁴⁰

The late *englyn* *The White Town* evokes a situation little seen in most early Welsh verse, in which rival war-bands have become stalemated with one another, to the detriment of the local inhabitants:

White town within its valley,
Festive the birds in battle's butchery:
Its people have perished.

White town between Tren and Trodwyd,
More common were torn shields coming from combat
Than oxen at mid-day rest.

White town between Tren and Trafal,
More common was blood on the face of its grass
Than ploughing of fallow.¹⁴¹

Rowland suggested a similar message in her notes on this particular poem; the word which she and Clancy render as 'people' [*gwerin*] can mean 'people, troop or host' but she believes the references to agricultural pursuits indicates that the poet intended it to mean 'people of sufficient status to bear arms, but unlike the upper nobility

¹³⁹ *Fall of Rheged*, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Original text from *EWSP*, pp. 424-5. Note that Rowland arrives at roughly the same translations for these lines as Clancy (*EWSP*, p. 480).

¹⁴¹ *The White Town*, ll. 7-15.

warfare was not their *raison d'être*'.¹⁴² She suggests an equivalence of these men with the early English fyrd of 'farming yeomen'.¹⁴³

In *FB* the wives of the three contenders for the champion's portion hold a poetic contest in which each seeks to establish her husband as the pre-eminent warrior. As part of their strategy, both Loegaire and Conall Cernach's wives extoll their husband's defence of Ulster from enemies. Fedelm's poem about her husband Loigaire includes the following lines: 'Ulster's marches from foeman, ever equal in strength, ever hostile – / All by himself were they holden: from wounds a defence and protection'.¹⁴⁴ In response, Lendabair boasts for Conall Cernach:

Swords he getteth together for the clashing in conflict of Ulster;
Guardian of every ford-way, he destroyeth them too at his pleasure;
Fords he defendeth from foemen, the wrongful attack he avengeth'.¹⁴⁵

Intriguingly, Emer does not rely upon such defensive imagery to praise Cú Chulainn, despite his later pre-eminence in the contest.

The *TBC I* presents the cost of failure when the local war-band fails to defend its populace and land from external aggression – when the Connacht army reaches Cuailnge, they 'set the country on fire' and seize all of the women, boys, girls, and cattle.¹⁴⁶ Cú Chulainn describes what happens to a defenceless populace when he reports the ravaging to his king: 'Women are taken captive ... cattle are driven away, men are slain.'¹⁴⁷ We find a rare recognition in the heroic tale *The Death of Cet mac Mágach* of the potential damage such men can inflict even upon their own environs. The tale begins with a battle between Cet and Conall Cernach, in which Conall strikes down Cet but is himself wounded so badly that he collapses. At this point the old man Bélchú of Brefne comes upon the scene and seeing the two apparently dead warriors:

¹⁴² *EWSP*, pp. 436, 487, 595.

¹⁴³ *EWSP*, p. 595.

¹⁴⁴ *FB*, II.22, p. 23.

¹⁴⁵ *FB*, II.23, p. 25.

¹⁴⁶ *TBC I*, p. 152.

¹⁴⁷ *TBC I*, p. 158.

“This is Cet,” said he. “And here is Conall,” said he. “And henceforth Ireland will be happy, since these two slaughter-hounds have fallen, who ruined Ireland between them.” So saying, he set the butt-end of his spear on Conall.¹⁴⁸

Moving on to the Old English heroic literature, we do not have to look far to find what appears to be a more developed expression of the war-band’s role as the defender of country, people and treasure. Early in *The Battle of Maldon (TBOM)* the ealdorman Byrhtnoth forewarns the Vikings of what they will face if they choose to fight him:

“here stands with his company an earl of unstained reputation,
who intends to defend his homeland,
the kingdom of Æthelred, my lord’s
people and his country. They shall fall,
the heathens in battle. It appears to me too shameful
that you should return to your ships with our money
unopposed, now that you thus far in this direction
have penetrated into our territory.”¹⁴⁹

While the kingdom is Æthelred’s, Byrhtnoth makes clear that he defends not only his own homeland, but also his king’s country and people.

This bold statement by the ealdorman has already received a good deal of attention from earlier critics, with C.M. Bowra arguing that the Maldon poet chose to present the English force as one fighting for king and country.¹⁵⁰ Subsequent critics have likewise viewed *TBOM* as depicting a ‘united’ effort by the English community to defeat foreign invaders; as Hugh Magennis writes, it ‘celebrates the principle of solidarity against foreign aggression’.¹⁵¹ Indeed, James Campbell has highlighted the ‘just’ nature of this form of warfare (one of the few to do so in connection to heroic literature) and has even suggested that in making this statement Byrhtnoth makes it clear to the audience that he is about to engage in a just war.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ *The Death of Cet mac Mágach*, in Kuno Meyer (ed.), *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes* (Dublin, 1906), p. 39.

¹⁴⁹ *TBOM*, ll. 51-8, p. 21.

¹⁵⁰ C.M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London, 1952), pp. 467-8.

¹⁵¹ Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, pp. 199-200. For others, see James Campbell, ‘England c. 991’, in Janet Cooper (ed.), *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact* (Hambledon, 1993), pp. 1-17 (16), and Ann Williams, ‘The Battle of Maldon and ‘The Battle of Maldon’: History, Poetry and Propaganda’, *Medieval History II* (1992), pp. 41-4.

¹⁵² Campbell, ‘England c. 991’, p. 16.

A few critics have seen this component of the poem as overstated by modern scholarship, however. Roberta Frank acknowledged its existence within *TBOM*, but feels that it is overshadowed by the poet's efforts to stress the loyalty of a lord's personal retainers.¹⁵³ In her defence, there are no further outright references to the defence of king and country after Byrhtnoth's speech to the Viking messenger. Alice Jorgensen holds a slightly more nuanced view, arguing that the first part of the poem does indeed emphasize Byrhtnoth's defence of his territory against heathen invaders before it re-focuses upon issues of loyalty and revenge following his death.¹⁵⁴ I think she is right to mention the 'heathen' nature of the earl's opponents (which we discussed earlier), as it would make the unstated claim of just war that much more apparent. Frank and Jorgensen's arguments regarding the images of loyalty and its related attributes in this work will re-appear in our examination of *TBOM* in this regard in Chapter 5.

A similar sentiment may appear in another poem, *The Battle of Brunanburh*, found in most versions of the *ASC* under the year 937. This work commemorates the victory by King Athelstan of England and his younger brother Edmund over a combined Scottish and Norse army in which the later force is cast as invaders. In contrast, the poet exults that for Athelstan and Edmund 'it was natural to men of their lineage to defend their land, their treasure and their homes, in frequent battle against every foe.'¹⁵⁵ Jayne Carroll largely agrees with the image that Æthelstan fights a 'defensive battle' although she thinks that the propaganda for West Saxon overlordship in England remains 'subtle' rather than direct.¹⁵⁶ Hugh Magennis, however, disagrees with both Hill and Carroll; he sees this work as one not describing a 'society under attack', but rather a celebration of the military power and strength of Æthelstan and Edmund, used in a more aggressive fashion.¹⁵⁷

John M. Hill argues that this demonstrates one of the themes of this particular work, that Æthelstan's victory reflected both divine and ancient ideas concerning

¹⁵³ Frank, 'The Battle of Maldon and Heroic Literature', in *TBOM991*, pp. 196-7 (204-5).

¹⁵⁴ Alice Jorgensen, 'Power, Poetry, and Violence: The Battle of Maldon', in Brenda M. Bolton and Christine E. Meek (eds.), *Aspects of Power and Authority in the Middle Ages*, pp. 235-49 (243-4).

¹⁵⁵ *ASC* 937.

¹⁵⁶ Jayne Carroll, 'Concepts of Power in Anglo-Scandinavian Verse', in Bolton and Meek (eds.), *Aspects of Power and authority in the Middle Ages*, pp. 217-33 (230-1).

¹⁵⁷ Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, pp. 195-7.

‘lordship in defense of home, land, and hoard’.¹⁵⁸ He further speculates that in real life the slain enemy warriors, had they won the battle, would have ‘continued terrorizing Northumbria and parts of Mercia’ and while chasing the fleeing Anglo-Saxon army may have laid ‘waste to whatever countryside they passed through’ and possibly even penetrated into the Wessex homeland.¹⁵⁹ Hill recognizes the importance that just war plays in the heroic image presented here, as in fighting and winning at Brunanburh the brothers prosecute a ‘just war’ – ‘in a manner innate to their lineage and upbringing’ they take the lawful decision to respond militarily to the attack by the Danes and Scots.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, his concentration upon their upbringing returns us briefly to our conclusion in Chapter 2 that the waging of just war often required a legitimate authority, although he believes in this case that their pursuit of just war in this instance actually further legitimized the West Saxon dynasties rule over England.¹⁶¹

Beowulf makes an even greater use of such language, although it is frequently difficult to determine how much behaviour or roles ascribed to a king or lord would include his war-band. We find similar appellations to those provided above and drawn from the Welsh poetry – phrases such as ‘defender of his people’ or ‘guardian of the homeland/nation/people’ throughout its length.¹⁶² In nearly every battle in which Beowulf engages, however, he is clearly reacting to a threat or violence which Isidore of Seville would cite as grounds for just war. When Beowulf first arrives at Heorot, Hrothgar acknowledges his offer to crush Grendel in just such terms: “Beowulf my friend, you have sought us out to fight in our defence and out of good will.”¹⁶³ Grendel has attacked the Danes, he is a scion of Cain, so therefore Beowulf is justified in slaying him. Similarly, Grendel’s mother slays one of Hrothgar’s foremost councillors, necessitating vengeance (which we will discuss in the next chapter). The dragon inflicts far greater damage upon the Geats than the Grendel-kin

¹⁵⁸ John M. Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature* (Gainesville, 2000), pp. 17, 95.

¹⁵⁹ Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*, p. 100.

¹⁶⁰ Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*, pp. 102-3.

¹⁶¹ Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*, p. 106.

¹⁶² *Beowulf*, ll. 267-9, 662-3, 1707-9, 1830-5, 2026-9, 2190-2, 2208-13, 2337-41, 2638-46, 2702-5, pp. 47, 65, 115-7, 121-3, 131, 139, 139-41, 147, 161, 163. The terms mostly include some form of guardian, friend, refuge or friend of a people. We also have the compliment ‘the Sea-Geats would have no better man to choose as king and guardian of the treasure-hoard of heroes’.

¹⁶³ *Beowulf*, ll. 456-8, p. 57.

dealt out to the Danes. The poet writes at the beginning of the episode that ‘The beginning was terrible to the people in the land...’ before continuing:

Then the visitant began to spew forth coals of fire, to burn the bright houses;
the light of burning arose, bringing terror upon men. The loathsome creature
flying in the air wished to leave nothing there alive. From far and near the
serpent’s warfare, cruelly hostile malice, was widely evident, how the warlike
scourge persecuted and humiliated the people of the Geats. It darted back to the
hoard, its secret, splendid hall, before daytime. It had encircled those who
dwelt in the land with flame, fire and burning...’¹⁶⁴

It seems quite clear that the dragon is a force that threatens to destroy everyone in the land. As Tolkien insightfully wrote, ‘The imagination of the author of *Beowulf* moved upon the threshold of Christian chivalry, if indeed it had not already passed within.’¹⁶⁵

In a speech to Beowulf following his triumph over Grendel and his mother, Hrothgar predicts that the young hero will become ‘a comfort to your people, a help to heroes, given to endure for a very long time’.¹⁶⁶ Later Hrothgar adds that in the event that the Geatish king Hygelac dies, “the Sea-Geats would have no better man to choose as king and guardian of the treasure-hoard of heroes” than Beowulf.¹⁶⁷ Hrothgar himself claims “Thus for a hundred seasons I ruled the Ring-Danes beneath the skies, and secured them from war by spear and sword-edge against many nations throughout the world, so that I did not reckon on any opponent beneath the expanse of heaven.”¹⁶⁸ A dying Beowulf years later recounts his own reign in similar language, stating “I held this nation for fifty winters; there was no nation’s king among those dwelling around who dared approach me with allies in war, threaten with terror.”¹⁶⁹

Beowulf’s enemies conversely appear in the opposite role. Grendel, a ‘patron of crimes’ and ‘foe of mankind’, dwells apart from society; we read that he ‘trode the

¹⁶⁴ *Beowulf*, ll. 2312-22, p. 145.

¹⁶⁵ Tolkien, in *Beowulf and the Finnesburg fragment*, translated by John R. Clark, with prefatory remarks by J.R.R. Tolkien, completely revised with notes and an introduction by C.L. Wrenn (London, 1940), p. xxii.

¹⁶⁶ *Beowulf*, ll. 1708-9, pp. 115-7.

¹⁶⁷ *Beowulf*, ll. 1845-52, p. 123.

¹⁶⁸ *Beowulf*, ll. 1769-73, p. 119.

¹⁶⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 2732-6, p. 165.

paths of exile in the form of a man'.¹⁷⁰ Following the attack by Grendel's mother upon Heorot, Hrothgar speaks of Grendel and his mother in the following terms: "I have heard that those who dwell in the land, my people, hall-councillors, say this – that they have seen two such huge prowlers in the border regions, alien visitants holding the wastelands."¹⁷¹ Some parts of Grendel's role may perhaps echo the lifestyle of the *díbergaig* and *fianna* which we examined previously – both are often exiles, who live apart from society, and dwell in the 'border regions', the wilds.¹⁷² Both seem to fulfil a similar role – violent and powerful outsiders who can harm society. Yet most real-life *díbergaig* and *fianna* seem to have eventually rejoined their society and were at worst 'equal opportunity' predators – whereas Grendel is perpetually a murderous outlaw who fixates upon Hrothgar's court. This aspect of Grendel accords with one of presentations espoused by Stanley B. Greenfield – that the ogre is a social outcast 'who will not accept the sanctions of *comitatus* society'.¹⁷³

Eric John disagreed with Tolkien regarding the Christian identity of the warrior and war-band in *Beowulf*, and follows Erdmann's claim that profession of arms only became a Christian vocation during the reform movement of the late-tenth and eleventh centuries. During the time *Beowulf* was written, the warrior was akin to publicans and sinners.¹⁷⁴ Yet he also believes that medieval man could understand and appreciate characters such as Moses, David, Saul and Samuel from the Old Testament, described as 'a warrior's bible', and that such men served as models for political thinking and action.¹⁷⁵ The objection raised by John depends heavily upon his assumption of an early date for *Beowulf* – a *Beowulf* created or edited from the tenth century onward could certainly reflect just such a notion of a class who fight (as opposed to those who labour and those who pray) and in so doing practice just war. Hugh Magennis sees a contradiction in the poetry, with *Beowulf*'s goal of

¹⁷⁰ *Beowulf*, ll. 750, 1276, 1351-3, pp. 71, 95 and 99.

¹⁷¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 1345-9, p. 99.

¹⁷² A point which David Wyatt perceptively noted as well, although he also views Grendel as embodying all of the malevolent aspects of such men to the point of exaggeration (David Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain and Ireland, 800-1200* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 103-4.

¹⁷³ Stanley B. Greenfield, 'The Authenticating Voice in *Beowulf*', *ASE* 5 (1976), pp. 51-62 (53).

¹⁷⁴ Eric John, 'Beowulf and the Margins of Literacy', in Peter S. Baker (ed.), *The Beowulf Reader* (New York, 2000), pp. 51-77 (58-9).

¹⁷⁵ John, 'Beowulf and the Margins of Literacy', pp. 62-3

personal heroism even while defending the Geatish realm leading to his choice to fight the dragon single-handedly, a decision that may expose his community to danger.¹⁷⁶ This is problematic, as war for glory would not be just war.

Finally, the remaining Geats make clear what Beowulf's loss will mean to them, with Wiglaf first giving a frank estimate of the situation. He declares that "Now the people can expect a period of conflict, once the fall of the king becomes openly known abroad among Franks and Frisians."¹⁷⁷ This is not all, however; after describing the history of animosity between the Geats and these two peoples, he proceeds to discuss their old enmities with the Swedes and concludes that '...the people of the Swedes will come looking for us, once they hear that our lord has lost his life – he who earlier held hoard and kingdom against those who hated us, after the fall of heroes furthered the good of the people'.¹⁷⁸ Shortly after his assessment, the poet describes the following scene:

Likewise, a Geatish woman, sorrowful, her hair bound up, sang a mournful lay, chanted clamorously again and again that she sorely feared days of lamentation for herself, a multitude of slaughters, the terror of an army, humiliation and captivity.¹⁷⁹

Thus, we have seen at the beginning of *TBOM* and throughout *Beowulf* a clear thread emphasizing the protective role of the war-band and its lord toward their people. What of the remaining OE works? Janet Bately writes that the OE version of Orosius describes the Romans as good *thegns* when they stoutly resist attacks against the odds from all quarters, as well as an invasion by Hannibal, as they stood firm in an apparently hopeless situation.¹⁸⁰ Guy Halsall, in his article 'Anthropology and the Study of Pre-Conquest Warfare and Society', cites the OE *Elene* as a work which concentrates on the king's role as defender of his people. While this does not specify

¹⁷⁶ Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, pp. 38-9, 74-5.

¹⁷⁷ *Beowulf*, ll. 2910-3, p. 173.

¹⁷⁸ *Beowulf*, ll. 3001-5, pp. 177-9.

¹⁷⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 3150-5, p. 185.

¹⁸⁰ Janet Bately, 'The nature of Old English prose', in *TCCOEL*, pp. 71-87 (78).

the war-band, I wonder how implicitly this source hints at the presence of the lord's war-band.¹⁸¹

As a final section of our look at the relationship of the war-band with the 'common folk', we may look at some of the Scandinavian-influenced evidence, particularly that more closely tied in time and place of its authorship with the Insular world between the mid-eighth and mid-eleventh centuries. This material completely departs from the Welsh, Irish and Old English sagas and poems which we have already examined, in that the skalds accept and even exult in the destruction of commoners and warriors at the hands of their patrons. Sighvat the Skald in his poem commemorating King Ólafr, the *Ólafsdrápa*, describes an attack by his subject upon Canterbury: 'The governors could not defend their town of Canterbury from the noble Olaf. Much woe befell the *Portar*'.¹⁸² The translation of *portar* remains ambiguous, but Whitelock tentatively suggests that the term means 'citizens'; this may lead one to the assumption that the victims were primarily from the non-military segments of society, but such a conclusion would be premature.¹⁸³ Late Anglo-Saxon guild regulations, such as those belonging to the Thegns' Guild in Cambridge, provide clear evidence that burgesses during this period were by no means strict non-combatants but rather men who act as warriors at least some of the time and are also town dwellers, like a militia.¹⁸⁴ The destruction of Canterbury once again appears in the *Head-Ransom* composed by Ottar the Black, where he writes 'Gracious lord, you took wide Canterbury in the morning. Fire and smoke played fiercely upon the dwellings. I learned that you destroyed the lives of men'.¹⁸⁵ While the men slain could be warriors, the burning of houses may imply a more indiscriminate slaughter.

This picture continues in the *Eiríksdrápa* of Thord Kolbeinsson when the Norwegian Eric makes a foray to England: 'But the natives, who meant to defend their homesteads, made an expedition against them. The king's following repaid them with sword-play'.¹⁸⁶ Once again we have little specific information on who

¹⁸¹ Guy Halsall, 'Anthropology and the Study of Pre-Conquest Warfare and Society: The Ritual War in Anglo-Saxon England', in *WWASE*, pp. 155-77 (160).

¹⁸² Sighvat the Skald, *Ólafsdrápa*, 8: *EHD I*, p. 305-6 (305).

¹⁸³ Whitelock, *EHD I*, fn. 5 on p. 305.

¹⁸⁴ *The Thegns' Guild in Cambridge: EHD I*, pp. 557-8. I would like to thank Alex Woolf for pointing out this possibility.

¹⁸⁵ Ottar the Black, *Head Ransom*, 10: *EHD I*, p. 306.

¹⁸⁶ Thord Kolbeinsson, *Eiríksdrápa*, 13: *EHD I*, p. 307.

fought Eric, but that fact that they were defending *their* homesteads may indicate it was men who were not professional warriors – although if Thord meant ‘they’ in the sense of the English as a whole it could certainly refer to a local war-band or the *fyrð*. Another skaldic verse, the *Knútsdrápa*, hints towards a king targeting non-combatants when it praises King Cnut: ‘Dwellings and houses of men burned [...] There, I know, you took the Frisians’ lives, breaker of the peace of shields. You shattered Brentford with its habitations’.¹⁸⁷

ii. The historical ‘reality’

The Irish annalists praise the same royal efforts to guard the nation or people as the church. In *AU* 980, our informer flatly states that as a result of Mael Sechnaill’s victory over the Scandinavians of Áth Cliath and the Isles, ‘foreign power’ was ejected from Ireland’.¹⁸⁸ This notion expands and becomes infused with biblical allusion in the other annals. In the *CS* entry recording the same event we read that afterwards,

It is then that Mael Sechnaill proclaimed that anyone of the Irish that is in the territory of the foreigners in bondage and oppression should depart thence to his own land in peace and rejoicing. That army was the *end of the* Babylonian captivity of Ireland.¹⁸⁹

The *AFM* and *AT* relay this information even more stridently, declaring that the Norse rule ‘was the Babylonian captivity of Ireland, until they were released by Maelseachlainn; it was indeed next to the captivity of hell’.¹⁹⁰ This focus upon the pagan nature of the oppressors reminds the reader of the ASC poem *The Capture of the Five Boroughs*.

In our historical sources we also find the use of ‘defender of the land’ in addition to its people. A good example of such writing can be found in the *AU* under the year 903, when we find a poem lamenting the death of Mael Finnia son of

¹⁸⁷ Ottar the Black, *Knútsdrápa*, 4, 7: *EHD I*, pp. 308-9 (308).

¹⁸⁸ *AU* 980.1.

¹⁸⁹ *CS* 980.

¹⁹⁰ *AFM* 979.6.

Flannacán, king of Brega.¹⁹¹ The poet begins his work with the lines ‘The son of Der bFáil, fighting for Brega’s plain’, but then continues by adding that Mael Finnia ‘was wont to smash every deceitful band’.¹⁹² Who are these ‘deceitful bands’ – enemies from outside Brega, or local *fianna* and *díbergaig*? The fact that Mael Finnia led the assault which drove the Scandinavians from Áth Cliath the previous year may indicate that the poet has Viking raiders in mind, but we should not automatically rule out the possibility of his earlier activities in which he could be suppressing both Norse Vikings and Irish brigands.¹⁹³ A poem eulogizing Aed son of Niall, king of Tara tells us that the ruler was:

A generous prudent man of shields
Who brought plenty to landed Temair,
Against iron-tipped spears a buckler.’¹⁹⁴

This last line in particular seems to imply defence, with Aed’s ‘buckler’ blocking the attacks of enemy ‘spears’. The reference to Tara would seem to further indicate the defence of Ireland as a whole.

Complementing this we have several instances in Anglo-Saxon sources in which the war-band may fulfil the role of ‘defender of the nation’ as depicted in the vernacular Old English poetry such as the *Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf*. The long entry in the A and E versions of the ASC for 871 describes the many battles between the kings of Wessex and the Viking invaders as *folcgefeoh*t, which some translators render as ‘national fights’.¹⁹⁵ That said, the element *folc* can just as easily mean ‘army’ or ‘troop’, leading some editors to render the word here as ‘general engagements’ or ‘pitched battle’.¹⁹⁶ When Alfred occupied London several years later the chronicler boasts that ‘all the English people that were not under subjection to the Danes submitted to him’.¹⁹⁷ This sounds suspiciously similar to the sentiment found in the *Battle of the Five Boroughs* and various Irish annals for the year

¹⁹¹ AU 903.2.

¹⁹² AU 903.2 (ll. 1-2).

¹⁹³ AU 902.2.

¹⁹⁴ AU 879.1 (ll. 4-6).

¹⁹⁵ Michael Swanton does so in his translation for entry 871 (see Swanton (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New York, 1996), fn.4 on p. 72).

¹⁹⁶ Such as Whitelock in her translation of ASC 871 (*EHD I*, pp. 177-8).

¹⁹⁷ ASC AE 886.

979/980. The admittedly late source the *Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan* follows a similar tack as these others in comparing Gruffudd to Judas Maccabeus at several points in its narrative. Early we read that:

He rejoiced [...] freeing Gwynedd from the masters who had ruled it without right, as Judas Maccabeus defended the land of Israel from pagan kings and neighbouring peoples, who frequently made inroads among them.¹⁹⁸

Once Gruffudd established himself he brought back ‘all his people from exile in various parts’ and increased the possessions of his kingdom ‘as happened in the case of the land of Israel and their return from the captivity of Babylon’.¹⁹⁹

The ASC alliterative verse entries for the years 959 and 975 boast that King Edgar ‘improved the peace of the people more than those kings who were before him in the memory of men’, so that there was neither ‘fleet so proud’ nor ‘host so strong’ that it got itself pretty in England as long as the noble king held the throne’.²⁰⁰ We also find King Edgar referred to as ‘friend of the West Saxons and protector of the Mercians’ in the second of these entries.²⁰¹ Indeed, Magennis argued that the entry for 975 lamented the ‘breakdown of security and order’ following Edgar’s death.²⁰² Interestingly, a poem in the C and D versions of the ASC also ascribes martial qualities to King Edward the Confessor, even declaring that ‘the princely Edward defended homeland, / country and nation to the very bitter death.’²⁰³ Echoing the *Battle of Brunanburh*, Simeon of Durham claimed that Æthelstan was ‘fearsome’ to his ‘enemies everywhere’, but ‘peaceful towards his own people’.²⁰⁴

Continuing in this look at civil disorder and internal conflict, in 1052 the C and D versions of the ASC explain that when the armies of King Edward the Confessor and Earl Godwine stared each other down, the men on both side forced the two to make peace, as in the words of the chronicler:

¹⁹⁸ *The Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan: The Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan*, edited by D. Simon Evans (Lampeter, 1990), p. 61.

¹⁹⁹ *The Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan*, p. 80.

²⁰⁰ ASC D (E,F) 959, D (E) 975.

²⁰¹ ASC 975.

²⁰² Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, p. 197.

²⁰³ ASC CD 1065.

²⁰⁴ Simeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio*, ii.18, p. 139.

...it was abhorrent to almost all of them that they should fight against men of their own race ... they did not want that this country should be the more greatly laid open to foreign nations, should they themselves destroy each other.²⁰⁵

An entry in the Irish annals suggests that Brian Bóruma suppressed internal trouble-makers such as *fianna* and *díbergaig*. The latter interpretation receives further strength from an entry in the *AI* regarding Brian. The annalist describes a hosting by Brian across Desmumu in which ‘he took the hostages of Les Mór, Corcach and Imlech Ibur as a guarantee of the banishment of robbers and lawless people therefrom.’²⁰⁶ McCone may be correct as well, however, when he refers to some of the *fián* offices and/or *fianna* serving the greater community or kings – the *AU* entry for 869 records that ‘Mael Ciaráin son of Rónán, royal champion of eastern Ireland, a warrior who plundered the foreigners, was killed.’²⁰⁷ Notably, the original Irish for ‘royal champion of eastern Ireland’ reads *rignia airthir Ereenn, feinid* – while *feinid* often means ‘warrior’ or ‘champion’ it can also mean a ‘member of a *fián*’.

As a final note, these sources may have influenced Frank Stenton’s view of the earlier ealdormen, the eighth and ninth centuries (a period in which he views these men as members of the king’s war-band or ‘military household’ who have been placed in charge of a shire or other region) – he writes that one of their duties was to ‘impose terms on local nobles who had allowed their own household men to break the peace.’²⁰⁸ Abels briefly addresses this issue of law enforcement and justice, as he believes that the laws provide evidence that Alfred and his grandson Æthelstan assigned the war-bands of those men who owed service to the king (through personal ties or possession of bookland) with the task of arresting law-breakers. *ASC* 896 may demonstrate this aspect, when Alfred has all of the survivors from two stranded Viking ships hanged – or it may simply point to his role as defender of the nation.²⁰⁹

iii. Failure to defend and ravager

²⁰⁵ *ASC* C 1052.

²⁰⁶ *AI* 987.2.

²⁰⁷ *AU* 869.4.

²⁰⁸ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 305-6.

²⁰⁹ *ASC* 896.

The activities of various Scandinavian forces in England certainly form a very negative recurring example during our period – although as noted in Chapter 1, we cannot be completely certain that these forces were only comprised of war-bands. The description of Danish behaviour after the truce of 1011, however, strongly hints at such groups comprising the Danish army when we read that its members ‘journeyed [*ferdon*] none the less in bands [*flocmælum*] everywhere, and harried our wretched people, and plundered and killed them’.²¹⁰ During an earlier war between King Edward the Elder and the Danes of the Midlands we read that when the Danes failed to take the stronghold of Towcaster they returned at night in a ‘marauding band’ [*stælherge*] which preyed upon unprepared [*ungearwe*] men and captured a great number of cattle and men.²¹¹ The number of instances of such activity is striking, particularly in the late-tenth and early-eleventh century when the chronicler describes the Viking forces as ‘accustomed’ to burning, raiding and killing.²¹²

Archbishop Wulfstan gave a strong impression of his view on the activities which such foreign war-bands could inflict upon a defenceless populace, as well as the failure of the *bellatores* to stop such injuries. In his *Sermon of the Wolf to the English*, he angrily rails:

And often ten or a dozen, one after another, insult disgracefully the thegn’s wife, and sometimes his daughter or near kinswoman, whilst he looks on, who considered himself brave and mighty and stout enough before that happened [...] Often two sea-men, or maybe three, drive the droves of Christian men from seas to sea [...] they ravage and they burn, plunder and rob and carry on board.²¹³

The chronicler of the ASC bitterly describes a similar situation for the year 1006 when the armies of King Æthelred took the field against the Norse, recalling:

²¹⁰ ASC C (D, E) 1011. Original from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Vol. 6: MS. D*, ed. by G.P. Cubbin (Cambridge, 1996), p. 56, and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Vol. 7: MS. E*, ed. by Susan Irvine (Cambridge, 2004), p. 68. While the verb *ferdon* can mean to journey, it also has a sense of ‘soldiering’ or travelling on a military expedition. The adverb *flocmælum* simply means ‘in troops’.

²¹¹ ASC A 917 (920). Original from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Vol. 3: MS. A*, ed. by Janet Bately (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 66-7. Typically *stælherge* means ‘predatory army, a marauding band’, while *ungearwe* simply means ‘unawares’.

²¹² ASC A, C (D, E) 1001, C (D, E) 1006, C (D, E) 1016.

²¹³ Wulfstan, *The Sermon of the Wolf to the English: EHD I*, pp. 854-9 (857-8).

...yet it availed no whit more than it had often done before; for in spite of it all, the Danish army went about as it pleased, and the English levy caused the people of the country every sort of harm, so that they profited neither from the native army nor the foreign army.²¹⁴

We may be able to include the behaviour of the English besiegers of Chester in 894, when the Vikings were ensconced within and starving, for the English ‘seized all the cattle that was outside, and killed the men whom they could cut off outside the fortress, and burnt all the corn, or consumed it by means of their horses, in all the surrounding districts’.²¹⁵ While the *ASC* describes Chester as a deserted city in this entry, the presence of a significant amount of corn in the surrounding region would indicate it was inhabited. It was the locals who primarily suffered when the grain was burnt (although this may have been done to prevent the Viking army from using it) – the cattle seized and men slain are less clear, as they could have been part of the Viking force or local in nature. While Chester at this time was still likely considered part of Danish Mercia, the surrounding populace likely included many who formerly lived under Mercian rule – a fact which becomes more significant when one considers the number of warriors from English Mercia who were likely to have taken part in the campaign.

Æthelred II’s failure has naturally become the subject of much scholarly discussion. Nicholas Hooper surmised that foraging and plundering not only hurt the victim materially, but also damaged the enemy lord’s reputation, as he failed to protect his land.²¹⁶ Sean Davies noted this as well, adding that for the war-band itself there was no shame attached to waging war on the peasants and their land; also such activities could even force a battle with a reluctant defender – while the defending force could hide out in a fortress, it needed to defeat the invaders in combat to protect the land and its wealth.²¹⁷ In such a case, a king or lord’s ability to defend his land and people was imperative. Chris Dennis argued that a long tradition in Anglo-Saxon England from the days of Alfred the Great stressed the king’s role in guarding and defending the land from external aggression, while Alice Sheppard saw a homiletic

²¹⁴ *ASC* C (D, E) 1006.

²¹⁵ *ASC* 893 and 894 (except E).

²¹⁶ Hooper, ‘The Anglo-Saxons at War’, in *WWASE*, pp. 191-202 (193-4).

²¹⁷ Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, pp. 91-2.

discourse in the ASC entries for the 990s – 1010s which ‘insists that a king must protect his people and the church’.²¹⁸ Richard Abels, Chris Dennis and Alice Sheppard all see in Æthelred II’s inability to protect England his greatest failing as a king.²¹⁹ Sheppard adds that he also ‘actively harasses his people instead of protecting them’, executing/murdering four underlings, sacking Rochester, ordering the killing of all the Danes in his country and finally fleeing the realm.²²⁰ This seems plausible, in so far as Æthelred’s failure resulted in his own people actually opting to accept the very man ravaging their country, Swein, as the only one who could stop it. In contrast to Æthelred, Harold II demonstrated his capability to defend England and its people from external threats when he destroyed Gruffudd ap Llewelyn; this success may have aided in his accession to the throne following the death of Edward the Confessor.²²¹

We find in the *Libellus de Exordio* of Simeon of Durham a description of the conquest of the region about Durham by King Rognvaldr of Northumbria. Upon establishing his rule in Northumbria, Rognvaldr distributed several villas belonging to the bishop of Chester-le-Street to his henchmen Scula and Onlafball. Simeon laments that Scula held the villa called Eden ‘as far as Billingham’ and inflicted ‘heavy and intolerable tribute on the unfortunate inhabitants.’²²² While Scula certainly despoiled the church, his actions here seem to have affected the common people as well. Private war-bands in particular seem to have engaged in such behaviour, or at least appear in our historical sources committing such outrages. We may remember that the retinue led by Wulfbald’s widow and unnamed child invaded the land at Bourne which Wulfbald had held illegally, and even slew the king’s thegn Eadmer with fifteen of his companions.²²³

²¹⁸ Chris Dennis, ‘Image-Making for the Conquerors of England: Cnut and William I’, in Brenda Bolton and Christine Meek (eds.), *Aspects of Power of Authority in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 33-52 (43), Alice Sheppard, *Families of the King: Writing Identity in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto, 2004), pp. 72-4.

²¹⁹ Abels, ‘From Alfred to Harold II: the Military Failure of the Late Anglo-Saxon State’, in Richard P. Abels and Bernard S. Bachrach (eds.), *The Normans and their Adversaries at War: Essays in Memory of C. Warren Hollister* (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 15-30 (28), Dennis, ‘Image-Making for the Conquerors of England’, pp. 46-7, Sheppard, *Families of the King*, pp. 72-4.

²²⁰ Alice Sheppard, *Families of the King*, pp. 72-4.

²²¹ Per Kelly DeVries, ‘Harold Godwinson in Wales: Military Legitimacy in Late Anglo-Saxon England’, in Abels and Bachrach (eds.), *The Normans and their Adversaries at War*, pp. 65-85 (84).

²²² Simeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio*, ii.16.

²²³ Given in *EHD* I, pp. 531-4 (532).

An episode recorded in the *ASC* for the year 1051 is even more revealing. Eustace of Bolougne had recently visited with his relative King Edward the Confessor and was returning to France when he decided to seek lodgings in Dover with his retainers. Upon reaching Dover chaos ensued, for in the words of the D version of the *ASC*:

His men then travelled looking for quarters foolishly, and killed a certain man from the market-town; and another man from the market-town [killed] their companions, so that there lay dead 7 of his companions; and great harm was done there on either side with horse and also with weapons, until the people gathered, and then they [Eustace and his followers] fled away...²²⁴

The E version of the *ASC* presents Eustace as even more culpable, noting that he and his companions donned their mail-coats before even riding into Dover as they apparently planned to foment trouble. The E version also states that the miscreants slew ‘more than 20 men’, losing 19 of their own in return and ‘they knew not how many’ wounded.²²⁵ In this case, the activities of the war-band – its depredations – not only result in death and destruction in Dover, but eventually result in a showdown between the king, Edward the Confessor, and his most powerful magnate, Earl Godwin, causing a kingdom-wide crisis.

Destruction on an even more spectacular scale occurred in 1064 when the Northumbrians drove forth their earl Tostig and chose Morcar as his replacement. The new earl proceeded to lead the Northumbrians and men of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire south to Northampton, where he linked up with his brother Edwin, who brought his own supporters from Mercia and Wales. The two remained in place negotiating with the king through Harold Godwineson until an accord was reached and they returned to their earldoms. While civil war is averted and the leading men eventually resolve their difference, things did not go so well for those exposed to the northern war-bands:

...the northern men did great harm around Northampton [...] in that they both killed men and burned houses and corn, and seized all the cattle that they could come at, which was many thousands; and they seized many hundreds of men,

²²⁴ *ASC* D 1051.

²²⁵ *ASC* E 1051, p. 173.

and led them off north with them, so that the shire and the other shires which were near there were for many years the worse.²²⁶

Leslie Alcock suggested such a possibility when he argued that war-band recruits could act as brigands or predators, as opposed to ‘the socially acceptable and politically glorified predation of a royal hosting’.²²⁷ He may be onto something here, for later he notes that the ravaging of kings such as Ecgfrith and Oengus would harm the entire population, especially women and children.²²⁸ Thus we have seen the danger that such military groups could inflict – not just those of a foreign or independent character (although these seem to have been worse in this regard), but even those of a local and legitimate character.

Davies blames such activity on the warriors themselves in a Welsh context, arguing that the *teulu* exerted an influence over its lord in that he had to satisfy their lust for combat, as well as booty and land with which he rewarded them. In general, he believes that it had a disruptive effect upon Welsh society, exacerbating endemic warfare between rival rulers.²²⁹ This statement reminds one of *TBDD*, when the *díbergaig* under the sons of Donn Désa urged their leaders to proceed with the attack on Conaire. A historical example of such behaviour *may* be located in the Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan, when the Hiberno-Norse mercenaries revolted against Gruffydd when he tried to prevent them from plundering Anglesey; they do so anyway, and then force him to accompany them back to Ireland.²³⁰ Even here, however, we may see a manipulated image as this raid may have been retrospectively edited once Gruffydd became king of Gwynedd to exonerate him from earlier well-known pirate activity.²³¹

Davies may also hint at the existence of *díbergaig* and *fianna* type groups in the British context, noting that young warriors unable to find a lord and patronage could become restless, and therefore dangerous.²³² Hilda Ellis Davidson also applied the idea of the *fianna* to Anglo-Saxon society and envisions a similar process, in

²²⁶ ASC E 1064.

²²⁷ Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests* (Edinburgh, 2003), p. 158.

²²⁸ Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests*, p. 202.

²²⁹ Sean Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, p. 41.

²³⁰ *Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan*, pp. 64-5. See also Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, p. 42.

²³¹ I would like to thank Alex Woolf aiding me in this observation.

²³² Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, p. 48.

which a youth joined a band of young warriors operating on the fringes of society for a time before graduating as a warrior and re-integrating into society.²³³ Both Davidson and Guy Halsall refer to the pre-ecclesiastical activities of St. Cuthbert and St. Guthlac, particularly those of the latter as retold by his hagiographer Felix, and which consisted of fighting, devastating towns and residences, collecting booty and engaging generally in ‘pillage, slaughter and rapine’ at the head of a small band of youths.²³⁴ Jenny Rowland takes this concept further and draws upon Davidson and McCone’s theories to suggest that young men of the warrior class in Welsh society spent an apprenticeship in licensed brigandage, either in small troops or under a ruler, and even suggests that Llywarch’s exhortations indicate his leadership of such a group when young and his expectation that his sons will follow in his footsteps.²³⁵

We have seen that the idea of the war-band acting as the defender of the realm and its inhabitants finds much greater expression in Old English and Welsh literary sources than those of an Irish origin, although even there it was not entirely absent. Only in the skaldic poetry does it completely disappear, to be replaced with the depiction of kings ravaging and destroying towns and settlements. Nonetheless, we find a far more complex picture for the effects of warriors in other sources such as annals and hagiographies, in which the royal war-band usually acts in the defensive role, with foreign, private and aristocratically-led war-bands providing most of the incidents of ravaging and destruction. Such private or independent war-bands may have had problems maintaining this independence during times of strong rule by the West Saxon and Danish kings. Even those who are not king in the literature yet command benevolent war-bands, such as Byrhtnoth and Beowulf, serve kings. What we may glimpse in the literature is an attempt, either overt or possibly subconscious, to equate proper or legitimate war with royal endeavours, and condemn all other military action as illegitimate. This finds further support in those Welsh verses which praise a lord and his warriors for keeping the peace, hunting down brigands and shackling the wicked or in Beowulf’s picture of Grendel as a lone outcast with no lord or place in society. Thus in the literature we may be seeing

²³³ She does, however, cite some heroic literary material such as the training of Cú Chulainn in *TBC I*. See Hilda Ellis Davidson, ‘The Training of Warriors’, in *WWASE*, p. 20.

²³⁴ Davidson, ‘The Training of Warriors’, p. 20, and Halsall, ‘Anthropology and the Study of Pre-Conquest Warfare and Society’, p. 160.

²³⁵ Rowland, ‘Warfare and Horses in The Gododdin and the Problem of Catraeth’, p. 34.

echoes along the same lines or thought-pattern as the efforts of the Wessex kings during the late-ninth and tenth centuries to emphasis the leadership of the king above all war-bands, with those who failed to bend the knee denigrated as outlaws.

IV. Conclusion

The picture presented by the heroic literature certainly does not completely match that provided by our historic and hagiographical sources. In the former, the war-band is almost always a stabilizing component of society which protects church, people and land – with the exception of those antagonistic war-bands which do the opposite and must be combated by the protagonists. The hagiographical sources, however, present most war-bands and in particular those of youths and brigands as a threat to the church, *innocentes* and society at large. Our historical sources occupy more of a middle ground, upholding the legitimate and royal war-bands led by the king and his trusted lieutenants while damning those of a foreign or outlaw background – although these sources may at times also admit the damage that the former can cause to a neighbourhood.

A closer look at our heroic sources and subsequent comparison to the historical and other sources has revealed several problems occupying the minds of the authors of the former, as well as the possible agendas which they infused into their writings in an attempt to rectify such problems. Those authors in the Anglo-Saxon, and to a lesser extent Irish, cultural milieus show a particularly strong dislike of independent war-bands, particularly those outside of any sort of royal or ‘official’ control. Extreme examples of such groups would include any sort of landless band of youths such as *díbergaig* or *fianna*, rebellious retainers and lawbreakers.²³⁶ While the Irish concentrate on the damage such bands can inflict, the Anglo-Saxon sources

²³⁶ Unfortunately, this thesis was largely completed before the author consulted David Wyatt’s work on the the relationship between warfare and slavery in the British Isles in the period from 800 to 1200. Wyatt makes a strong case for the existence of *fianna*-like groups throughout the Insular world throughout the Viking Age (as well as before and after), and gives an exhaustive discussion of depredation such groups could inflict upon a populace (Wyatt, *Warriors and Slaves in Britain and Ireland*, 800-1200 (Lieden, 2009), pp. 62-109).

seem to focus on exalting the royal or legitimate war-band (and other royal military forces).

The British/Welsh vernacular works focus on questions of the defence of the land and its people. While the Anglo-Saxon sources do likewise, the British ones appear to view this (at times) as part of a lord's honour. They also explicitly state the Christianity of their paragons, their identity as men integrated into Christendom – perhaps as an attempt to prevent the sorts of actions as found in the *Llandaff Charters* and the *Life of St. Cadog*. In this regard, we may also see a bit of subtle criticism in both types of praise – the defence of the land, and Christianity – of the war-band. Finally, the poets will sometimes go out of their way to state that their subject is not a brigand, pirate or other malefactor. Could this be another attempt to reward and/or encourage good behaviour? The Norse sources seem to revel in destruction, but noticeably, all of the raiding and violence which is praised occurs against enemies and foreign groups, rather than within their own lands. Yet even here there may be a whiff of legitimate authority – as the victims in the panegyric poetry did not properly submit to the suzerainty of the skald's master, the skald may have chosen to portray their suffering as a just punishment inflicted by a lord establishing his lawful authority.

We may conclude, then, that the heroic literature produced in the Insular world in the Viking age deliberately set out to cast the royal and legitimate armies as practitioners of just war. This vindicates our earlier suggestions from Chapters 2 and 3 that the authors of these sources used the numbers of protagonists and their social standing to indicate that these heroes were engaged in just war. They did so by giving their war-bands the same number of men as those found in Biblical and Classical exemplars, or by describing the warriors as members of an elite dedicated warrior class. The heroic literature becomes far more overt, however, in its presentation of these same men as defenders of legitimate authority, the church, the *innocentes* and the non-military classes from pagans, external foes and internal criminals – all with the intention of further publicizing its pursuit of just war.

Essentially, the heroic sources of the primary three cultures involved – the Anglo-Saxon, British and Irish – seem concerned with establishing the toleration of just war, perhaps even encouraging it if such action will result in a like diminution of

unjust war. Viewed in this light, we can see the reactions of the authors to those aspects of war which they found unjust within their locale. We have yet, however, to look into one of the possible causes for the longevity of private or extralegal combatants – issues of loyalty and vengeance. At this point, we are ready to move into this next realm.

Chapter Five – Loyalty, Vengeance and Betrayal

Most scholars studying warfare in the early medieval Insular world have arrived at the general consensus that several behaviours illustrated in the surviving heroic literature – namely fighting to the death on behalf of one’s lord, exacting vengeance for his death and never turning upon him – reflect real-life societal demands placed upon aristocratic fighting men or those whose principal occupation was warfare.¹ One needs look no further than F.M. Stenton’s *Anglo-Saxon England* for a concise summarization of such a view:

The sanctity of the bond between lord and man, the duty of defending and avenging a lord, the disgrace of surviving him, gave rise to situations in which English listeners were always interested [...] There is no doubt that this literature represented real life.²

The above assumptions have suffered several challenges over recent years, but most of these have been limited to a particular literary tradition in the Insular world (such as Old English or Middle Welsh literature) or even more frequently to a particular source such as *TBOM*.³ Perhaps as a result of this spotty approach, the old construct

¹ H.M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge, 1912), pp. 348-9; note that while he dates the ‘Heroic Age’ to the sixth century and before, he claims on p. 349 of the same work that the same spirit of loyalty permeated even later Anglo-Saxon England. See also Chadwick’s *The Origin of the English Nation* (Cambridge, 1924), pp. 166-7. For some earlier writers subscribing to much the same view as Chadwick, see BWP, pp. 48, 124, 164, C. Warren Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Norman Conquest* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 9-13, Kenneth Jackson, *GOSP*, pp. 36, 37-8, and Dorothy Whitelock, ‘Anglo-Saxon poetry and the historian’, *TRHS*, 4th series, 31 (1949), pp. 75-94 (89-90). For more recent works, see Nick Aitchison, *The Picts and the Scots at War* (Stroud, 2003), pp. 28-30, Leslie Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare Among the Britons and Saxons* (Cardiff, 1987), p. 302, Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: 1977), pp. 209-10, A.D. Carr, ‘Teulu and Penteulu’ in T.M. Charles-Edwards, Morfydd E. Owen and Paul Russell (eds.), *The Welsh King and his Court* (Cardiff, 2000), pp. 63-81 (63-4, 74-5), Sean Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, 633-1283 (Cardiff, 2004), p. 38, Nora Chadwick, *The British Heroic Age* (Cardiff, 1976), pp. 71-2, Stephen S. Evans, *The Lords of Battle* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 58-66, 68-73, Patrick Wormald, ‘Anglo-Saxon society and its literature’, in *TCCOEL*, pp. 1-22 (11-2). For some more general works which repeat this notion, see Helen Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare*, p. 29 and J.F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, from the Eighth Century to 1340*, second edition, translated by Sumner Willard and R.W. Southern (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 67-8.

² F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd Edition (Oxford, 1971), p. 302.

³ See Steven Fanning, ‘Tacitus, ‘Beowulf’, and the ‘Comitatus’, in *The Haskins Society Journal* 9 (1997), pp. 17-38 (20-8), Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, ‘Heroic values and Christian ethics’, in *TCCOEL*, pp. 107-25 (112-3 and 122), Rosemary Woolf, ‘The ideal of men dying with their lord in

has remained the received opinion for most recent commentators. For an example of its persistence, we may cite an excerpt from a recent article concerning Anglo-Saxon England:

This was an age when the code permeating Beowulf – ‘the duty of protecting one’s kindred or one’s lord, or one’s man, and of exacting retribution from the slayer and his kindred’ - needed no glossing. A warrior ethos prevailed...⁴

This conception of the warrior’s loyalty ethic has found fertile soil outside specialized works focussing upon the Insular world. To give a pertinent example, Helen Nicholson relies heavily upon Stephen S. Evan’s conclusion from *Lords of Battle* when she summarizes the importance of loyalty in early medieval Europe in her text covering medieval warfare – conclusions which Evans himself drew primarily from heroic literature of the period.⁵ Due to the widespread acceptance of this historical model for battlefield loyalty and revenge, with its heavy reliance upon literary material, it promises to be an ideal candidate for the same treatment previously given to the issues of numbers, social background and the societal role of warriors. For the purposes of this chapter, I have divided the catch-all of loyalty into three particular aspects that I will investigate:

1. The ideal that a warrior should display unflinching loyalty to his lord in the face of certain death.
2. The ideal that a warrior must avenge his slain lord.
3. The ideal that a warrior would never betray and murder his own lord, as this was a horrible crime.

the Germania and in *The Battle of Maldon*, *ASE*, 5 (1976), pp. 63-81. O’Keeffe compares Alfred the Great’s policies with the image in *OE* poetry, while Woolf and Fanning concentrates on *TBOM*. Also note that Alcock later questioned identifying the early medieval Insular royal bodyguard with the *comitatus* of Tacitus but did not rule out such displays of loyalty (Leslie Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests* (Edinburgh, 2004), p. 56.

⁴ G.T. Dempsey, ‘Aldhelm of Malmesbury’s social theology: the barbaric heroic ideal christianised’, in *Peritia* 15 (2001), pp. 58-80 (77). He quotes Dorothy Whitelock, *The audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), p. 13.

⁵ Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare*, p. 29.

I. Death before Dishonour – Fighting to the death

i. The heroic image of men fighting to the death

Beowulf

Let us open our discussion of loyalty unto death with several frequently cited examples from *Beowulf*. Late in life, our eponymous hero recalls his service to king Hygelac as one of repayment, boasting

“I repaid with my bright sword in battle the treasures he bestowed upon me; he gave me estate, dwelling, delight in homeland. There was no need, not any cause, for him to seek out to hire for a price a worse fighting-man among the Gifthas or among the Spear-Danes or in the Swedish kingdom. I would always go before him in the troop, alone in the van; and while life lasts I shall do battle for as long as this sword endures that has stood by me early and late, ever since I slew the Franks’ champion Daeghrefn with my hand in the presence of tried warriors”.⁶

Some have seen in this an assertion by Beowulf that he would fight to the death on behalf of his lord, but a more economical interpretation suggests that Beowulf has merely highlighted his willingness to serve his lord courageously in battle.⁷

For the next example of loyalty commonly cited from *Beowulf* occurs when Beowulf has entered combat with a fearsome dragon which has been ravaging his kingdom. Beowulf’s party of retainers flee in a blind panic as the two combatants clash, although as they flee the young warrior Wiglaf stops himself when he remembers the ‘the property which formerly [Beowulf] granted him, the wealthy dwelling-place of the Wægmundings’.⁸ Deciding to return to the fight, Wiglaf attempts to rally his companions with a rousing speech:

⁶ *Beowulf*, ll. 2490-2502, pp. 153-5.

⁷ Edward B. Irving seems to incline towards the view that Beowulf here explains the heroic contract and will continue even after Hygelac’s death (Edward B. Irving, Jr., ‘Heroic Role-Models: Beowulf and Others’, in *HPASP*, pp. 347-372 (363-4)). Yet he seems to merely state that he will do battle as long as the sword endures which he has carried since the battle – perhaps this was Hygelac’s sword?

⁸ *Beowulf*, ll. 2606-8, p. 159.

“I remember the occasion on which we drank mead, when in the beer hall we promised our lord, who gave us these rings, that we would repay him for the war-equipment, the helmets and hard sword, if any such need as this were to befall him.”⁹

Unfortunately, this attempt fails but Wiglaf and Beowulf together manage to slay the dragon after a terrible fight. Beowulf is mortally wounded by the wyrm and soon passes away, at which point his cowardly followers finally return. Wiglaf castigates them and declares that from that point onward they will become reviled. He proceeds to spell out their fate:

“Now the receiving of treasure and giving of swords, all delight in native land, beloved home, must cease for your race; once princes afar off should hear of your flight, inglorious action, every man of the tribe will have to wander, stripped of rights in the land. To any warrior death is better than a life of disgrace!”¹⁰

Most previous scholarship has followed a straightforward reading of this passage, in which Wiglaf has enunciated the contemporary view that the members of a war-band were expected to defend their lord to the death, with severe and terrible penalties awaiting those whose courage failed them in the breach; some of those subscribing to such a viewpoint have tied such behaviour to that exhibited by the Germanic *comitatus* described by Tacitus.¹¹ While such a perspective may possess some merit, one is stuck by the length of the speeches given by Wiglaf to the cowardly *thegns* – if the ‘rewards’ for disloyalty were so well known, why does the poet consume so much ink and vellum to bang on about the failure of the *thegns* in this regard?

Several previous critics have also suggested that the author did not seek to simply describe real-life behaviour through Wiglaf’s speech, with two propositions enjoying a fair amount of popularity. The first of these sees the contrasting choices of the cowardly thegns and Wiglaf as an attempt to instil courage and loyalty within the

⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 2633-8, p. 161.

¹⁰ *Beowulf*, ll. 2884-91, pp. 172-3.

¹¹ See in particular Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation*, pp. 166-7, Evans, *Lords of Battle*, pp. 59-60, Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, pp. 79-80, and Michael Swanton, *Beowulf*, p. 203.

young members of the ‘aristocratic warrior class’ through a model of proper behaviour, with Wiglaf’s speech clarifying the right choice.¹² In the second model, this episode serves as a warning about the wages of the disloyalty and cowardice plaguing England around the turn of the millennium, with Geatland as an analogue for England, with a similar fate in store for England if its people, like the cowardly thegns, fail to provide loyal service to their king and lords.¹³

While insightful, these two theories may not entirely account for the passages in question. In particular, why does Wiglaf allude to the promises made in the hall while drinking mead and the exchange of military service for war-equipment if these have a deeper meaning than a simple reflection of real-life practice? The first of these questions will unfortunately have to await a more detailed discussion in our discussion of *talū medd*, or ‘Earning one’s mead’ in the next chapter, but in the meantime we would do well to note that he refers to the very thing which fortified Beowulf’s loyalty to his own lord – the granting of weapons, treasures and land – a point to which we shall return shortly.

The Battle of Maldon (TBOM)

TBOM has long occupied a central position in many discussions of the war-band and its loyalty to its lord – as Ann Williams recently remarked, ‘all agree’ that loyalty comprises the theme of *TBOM*, and in particular that given by Byrhtnoth’s men to their lord and by Byrhtnoth himself to his king.¹⁴ Halfway through the surviving narrative of this poem the English leader ealdorman Byrhtnoth falls in combat with Danish invaders, at which point a large section of his army decides to flee the battlefield. The poet especially notes the flight of a certain Godric:

¹² See for instance Edward B. Irving, Jr., ‘Heroic Role-Models: Beowulf and Others’, in *HPASP*, pp. 347-372 (347 and 365). Irving believes that within the poem itself Beowulf was leading by example, and expected his *thegns* (here termed a *comitatus*) to replicate his own heroic exploits as a youth.

¹³ While Robert L. Kellogg believes that the primary goal of *Beowulf* was to foster the amalgamation of Danes, Mercians and West Saxons into a single people, he also sees this episode as serving such a purpose. See Kellogg, ‘The Context for Epic in Later Anglo-Saxon England’, in *HPASP*, pp. 139-156 (151-3). Most who hold this view see Wiglaf’s prediction as applicable to the whole of Geat-dom rather than just the cowardly retainers and their families.

¹⁴ Ann Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England*, p. 121.

Godric turned from the battle, and abandoned the brave man
who had often made him a gift of many a horse;
he leapt on the horse that his lord had owned,
on to the trapping which was highly improper,¹⁵

These lines superficially cast Godric and his fellows in the same role occupied by the cowardly *thegns* from *Beowulf*, but there remains a very important difference: while the flight of Beowulf's *thegns* contributed directly to his death, Godric and those who fled from Maldon abandoned a lord already dead. Yet the *TBOM* poet views Godric's actions as a form of betrayal all the same, writing that the coward 'abandoned' his lord.¹⁶

A large section of Byrhtnoth's army decides to stay and fight, and in several speeches they ascribe their decision as one of continuing loyalty to their lord. Ælfwine begins his speech in the same manner as Wiglaf:

"Remember the times that we often made speeches over mead,
when we raised pledges while sitting on a bench,
warriors in the hall, about fierce encounters:
now we can test who is brave."¹⁷

He diverges from Wiglaf, however, when he states his motivation:

Thegns will not be able to taunt me in that nation
that I meant to desert this militia,
to seek my homeland, now that my leader lies dead,
cut to pieces in battle..."¹⁸

Once again we have a character providing a long harangue on loyalty but while Wiglaf speaks of his need to support a *living* lord who gave him land and treasure and who is now in peril of his life, Ælfwine wishes to avoid the opprobrium of abandoning his *fallen* lord on the battlefield.

¹⁵ *TBOM*, ll. 187-90.

¹⁶ Steven Fanning argued that the *TBOM* poet does not disapprove of Godric's actions but I believe the poet's verbiage belabouring this flight and Offa's later speech make it quite clear that he in fact does. See Fanning, 'Tacitus, *Beowulf*, and the *Comitatus*', pp. 17-38.

¹⁷ *TBOM*, ll. 212-5.

¹⁸ *TBOM*, ll. 220-3.

This contrast becomes increasingly obvious as the remaining heroes at Maldon give increasingly fatalistic speeches, in which they recognize that their choice to remain will result in their own deaths. One of these men, the ‘old retainer’ Byrhtwold, laments his lord’s death before stating:¹⁹

“I am advanced in years; I do not intend to leave,
but I beside my own lord,
beside that well beloved man, intend to lie.”²⁰

The poet shows his approval for this sentiment when he describes the fate of Byrhtnoth’s thegn Offa:

Offa was quickly cut to pieces in the battle, yet he vowed formerly to his treasure-giver that they must both ride back to their dwelling, safe in their homestead, or die amongst the Vikings, perish with wounds on the field of slaughter. He lay near his lord as a thegn should.²¹

Many early commentators used the behaviour of Byrhtnoth’s followers as evidence that such loyalty was a key component in the war-band’s identity, with its members seeking death rather than flight or even out-living their lord (with the assumption that such a social practice was a survival from the Germanic *comitatus* described by Tacitus).²² More recently, questions have been raised about the accuracy of *TBOM* in providing a mirror of real-life behaviour amongst Anglo-Saxon war-bands or warriors in general. In a much-quoted article, Rosemary Woolf strenuously argued that the behaviour of Byrhtnoth’s loyal thegns had absolutely no basis in real-life warfare and was even an aberration in OE literary works. She furthermore suggested that the ideal retainer in reality sought to avenge his lord, with the motif in *TBOM* perhaps inspired by the *Vita Sancti Oswaldi* or a version of the Danish *Bjarkamal*.²³

¹⁹ *TBOM*, ll. 310, 314-5.

²⁰ *TBOM*, ll. 317-9. For another examples see Leofsunu, *TBOM*, ll. 249-52.

²¹ *TBOM*, ll. 288-94.

²² See C.M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London, 1964), p. 113, Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, pp. 9-11, Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 302, 377.

²³ Woolf, ‘The Ideal of men dying with their lord’, pp. 69-70, 72, 76-9.

Several other scholars have subsequently followed Woolf's assertions, with the recognition that *TBOM* is a literary work, and not necessarily a factual description of a real-life battle.²⁴ In fact Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe anticipates the method used in this thesis when she attempts to compare the depiction of the battle of Maldon in *TBOM* with that in historical records, so as to study the interstices between the OE literary conventions of heroic ethos and the events in 'real life' Anglo-Saxon England.²⁵ She concludes like Woolf that loyalty unto death was not a rule either in life or literature in late Anglo-Saxon England, although she does admit that Ælfwine and his fellow warriors present their own resolve as if such behaviour was expected.²⁶

Once we realize the disconnection between the battlefield bravery of *TBOM* and real-life, we may ask what purpose it served beyond mere entertainment with a patina of antiquity or extreme heroism. One popular opinion in recent decades sees in this work the same message as that found in the dragon episode from *Beowulf*: a warning for its late tenth- and early eleventh-century English audience on the perils of disloyalty and flight.²⁷ Others have suggested that the work served as a form of panegyric, either commissioned by the surviving kin of those men lauded in the text or as an attempt to remake a military loss into a moral victory.²⁸ Roberta Frank on the other hand ties the motif of men dying with their lord in *TBOM* to its nearly simultaneous appearance as a literary device throughout Western Europe, from works as diverse as the *chansons d'geste* to early Norse skaldic poetry.²⁹ Frank concludes that it emerged as a by-product of 'individual, voluntary Christian fidelity,

²⁴ Besides those which follow, see also Steven Fanning, 'Tacitus, *Beowulf*, and the *Comitatus*', pp. 17-38, D.G. Scragg, 'The Battle of Maldon', in *TBOM 991*, pp. 1-36 (33), and 'The nature of Old English verse', in *TCCOEL*, p. 55-70 (65-6).

²⁵ O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Heroic values and Christian ethics', p. 117.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-3.

²⁷ See George Clark, 'The hero of Maldon: vir pius et strenuus', in *Speculum* 54:2 (1977), pp. 257-82 (258), in which he argues Godric's fight and not Byrhtnoth's poor decisions led to the English defeat. More recently, Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, pp. 15, 24-8, O'Keeffe, 'Heroic values and Christian ethics', pp. 122-3.

²⁸ Alice Jorgensen, 'Power, Poetry, and Violence: The Battle of Maldon', in Brenda Bolton and Christine E. Meek (eds.), *Aspects of Power and authority in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 235-49 (243, 248), and D.G. Scragg, 'The Battle of Maldon: Fact or Fiction?', in Janet Cooper (ed.), *The Battle of Maldon*, pp. 19-31 (23).

²⁹ Roberta Frank, 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the Battle of Maldon', in Ian Wood and Niels Lund (eds.), *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600* (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 95-106 (99-103).

of a loyalty that is only truly tested when its object has been physically extinguished'.³⁰ Such depictions of loyalty to dead lords do not look backwards into 'Germanic pre-history', but forwards to an eleventh century Europe.³¹

In view of Frank's arguments, I find it interesting that a similar *mentalité* to that promulgated in *TBOM* only reappears in Old English religious texts. We find its negative example in the quasi-heroic version of the Old Testament *Judith*, when Holofernes's *thegns* awaken after Judith has killed their lord and taken his head. Finding the corpse of their decapitated lord, the Assyrian warriors proceed to abandon their camp and in the words of Malcolm Godden, 'reverse the tradition of heroic loyalty and take to flight, leaving their lord alone and dead on the battlefield.'³² While *TBOM* viewed continuing to fight for one's dead lord as laudable, the author of *Judith* ascribes its reverse as action befitting the pagan foes of an Old Testament heroine. As such, we should keep in mind the possibility that Christian thinking informs this ethic as expressed in *TBOM* and *Judith*, as well as the identification of those who fight and flee in each poem – the protagonists surround their dead lord and seek to avenge him or die, while pagans and the disloyal flee once he dies.

Encomium Emmae Reginae and Skaldic Verses

Having considered the differing forms of loyalty found in *Beowulf* and *TBOM* I would like to proceed to one of the sources which Roberta Frank consulted in her study of the motif of men dying with their lord – early skaldic verse. In his memorial ode to St. Oláfr, Sighvatr praises those who act as Bryhtwold and Offa did in *TBOM*:

He fell in the host with the loyal
Men of the king's bodyguard
At the head of his renowned lord;
Praised is that death.³³

³⁰ Frank, 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord', pp. 105.

³¹ Frank, 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord', pp. 105-6.

³² *Judith*, pp. 129-30. Malcolm Godden, 'Biblical literature: the Old Testament', in *TCCOEL*, pp. 206-226 (221).

³³ *Ólafsdrápa*, in Frank, 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord', p. 101.

Just as Offa lay near his lord as ‘a thegn should’, Sighvatr praises the man who falls at the head of his lord. Arnórr Thortharson’s utilizes this same ethic of men choosing to die by their fallen lord in his memorial to Haraldr Harthrathi, when he describes the reaction of Haraldr’s followers to a peace offering following the death of their king:

Harald Godwineson offered peace to his brother Tostig and all the survivors.
But they all shouted back at once and said that they would never accept a truce.
They said they would have victory over their enemies or lie there, all of them,
around their king.’³⁴

All the warriors of the generous ruler
Chose rather to fall
Around the battle-swift king
Than to accept peace.’³⁵

A possibly Scandinavian-influenced source, the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* (likely commissioned by the Anglo-Danish king Hardacnut or his mother Emma around 1039-1042) boasts of the loyalty rendered to the Danish king Svein by his followers:

So that you may realize how highly he was regarded by his men, I can strongly affirm that not one of them would have recoiled from danger owing to fear of death, but unafraid, would have gone out of loyalty to him against innumerable enemies alone, and even with bare hands against armed men, if only the royal signal should be given to them as they went.’³⁶

Despite being written in Latin, the sentiment echoes almost precisely what we have already encountered in the *Fight at Finnsburh* and *Beowulf*, but it does not make the claim that Svein’s warriors would fight to the death once he was slain.

Togail Bruidne Da Derga

Turning now to Irish saga, we find both levels of battlefield loyalty in *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*. During the final attack upon the hostel, the

³⁴ *Morkinskinna*, in Frank, ‘The ideal of men’, p. 102.

³⁵ *Morkinskinna*, in Frank, ‘The ideal of men’, p. 102.

³⁶ *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, I. i. 22-5.

besiegers use their druidic arts to magically inflict an overwhelming thirst upon the high king Conaire, causing him to send his battle-champion Macc Cecht in search of water. The rest of Conaire's retinue promptly deserts, battling their way through the besiegers and leaving only three champions to guard their king – Conall Cernach, Sencha and Dubthach.³⁷ Eventually Conaire expires from the magical thirst, at which point even these three warriors depart, fighting their way out to 'fare forth from the Hostel, wounded, to-broken and maimed'.³⁸ As further proof of the desertion of most of his retinue, the existing saga reports that 'some books relate' only nine men 'fell around Conaire'.³⁹ Once Macc Cecht returns, however, he wastes no time in avenging his lord and recovering his body; he slaughters the two men who he catches beheading Conaire's corpse, chases off the few surviving reavers and carries his lord's body to Tara for a proper burial.⁴⁰

When Conall Cernach returns home, he finds that he has failed to live up to his father's code of loyalty in battle, for the older man exclaims "I swear to God what the great tribes of Ulaid swear, it is cowardly that for the man who went thereout alive, having left his lord with his foes in death."⁴¹ It seems we are once again seeing the ideal that a warrior should die with his lord or at least slaughter all of the foes who slew his lord; these words in some way echo those uttered Ælfwine and his comrades in *TBOM*. Conall Cernach certainly measures up to the standard of bravery found in *Beowulf*, but only Macc Cecht attains that glorified in *TBOM*. In response to his father's disapproval Conall Cernach holds up his hacked-up shield arm, to which his father admits "That arm fought tonight, my son..." Apparently, Conall Cernach felt he acquitted himself sufficiently by defending his lord until he died and sought to reassure his father that he did not flee at the first clash of arms. This grudging admission by his father may hint that he recognized his son's achievement in practicing the Beowulf form of loyalty unto death, if not the Ælfwine one.

Táin Bó Cúailnge

³⁷ *TBDD*, 152, p. 320.

³⁸ *TBDD*, 153, p. 320.

³⁹ *TBDD*, 158, p. 324. I take this to mean nine of his men and not the enemy, as the author later gives two conflicting reports of the number of attackers slain, both of which are far higher numbers.

⁴⁰ *TBDD*, 157, 162 and 164, pp. 323-5, 327.

⁴¹ *TBDD*, 166, p. 328.

The depiction of steadfast loyalty in the face of danger or even certain death appears elsewhere in the Ulster Cycle. Most prior critics and historians who have studied the Ulster Cycle have hypothesized that these texts simply lauded those warriors who fought to the death against impossible odds, with no ulterior motive. Katherine Simms proposes that a ‘cult of reckless personal bravery’ existed not only in the literature but within the society which generated this material. Yet despite such assertions, this battlefield loyalty appears less pronounced in the Ulster Cycle than it does within Old English and Norse texts, with the exception of *TBDD*.

Fergus recalls one of Cú Chulainn’s boyhood deeds in *TBC I* which seems somewhat analogous to Wiglaf’s return to Beowulf during his fight with the dragon. During a battle in which the men of Ulster were defeated, the fleeing warriors left their king Conchobar alone and wounded on the now-deserted battlefield. Out of faithfulness to his lord, the young Cú Chulainn journeyed without any assistance to rescue Conchobar. Not only did he succeed in doing so, but he even provided his king with shelter and a pig to eat.⁴² Just like Wiglaf, Cú Chulainn out-performed all of the veterans who failed to properly defend their lord in battle. Later in the *TBC I*, Cú Chulainn again shows a strong loyalty to his lord when he bitterly rejects King Ailill and Queen Medb’s offer of great rewards in return for his desertion from Conchobar’s service for their own.⁴³

The Gododdin

A number of *awdlau* in *The Gododdin* boast that the poet’s subjects will not retreat from battle in the face of overwhelming odds and even fight to the death, but almost none of these contextualize their choice as part of a social arrangement with their lord.⁴⁴ Outside of this reluctance to explicitly mention this behaviour as a facet of loyalty to one’s lord, the Gododdin warriors remind one of what we observed in

⁴² *TBC I*, pp. 138-9.

⁴³ *TBC I*, p. 159. Obviously, this loyalty to king is combined with loyalty to kin in this particular case.

⁴⁴ I have found at least 28 such references in *The Gododdin*, excluding those *awdlau* which use the metaphor of a pillar, bulwark, fortress or some other immovable building or architectural feature to describe a given warrior.

TBOM, men who were ‘reckless of life’ and kept ‘no thought of survival’.⁴⁵ In some cases, their choice apparently led to the same outcome, such as when we read of one group that ‘their mettle shortened their lives’.⁴⁶

Early reviewers of *The Gododdin* reached much the same conclusion as their peers who studied *Beowulf* and *TBOM*, that these *awdlau* simply described the expected loyalty of a British or Welsh war-band in the early Middle Ages, a view which has mostly gone unchallenged.⁴⁷ In her article investigating this ideal in *TBOM*, however, Rosemary Woolf asserted that she could not find the notion that men should die with their lords in *The Gododdin*.⁴⁸ Jenny Rowland believed that *The Gododdin*, with its emphasis on the heroic sacrifice of warriors who battled to the death against impossible odds, has ‘wrongly coloured’ Welsh scholarly notions of heroism and behaviour in actual battle.⁴⁹ Yet in opposition to Woolf, she also realized that the motif of men fighting to the death was not an ‘alien’ device for Welsh heroic literature despite its rarity or absence from real-life military practice.⁵⁰ In Rowland’s view, *The Gododdin* as a panegyric would uphold the social values and organization of a community and thus only includes themes and expressions deemed appropriate for this task.⁵¹

A few verses do suggest some form of social contract or vow similar to those mentioned by Wiglaf and Ælfwine. We read that the pledge which Cadfannan made was ‘a purpose kept’, while for the sake of Mynyddawg, Cynon ‘set his side against enemy spears’.⁵² I would also like to address a passage which we earlier touched upon in Chapter 3 and which has troubled generations of critics. *Awdlau* CA.xx A and CA.xx B are essentially the same poem with a very important variation in the penultimate line, with the first reading ‘Glory come to you, for you would not sin

⁴⁵ See *The Gododdin*, CA.lxi A and CA.xcvii. Also *The Gododdin*, CA.lxxxiv and CA.lxxxvii B. The first of these last two prefaces ‘They were heedless with ‘After being drunk / With drinking mead’. The dimension added by drinking to this notion of fighting to the death will be a primary topic of focus in Chapter 6

⁴⁶ *The Gododdin*, CA.xi. See also *The Gododdin*, CA.ii, CA.xx A and CA.lxxxiii.

⁴⁷ *BWP*, pp. 47-8, 124. Evans, *Lords of Battle*, A.O.H. Jarman, *The Cynfeirdd: Early Welsh Poets and Poetry* (Cardiff, 1981), pp. 54-5).

⁴⁸ Woolf, see ‘The ideal of men dying with their lord’, p. 72.

⁴⁹ Jenny Rowland, *EWSP*, p. 15.

⁵⁰ Rowland, ‘Warfare and Horses in *The Gododdin* and the problem of *Catraeth*’, pp. 37-9.

⁵¹ Rowland, *EWSP*, pp. 36-7.

⁵² See CA.iii, ll. 3-4, and CA.lxvi B, ll. 5-6, in *MWP*, p. 45, 75.

[*phecut*]' and the second 'Heaven's home be yours, because you would not flee [*thecut*]',⁵³

Most previous scholars view the second of these as the original reading with the variation resulting from the efforts of a blundering ecclesiastic attempting to accord the *awdl* with his own moral imperatives.⁵⁴ This is possible, although many of these same scholars have noted various plays on words throughout *The Gododdin*, and I believe we may see another here. I am not certain 'to flee' was the older of the two, despite its inclusion in the B-text, but I do think that we may do well to view it in the context of *TBOM* and *Judith* where to stand one's ground may have come to possess a Christian significance. Could the author who inserted the 'variant' verse have been making a point in this direction?

It seems we can reasonably assume that *The Gododdin* certainly praises those warriors who avoid flight in battle even when it results in their death, although this does not seem connected to questions of lordship nor does it form the central theme of the work. In those lines which do support such activity, we may see several motivators picked out which we have encountered before – a warrior fulfilling a promise or vow, or his part in an exchange in which he received drink, weapons, land or treasure. Once again, we will save our discussions of *talû medd* for the following chapter, limiting ourselves to the vows made and the tangible gifts received. Also, we may once again notice the presence of some Christian iconography – particularly in the possibly purposeful equation of 'to flee' and 'to sin'. I think at this point we can begin to conclude that we may indeed be seeing a genre-wide phenomenon in which the authors are indeed ascribing certain motivators to the full-time warrior's 'unique' performance on the battlefield.

Other Welsh Heroic Literature

We find little evidence of warriors fighting to the death for their lord or dying with him in the Taliesin poetry, but an interest in such matters becomes more evident as we peruse the Llywarch Hen and Heledd poems. A major division occurs amongst

⁵³ CA.xx A, l. 5, and CA.xx B, l. 7, in *MWP*, pp. 50 and 69.

⁵⁴ Jackson, *GOSP*, p. 124, Jarman, *The Cynfeirdd*, p. 52.

the poetry ascribed to Llywarch Hen, between those poems which endorse the sentiment found in *TBOM*, *TBDD* and *The Gododdin*, and those which meditate over the results of such decisions. A good example of the first group is *Marwnad Pyll*, in which when the narrator Llywarch Hen fondly recalls the exploits of his son Pyll:

One could put up a hall with planks of shields
While he stood his ground
That were shattered by Pyll's hand.
[...]
Through a horde from England came to Wales,
And many from far off,
Pyll showed them what he was made of.⁵⁵

While Pyll perished from his bravery, his father Llywarch's tone remains one of pride for a son who stood his ground against overwhelming odds rather than lament for his slain child. Several other poems from this collection follow the general thrust of this one.

Two poems from the Llywarch Hen collection and nearly all of those from the Heledd poems form a second group in their treatment of fighting to the death and avoiding retreat. Llywarch Hen's tone changes dramatically between the two poems making up an apparently interlinked set, which are commonly referred to as *Gwên* and *Marwnad Gwên*. The first of these forms a dialogue between the young warrior Gwên and his cantankerous and honour-obsessed father, in which Llywarch heckles his son until he extracts from the lad a vow that he will not flee from his upcoming watch on the border.⁵⁶ To illustrate the key points of this dialogue, I have included several *awdl* from the poem below, preceding each with its speaker:

Llywarch Hen: "If you win free, I shall see you.
If you are slain, I shall mourn you.
Forfeit not honour, hard-pressed."

Gwên: "I'll not forfeit your honour, contentious man,

⁵⁵ *Lament for Pyll*, ll. 4-6 and 28-30, *MWP*. Rowland translates the first set of *englyn* here essentially the same as Clancy (*ESWP*, p. 470). As noted earlier, she recognizes that the second set of *englyn* may actually refer to enemy warriors from Wales. She also translates the last line as 'Pyll would have taught them sense' (*EWSP*, p. 471); this does slightly change the sense of Llywarch's praise, but not the overall message of pride in a slain son.

⁵⁶ See Rowland, *EWSP*, for a particularly good synopsis of this dialogue.

- When warriors arm for the border.
I'll bear hardship before I give way."
- Llywarch Hen: "Running, the wave on the strand.
Resolve will quickly break.
Fight pledged, it's flight for the glib."
- Gwên: "I intend to do what I say.
Shatter will spears where I stand.
I'll not say I will not flee."
- Llywarch Hen: "Soft the fens, hard the hillside.
From horse-hoof bank's edge crumbles.
A pledge unperformed it worthless."
- Gwên: "Streams spread round a fort's rampart.
As for me, I am ready:
Shield-face shattered, before I retreat."
- Llywarch Hen: "The horn that Urien gave you,
Its gold band about its mouth,
Blow it, if need comes on you."
- Gwên: "Though I dread the need, facing England's warriors,
I'll not sully my worth.
I will not awaken maidens."⁵⁷

Llywarch seems quite unconcerned that his son may die, as long as he stands fast like his brother Pyll. We see here again the swearing of vows to fortify one's courage as found previously in *Beowulf*, *The Gododdin*, and *TBOM*. Indeed, he has even extracted an oath from the young man that he will not even sound his horn to summon help if overwhelmed.⁵⁸ Gwên's refusal to blow his horn also recalls *Le Chanson de Roland* and the refusal of its hero to sound his horn if hard-pressed.⁵⁹ In general, the exchange and its finish foreshadow a tragic fate awaiting the young man.

The companion poem, the *Marwnad Gwên*, unfortunately vindicates our concerns as we hear that Gwên perished in his attempt to live up to his father's demands. A forlorn Llywarch now laments his foolish demands towards his son, in a language far removed from his earlier heckling, as he laments "Gwên, I knew your

⁵⁷ *Gwên*, ll.13-36, *MWP*, p. 85. Rowland's translation is essentially the same (*EWSP*, pp. 468-9).

⁵⁸ Indeed, Rowland believes he seeks here to prevent Gwên from using his horn (*EWSP*, p. 17).

⁵⁹ Rowland and Jarman both noted this resemblance. See *EWSP*, p. 17 and Jarman, 'Y Delfryd', pp. 144-5.

nature [...] If I were wise you would have escaped.”⁶⁰ At the end of the poem he disowns his quest for glory through his sons:

“Four and twenty sons, bred of my body:
Because of my tongue, they were slain.
Small fame is best: they were lost.”⁶¹

The juxtaposition of tone in these two works and their general divergence from the sentiment present in the other Llywarch Hen poetry has certainly not escaped the attention of several previous students of medieval Welsh poetry. As has been noted before, they together act as a powerful alternative to the other heroic literature, with the narrator ruminating upon the ethic of fighting to the death in battle due to pledges, and its invariably fatal results (see for instance Rowland, *MWSP*, Williams, *BOWP*, and Jarman, *Cynfeirdd*).

Jenny Rowland provided a rather insightful summarization of the above action in her *EWSP*, in which she anticipated most of the above conclusions. As Rowland views matters, Llywarch is the blameworthy figure here – it was his insistence that his son stand fast even in the face of certain death that has led to the situation he now finds himself in. She focuses particularly upon Llywarch’s lust for glory as the spur which led him to incite his youngest son to unreasonable vows, vows which move him from mere bravery to ‘foolhardy courage’.⁶² As such, Llywarch Hen laments Gwên’s death in battle after the event and blames the onerous demands he placed upon his son for the disaster and the importance of fame in his society.⁶³

Rowland sees Llywarch Hen expressing a multi-faceted approach to loyalty with a critique of the consequences of one’s actions. She further argues that this is lacking in the earlier praise poetry such as *The Gododdin* and only appears with the semi-narrative *englyn* poems and later narrative works, such as the *TBOM* and the Llywarch Hen poetry.⁶⁴ I believe that her conclusions regarding these two particular

⁶⁰ *Lament for Gwên*, l. 19, in *EWSP*, p. 469.

⁶¹ *Lament for Gwên*, ll. 40-42, *MWP*.

⁶² Rowland, *EWSP*, p. 203.

⁶³ Rowland also addresses this, on p. 19 of her work *EWSP*. As will be seen, she proposes her own reasons the use of this presentation of Gwên’s demise.

⁶⁴ Jenny Rowland, ‘Genres’, in *EWSP*, p. 202.

poems from the Llywarch Hen collection are well-merited, although I fail to see the same approach to loyalty in *TBOM*. Indeed, I would suggest that *Gwên* and *Marwnad Gwên* do not disown that level of loyalty present in *Beowulf* and most Irish sagas, just the more extreme levels found in *TBOM*, *The Gododdin* and some skaldic poetry.

The Heledd poetry has a brief allusion to fighting to the death in its *englyn* version of *Marwnad Cynddylan*. At the end of the poem, the narrator recalls:

Cynddylan, block the hillside
Where the English come today.
Concern for one person's worthless.

Cynddylan, block the passage
Where the English come through Tren.
One tree isn't called a fortress.⁶⁵

The tonal difference between these two sets of stanzas is striking. The first appears to serve the same function as Llywarch's exhortations towards his sons, with Heledd commanding her brother Cynddylan to guard the border against the English invaders without concern for his own life.⁶⁶ In the next set of stanzas, however, she foreshadows his doom due to her unreasonable demands upon Cynddylan, who lone or heavily outnumbered will stand no chance against a large body of enemies; as a 'lone tree', he would fail to check their progress, and his resulting death would like that of *Gwên* serve no real purpose.

So, to summarize the image in heroic literature of men fighting to the death on behalf of their lord, we perceive that there exists a general disdain for those who flee combat while their lord still lives or while victory remains a possibility. At this point we find a shift, with some of the literary sources allowing that one may find it advisable to retreat once his lord dies through no fault of his own, with the caveat that he must avoid treating with his lord's slayer. Others, however, depict an ideal in which a warrior should retreat under no circumstance, and if his lord is slain he must remain in an attempt to avenge his lord or also fall. As an aside, we have also seen

⁶⁵ *Marwnad Cynddylan*, ll. 41-6, *MWP*.

⁶⁶ Rowland seems to disagree, and views this *englyn* as Heledd's realization that she cannot will her brother to survive the coming battle (*EWSP*, p. 583).

that some of the Welsh material diverges from the Old English, Scandinavian and Irish in that it doesn't focus on the demands of lordship, even while still emphasizing the need for a warrior to stand fast against overwhelming odds. How do these two images compare to the 'reality'?

ii. Death before dishonour – The 'reality'

The Cynewulf and Cyneheard Episode

I believe the so-called Cynewulf and Cyneheard episode from the ASC would be one of the best places to begin our look at the historical evidence for the previously discussed forms of fighting to the death on behalf of one's lord. This story appears in the ASC under the entry for the year 755, although the actual event in question occurred in the year 786. Essentially, it begins when the West Saxon king Cynewulf decides to move against the ætheling Cyneheard, a brother of the current king's predecessor. Due to its importance in previous arguments as well as our investigation here, I have decided to quote the narrative of what follows from the ASC entry:

And Cyneheard discovered that the king was at Meretun visiting his mistress with a small following, and he overtook him there and surrounded the chamber before the men who were with the king became aware of him.

Then the king perceived this and went to the doorway, and nobly defended himself until he caught sight of the atheling and thereupon he rushed out against him and wounded him severely. Then they all fought against the king until they had slain him. Then by the woman's outcry, the king's thegns became aware of the disturbance and ran to the spot, each as he got ready and as quickly as possible. And the atheling made an offer to each of money and life; and not one of them would accept it. But they continued to fight until they all lay dead except for one British hostage, and he was severely wounded.

Then in the morning the king's thegns who had been left behind heard that the king had been slain. Then they rode thither – and his ealdorman Osric and his thegn Wigfrith and the men he had left behind him – and discovered the atheling in the stronghold where the king lay slain – and they had locked the gates against them – and they then went thither. And then the atheling offered them money and land on their own terms, if they would allow him the

kingdom, and told them that kinsmen of theirs, who would not desert him, were with him. Then they replied that no kinsman was dearer to them than their lord, and they would never serve his slayer; and they offered their kinsmen that they might go away unharmed. Their kinsmen said that the same offer had been made to their comrades who had been with the king. Moreover, they said that they would pay no regard to it, “any more than did your comrades who were slain along with the king”. And they proceeded to fight around the gates until they broke their way in, and killed the atheling and the men who were with him, all except one who, was the ealdorman’s godson. And he saved his life, though he was often wounded.⁶⁷

Many historians of Anglo-Saxon England and literary critics of Old English have taken this tale as a reliable indicator that a contemporary retainer typically valued his loyalty to his lord higher than that to his own kin and would fight to the death on behalf of his lord.⁶⁸ More recently such a reading has found application to military forces outside of the Anglo-Saxon sphere. Leslie Alcock cites it as a one of ‘numerous contemporary witnesses’ to such behaviour.⁶⁹ ASC 755 has even found use in discussions of the loyalty of the Welsh *teulu*, such as an article by A.D. Carr, which takes this incident as proof that there was a real-life inspiration to the poetic image of the war-band’s loyalty to its lord – that the men of the *teulu* (as well as those in Anglo-Saxon and Norse war-bands) were willing to die for their lord on their battlefield, and that flight or surviving one’s lord was the ‘ultimate disgrace’.⁷⁰

More recently, this view of the episode has received criticism, although some scholars continue to view it as simply presenting an accurate representation of how Anglo-Saxon, and indeed, early medieval Insular, society functioned.⁷¹ Francis Battaglia notes that the two war-bands were indeed related, but suggests that the men in each group were more closely interrelated to one another than to the men in the

⁶⁷ ASC 755. The various versions differ slightly but the general story remains practically the same identical.

⁶⁸ In addition to those commentators discussed in the main text, see also Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 209-10, Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation*, pp. 166-7, F.P. Magoun, ‘Cynewulf, Cyneheard and Osric’, *Anglia* 57 (1933), pp. 361-77 (373), Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 302, Whitelock, *EHD I*, p. 55. For those who merely see this affair as one in which the loyalties to one’s kindred and one’s lord conflict, see John M. Hill, *The Cultural World of Beowulf* (Toronto, 1995), pp. 14-5, Patrick Wormald, ‘Anglo-Saxon society and its literature’, in *TTCOEL*, pp. 1-22 (11), C.L. Wrenn, ‘A Saga of the Anglo-Saxons’, *History* 25/99 (1940), pp. 208-15 (214)).

⁶⁹ Leslie Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare Among the Britons and Saxons*, p. 302.

⁷⁰ A.D. Carr, ‘*Teulu* and *Penteulu*’, in *The Welsh King and his Court*, pp. 63-81 (64).

⁷¹ For an example of the latter view, see Evans, *Lords of Battle*, p. 59, and n.24 on p. 53.

opposing force. As such, the men were upholding blood ties and *comitatus* ties, indicating that lordship ties may not have actually superseded kin ties.⁷² Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe believes that the episode indicates that loyalty to family and group were strong forces in Anglo-Saxon society even if 'loyalty unto death' was not observed in literature or in real-life.⁷³ Rosemary Woolf and Stephen Fanning both attacked the traditional reading for this source, with Woolf arguing that the two groups of retainers sought not to die with their lords but rather seek vengeance upon their slayers.⁷⁴

Two recent critics have also put forward the theory that this episode was a vehicle to extoll the lordship ideology of the West Saxon kings.⁷⁵ John M. Hill believes that this tale forms 'a complex response to the awesome question of loyalties and right in either the deposing or killing of a king', in which one must only unseat a king who is unjust or treacherous, and even such a tyrant should be deposed or driven out of the realm rather than killed.⁷⁶ Alice Sheppard argues that it is 'a celebration of the lordship ethic in Wessex, a study of the politics of king-making, and an exploration of West Saxon identity'.⁷⁷ She furthermore suggests that the reference to the death of the Mercian king Æthelbald at the end of the entry serves to compare the fidelity given to West Saxon kings by their retainers to the treachery and faithlessness lurking in the Mercian royal household – an assertion with which I disagree as will be seen shortly.

While many of these theories and suppositions are well thought out, very few commentators have considered all of the evidence for this fracas – particularly that outside of the *ASC*. The late tenth-century historian Æthelweard gives his own version of this incident, which differs significantly from that found in the *ASC* at several points and may include information gleaned from other sources or reflect later interpretations of the whole affair. Æthelweard reports that when Cynewulf

⁷² Francis Battaglia, 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 755: The Missing Evidence for a Traditional Reading', *PMLA*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (1966), pp. 173-8 (177).

⁷³ O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Heroic values and Christian ethics', pp. 116, 122.

⁷⁴ Woolf, 'The ideal of men dying with their lord', pp. 69-71.

⁷⁵ John M. Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon warrior ethic: reconstructing lordship in Early English literature* (Gainesville, 2000), pp. 1, 74, Alice Sheppard, *Families of the King: Writing Identity in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto, 2004), p. 34.

⁷⁶ Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon warrior ethic*, pp. 75-7, fn. 13 on p. 156.

⁷⁷ Sheppard, *Families of the King*, p. 34; Eric John also made a similar assertion in his *Orbis Britanniae, and other studies* (Leicester, 1966), on pp. 119-20, 140.

attacked and wounded Cyneheard, ‘his [Cyneheard’s] companions did not forget their boasts [*minas*], and slew the king’.⁷⁸ Cynewulf’s immediate companions then emerged in ‘a rage’ and eager to fight; as in the *ASC* version they decline Cyneheard’s offer of peace, but Æthelweard proceeds to supply their motivation for refusing the aetheling: ‘Their lord being dead they desired death [*post dominum desiderant orcum*] and disregarded the promises’. When the rest of Cynewulf’s followers arrived the following day and surrounded the house (and effectively placing Cyneheard and his men under siege), they rejected Cyneheard’s offer of ‘great things’ in return for allowing him to succeed to the West Saxon kingship, and instead entreated their relatives serving under Cyneheard to abandon the aetheling. Cyneheard’s men refused to abandon their own lord as in the *ASC* version, but in this account they add that “There is no love between relatives like that of our lord, and we cannot be present and follow his funeral [*Nullus amor tam propinquis quam domini, nec praesenti vultu exequias eius sectari valemus*].”⁷⁹

It is rather interesting that our late tenth-century source has chosen to portray the actions of both retinues in a manner far closer to those of the men at Maldon than the original. Not only do Cyneheard’s men ‘remember their boasts’ – a phrase rather reminiscent of heroic poetry from *Beowulf* to *TBOM* – but Æthelweard reports that Cynewulf’s men desired death because their lord was dead. This is not the only time when Æthelweard’s version of history has a slightly more heroic cast. While an *ASC* entry for the mid-ninth century laconically records that Ealdorman Æthelhelm was slain by a Danish band, Æthelweard added that ‘his companions with him’ were also killed.⁸⁰ We may note that only the ealdorman’s companions fell with their lord – the fate or decision of the rest of his military force remains unspoken. Regarding his retinue – did they choose to die with him, or did they not have the opportunity to make such a decision? While Æthelweard certainly doesn’t mention that they fled or attempted to do so, the rather scanty nature of this record will only allow us to suggest as a possibility that they chose not to flee.

⁷⁸ *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. by A. Campbell (London: 1962), II.18, p. 23. *Minas* means literally ‘battlements, parapets/threats, or menaces’ – it would seem mostly likely to possess the last meaning here, with Campbell further refining it as ‘boasts’.

⁷⁹ All found in *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. by A. Campbell (London: 1962), II.18, pp. 23-4.

⁸⁰ See also *ASC* 840 (837) and *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, III.4, p. 30.

The ASC and Irish Annals

We may find a historic echo of the events in *TBOM* when King Edward captured Tempsford in 920, for the annalists records that the English host slew the enemy king, Jarl Toglos, his son Jarl Manna, his brother and ‘all those who were inside and chose to defend themselves’ after which ‘they captured the others and everything that was inside’.⁸¹ Could some of the men have chosen to die with their leader or at the very least defend themselves to the death, while others sought to escape or at least surrender to save their lives? The fact that the entry specifies those who ‘inside there and wished to defend themselves’ may indicate that those who were outside may have fled like Godric, forcing the remainder to decide if they should take the course *TBOM* later presents Byrhtnoth’s loyal men pursuing. Over a century later we read that when Earl Godwine returned from exile in 1052 he gathered to his side men from Essex, Kent, Surrey, Hastings ‘and much else in addition’, all of whom ‘declared that they would live and die with him.’⁸² This assurance is reminiscent of those found within much of the previously discussed heroic literature.

Looking at the bulk of the *ASC* entries, however, we find that any such promises often went unfulfilled, with men who lost their lord in battle far more likely to come to an accommodation with the enemy than fight to the death. For instance, when the two Northumbrian kings, Osberht and Aelle, attempted to drive the Vikings from York ‘both kings were killed, and the survivors made peace with the enemy’.⁸³ While we cannot be absolutely certain that the annalist here refers strictly to full-time warriors serving the two rival kings, one would suspect that any rapidly assembled mobile force of the era would essentially consist of the royal war-band stiffened by additional retinues following his closest nobles (many likely also members of his war-band).

We find similar failures several centuries later. In the *ASC* entry for 1055 Earl Ralph confronted Earl Ælfgar and Gruffydd at Hereford only for his forces to flee

⁸¹ *ASC* A 917 (920).

⁸² *ASC* D 1052.

⁸³ *ASC* 867.

(according to one version of the *ASC*, ‘because they were on horse’).⁸⁴ Once again, it is not clear if we are dealing with a composite force of full-time and occasional warriors – although those of Earl Ralph’s forces who were mounted likely comprised the former type of group. The men following bishop Æthelstan against Gruffydd the following year gave a better account of themselves, only fleeing once the bishop, other priests, the sheriff Ælfnoth and ‘many good men’ were slain in combat.⁸⁵

The Irish Annals provide several examples of men deserting during a campaign, such as when the ‘army of Munster deserted without leave’ during a campaign against Osraige and Leinster.⁸⁶ The withdrawal of the entire army suggests that the various leaders under the Munster king no longer felt eager to pursue the campaign of their overlord, with their men simply following their immediate lord. In the *AFM* we read that when the foray led by Niall son of Muirchertach Ua Lochlainn ended in defeat, his entire force of twelve score men was killed ‘except some deserters and fugitives’ (and Niall himself, who was captured).⁸⁷ Like the men following Æthelhelm, we cannot be certain if those men who perished chose to fight to the death or simply had no chance to flee or surrender. The language of the entry, however, seems to indicate that only some of those who fled survived as well.

Perhaps one of the most outrageous examples of desertion occurs in 1166, when the contest for the high kingship of Ireland between Ruaidri Ua Conchobar and Muirchertach Ua Lochlainn ended in the complete and utter defeat of the latter. We read in the *AU* account of this final contest that Muirchertach’s downfall began when his own people of the Cenel nEogain abandoned him and made overtures for his various enemies to attack him.⁸⁸ In response to this invitation, Donnchadh Ua Cerbaill invaded with a great host which included the Airghialla, Ui-Briuin and Conmaicni. Despite being terribly outnumbered, Muirchertach refused to give up and moved to intercept the invaders with ‘a small party of the Cenel-Eogain of Telach-

⁸⁴ See *ASC* C 1055, *ASC* D 1055. In fn. 2 on p. 186, Swanton notes that Florence claimed that ‘the earl with his Frenchmen and Norman knights fled’, after which the English fled as well.

⁸⁵ See *ASC* C [1056], D 1056.

⁸⁶ *FA* 423 (908).

⁸⁷ *AFM* 1163.9.

⁸⁸ *AU* 1166.10.

og’.⁸⁹ Unfortunately for the erstwhile king of Cenel nEogain, even this small band then chose to desert, leaving him virtually undefended!

As opposed to this, we have a few examples of men fighting to the bitter end with their lords, although these tend to be based upon annal entries which leave a considerable leeway in interpretation. In *AFM* 1135, we read that a king was ‘treacherously killed’ with the ‘choice part of his people’.⁹⁰ Unfortunately, due to a lack of knowledge of the exact nature of the treacherous slaying of either king, we do not know if their war-bands even had the opportunity to flee or surrender. Towards the end of our period of study, however, we find one particular event in the annals which does rather closely resemble the motif of a retainer fighting to the death on behalf of his lord as depicted in saga literature. In the tragic dénouement of the aforementioned collapse of Muirchertach Ua Lochlainn’s authority, a small fraction of his retinue remained with their lord to the bitter and inevitable end:

So there fell in that place Muirchertach (son of Niall) Ua Lachlainn, arch-king of Ireland [...] And a few of Cenel-Eogain were killed there, namely, thirteen men. A great marvel and wonderful deed was done then: to wit, the king of Ireland to fall without battle, without contest...⁹¹

The loyalty of this last fragment of Muirchertach’s retinue stands out, and seems to recall heroic material such as *The Gododdin* or *TBOM* in its presentation of retainers standing fast against enormous odds – indeed, it may even surpass these two works, as the odds the thirteen men with Muirchertach faced were even more impossible.

In some cases a lord himself provided the excuse to flee. In a dispute over the succession to the West Saxon kingship in 901, King Edward’s cousin the ætheling Æthelwold seized the manor at Wimborne and barricaded himself within ‘with the men who had given allegiance to him’.⁹² When besieged by Edward, the rebel prince Æthelwold declared that ‘he would either live there or die there’, shortly before slipping away under the cover of night to flee the kingdom.⁹³ In the late-tenth and

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ *AFM* 1135.19.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² *ASC* 900.

⁹³ Ibid.

early-eleventh century entries for the ASC we find numerous other examples of such behaviour.⁹⁴

The Laws and Other Evidence

Three final pieces of Old English evidence may give additional insight into questions of fighting to the end vs. desertion. First, King Æthelred II proclaimed in one of his law codes that if ‘anyone deserts from an army which the king himself is with, it is to be at the peril of his life and all his property’ while anyone who deserts from an army where the king is absent forfeits 120 shillings.⁹⁵ Interestingly, none of the earlier law codes tackled this issue of desertion. Also, the differentiation between expeditions led by the king and anyone else is also fascinating as Æthelred II only personally led 2 armies during his entire reign according to the ASC. Nearly a century earlier King Edward the Elder recounted in a charter how he came to possess a piece of land:

Truly this afore-named estate was originally forfeited by a certain ealdorman, Wulfhere by name, and his wife, when he deserted without permission both his lord King Alfred and his country in spite of the oath which he had sworn to the king and all his leading men.⁹⁶

While Wulfhere may or may not have deserted in the midst of a campaign, Edward’s language seems bitter and he draws attention to the oath that the ealdorman swore.

The final piece of evidence is perhaps more properly Anglo-Danish – the law code *II Cnut*. Part 77 states that a warrior who deserted his lord out of cowardice while on campaign was to suffer the loss of life and property, while part 78 states that a warrior who distinguished himself through dying by the side of his lord in

⁹⁴ See for instance ASC C (D, E) 992, C (D, E) 993, C (D, E) 998 and C (D, E) 1003. For secondary material regarding such flights by late Anglo-Saxon military leaders, see Richard Abels, ‘From Alfred to Harold II: The Military Failure of the Late Anglo-Saxon State’, in Richard P. Abels and Bernard S. Bachrach (eds.), *The Normans and their Adversaries at War, Essays in Memory of C. Warren Hollister* (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 15-30 (26).

⁹⁵ *V Æthelred*, in *EHD I*, pp. 405-9 (408).

⁹⁶ *EHD I*, pp. 499-500 (499).

battle would earn the remittance of the payment of his *heriot* as well as the succession of his heirs to his landed estate.⁹⁷

Before moving on to evidence from other Insular cultural zones, I would like to present two final overviews of Anglo-Saxon loyalty, fighting to the death, and fidelity to a lord. Susan Reynolds questions if the ‘interpersonal, dyadic relation’ betwixt lord and vassal was truly the main bond of society, even before the year 900 (let alone afterwards). She concludes that such a relationship was not the primary bond, but rather that collective activity, fuelled by ‘collective values’, dominated. She also considers whether the relations between lords and their noble followers were truly ‘interpersonal, affective, and dyadic’.⁹⁸ Alice Jorgensen, however, takes almost the opposite position of Reynolds – while she largely disagrees with the view that *TBOM* accurately depicts the battle in near-journalistic manner, she does believe that the bonds between lord and man were ‘at the heart of late Anglo-Saxon military organization’.⁹⁹ Thus, it seems that the jury is still out on the real-life importance of this bond, at least amongst recent scholarship.

Regarding the Welsh material, we must first recall the basic arguments made about the primary sources by critics such as Ifor Williams, Kenneth Jackson and Jenny Rowland. Gwyn Jones, speaking of Welsh poetry in general for our period sees it express the beliefs of its society: valour, loyalty and service amongst others.¹⁰⁰ Sean Davies does not seem to address ‘fighting to the finish’ but he does argue that the *teulu* was expected to remain loyal to its immediate lord, even in opposition to his overlord; in this, he sees a parallel to Abel’s citation of a similar ethic in the Anglo-Saxon household in England.¹⁰¹ As noted in our last chapter, he suggested that this ‘duty ethic’ was responsible for much of the chaos which the *teulu* inflicted upon Welsh society.¹⁰² While admittedly late, the *Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan* does provide several negative examples in which his soldiers either deserted him or forced

⁹⁷ Cited from Richard Abels, ‘Bookland and Fyrd Service in Late Saxon England’, *Anglo-Norman Studies VII* (1984), pp. 1-25 (5).

⁹⁸ Reynolds, ‘Afterthoughts on Fiefs and Vassals’, *Haskins Society Journal* 9 (1997), pp. 1-15 (2-3).

⁹⁹ Alice Jorgensen, ‘Power, Poetry, and Violence: *The Battle of Maldon*’, pp. 247-8.

¹⁰⁰ Gwyn Jones (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse in English* (Oxford, 1977), p. xix.

¹⁰¹ Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, p. 39.

¹⁰² Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, p. 41.

him to retire from campaign – although the one case where they sold him to the Earl of Chester would properly fit under betrayal.¹⁰³

iii. Death before dishonour – conclusions

Having compared heroic literature with our other primary sources, we can discern a definite disjunction between the images of loyalty drawn from the surviving heroic literature and our other contemporary sources. Within the heroic literature only a coward or villain would flee the field of battle while his lord still lived, but matters are not simple once a man's lord has fallen. In the opinion of some authors a warrior would incur no shame if he retreated at this point, provided that he refused to serve his lord's slayers or took vengeance on his behalf. Other authors promulgate a code in which a warrior who outlived his lord should refuse to withdraw from battle, seeking to avenge his lord and achieve victory then and there, or perish in the attempt. One wonders to what extent such ideology was present amongst the audience for this material. The non-literary sources provide a more extensive spectrum of battlefield choice, ranging from men who flee before battle is even joined, through those who flee during the melee or once their lord dies, all the way to those who truly may emulate the protagonists of *TBOM* and fight until they or the enemy are dead. We also find a difference between the description of battle in earlier and latter annalistic and historical sources – while the earlier sources often give a brief description of the battle with little elaboration upon whether or not men died bravely, later sources describing the same event will frequently add descriptions of men choosing death over flight and laude such decisions.

We have previously seen the principal theories advanced for the fixation upon such forms of loyalty in the heroic literature – that the authors sought to warn their audience of the perils of disloyalty in the face of Danish invasions, to foster 'proper behaviour' amongst the younger members of their audience, or to draw upon Christian thinking to create a new construct which looked forward to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Considering our findings thus far in this thesis, I believe this

¹⁰³ *Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan*, pp. 63-5, 69-70.

last possibility deserves the most consideration, although one must be careful in drawing parallels without proper consideration. As an instance of such a danger, one may look to the death of King Saul in the Old Testament. Seeing his oncoming death in battle against the Philistines, Saul fell upon his own sword to avoid being killed or captured by his enemies, at which point his armourbearer proceeded to emulate his master.¹⁰⁴ This episode superficially appears to resemble the supposed ethos in the heroic literature of the early medieval Insular world that a warrior should not outlive his lord. Yet a closer consideration of the timing and context of Saul's death demonstrates the unlikelihood of such an inspiration – by this point in the narrative of 1 Samuel, God had decided to remove the kingship from Saul and grant it to David. As the heroic authors typically frame their protagonists in the context of the highest praise, it would seem David and his followers would act as the inspiration for our later authors rather than Saul and his men.

Is there perhaps a threat by which loyalty to an immediate lord is conflicting with ideals of loyalty to the overlord or a king, perhaps clerically inspired? Such a possibility would accord well with the previously noted argument by Sean Davies, in which he argued that the 'duty ethic' of the *teulu* to its immediate lord in preference to an overlord could frequently disturb society.¹⁰⁵ At first glance, such recognition of the danger of such loyalty could tie into attempts on the continent to curtail such activity and even insert the king between a warrior and his lord – Charlemagne issued several such edicts during his reign. An episode from the conflict between King Edward and Earl Godwine within England during the years 1051-2 may point to a similar royal initiative. At one point in the contest 'The king asked for all those thegns that the earl formerly had, and they resigned them all into his hands.' This sort of loyalty would directly contradict the possible motivation behind presentations of the warrior as the protector or ravager of society – as we saw in Chapter 4, independent war-bands were seen as problematic (particularly in the Irish and Anglo-Saxon context), engaging in unjust warfare and even acting as a threat to the 'proper' military force of the king or dominant lord.

¹⁰⁴ 1 Samuel, 31:4-6.

¹⁰⁵ Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, pp. 39-41.

At this point we may return to our earlier statements regarding the importance of just war to the authors responsible for our primary sources, including the surviving examples of heroic literature, and the ways in which these authors may have attempted to present their heroes as men engaged in just war. In this case, the use of loyalty may represent a direct continuation of Isidore of Seville's reference to military law, which includes 'the military discipline for the disgrace of deserting one's post'.¹⁰⁶ Like the depiction of certain warriors as an elite by birth or service who form a defensive force protecting their society and the church, this over-emphasis upon their loyalty to a lord at all costs serves to emphasize their 'separateness' from the other military forces, and exalt them as combatants practising just war. Thus, while warfare in general is evil and to be avoided, those warriors waging warfare on behalf of a legitimate power engage in a much lesser and very necessary evil.

¹⁰⁶ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, V.vii, p. 118

II. Vengeance

Before we move from our investigation of loyalty to that of vengeance, we must take a moment to establish the proper societal context for a discussion of this nature. In discussing the ideal of vengeance by a warrior, we cannot avoid touching upon the more well-studied societal phenomena of feud and ‘customary vengeance’ present throughout the full range of source material for the early medieval Insular world. As the majority of historians view these processes operating across society, we must address them before we can focus more specifically upon their practice by men whose primary occupation was fighting, as such ideology may have impacted on or influenced the war-band’s image and/or real-life practice in this area. Indeed, in discussing this topic I hope to remedy an oversight made by many previous studies of early medieval warfare, including Evans’s *Lords of Battle*, which fail to address this social mechanism, which I believe must be looked at before we can properly decide where to place vengeance by the early historic Insular warrior, both as an image and a possible reality.

i. Feud and ‘Customary Vengeance’

A number of historians over the past several decades have investigated the societal practice commonly referred to as feud in the context of the early Middle Ages in Europe, although a number of disagreements remain concerning such activity. To summarize the ‘classical view’ of feuding, the process begins when a person from one social group (typically defined by kinship, fictive kinship or lordship-follower bonds) inflicts some form of injury or offence (typically a violent one) against a person belonging to another such group. At this point, the aggrieved party has a responsibility (often legal) to take retaliatory action appropriate to the original crime upon the perpetrator and his kin. Alternately, the perpetrator’s group

may offer suitable compensation, either in money or kind, to the victim's group to end the feud.¹⁰⁷

Many early legal scholars viewed blood-feud as symptomatic of primitive societies lacking strong state coercion, which gradually yielded to 'the superior equity of royal justice'.¹⁰⁸ In the early 1960s, however, J.M. Wallace-Hadrill spearheaded an alternative interpretation that feud could actually serve as a stabilizing force and even operate simultaneously with royal justice.¹⁰⁹ In particular he stressed three assertions: that feud entailed an elaborate procedure, that it tended to end in composition rather than violence, and most importantly that it played a major role in forcing composition in a world lacking both a 'police force' and the 'requisite concept of public order'.¹¹⁰ He combined all three of these arguments to sum up his view on the matter:

Feuding in the sense of incessant private warfare, is a myth; feuding in the sense of very widespread and frequent procedures to reach composition-settlements necessarily hovering on the edge of bloodshed, is not.¹¹¹

Subsequent researchers into feud in its early Insular guise have generally followed Wallace-Hadrill's assertions.¹¹² Some have also stressed the fact that while feud may act as the primary system for dispute resolution in societies with a weak or non-existent state, it is not mutually exclusive with the presence of what modern observers would describe as law or a well-defined legal system.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Taken primarily from Alan Kennedy, 'Feuds', in *The Blackwell encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 182-3, William I. Miller, 'Choosing the avenger: some aspects of the blood-feud in medieval Iceland and England', *Law and History Review* 1:2 (1983), pp. 159-204 (160-2), and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Bloodfeud of the Franks', in *The Long-Haired Kings and other studies in Frankish history* (London, 1962), pp. 121-47.

¹⁰⁸ This notion has not entirely disappeared, although it has become moderated. For instance, the more recent researcher John G.H. Hudson appears to incline to the view that kings certainly tried to restrict feud as much as possible (Hudson, 'Feud, Vengeance and Violence in England from the Tenth to the Twelfth Centuries', in *Feud, Violence and Practice: Essays in Medieval Studies in Honor of Stephen D. White*, edited by Belle S. Tuten and Tracey L. Billado (Farnham, 2010), pp. 29-53 (33)).

¹⁰⁹ Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Bloodfeud of the Franks', p. 146.

¹¹⁰ Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Bloodfeud of the Franks', pp. 123-5, 129, and 146-7.

¹¹¹ Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Bloodfeud of the Franks', p. 147.

¹¹² See for example William I. Miller, 'Choosing the avenger: some aspects of the blood-feud in medieval Iceland and England', *Law and History Review* 1:2 (1983), pp. 159-204 (160-1).

¹¹³ Paul Hyams, 'Feud in Medieval England', *Haskins Society Journal Studies in Medieval History* 3 (1991), pp. 1-21 (8-9), Miller, 'Choosing the avenger', p. 161.

While the preceding interpretation has remained influential, scholarship on the issue of feud has not remained static. Several subsequent researchers studying feud in the early Middle Ages have discerned what they see as remaining problems with modern-day interpretations of feud in the early middle ages, although none deny the importance of vengeance or its threat as a tool for ending conflicts.¹¹⁴ Peter Sawyer attacked the notion that feud was an ancient Germanic custom which originally stressed kinship ties over those of lordship; additionally, he saw a problem with the assumption that feud gradually died out as the middle ages progressed, citing evidence from as late as the fifteenth century of such activity.¹¹⁵ He regards the literary feud featuring great kindreds seeking revenge ('bloodfeud') as primarily the domain of poets and saga writers.¹¹⁶

Guy Halsall questioned the historian's use of the modern word 'feud' as problematic due to its modern connotations, and demonstrated that very few recorded feuds of the early middle ages actually met the criteria of feud suggested by anthropologists – 'a relationship of lasting hostility between groups, marked by periodic, cyclical, reciprocal violence'.¹¹⁷ Rather, most medieval feuds possessed a clearly defined end point when the injured party completed its retaliation or accepted compensation, unlike the anthropological feud which typically continued *ad infinitum*.¹¹⁸ Due to this clear end point and the fact that the threat of violence in the early middle ages often ensured a peaceful resolution he proposed that historians use the alternative term 'customary vengeance' to describe most instances of 'feud' in the early middle ages, reserving 'feud' for those few outbreaks of violence which met the classical anthropological definition.¹¹⁹

Paul Hyams saw a problem in considering every instance of vengeance-motivated violence as feud in the legal definition of the word. As a result, he suggested the existence of two forms of feud – the 'strong' feud or feud in its

¹¹⁴ Guy Halsall, 'Violence and society in the early medieval west: an introductory survey', in *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*, edited by Guy Halsall (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 1-45 (19-20), Hudson, 'Feud, Vengeance and Violence in England from the Tenth to the Twelfth Centuries', p. 33.

¹¹⁵ Peter Sawyer, 'The Bloodfeud in fact and fiction', in *Tradition og Historie-Skrivning* (1987), pp. 27-38 (27, 34-6).

¹¹⁶ Sawyer, 'The Bloodfeud in fact and fiction', pp. 27, 32-3 and 36.

¹¹⁷ Halsall, 'Violence and society in the early medieval west', pp. 19-28.

¹¹⁸ Ibid..

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

customary and legally-recognizable forms, and the ‘weak’ feud which was motivated by the same emotions but fell outside custom and law and was thus often termed criminal by hostile observers and public law.¹²⁰ The rituals associated with ‘strong’ feud served to ‘demarcate the vengeance of legitimate feud from other illicit killings and violence’ – a distinction which ‘weak’ feud failed to achieve.¹²¹ Hyams does touch upon an important possibility which will re-appear later – that in following the proper procedures demanded of ‘strong’ feud, ‘avengers wished to proclaim higher motives than lay behind conventional crimes’.¹²²

Hudson also sees problems with the use of the term ‘feud’ by modern historians, in that he regards it as a ‘modern concept for a phenomenon observed in the Middle Ages’; furthermore, he believes that difficulties remain in defining the ‘exact characteristics’ of this phenomenon – a problem also evident in the sphere of anthropology.¹²³ Steering clear of heroic literature, he relies almost entirely upon the Anglo-Saxon royal law codes for his consequent discussion.¹²⁴ He also considers non-regal attitudes hinted at by the laws, concluding that for most people vengeance was an important motive in commencing a dispute, with the result that kings were forced to channel the practice as they could not do away with it outright.¹²⁵ In particular, he suggests that the laws ruling out vengeance by the kin of a slain thief indicated various factors which may have motivated the avengers – the belief that their kinsman was wrongly accused, that his death was out of proportion to the crime or simply that they felt royal justice was becoming too intrusive.¹²⁶

T.M. Charles-Edwards briefly addresses feud, particularly in connection with the Irish *cáin* or laws, and practice of banishment. In general, he believes that *cáin* replaced ‘the ordinary processes of feud’ with its ‘own means of enforcing compensation’.¹²⁷ Likewise, he believes that the policy of banishment could short-

¹²⁰ Hyams, ‘Feud in Medieval England’, p. 6.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Hudson, p. 33. In this regard he cites Black-Michaud, *Cohesive Force* (1975), pp. 1-23.

¹²⁴ Hudson, ‘Feud, Vengeance and Violence in England from the Tenth to the Twelfth Centuries’, pp. 34-5. Indeed, he writes ‘That men listened to poems such as Beowulf is clearly significant, but can give only limited suggestion as to their activities in practice’.

¹²⁵ Hudson, ‘Feud, Vengeance and Violence in England from the Tenth to the Twelfth Centuries’, pp. 35-6.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 567.

circuit the functioning of feud, in that once the object of vengeance was removed from the locality the aggrieved kindred would be more likely to accept compensation in place of retaliatory bloodshed.¹²⁸

We now reach the primary reason for our diversion: A number of historians have also argued for the applicability of feud in its legal sense to non-family groups such as the war-band, with the assumption that in such instances it operated in much the same manner.¹²⁹ In some cases, these authors have relied upon the image of revenge from heroic literature in reaching this conclusion – for instance, William Miller states that in Anglo-Saxon England that ‘The lord-retainer relation, like the kinsman bond, brought with it the obligation either to avenge the death of the other or to receive or pay compensation on the other’s behalf’.¹³⁰ Miller even explains that this ‘duty’ descended from the early Germans outside the Roman Empire described by Tacitus although he then abruptly acknowledges that ‘This duty, however, may have been more the stuff of literature than of life or law’.¹³¹ Lastly, I would like to note another valuable observation of Hyams regarding the image of vengeance in *Beowulf* – the poet’s tendency to describe wars in terms of feud, and assumes the ‘legitimacy of a feud mentality’ while condemning illicit violence such as Unferth’s murder of his brothers.¹³²

ii. Vengeance – the image

Revenge often appears intrinsically connected to the desire to fight to the death in the heroic literature. Upon finishing his speech in *TBOM*, Ælfwine remembers his ‘feud’ and presses forward to continue fighting, while his comrade Leofsunu is more verbose when he declares that he wishes to “avenge my lord and

¹²⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 568.

¹²⁹ See Charles-Edwards, *Early Medieval Ireland*, p. 113, Kennedy, ‘Feuds’, pp. 182-3 and Miller, ‘Choosing the avenger’, p. 170. Peter Sawyer sees lordship ties as more important than those of family in threatening revenge and gaining compensation (Sawyer, ‘The Bloodfeud in fact and fiction’, pp. 35-6).

¹³⁰ Miller, ‘Choosing the avenger’, p. 170. He relies upon examples from *Beowulf* and *TBOM*. See also Hyams who relies heavily upon *Beowulf* (Hyams, ‘Feud in Medieval England’, pp. 7-8).

¹³¹ Miller, ‘Choosing the avenger’, p. 170.

¹³² Ibid.

friend in the struggle”.¹³³ Even Dunnere, that ‘simple yeoman’, gives the audience a gnomic-sounding enjoinder: “He must never flinch who thinks to avenge his lord in this body of men, nor be anxious about life.”¹³⁴ Later the poet who created *TBOM* describes the loyal warriors in the following terms:

...they did not care about life;
the soldiers then continued fighting fiercely,
angry spear-bearers, and prayed to God
that they might avenge their beloved lord
and bring destruction to their enemies.¹³⁵

Examples of revenge on behalf of a lord litter *Beowulf*. We previously noted that Hnaef’s followers did not fight to the death on behalf of their slain lord but rather made peace and took up service with his slayer Finn out of necessity. Their new lord Hengest stayed with Finn over the winter, but once spring came he began to desire revenge for his dead lord more than a return to his homeland. Urged on by several other warriors who could not forget Hnaef’s death, he eventually followed ‘the way of the world’ and hacked down Finn in his own hall.¹³⁶

Beowulf himself discusses vengeance in connection with Hrothgar’s attempt to forge peace with the Heathobards through a marriage between his daughter Freawaru and the Heathobard prince Ingeld. Beowulf sees only futility in such an effort as he imagines that the Heathobard war-band will take steps to re-ignite the ‘feud’ against the better interest of their rulers and people. He describes to his own lord Hygelac how anger will swell in the hearts of the Heathobard *thegns* when they arrive at Heorot and see their family heirlooms looted in earlier wars worn by their Danish hosts. Eventually, some ‘old spear-fighter’ will begin to dwell upon the death of his former comrades as he becomes full of drink, at which point he will stir up Ingeld with claims that the Danes are boasting of the slaughter of Ingeld’s father and other Heathobards by wearing treasures that rightfully belong to the Heathobards.¹³⁷ Beowulf predicts that violence will then break out due to the desire for vengeance by

¹³³ *TBOM*, ll. 225 and 246-8, p. 27 and 29.

¹³⁴ *TBOM*, ll. 258-9, p. 29.

¹³⁵ *TBOM*, ll. 260-4, p. 29.

¹³⁶ *Beowulf*, ll. 1132-53, pp. 88-9.

¹³⁷ *Beowulf*, ll. 2032-56, pp. 131-3.

the members of the Heathobard war-band, against the interests of their lord and people.¹³⁸

This prescient schema by Beowulf may tie into a phenomenon observed by the anthropologist Lawrence Keeley in many primitive or pre-state societies, in which ‘hawks’ or ‘hotheads’ who dissent from the consensus to establish peace can easily ruin such negotiations by committing further acts of violence.¹³⁹ Keeley writes that in the context of New Guinea such men opposed to the peace process usually included ‘self-confident’ military leaders, ‘hotheaded young bachelors’ and the bereaved relatives of those slain in previous conflicts – the latter two corresponding to at least some of the membership of the military followings in our own period of study.¹⁴⁰ Unfortunately for the Heathobards, the Beowulf poet seems to hint that the resumption of ‘feud’ will prove fatal to their prince and his war-band.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, this heroic imagery greatly influenced a number of latter-day commentators who took it for a description of real-life custom amongst warriors at the time these works were composed.¹⁴¹ While Hollister and Woolf disagreed upon the existence of an ethic that the warrior must fight to the death after his lord has been slain, both agreed that he had a duty to avenge his lord at some point.¹⁴² Indeed, Woolf appears to lean towards the implication that a retainer should retreat from the battlefield or make a temporary truce if this furthered the pursuit of vengeance; O’Brien O’Keeffe likewise writes that ‘Not in every case was the vengeance immediate’.¹⁴³ This material has even influenced thoughts on the practice of ‘feud’ throughout the general population of the early medieval Insular world; Paul R. Hyams marshalled the Finnsburh recapitulation in Beowulf (in addition to the Cynewulf and Cyneheard entry from the *ASC* which

¹³⁸ *Beowulf*, ll. 2057-69, p. 133.

¹³⁹ Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization*, p. 148.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ See for instance Evans, *Lords of Battle*, pp. 69-73, O’Brien O’Keeffe, ‘Heroic values and Christian ethics’, p. 110, Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 90, 302.

¹⁴² Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, pp. 11, O’Brien O’Keeffe, ‘Heroic values and Christian ethics’, p. 110, Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 90, 302, Woolf, ‘The ideal of men dying with their lord’, pp. 69-70, 72, 75-6.

¹⁴³ Miller, ‘Choosing the avenger’, pp. 195-7, O’Brien O’Keeffe, ‘Heroic values and Christian ethics’, p. 110.

we shall discuss shortly) as a ‘strong prima facie’ case that feud did indeed exist within late Anglo-Saxon society and formed a recurring feature of aristocratic life.¹⁴⁴

Some modern-day critics have also taken Beowulf’s account of his actions following the death of his king, Hygelac, as indicative of an obligation by a member of the war-band to avenge his lord. In recounting the battle in which Hygelac was slain, Beowulf boasts:

“I slew the Franks’ champion Daeghrefn with my hand in the presence of tried warriors. In no way could he bring to the Frisian king the ornament adorning the breast, but the standard-bearer fell in the contest, a prince with courage...”¹⁴⁵

While the poet never directly identifies Hygelac’s slayer, some reviewers have argued that whoever killed the king would be the first person to loot his corpse. In this case, Daeghrefn overwhelmed Hygelac only to be hacked down by Beowulf, with the assumption that this provides additional proof that a warrior should avenge his lord.¹⁴⁶ Others have viewed Beowulf’s statement as an ‘authenticating’ strategy to excuse his survival and possible flight from the battle without his lord’s body. We will return to this idea of justifying one’s actions through vengeance towards the end of this section.

Revenge for one’s lord and comrades appears in heroic literature outside the Anglo-Saxon sphere during the mid-eighth to mid-eleventh centuries, although references to such behaviour are less commonplace and have attracted less attention from academics. Within the Welsh context, notions of vengeance appear primarily within *The Gododdin*, although here they usually result from the killing of a companion or fellow warrior rather than one’s lord in a manner reminiscent of the Ingeld episode in *Beowulf*. The poet laments the death of the son of Cian in terms that speak of a need to avenge his friend:

¹⁴⁴ Hyams, ‘Feud in Medieval England’, pp. 7-8.

¹⁴⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 2500-6, pp. 152-5.

¹⁴⁶ For instance, Rosemary Woolf argued that Beowulf’s action here, as with Hengest’s dealing with Finn, was the expected action of the ideal retainer in which the retainer should take vengeance for his fallen lord rather than die with him (Woolf, ‘The ideal of men dying with their lord’, pp. 69-70).

Of Brennych's war-band I'd have thought it a burden:
Should I leave one in human form alive.
I lost a comrade, I was steadfast,
Ready man in combat, hard for me to leave him.¹⁴⁷

This same need motivates the warrior Gwrfelling during battle, although it may have resulted in his death:

Comrades fell
In warfare's strife:
Unfaltering his fighting,
Blameless he avenged them.
His rage was appeased
Before green turf covered
The grave of Gwrfelling Fras.¹⁴⁸

Like the loyal men of *TBOM*, Gwrfelling Fras lost his life during his attempt, apparently successful, to gain vengeance for his fallen comrades – with the important difference that he wishes to punish the enemy for his fallen comrades while the men at Maldon were impelled by the need for vengeance for their lord.

Revenge for one's own kin frequently appears as a motivating force for violence in the Irish sagas but occasionally offences given to a warrior's lord or fellows will also result in vengeance. In *TBC I*, when Órlám the son of Ailill and Medb falls in combat against Cú Chulainn, the 'three Meic Gárach' (Lon, Úalu and Diliu) 'thought Cú Chulainn had gone too far in doing what he had done, namely killing the king's two foster-sons and his son and brandishing his son's head before the host' so they sought to fight the victor 'in revenge for Órlám and so that they might themselves alone remove this cause of anxiety to the host'.¹⁴⁹ We may have a metaphorical instance of revenge by a warrior for his slain lord when the hospitaller Blai's otherworld hound guardian attempts to gain revenge on his killer Celtchair for the rest of the tale.¹⁵⁰ As McCone has noted, this could be a play on the word *cú*, with the hound actually being Blai's warrior.

¹⁴⁷ *The Gododdin*, CA.ix.

¹⁴⁸ *The Gododdin*, CA.xvii, ll. 22-8.

¹⁴⁹ *TBC I*, p. 150.

¹⁵⁰ McCone, *Aided Celtchair*, p. 17.

Perhaps the best example of this occurs in the saga *The Tale of Mac Da Thó's Pig*. In this tale the hosteller Macc Da Thó faces a dilemma, in that the rulers of Ulster and Connacht have both demanded his prize hound Ailbe. Fearing to anger either group by granting the hound to the other, he awards the hound to both contenders. As a result, the rivals unknowingly arrive with their full retinues at Macc Da Thó's hostel on the same day to collect the hound; as both are ushered into the feast hall from opposite sides, the atmosphere becomes tense, with the poet recounting '...the faces round the feast inside were not friendly, for many had done injury to the others there.'¹⁵¹ This particular scene reminds me of the ambience which we find in Finn's hall when Hengest and his men are forced to abide for the winter with the slayer of their lord.

iii. Vengeance – The 'reality'

We shall begin our look at the reality of revenge by returning to the Cynewulf and Cyneheard episode from the *ASC*. Not only has this story featured in the arsenal of those arguing that loyalty unto death was customarily rendered by warriors to their lord, but it has also found its way into various discussions about feud and the duty of such men to avenge their lord. Several researchers have discerned in this conflict over the West Saxon crown a latent bloodfeud between two rival branches of the royal house.¹⁵² More often, however, the actions of the warriors have caught attention as a manifestation of the separate obligation of revenge expected from a lord's followers.¹⁵³ While Rosemary Woolf argues that Cynewulf's men refused to serve his murderer, she elsewhere emphasizes the duty of such men to avenge their lord if at all possible.¹⁵⁴ Even Patrick Wormald, normally a 'maximalist' regarding

¹⁵¹ *The Story of Macc Da Thó's Pig*, in *EIMS*, p. 182.

¹⁵² See Battaglia, 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 755', p. 177, O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Heroic values and Christian ethics', pp. 116-7, and S.D. White, 'Kinship and Lordship in Early Medieval England: The Story of Sigebert, Cynewulf, and Cyneheard', *Viator* 20 (1989), pp. 1-18 (10).

¹⁵³ See Hyams, 'Feud in Medieval England', p. 8, O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Heroic values and Christian ethics', pp. 116-7. As noted earlier, Evans in *Lords of Battle* primarily saw their choices as resulting from a duty to fight to the death (pp. 58-9), although on pp. 68-9 he also refers to it as 'battlefield vengeance'.

¹⁵⁴ See in particular Woolf, 'The ideal of men dying with their lord', pp. 69-71, 75.

state power in late Anglo-Saxon England, argued that ‘The feuds and exiles that bedeck heroic poetry were to this extent part of everyday life.’¹⁵⁵

When we view later accounts of this same event, we see some interesting developments. Æthelweard’s account, while it dwells upon the need for men to die with their lord, does not mention their duty of vengeance.¹⁵⁶ Yet a century later Simeon of Durham highlights the element of vengeance in his narrative for Cyneheard’s death:

At that time, Cynewulf, king of the West Saxons, was killed with a miserable death by a treacherous tyrant Cyneheard, and the cruel slayer was himself killed without pity by Ealdorman Osred in vengeance for his lord...¹⁵⁷

Once again we see that the motif which modern commentators see in the *ASC* tale actually becomes far more apparent in later retellings of the story.

We may also consider that interesting case of vengeance-taking first raised in our look at the social status of warriors, the killing of the deposed West Saxon king Sigebert by a swineherd in which ‘he [the herdsman] thus avenged the ealdorman Cumbra’.¹⁵⁸ Some have viewed this as the proper vengeance by one of Cumbra’s followers upon Sigebert for the unjustified killing of Cumbra, with the swineherd as a client of Cumbra.¹⁵⁹ As noted in Chapter Three, S.D. White questioned such an assumption, noting that one would expect one of Cumbra’s own followers or thegns to seek vengeance for his death rather than a lone herdsman and proposing that the chronicler used his actions to show just how low Sigebert had fallen.¹⁶⁰

Other Anglo-Saxon written sources which at first glance prove that vengeance based upon lordship bonds was very much a part of Anglo-Saxon society may also benefit from a similar treatment. In a letter to Charlemagne in the late eighth century, Alcuin praises the warrior Torhtmund as a ‘faithful servant of King Ethelred’ who was ‘proved in loyalty, strenuous in arms, who has boldly avenged the

¹⁵⁵ Patrick Wormald, ‘Anglo-Saxon society and its literature’, in *TCCOEL*, pp. 1-22 (11).

¹⁵⁶ *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, III.18, p. 23.

¹⁵⁷ Simeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, 786, in *EHD 1*, pp. 239-54 (245).

¹⁵⁸ *ASC* 757 (755).

¹⁵⁹ For the former view, see Charles Moorman, ‘The ‘Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’ for 755’, *Notes & Queries* 199, pp. 94-8.

¹⁶⁰ White, ‘Kinship and Lordship in Early Medieval England’, p. 9, as noted in the last chapter.

blood of his lord.’¹⁶¹ While Alcuin may have approved of Torhtmund’s vengeance on behalf of his slain lord, it could not have hurt that this same fellow was one of several laymen who helped him in his journeys and protected his underlings – we may recall those instances in which Gregory of Tours used feud to legitimize warfare.¹⁶² Simeon of Durham or his source give a similar motivation for Torhtmund’s actions, recording among the events of 799 that ‘Ealdorman Ealdred, the murderer of King Ethelred, was killed by Ealdorman Torhtmund in vengeance for his lord’.¹⁶³

We also have the reaction of King Hardacnut to the murder of two of his housecarls within the minster of Worcester 1041 while trying to collect taxes – in response, he ‘had all Worcestershire ravaged for the sake of his two housecarls’.¹⁶⁴ While vengeance may certainly be a motive here, political considerations may play a role. Yet the later historian John of Worcester emphasizes the role of vengeance, writing that ‘Hence the king, moved to anger, sent there to avenge their slaying Thuri of the Midlanders, Leofric of the Mercians, Godwine of the West Saxons, Siward of the Northumbrians, Hrani of the Magonsæte, and the other earls of the whole of England, and almost all his housecarls, with a great army’.¹⁶⁵

We have no difficulty finding examples of revenge and feud in Irish Annals replete with instances of such retaliation, but like its appearance in the heroic literature most of these instances of retribution were undertaken on behalf of one’s kin or allied ecclesiastical foundations. For a good example of family vengeance, one may look to the AU entry for 810 which records that the Luigni killed Tadc and his brother in battle, in response to which their father Muirgius devastates the Luigni.¹⁶⁶ An accompanying poem highlights this tit-for-tat exchange, with a Luigni warrior realizing the results of his actions:

¹⁶¹ Alcuin, *Letter of Alcuin to Eanbald II, archbishop of York*, in *EHD I*, 206, p. 795. Both Whitelock and Stenton refer to this praise by Alcuin as further evidence for a real-life expectation that a good follower would revenge his slain lord (*EHD I*, p. 55, Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 90).

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Simeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, 799, p. 250.

¹⁶⁴ ASC 1041.

¹⁶⁵ John of Worcester, *Chronicon ex chronicis*, 1041: *The Chronicle of John of Worcester, Volume II: The Annals from 450 to 1066*, edited by R.R. Darlington and P. McGurk, translated by Jennifer Bray and P. McGurk (Oxford, 1995), p. 533.

¹⁶⁶ AU 810.3.

Muirgius killed my son;
Stupendous that it can befall me –
That it is I who plied the sword
On Tadc's throat for it.¹⁶⁷

We even find revenge occurring within some family groups – for example, after Muiredach son of Flann slew his kinsman Dubgall son of Donnchad, the heir designate of Ailech, he was beheaded by his own sept 'before a full month [had passed]'.¹⁶⁸ One is tempted to suggest that rival war-bands within the lineage were responsible for such occurrences, but little proof exists of such practice.

We do find a few rather sketchy references to revenge driven by lordship ties rather than those of kinship within the annals. The *AFM* provides what at first glance seems to be an iron-cast example of an Irish household avenging their lord – under the year 851 we read that Echtigern the lord of south Leinster was 'treacherously' slain by Bruadar son of Aed, and Cerball son of Dungal. The annalist concludes, however, that Bruadar was 'himself slain at the end of eight days afterwards, by the people of Echtigern, in revenge of their lord'.¹⁶⁹ In using the term 'people of Echtigern' instead of the 'people of South Leinster', we may easily imagine that it was a group of Echtigern's warriors, his war-band, which carried out the revenge killing.¹⁷⁰ Unfortunately, the matching entry for this incident from the *AU* gives a radically different conclusion to the event – here we read that 'Bruatur son of Aed was deceitfully killed by *his own* associates on the eighth day after the killing of Echtigern' (italics mine).¹⁷¹ If this latter account is correct then we have an instance of a war-band murdering its own lord – a phenomenon we will investigate more fully later. As pointed out by Alex Woolf in personal communication, the compilers of the *AFM* apparently tried to interpret what was originally an ambiguous entry in *AU*; the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid..

¹⁶⁸ *AU* 980.5.

¹⁶⁹ *AFM* 851.9,

¹⁷⁰ Nick Aitchison considered some of these problems of terminology in 'Regicide in early medieval Ireland', in *VSEMW*, pp. 108-25.

¹⁷¹ *AU* 853.3. The Latin original reads: 'Ectigern m. Guaire, rex Laigen Desgabhair, iugulatus est dolose a Bruatur filio Aedho & o Cerball filio Dunghaile, & Bruatur filius Aedho iugulatus est dolose a sociis suis .i.iii. die post iugulationem Echtigern.' (*AU* 853.3, from <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G100001A/text423.html>). Note the location of the comma and ampersand between the two clauses – this would suggest it was indeed Bruatur's own warriors and not those of Echtigern who killed Bruatur.

text as presented in *AU* could certainly become vague if an important comma or word was lost during transmission between the two sources.

Several centuries later Donnchad ua Anluain, king of Uí Nialláin, was ‘treacherously killed by his kinsmen’, after which ‘those kinsmen were themselves killed within twenty nights by the Uí Nialláin to avenge him’.¹⁷² Uí Nialláin would seem to here refer to the war-band and/or notables of the kingdom, as Donnchad was killed by ‘his kinsmen’ and was himself ‘ua Anluain’.¹⁷³ Finally, when the men of Leinster slew one of the chief warriors serving Áed son of Niall, they gave his head to the Norse, whom he had earlier slaughtered. In apparent revenge for his earlier attacks, they stuck it on a pole, and took turns shooting at it before casting it into the sea.¹⁷⁴

Most interestingly, we have further instances in the annals in which vengeance occurs in the opposite direction to that typically ascribed to the warrior, with a lord exacting revenge for the slaying of one or more of his followers. One such case occurs in the *FA* for the year 870, when Áed son of Niall invaded Leinster in concert with two other kings, and all three committed ‘as much burning and plundering and killing as they could’.¹⁷⁵ The annalists himself speculates that Áed’s depredations were motivated by a desire to avenge the above-mentioned murder of his chief warrior by the men of Leinster.¹⁷⁶ A similar case of a lord taking revenge for the death of an underling may be found in 1031, when Donnchadh the son of Brian invaded Osraige to avenge the steward of Dún na Sciath, who was slain earlier in the year when Gilla Pátraic’s son plundered the place.¹⁷⁷

iv. Revenge and feud – conclusions

We have seen that the image of revenge and vengeance-taking appears throughout the vernacular sages and poetry of the Insular World during our period. It

¹⁷² *AU* 1111.9.

¹⁷³ Note, however, that *AFM* 1111.6, states that he was killed by his ‘brothers’. This still leaves the possibility that ‘Uí Nialláin’ referred to the royal war-band.

¹⁷⁴ *FA*, 377.

¹⁷⁵ *FA*, 387 [870].

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *AI* 1031.7.

seems to reach its keenest expression in the Anglo-Saxon poetry, followed by the British and then Irish material. Interestingly, the Irish historical sources provide far more evidence for the practice of revenge than that found in the mythical stories and poems – although most of these presentations focus upon revenge enacted due to familial connections, with only a few instances of a warrior avenging his lord (or vice-versa). Unfortunately, the Welsh material for the reality of this practice is rather spotty, leading us to perhaps rely a bit too heavily upon the Welsh image material, as well as the reality found in Anglo-Saxon, Irish and even Norse material.

As far as the presentation of revenge, I think we may detect two separate strands of thought within the literature. The first and perhaps more powerful of the two seems to take a positive approach to the seeking of revenge for a slain lord; such a notion may tie into themes of general loyalty, and the fostering of such behaviour via the poetry and stories may reveal a concern on the part of the authors to foster this sense of loyalty that may have been missing from the reality of their time period. In a like manner, many instances of revenge receive clerical approval. What we see is not art imitating reality, but art utilizing and extolling a practice from reality as long as it serves its purpose – to build loyalty and discourage desertion and betrayal.

Opposing this theme is one which fears the destabilization which can result from unchecked vengeance seeking, with the consequences fully realized in the failure of the marriage between Ingeld and Freawaru as described in *Beowulf* or the violent confrontation that erupts in Mac Da Thó's hostel. In a manner similar to the 'war-hawks' described by Keeley in his anthropological arguments, the heroic literature depicts some warriors as driving this sort of revenge against the wishes or at least better interests of their lord (although they often prevail upon him to allow or even commence the re-opening of hostilities). Authors displaying this view of revenge-seeking by a lord's military household frequently depict such activities as the classical view so neatly summarized by Michaud, in which a spiral of violence feeds from the continual need to avenge the last round of slayings, rather than the 'customary vengeance' described by Halsall and observed in our readings of the historical, legal and other sources from this era. As an aside, Keeley also suggested that even when warriors in pre-state societies fight for other reasons, they will often claim that they fought 'to avenge or redress wrongs: murders, broken trade or

marriage contracts, abduction of women, poaching, or theft.’¹⁷⁸ In this regard, we may view such claims as part of a legitimizing strategy for acts of violence, which brings us to a third possible influence for the heroic literary depictions of feud and revenge – one hitherto little explored, and likely the most promising in terms of the general thrust of this thesis.¹⁷⁹

In his paper ‘The bloodfeud in fact and fiction’, Peter Sawyer insightfully suggested a novel reason for the frequent appearance of feud within the pages of Gregory of Tours’s *History of the Franks*, particularly in reference to Merovingian wars against the Burgundians, Thuringians and Visigoths. Sawyer suggests that while the Merovingians saw no need to justify these military endeavours, their chronicler Gregory did see a need to legitimize these wars, and hit upon the tactic of presenting each as a conflict waged to revenge the mistreatment of the Merovingians’ kinswomen by their foreign husbands. While Sawyer does not mention ‘just war’ in the context of Gregory’s efforts, one should recall that Saint Augustine certainly included those wars waged to right injustices amongst those which he defined as ‘just’.¹⁸⁰ Sawyer’s observation combined with our study of ‘just war’ during this period suggest that the authors of the heroic literature we have studied may once again have concentrated upon and even developed those aspects of their warrior protagonists which would characterize them as men waging ‘just war’ in the minds of a Christian audience.

¹⁷⁸ Keeley, *War Before Civilization*, p. 108.

¹⁷⁹ Halsall also notes the use of such justification as part of a mentality which sees vengeance as ‘legitimate and ‘correct’’, even if it is not a ‘feuding society’ in the classical sense (Halsall, ‘Violence and Society’, pp. 20-1.

¹⁸⁰ As noted by J.E. Cross, ‘The ethic of war in Old English’, in *England before the Conquest: Studies in primary sources presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, edited by Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 269-82 (271) and Halsall, ‘Violence and society’, p. 27.

III. Betrayal and Murder of a Lord by his Warriors

A final factor which influenced the writings of this period still remains to be addressed. Some of the surviving annals and chronicles reveal the growing predilection of war-bands to engage in a practice that every lord of the period probably feared in the deepest parts of his mind - the possibility that his own trusted retainers or bodyguard could some day turn on him and even murder him. Such behaviour turned the relationship between the lord and his men upside down; this was the ultimate act of rebellion, destroying the natural order of society and hierarchy. Writing in the early twentieth century, H. Munro Chadwick argued that 'Examples of kings or other lords who were slain by their personal followers are much less frequent [than kin-slaying]...' and that the fate of Heremod in *Beowulf* has been misinterpreted as such.¹⁸¹ Yet Alex Woolf regards the killing of a lord by his own war-band or retinue as an act regarded by contemporaries as 'a hideous crime', but one that 'was not unprecedented'.¹⁸² I believe the evidence in this sub-chapter will show that there may have been a growth in such activity from the mid-eighth century, or at least a growth in the concern over it – either of which could have had an effect on the presentation of loyalty that we have noted within the literature of the period. The emphatic adulation of loyal service may have been a reaction against what the authors saw as a growing problem in their day. As will be seen, even the betrayal of a lord heavily disliked by ecclesiastical authors was met with general disapproval. I believe that such behaviour goes beyond simple desertion, and I have thus treated it as a separate phenomenon.

i. Betrayal and murder of a lord by his warriors – the image

Summing up betrayal in the Anglo-Saxon context, Hugh Magennis states outright that 'Episodes of treachery and betrayal occur in texts from throughout the Anglo-Saxon era, both secular and religious, both in Old English and in Latin', and

¹⁸¹ Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation* (Cambridge, 1907), p. 156.

¹⁸² Woolf, *Pictland to Alba*, p. 116.

that 'Treachery represents the reverse of the great Anglo-Saxon ideal of loyalty.'¹⁸³ Yet in looking at the main works of Old English heroic poetry, we find only hints of such action by those men who serve a lord in a military capacity. Perhaps the most direct instance of a group of warriors betraying a lord occurs in *Beowulf*, where the poet provides several disquieting allusions that Hrothgar's nephew Hrothulf will engineer the overthrow of Hrothgar's son and successor Hrethric; as a key member of Hrothgar's war-band, it seems likely that Hrothulf would suborn that body to help him in this usurpation.¹⁸⁴ Interestingly, Wealhtheow speaks to her husband Hrothgar of her belief that Hrothulf will loyally serve and protect both of her sons (Hrethric and Hrothmund) once Hrethric succeeds to the throne.¹⁸⁵

This seems to be the extent of such activity in the Old English heroic literature, as most of the other betrayals are either instances of desertion and cowardice which we discussed in the first section of this chapter, or the work of men outside the command of the victim, such as Finn's ambush upon Hnaef in *Beowulf* and the *Fight at Finnsburh*. We have to move to the other languages used for heroic literature in the Insular world to find further images of such types of betrayal. A possible example occurs in the Welsh poem *Pen Urien*. While most reviewers believe that the narrator of this composition is one of Urien's loyal retainers and seeks to rescue his lord's head to prevent it becoming a war-trophy, other scholars such as Jenny Rowland and N.J.A. Williams propose that the narrator was suborned by Urien's rivals, murdered his lord and now bears his head to his new masters as a trophy or proof of the deed.¹⁸⁶

Patrick Sims-Williams explored the theme of this poem at great length and hypothesized that the author cast one of Urien's relations as the narrator (Llywarch Hen in fact), a man who did not actually slay Urien despite being a party to those who brought about his downfall.¹⁸⁷ Sims-Williams concluded that the poet intended that his work act as a parallel story to Vortigern's invitation of the Saxons to Britain, and that it demonstrated how the early medieval Welsh interpreted the loss of British

¹⁸³ Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 15.

¹⁸⁴ *Beowulf*, ll. 1014-9, 1162-5, pp. 83, 89-91.

¹⁸⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 1180-7, p. 91.

¹⁸⁶ *AH*, edited by Rachel Bromwich and R. Brynley Jones (Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1978), pp. 19. This is according to B.F. Roberts' summarization of Williams' paper. Rowland, *EWSP*, pp. 77-83

¹⁸⁷ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Death of Urien', *CMCS*, 32 (Winter 1996), pp. 25-56 (44-5, 50-1, 56).

sovereignty in Northumbria.¹⁸⁸ In this regard, he believed that it highlighted the Britons' folly and acted as an object lesson, showing how the Britons 'lost Britain' rather than how the English conquered it; in this regard it can be seen as an exhortation for Britons to unite and repeat the triumph of Badon – rather like *Armes Prydein*.¹⁸⁹

Interestingly, some of the Norse praise poetry related to Britain and Ireland discusses the possible betrayal and murder of a lord by his military followers more openly than our other literature, albeit in strongly negative tones. Sighvat the Skald devotes several verses to the fate of those who betray their lord for money:

The king's enemies are walking about with open purses; men offer heavy metal for the priceless head of the king. Everyone knows that he who takes gold for the head of his good lord has his place in the midst of black hell. He deserves such punishment.¹⁹⁰

It was a sad bargain in heaven, when they who betrayed their lord went to the deep-lying world of flaming fire.¹⁹¹

Another verse not only reinforces the notion that such men would be the most likely perpetrator of such a deed, but that the suggestion of such faithlessness impugned directly upon their honour:

The housecarls of the Harda-king [Olaf] would be too accommodating to the earl [Hákon] if they took money for Olaf's life. It does not honour his household to be talked of thus. Better is it with us if we are all clear of treason.¹⁹²

Before we leave off our discussion of betrayal in the heroic literature, I would like to note the presence of an interesting reversal of this theme which appears in the Irish saga *The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, in which the eponymous sons suffer from the machinations of their lord, the king of Alba. Their trouble begins when the girl Derdriu falls in love with one of the sons, Noisiu; unfortunately, the Ulster king

¹⁸⁸ Sims-Williams, 'The Death of Urien', p. 25.

¹⁸⁹ Sims-Williams, 'The Death of Urien', pp. 35, 56.

¹⁹⁰ Sighvat the Skald, *Occasional Verses*, 16: *EHD I*, p. 311-2 (311).

¹⁹¹ Sighvat the Skald, *Occasional Verses*, 17, p. 311. According to fn. 5 at least one editor rendered it as treachery against 'the home in heaven', rather than a man's lord (*EHD I*, p. 311).

¹⁹² Sighvat the Skald, *Occasional Verses*, 18: *EHD I*, p. 312.

Conchobar also desires the same girl, forcing the sons to flee with their households. Eventually they arrive in Alba, where the king ‘took them into his entourage; they became his mercenaries’ until he learned of Derdriu’s beauty, at which point he decided to destroy his new retainers – first by sending them into dangerous situations, and this failing, plotting to murder them and take the girl for his own.¹⁹³ His stratagem reminds one of that employed by King David in the Bible to rid himself of Urias the Hethite so that he could marry the man’s wife.¹⁹⁴ Another instance of a lord betraying members of his war-band may appear in *Beowulf*, when we read that Heremod of the Ring-Danes ‘destroyed the companions of his table, close comrades’.¹⁹⁵

ii. Betrayal and murder of a lord by his warriors – The ‘reality’

One does not have to search nearly as hard to find real life scenarios in which warriors murdered their own lord. We find two prominent examples in the mid-eighth century at the beginning of our era, both of which clearly implicate the ruler’s immediate war-band. In the year 738 the *AU* and *AT* report that ‘Cernach son of Fogartach is treacherously killed by his own criminal adherents, and the calves of the cows and the women of this lower world for long bewailed him’, with the *AT* calling his killers ‘accursed comrades’.¹⁹⁶ Under the year 757 the *Continuation of Bede* laments that ‘Æthelbald, king of the Mercians, was wretchedly and treacherously killed at night by his bodyguard; Beornred began to reign.’¹⁹⁷ In both cases, whatever the faults of the ruler in question, the manner of their demise is considered deplorable.

Æthelbald’s death has attracted some attention from Alice Sheppard, who uses it as part of an argument that the *ASC* entry for 755 was intended to function as a coherent and continuous narrative in which the loyalty given to the West Saxons

¹⁹³ *The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, in *EIMS*, pp. 261-2.

¹⁹⁴ II Samuel 11:14-7 and 11:26-7.

¹⁹⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 1713-5, p. 117.

¹⁹⁶ *AU* 738.3, *AT* 738.3.

¹⁹⁷ *Continuation of Bede*, 757: *EHD I*, pp. 259-60. While Simeon of Durham recast Cynewulf’s war-band as motivated by revenge, he notes that Æthelbald was ‘treacherously killed by his bodyguard’ without displaying any hostility towards the slain king (Simeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, 757).

Cynewulf and Cyneheard juxtaposes with the disloyalty plaguing the Mercian king – while their men choose to fight to the death for their lords, Æthelbald’s own bodyguard kills him.¹⁹⁸ To further support her theory that the *ASC* entry seeks to denigrate Mercian lordship at the expense of Wessex lordship, she argues that the chronicler ascribes a variety of immoral activities to Æthelbald, all of which Cynewulf and Cyneheard avoid.¹⁹⁹

Unfortunately, the evidence does not fully bear out Sheppard’s thesis. She overlooks the fact that only the *Continuation of Bede* and several post-conquest writers give the manner of Æthelbald’s death; the *ASC* simply reads that ‘Æthelbald, king of the Mercians, was killed at Seckington’.²⁰⁰ Similarly, she derives her information regarding Æthelbald’s immoral character not from the *ASC*, but from the *Continuation of Bede* and letters written by St. Boniface, both of which take a grim view of the king’s behaviour.²⁰¹ I suspect she was inspired to pursue this line of inquiry by Dorothy Whitelock, who observed the real-life contrast between the loyalty rendered by Cynewulf’s followers to the disloyalty shown to Æthelbald and Oswulf.²⁰² Unlike Sheppard, Whitelock, made this comparison in general terms without seeking to explain any form of authorial intent.²⁰³

Following the murder of Æthelbald, we see three hot spots in the historical records in which men frequently betray and kill their lords in the Insular world. A brief perusal of the *Continuation of Bede* and the pages of Simeon of Durham reveals the first of these – late eighth-century Northumbria. In 758 the young king Oswulf of Northumbria, not yet a year on the throne, suffered the same fate as Æthelbald to the displeasure of various witnesses, as the *Continuation of Bede* reports that he was ‘treacherously killed by his thegns’ while Simeon of Durham writes that ‘he was wickedly killed by his household’.²⁰⁴ Ann Williams believes that his successor, Æthelwald Moll, was likely the head of Oswulf’s household and thus in an ideal

¹⁹⁸ Sheppard, *Families of the King*, pp. 36-8.

¹⁹⁹ Sheppard, *Families of the King*, pp. 36-8, fn. 57 on pp. 173-4.

²⁰⁰ *ASC* 757 (755).

²⁰¹ Alice Sheppard, *Families of the King*, pp. 36-7.

²⁰² Dorothy Whitelock, *EHD I*, pp. 23-4. Interestingly, the *ASC* does mention that Oswulf’s household killed him.

²⁰³ Dorothy Whitelock, *EHD I*, pp. 23-4.

²⁰⁴ Simeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, 758, and *The Continuation of Bede*, 758.

position to institute a 'palace coup'.²⁰⁵ Williams's assertion here may have some validity – Sean Davies noted the possible danger posed by the *penteulu* (head of a Welsh lord's military household) to his lord 'for obvious reasons'.²⁰⁶

The travails of the Northumbrian kings throughout the remainder of the eighth and into the early ninth century furnish additional examples of betrayal, although one must be careful to pick out those instances where the king's immediate retinue betrayed him rather than the nobility or people as a whole. In at least one instance it seems that the latter occurred, when King Alhred of Northumbria 'was deprived of the society of the royal household and nobles, by counsel and consent of all his people, and exchanged the majesty of empire for exile. He departed with 'a few companions in flight' (italics mine), suggesting that like Muirchertach Ua Lochlainn and king Sigeberht of Wessex he managed to retain the loyalty of a few core followers, which perhaps explains why he suffered exile rather than death.²⁰⁷ The unfortunate King Ælfwold was less fortunate – in a conspiracy led by his 'patrician' Sigga, 'King Ælfwold was killed by a miserable death on 23 September at the place called *Scythlescester* near the wall'.²⁰⁸

The deposition and killing of Northumbrian kings continued down to the end of the century. In 790 King Osred was tonsured and exiled by 'his nobles' (which could indicate his war-band or other magnates).²⁰⁹ Six years later the Northumbrian 'patrician' Osbald acceded to the kingship with the assistance of 'some nobles of the nation', but after only twenty-seven days he was 'deserted by the whole company of the royal household and the nobles, put to flight and banished from the kingdom, and retired with a few followers to the island of Lindisfarne'.²¹⁰ Here it appears it was the war-band and the landed aristocracy which abandoned their new king, although he apparently managed to retain the loyalty of a few retainers. Osbald himself may have

²⁰⁵ Æthelwald is referred to as a *patricius* which Williams suggests is the head of a king's household in eighth-century Northumbria (Ann Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 51).

²⁰⁶ Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, pp. 33-4. A.D. Carr disagreed and presumed that because most men who served as *penteulu* were close relatives of the ruler that they could be 'relied upon' not to make bids for power (Carr, 'Teulu and Penteulu', in *The Welsh King and his Court*, pp. 63-81 (77-9)). I find Carr's case less convincing than Davies's.

²⁰⁷ Simeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, 774.

²⁰⁸ Simeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, 788.

²⁰⁹ Simeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, 790.

²¹⁰ Simeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, 796.

had stained hands as Mary Garrison argues that Alcuin believed Osbald responsible for arranging the murder of his predecessor Æthelred.²¹¹ After 802 we hear of less regicide in Northumbria, although this could be a result of the sources drying up for a time after this year; one set of Irish Annals report that the mid-ninth century king Ælle of Northumbria was slain due to ‘the deceit and treachery of a young lad of his own household’ where elsewhere he is reported as dying in battle against the Vikings at York.²¹²

Our Irish sources hint at a similar ‘escalation’ of such behaviour in mid- to late-ninth century Ireland and Pictland/Alba; while we find only two instances of such behaviour in the Irish annals before the year 850, matters appear much worse as the century progresses, with eleven lords slain by their immediate followers between 850 and 902.²¹³ Most of these read like the following example: ‘Aed son of Cinaed, king of the Picts, was killed by his own associates’.²¹⁴ In those occurrences from 878-96 the annalist notably leaves out any word related to treachery. Could he have seen the homicides as justifiable? Or perhaps the crime had become so common that he became numb to it and ceased to qualify these killings? Such behaviour declines in frequency within the annals after this time, although we find late instances in the mid- to late-eleventh century such as the downfall of Sitric son of Gialla Bruidhe Ó Ruairc, who was ‘killed treacherously by his own men’ in 1091.²¹⁵

In most cases, the perpetrators seem to be most or all of a given lord’s military followers, but in a few instances a specific man commits the crime. In one of the previously noted slayings, ‘Donnacán son of Cétfaid, king of the Uí Cheinnselaig, was treacherously killed by his companion’ – note the use of the singular *a socio suo* rather than the more usual *a sociis suis*.²¹⁶ Several centuries later we read that Brodur ‘the enemy of Comgall’ killed his king, Donnchad ua

²¹¹ Mary Garrison, ‘The Bible and Alcuin’s Interpretation of Current Events’, in *Peritia* 16 (2002), pp. 68-84 (79).

²¹² *ASC* 867, *FA* 348.

²¹³ For the three early references, see the above-mentioned deaths of Fiannamail the king of Leinster and Cernach son of Fogartach, as well as the murder of Eochaid son of Bresal, king of Dál Araidi of the North, who was killed ‘by his own associates’ in 824 (*AU* 824.7). For the eleven other references, see *AU* 853.3, *AU* 869.7, *AU* 878.2, *AU* 884.3, *AU* 885.4, *AU* 886.3, *AU* 887.2, *AU* 896.4, *AU* 897.3, *AU* 898.1 and *AU* 902.1. The *AClon*, *CS* and *AFM* report some but not all of these events.

²¹⁴ *AU* 878.2.

²¹⁵ *AT* 1091.1.

²¹⁶ *AU* 869.7.

Mathgamna, king of Ulaid in Bennchor; his action did not profit him long, as he was later slain in turn by the king of the Dal Araide.²¹⁷ Around the same time the *AT* reports that ‘Domhnall the Stammerer, king of Meath, was treacherously killed by his own soldier [*o a amus féin*], Cú Cairn O Cobhthaigh’.²¹⁸ Like Alhred and Osbald, Murchad son of Mael Dúin should have considered himself fortunate to escape with his life when he was deposed by Niall son of Aed and the Cenél Eógain in 823.²¹⁹ In any case, we may note the re-appearance of the word ‘trecherous’ in many of these Irish incidents after the spate of

Moving back to the Anglo-Saxon material, we may see one reason why a group of warriors would turn on its lord. Simeon of Durham reports that on the 29th of September in the year 778 the nobles Æthelbald and Heardberht under orders from King Æthelred of Northumbria ‘treacherously killed’ the ealdormen Ealdwulf, Cynewulf and Ecga.²²⁰ This bloodbath is the last entry for the year 778; the subsequent year begins with the sentence ‘Ethelred was expelled from the royal throne and driven into exile...’²²¹ In ‘treacherously’ ordering the deaths of several ealdormen, did he commit disloyalty to his own retainers – or was the reaction merely that of an aristocracy which felt itself under threat? The scenario harks back to the allusion about King Heremod from *Beowulf* and the behaviour of the King of Alba from the *The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*; indeed, the withdrawal of support for Æthelred also recalls more specifically the fate of the Heremod.

We have unfortunately not seen much material for the British/Welsh context. The clearest cut case of military followers doing away with their lord in the Welsh sources appears in the description of the downfall of the Welsh king Gruffydd ap Llewellyn. In the year 1063 the D version of the *ASC* reports ‘But here in this same year, at harvest, on fifth August, King Gruffydd was killed by his own men, because of the struggle he was waging with Earl Harold.’²²² The E version gives a longer but similar account: ‘Here Earl Harold and his brother Earl Tostig went into Wales ... and conquered that land; and that people gave hostages and submitted to them, and

²¹⁷ *AU* 1065.5.

²¹⁸ *AT* 1030.12.

²¹⁹ *AU*, 823.7.

²²⁰ Simeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, 778, p. 244.

²²¹ Simeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, 779, p. 244.

²²² *ASC* D 1063.

afterwards went to and killed their king Gruffydd, and brought Harold his head, and he set another king for it.’²²³ Sean Davies tersely notes that the *teulu* would often turn upon a lord who had lost their trust and confidence.²²⁴ It certainly seems that Harold had gotten the better of Gruffydd militarily – perhaps it was for the good of the ‘land’ that his retinue submitted and offered up their bloody token of peace.²²⁵

In his famous ‘Sermon of the Wolf to the English’, Archbishop Wulfstan made clear the ecclesiastics’ view of the betrayal of a lord by his men, particularly when it resulted in his death:

And it is the greatest of all treachery in the world that a man betray his lord’s soul; and a full great treachery it is also in the world that a man should betray his lord to death, or drive him in his lifetime from the land; and both have happened in this country: Edward was betrayed and then killed, and afterwards burnt, [Nero A 1 ends this sentence here, but other manuscripts continue ‘and Ethelred was driven out of his country.’]²²⁶

The various late Anglo-Saxon law codes address such treachery far more often than mere desertion. In the *Laws of Alfred*, the king legislates that ‘If anyone plots against the king’s life, directly or by harbouring his exiles or his men, he is liable to forfeit his life and all that he owns’. Yet Alfred attacks such behaviour even when it does not directly involve the king – a later section of this code reads ‘concerning all ranks, both *ceorl* and noble: he who plots against his lord’s life is to be liable to forfeit his life and all that he owns, or to clear himself by his lord’s wergild.’²²⁷ Half a century later, the law code *II Athelstan* repeats this concern with treachery against one’s lord: ‘Concerning treachery to a lord. And we have pronounced concerning treachery to a lord, that he [who is accused] is to forfeit his life if he cannot deny it or is afterwards convicted at the three-fold ordeal.’²²⁸ Nearly a full century on from Alfred’s code, one of the laws of his descendant Edgar declared ‘And no matter what refuge the

²²³ ASC E 1063.

²²⁴ Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, p. 42.

²²⁵ Although Benjamin Hudson, ‘The Destruction of Gruffudd ap Llywelyn’, in *Irish Sea Studies, 900-1200* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 81-99 (98-9), argues that it was not Gruffudd’s war-band but his rival Cynan ap Iago who slew him.

²²⁶ Wulfstan, *The Sermon of the Wolf to the English: EHD I*, pp. 854-9 (856-7). In fn. 6 on p. 856, Whitelock states her belief that the betrayal of a lord’s soul was the encouragement by his followers for him to do evil.

²²⁷ *Laws of Alfred*, 4 and 4.2: *EHD I*, pp. 372-80 (374).

²²⁸ *II Athelstan*, 4: *EHD I*, pp. 381-6 (382).

proved thief, or the man who is discovered in treason against his lord, may reach, they are never to save their lives',²²⁹

Ann Williams, in a good summary of the evidence for Æthelred II's reign, views it as one plagued by treachery and cowardice, and not just on the battlefield – as she notes, Exeter in 1003 and Canterbury in 1011 both fell by treachery.²³⁰ While Æthelred II was never actually killed by his own war-band or retinue, the law codes of his reign and the next likely show a fear of such betrayal. In the law code V Æthelred declares that '...if anyone plots against the king's life, he is to forfeit his life...', while the Laws of Cnut, 57, states 'And if anyone plots against the king or his lord, he is to forfeit his life and all that he owns, unless he goes to the three-fold ordeal.'²³¹

iii. Betrayal and murder of a lord by his war-band – conclusions

All in all, we have a phenomenon that is far more common in real-life than one would gather from the poetry and sagas of the age. The dry accounts of the historical and legal sources indicate that it was relatively common for a lord, particularly a weak or unsuccessful one, to face murder at the hands of his own retainers. In nearly all cases, the slain lord had shown himself incapable or unwilling to defend 'the land, the people and their treasure' – and thus some if not all of the interests of his warriors. In some cases, a previously successful ruler may have become ineffective through age or disease, opening the way for their eventual assassination, such King Æthelbald of Mercia. One must also admit the possibility that over-mighty members of a lord's household, or personal affronts by a lord to his warriors could also result in his murder and replacement.

The heroic literature attempts to sweep such behaviour under the carpet, rarely even using it as a negative example. Most of the major heroic works, such as *Beowulf*, *TBOM*, *FB*, the *Gododdin* and *TBC*, have no instance of a lord killed by his own war-band. Such a slaying may form the crux of the work *Pen Urien*, although

²²⁹ II and III Edgar, 7.3, in *EHD I*, pp. 394-7 (397).

²³⁰ Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England*, pp. 107, 119.

²³¹ *EHD I*, p. 427.

even here commentators are divided on whether the speaker beheaded Urien to save his head from becoming a trophy, or hacked it off to deliver to his new lord. *TBDD* is an outlier amongst the Irish material, as King Conaire falls at the hands of horde led in part by several of his former retainers – although even here the perpetrators are not currently in his service, having been cast into exile some time ago by the former lord. Only the early Norse skaldic material with an Insular context openly speaks of these matters, in which it promptly condemns the perpetrators of such crimes to hell.

While sources for the ‘reality’ belie any notion that such bloodlettings were rare, they also reveal a general ecclesiastical distaste for such actions – as shown by the judgemental language used to report many of the betrayals recorded in the Irish Annals, as well as by the content of Alcuin’s letter to the Northumbrians and Archbishop Wulfstan’s *Sermon of the Wolf*. Such notions influence the surviving vernacular tales and poems; the betrayal of a rightful lord was anathema, and even the betrayal of an imperfect lord upset the natural order of things. Part of this may derived from theories of just war – all such violence must be waged under the auspices of a legitimate authority. To eliminate that authority also expels one from the ranks that can engage in such warfare. Only when the ruler has broken the ‘contract’ between himself and his men, or when he has behaved in a particularly tyrannical or un-Christian manner will the writers side with those who slay or oust him – rather like the Bible’s justification of King David’s actions against Saul. As the creators of the heroic image of the war-band appeared to conceive of it in terms of just war, it may have seemed wiser to them to concentrate upon such a presentation in the heroic literature, leaving the inverse for those who cannot wage such war – pagan, brigands and the like.

IV. Final Conclusions

Our investigation of loyalty and its concomitant adjuncts has revealed a discernable agenda on the part of the writers and authors of the vernacular sources – the stories and poems created and/or transmitted during this period of Insular history. In many cases, as we have seen, real-life failed to live up to ecclesiastical expectations, leading to the need for the edification of these ideals within sources in

the language understandable to all. In all cases, however, loyalty must be granted only to the proper recipients – the rightful king or ruler, not local lords (unless they loyally serve the king) or independent war-bands which ignore or even harm legitimate rule. Loyalty given for the wrong reasons will receive a greater discussion in the first part of the next chapter – Drinking and Feasting – when we discuss the motif of ‘Earning one’s Mead’.

To review our findings in this chapter, we have seen that heroic literature and other writing seeks to portray warriors in a radically different light in the matters of loyalty to a lord unto death, enacting vengeance on behalf of a slain lord, and killing one’s own lord. Such a discrepancy militates strongly against the practice of using heroic literature as a simple reflection of real-life practice or ‘just another source’ for information on actual warriors.

We have seen that two levels of loyalty to one’s lord exist in the heroic literature – one in which a warrior defends his lord until either is slain, at which point the warrior may retreat or even make a temporary peace, and a second in which a warrior must slay all of his lord’s killers or die trying. As we have seen, this second idea may have a fair amount of Christian inspiration, and both seek to elevate their subject above ‘common’ men. This kind of behaviour could, like the portrayal of the war-band as noble, place their activity as a form of ‘just war’, particularly through their loyalty to a legitimate authority.

While some of the heroic literature may have merely sought to appeal to the vanity of its audience or instil in it a ‘fighting spirit’, it also sought to cast the loyal warrior as an instrument of just war through his loyalty ethic – just as the authors of this material used references to nobility and the warrior’s role as a defender of the church and society. Conversely, cowardice and disloyalty became the marks of unjust war, and were ascribed to pagans, brigands and those who should not fight but do so anyway.

In much the same way, the authors of this literature also used an ethic of vengeance. Here they were obviously on familiar ground, as demonstrated by the importance of feud and ‘customary vengeance’ throughout society in the early medieval Insular world. While vengeance was certainly practiced by warriors on behalf of their lord (as we observed in some non-literary forms of evidence), we find

that the historical evidence seldom dwells upon such behaviour to the same extent as heroic literature while the legal evidence describes it in a more mechanistic manner. Yet one must not assume clerical displeasure at vengeance-taking by retainers and other followers, for as we saw even Alcuin could commend a man who he believed had avenged his slain lord. Rather, war taken with the object of obtaining vengeance was considered a form of just war – one could extrapolate that vengeance itself could be a just aim even without a full-scale war. As we saw, writers could also dress up otherwise ‘political’ violence as revenge in an attempt to justify it, as Gregory of Tours did for his Merovingian masters. It seems likely that the discussions of vengeance in *Beowulf*, *TBC I* and *The Gododdin* sought to achieve the same ends.

Lastly, we find a dramatic reversal in the image of military followers slaying their own lord. Such a crime is only hinted at in most heroic literature, with even negative examples remaining either unmentioned entirely or hurried over in nearly all our sources. Those few which do actually discuss such action condemn in the most scathing terms, such as the skaldic verses which condemn those who betray their lord to hell. Yet this image does not concur with what we observe in other sources, which indicate that such treachery was not uncommon even if it did vex contemporaries. The rarity of such disloyalty in the heroic literature and its complete censure when it does appear may simply reflect lordly preoccupation with murder or expulsion by their own followers. More likely, however, is the importance of loyalty to a lord as part of just war which we have just finished discussing, combined with a good dose of Christian iconography. Not only does the Bible provide the contemporary audience with several ‘arch-betrayers’, but such crimes negate the loyalty ethic mentioned above. This renders the entire man-lord relationship null and casts the offenders into the depths of unjust war amongst other villains.

One stone in this arena of loyal service, revenge and betrayal remains unturned. Why do so many of the literary works make such obvious references to the vows and boasts, often over some form of drink, which warriors make to fortify their loyalty and intent? How does this tie into the concept of just war or Christian symbolism which we have proposed as a major influence on the presentation of loyalty in the heroic literature? This drink-related imagery has been studied before, particularly in the concept of *talú medd* or ‘paying for one’s mead’ which we hinted

at before. I believe it is time that we commence our next chapter with a more in-depth look at this idea as it appears in the heroic literature.

Chapter 6 – Hall Life: Feasting and Drinking and the War-Band

Feasting and the consumption of various alcoholic beverages occupy a prominent position within the heroic stories and poetry produced in the Insular world between the mid-eighth and mid-eleventh centuries. These activities usually appear within the context of the royal hall with the lord and his aristocratic war-band amongst the foremost participants, and as such promise to provide a rewarding further avenue for comparisons between the heroic image and historical reality of the war-band. Indeed, in some of this literature such events can form a central crux or theme.¹

Most early critics accepted without question that heroic literature presented a straightforward and accurate portrayal of the real-life leisure activities enjoyed by military retainers during these centuries.² Some even suggested that such frequent allusions to alcohol consumption revealed a real-life tendency for warriors to engage in warfare while inebriated – Thomas Stephen, writing in the nineteenth century, even wrote that ‘the decimation of the Gododdin warband’ was no more than retribution for their choice to enter battle ‘in a state of hopeless intoxication’.³ From the early twentieth century onward, however, a number of scholars began to look for a deeper meaning for such presentations, albeit one still rooted in real life social practice. In particular, critics focused upon statements within these sources which stated that a warrior had ‘earned his mead’ (or *talú medd* to give the Welsh phrase).⁴

¹ See *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *Macc Da Thó’s Pig*, the *Intoxication of the Ulaid*, *The Gododdin*, the Taliesin poetry and perhaps *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*.

² For example, Nora Chadwick, *The British Heroic Age* (Cardiff, 1976), p. 72, and Geoffrey Russom, ‘The Drink of Death in Old English and Germanic Literature’, in Daniel G. Calder and T. Craig Christy (eds.), *Germania: Comparative Studies in the Old Germanic Languages and Literatures* (Woodbridge, 1988), pp. 175-89 (182). While he does not agree with this assessment, Ifor Williams wrote that in the 1940s such an opinion was still commonplace (*BWP*, p. 65).

³ Quoted from Marged Haycock, ‘Where cider ends, there ale begins to reign’: drink in medieval Welsh poetry (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 17-8.

⁴ See *BWP*, p. 65; for just a few of the more prominent examples of this statement, see *The Gododdin*, CA.i, CA.iv, CA.ci, and the *Finnesburg Fragment*, ll. 36-9. During this chapter I will frequently use *talú medd* as shorthand for ‘earning his mead’ – despite its origin as a Welsh phrase, it neatly encapsulates the ideal.

From such literary claims, several historians and critics hypothesized the existence of a real-life social arrangement in which warriors served a lord in return for alcoholic beverages; Ifor Williams in particular popularized this view.⁵ As Williams succinctly put it, ‘A warrior’s pay in those days was plenty of mead and ale and wine [...] In return for their mead, they were expected to be faithful to their lord, even unto death.’⁶

Later scholars modified Williams’s view so that *talû medd* did not refer to the provision of drinks in return for loyal military service, but rather acted as a literary symbol that encompassed everything a warrior might receive from his lord, including food, lodging, land, weapons and gifts. One may find a particularly good example of this evolution in Kenneth Jackson’s introduction to his translation of *The Gododdin*, wherein he took pains to emphasize the cross-cultural existence of this *talû medd* motif, reporting its presence outside of *The Gododdin* in OE works such as *Beowulf* and *The Fight at Finnsburh*.⁷ This interpretation has become the generally accepted one for ‘earning his mead’ in the last several decades; for a recent example see Stephen S. Evan’s *The Lords of Battle*, in which he states that mead was a stand-in for the ‘hospitality, patronage, and protection’ which a warrior could expect from his lord.⁸

⁵ See Haycock, ‘Where cider ends, there ale begins to reign’, pp. 17-8 (originally from *The Gododdin*, CA.xlviii-xlix) and *BWP*, p. 65. In her book review for *The Cynfeirdd: Early Welsh Poet and Poetry*, Rachel Bromwich reports that Sir Ifor Williams finally put an end to ‘nearly two centuries of misconceptions on the part of successive Welsh scholars who had one and all assumed that the Gododdin warriors went out inebriated to battle’ (*CMCS* 6 (Winter, 1983), p. 106).

⁶ *BWP*, pp. 47, 65.

⁷ *GOSP*, pp. 36-7. See also Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 47. Note, however, the reference in *Beowulf* is not so clear cut, as we shall see.

⁸ In general see *BWP*, pp. 47, 65, Sean Davies, *Welsh Military Institutions*, pp. 41, 45, Wendy Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1982), pp. 51-3, Michael J. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tene to the Viking Age* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 5-12, 19, 95-7, Stephen S. Evans, *Lords of Battle, Image and Reality of the Comitatus in Dark-Age Britain* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 58, 61-2 and 106-7, Christine E. Fell, ‘Old English Beor’, *Leeds Studies in English* 8 (1975), pp. 76-95 (80-1), Haycock, ‘Where cider ends, there ale begins to reign’, pp. 17-8, Jackson, *GOSP*, pp. 36-7, Nicolas Jacobs, ‘The Old English Heroic Tradition in the Light of Welsh Evidence’, *CMCS* 2 (Winter, 1981), pp. 9-20 (18, 20), John T. Koch, ‘Fled Bricrenn’s Significance within the Broader Celtic Context’, in *Fled Bricrenn: Reassessments*, edited by Pádraig Ó Riain (London, 2000), pp. 15-39 (33-4), Hugh Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon Appetites: Food and Drink and Their Consumption in Old English and Related Literature* (Dublin, 1999), pp. 19-20, Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, p. 47, Jenny Rowland, ‘OE *Ealuscerwen* / *Meoduscervwen* and the Concept of “Paying for Mead”’, *Leeds Studies in English* 21 (1990), pp. 1-12 (2-5, 7-8) and *Y Gododdin, Britain’s Oldest Heroic Poem*, edited by A.O.H. Jarman (Llandysul, 1988), pp. xliii-xlvi. John M. Hill appears to display a similar belief when he ascribes such a debt impelling Cynewulf’s men in the Cynewulf and Cyneheard episode (*The Anglo-Saxon*

Academics may have been overhasty in accepting this paradigm without further investigation, but a few researchers have continued to explore the hall environment and the associated consumption of alcohol. While they tend to concentrate upon the ‘reality’ of hall-life and drinking, some of their findings remain quite valuable in establishing the position of the hall as a place of paramount importance within their respective societies.⁹ As Hugh Magennis recognized, ‘The hall was not just a location to hear poetry in Anglo-Saxon England – it was also the seat of business, of political brokering and conflicts, where power was exercised.’¹⁰ Michael Enright wrote in a similar vein that ‘It is here that the essential gestures of the society take place – the giving of gifts, the bestowal of honors, the granting of land.’¹¹ Furthermore, he made the bold claim that ‘Germanic concepts of contract, lordship, marriage, loyalty and community are all directly linked to the provision and distribution of liquor.’¹² Catherine O’Sullivan focused more upon the activity of feasting rather than its physical location in the hall when she concluded that for the inhabitants of medieval Ireland ‘Feasting was a fundamental, and therefore unavoidable, component of their existence’.¹³

While they have contributed valuable research to our knowledge of feasting and drinking in the early medieval Insular world, they have also passed up several possible avenues of research, including the commencement of a more wide-ranging survey of the intersection of feasting and the war-band throughout the entire Insular world, as well as a re-assessment of some of the widely accepted theories regarding feasting and drinking, such as the *talú medd* motif. Magennis showed the way to an extent, in that he addressed issues of the image within the poetry and prose of the period in comparison to its possible reality, with his evidence for an ambivalent attitude towards drink by one likely audience, the textual community, of particular

Warrior Ethic, Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature (Gainesville, 2000), pp. 83-4. For some more general works, see Ann Hagen, *A Second Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food & Drink, Production & Distribution* (Hockwold cum Wilton, 1995), p. 232, and Gwyn Williams, *An Introduction to Welsh Literature* (Cardiff, 1992), p. 3. Even Ifor Williams apparently leaned toward such a view eventually, for in a later article he equated the connection between mead and payment as the later one between salary and salt (*BWP*, p. 47, 65).

⁹ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 95-7.

¹⁰ Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, p. 13.

¹¹ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p. 5.

¹² Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 16, 95-7.

¹³ Catherine O’Sullivan, *Hospitality in medieval Ireland, 900-1500* (Dublin, 2004), p. 86.

importance. As we proceed, we must keep in mind that even in the vernacular stories and poems we almost certainly view the war-band through a lens created by the members of such a community, largely or even entirely ecclesiastical in complexion, and that such a lens reflects their own worldview as well as the aims that they wished to achieve through these works.

This is the final aspect of the war-band in which we shall compare its presentation within heroic poetry and prose to its reality, at least as depicted in historical, legal and other sources. We have departed a bit from our earlier model, however. As most (if not all) of the surviving heroic literature was created or transmitted by ecclesiastically-trained personnel, I have decided to present a synopsis of clerical opinion regarding feasting and drinking and its possible three-fold division before considering the appearance of such activities within hagiographical and historical sources. Only then will I consider their role in heroic literature. Within the last genre, I wish to apply the categorization of feasting and drinking to the ‘heroic’ sources, before looking at generalized imagery with a concentration upon that tying violence and bloodshed to drinking and drink, before finally reassessing some of the old paradigms regarding drinking, feasting and the war-band. Many aspects of the war-band that we have already investigated in previous chapters tie into some of the concepts that will be discussed here, forcing the occasional reference to material first seen at an earlier point in the thesis.

I. Feasting and Drinking – The Ecclesiastical Concept

Entry 177 in the *Fragmentary Annals (FA)* of Ireland supplies two radically conflicting presentations of aristocratic feasting. We have already mentioned this entry in connection to its description of the followers of Áed Alláin and Niall Condail, the two sons of the Uí Néill king Fergal.¹⁴ The annalist creates a clear dichotomy between each prince when he reports that Áed was a ‘prime, clever, cruel and vigorous warrior’ accompanied by ‘large, well-armed troops’, while Niall

¹⁴ The tale as it appears is likely from the sometime between the mid-ninth and tenth century; Joan Radner notes the importance of the author’s claim that ‘And that has been fulfilled so far’ when referring to the alternation of the kingship between the descendants of Áed and Niall (Radner, *FA*, p. 193).

arrived ‘calmly and temperately, peacefully’ with but a few attendants.¹⁵ Áed stayed in the royal hall that night and Niall took up residence in a ‘lovely secluded house’. Fergal, curious about the character of his sons, spied upon both during the night. Coming to the hall occupied by Áed, he finds:

it was very foul indeed inside that house. There were buffoons and satirists and horseboys and jugglers and oafs, roaring and bellowing there. Some were drinking, some sleeping, some vomiting, some piping, some whistling. Drummers and harpers were playing; a group was boasting and arguing.

Fergal then visited the secluded house where Niall was ensconced and listening at that house, ‘he heard nothing there but thanksgiving to God for all that they had received, and sweet, quiet harp playing, and the singing of praise songs to the Lord’.¹⁶

Fergal once again visits both places the following morning. First he surveys the aftermath of Áed’s feast:

Early in the morning he entered the great house where the elder son was staying, and he could scarcely pass through the house on account of the vomiting and filth and stench, and the number of dogs that were eating the vomit. And inside all were snoring as if they were dead [...] He was unable to remain inside because of the great foulness of the air in that house...¹⁷

Journeying onward to the house occupied by Niall, Fergal finds the youth already awake and praying to the Lord. Niall rises to greet his father upon sighting him and suggests that he rest until daybreak; once his father wakes, Niall reveals that his entourage only consumed half of the food and drink supplied on the previous night and proceeds to eat the remainder with his father.¹⁸

These two feasts possess a wholly different character, echoing the descriptions of each son and his respective retinues. This contradiction has previously attracted the attention of Kim McCone and Catherine O’Sullivan, who linked both feasts to the legal tri-partite division of feasting found in the eighth-

¹⁵ FA 177.

¹⁶ FA 177. Note that McCone, in his translation, arrives at ‘whores’ and ‘begging poets’ instead of ‘horseboys’ and ‘jugglers’ respectively (*Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p.222).

¹⁷ FA 177.

¹⁸ FA 177.

century Irish law tract *Corus Bescnai*.¹⁹ This latter sources divides all feasting into three categories – the godly feast (*fled déodae*), the human feast (*fled dóendae*), and the devilish feast (*fled demundae*). I believe a look at the full text of this scheme will prove most valuable despite its length:

What is the godly feast? A gift to God, a gift of Sunday on a weekday, celebration of a festival, the feeding of an anchorite, a gift to a church, the feeding of a company, refection on God's guests, comforting the wretched, consecration of a church, feeding paupers, comfortings that may sustain them for the poor. It is required of lords that they enforce each of them on their clients.

What is the human feast? Everyone's alehouse feast for his lord according to his entitlement with which there go according to deserts dinner party (*feis*), supper (*fuiririud*), lunch (*dithit*). In equal divisions of refectations distinctions are arranged, refection of maintenance for a kingdom's allies, for the seeking of truth and right, for answering wrong. Mutual obligation of the Féni in feastings (and) refection. The propriety of service regarding hosting, encampment, pledge, assembly, vengeance, posse and vigilante action, serving God, furthering the work of a lord and of everyone for his lord, for his kin, for his abbot. Protecting his lord with every enrichment and benefit according to God and man as regards good conduct, good law, good attention. For every proper profit, every render, every nobility, every good reputation due to a lord is lawful. Attending to the warding off of every loss from his lord. Every due is bound, levied, enforced, paid for inviolate persons (*do neimthib*) according to God and man.

A devilish feast, i.e. a feast which is given to sons of death (*do macaib bais*) and bad people, i.e. to buffoons (*do druthaib*, but in view of attested confusion between forms of *drúth* and *druí* possibly originally *do druídib* "to druids") and satirists (7 *cáintib*) and begging poets (7 *oblairib*) and farters and clowns (7 *fuirseoraib*) and bandits and pagans (7 *geintib*) and whores (7 *merdrechaib*) and other bad people. For every feast that is not given (read *na:tabarr*) for earthly exchange and is not given for heavenly reward, that feast belongs to the devil.²⁰

Both McCone and O'Sullivan offer Niall's feast as an example of the godly feast and that which Áed presides over as a virtual recapitulation of the devilish

¹⁹ McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, pp. 221-3, and O'Sullivan, *Hospitality in Medieval Ireland*, pp. 184-8.

²⁰ McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, pp. 221-2.

feast.²¹ O'Sullivan believes that these conceptual feasts from *Corus Bescnai* and their 'examples' in *FA 721* may possess biblical and hagiographical antecedents. She writes that the aftermath of the Áed's feast was 'no doubt inspired' by the biblical admonishment from Isaiah 5:11-2, which reads:

Woe to you that rise up early in the morning to follow drunkenness, and to drink in the evening, to be inflamed with wine. The harp, and the lyre, and the timbrel and the pipe, and wine are in your feasts: and the work of the Lord you regard not, nor do you consider the work of his hands.²²

O'Sullivan also provides several positive examples of feasting, drinking and merrymaking from the Bible which she thinks may have inspired the godly feast, in particular the Marriage at Cana (John 2:1-12), the episode in which Jesus provided food for his disciples in the desert (Mark 6:41) and the Last Supper (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 13).²³

McCone points to the fact that both princes eventually succeeded their father in real life, leading him to conclude that while the clerics clearly sought to illustrate a moral point by showing the success of the second son's line due to his holiness, they were also forced to admit that a life in the 'detested' *fíán* may precede a prince's succession to the kingship.²⁴ The presence of the *macc bais* and their various satellites at the devilish feast described in *Corus Bescnai* certainly strengthens McCone's assertion that Aed's company was such a group. The powerful image of dogs licking up vomit from the floor of Áed's hall may also point to the pagan or unholy nature of the feast, particularly when one considers its appearance in the New Testament. In II Peter Christian apostates and sinners are likened to a dog returning to its vomit.²⁵ The image reappears in the *Vita Columbae*, when a priest named Findtan connived in the ordination of his companion Áed the Black, who before his

²¹ McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 223, and O'Sullivan, *Hospitality in Medieval Ireland*, pp. 184-8.

²² Isaiah 5:11-2. See also O'Sullivan, *Hospitality in medieval Ireland*, p. 188. Interestingly, Marged Haycock saw Gildas's much earlier diatribe inspired in part by Isaiah (Haycock, 'Where Cider Ends, There Ale Begins to Reign', pp. 18-9).

²³ O'Sullivan, *Hospitality in medieval Ireland*, p. 184.

²⁴ McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 223.

²⁵ For the biblical citations, see Proverbs 26:11: 'As a dog that returneth to his vomit, so is the fool that repeateth his folly.' and II Peter 2:22: 'For, that of the true proverb has happened to them: The dog is returned to his vomit; and: The sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.'

retirement to Iona was ‘a very bloody man, and a slayer of many men [including] Diarmat, Cerball’s son, who had been ordained, by God’s will, as the ruler of all Ireland’.²⁶ Upon hearing of this irregular ordination, the saint predicts that Áed will soon back-slide: ‘Áed, unworthily ordained, will return like a dog to his vomit, and he will again be a bloody killer’.²⁷ This motif also appears in the Irish penitential literature in connection to the unlikely event of a dog eating the host.²⁸ Strangely, much of the distaste sticks to Áed’s men, rather than their royal leader; perhaps this is further evidence of an ecclesiastical acknowledgement that life in the *fian* precede kingship.

The early Insular hagiographical texts and penitentials further demonstrate an ambivalence towards drinking and feasting. Several of the penitentials address moral failings related to the over-indulgence of food and drink. While some ‘minor’ faults (such as an inability to sing the psalms due to drunkenness, or vomiting from gluttony or drunkenness, or remaining habitually drunk) warrant relatively light penances,²⁹ other actions can demand quite strict punishments. These guides view the attempt to intoxicate others as possibly more serious; a perpetrator doing so ‘for the sake of good fellowship’ (to quote one penitential) merely receives a penance equal to the person who becomes drunk, but one who intoxicates another out ‘of hatred or of wantonness’ so as to ‘confuse’ or ‘ridicule’ his victim, receives a far steeper the penalty.³⁰ As one may expect, vomiting the host due to gluttony or drunkenness demanded a far more serious penance.³¹ While most of these systems of penances appear intended for the use of monks and other ecclesiastics, there are some specifically designed for laymen, typically with much lighter ‘sentences’; for instance, the *Penitential of St. Columbanus* mandates a penance of one week with

²⁶ Adomnan, *Vita Columbae*, i.36, in *Adomnan’s Life of Columba*, edited with translation and notes by Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, revised by Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (Oxford, 1991), pp. 64-7.

²⁷ Adomnan, *Vita Columbae*, i.36, in *Adomnan’s Life of Columba*, pp. 66-7.

²⁸ For the penitential context, see *Penitential of Cummean*, 8, *Bigotian Penitential*, I.3.3, in Ludwig Bieler (ed. and trans.), *The Irish Penitentials*, pp. 113, 215.

²⁹ For example, see *Preface of Gildas on Penance*, 10, *Penitential of Cummean*, 4, in Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials*, pp. 63, 113. For the latter, see *Bigotian Penitential*, I.1 and I.2.1-4, *The Old-Irish Penitential*, Cap I, 15, in Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials*, pp. 215, 261.

³⁰ See *Excerpts from a Book of David*, 3, *Penitential of Cummean*, 2-3, *The Old-Irish Penitential*, Cap I, 7, in Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials*, pp. 71, 113, 260.

³¹ See *Penitential of Cummean*, I, 8, and XI, 7, *Bigotian Penitential*, I.3.1-4, pp. 113, 131, 215.

only bread and water if a layman ‘has become intoxicated, or eaten or drunk to the extent of vomiting’.³²

Magennis and O’Sullivan address this penitential literature in their discussions of drinking and feasting in Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Ireland respectively.³³ O’Sullivan gives these sources a lengthy consideration and suggests that their ‘clear, unambiguous guidelines’ allowed the pious to separate harmless celebration and outright debauchery, with a general upon the social aspect of such consumption.³⁴ While public feasting ‘served to celebrate life and extend goodwill to one’s fellow men’, secret feasting and drinking were condemned as gluttonous.³⁵ O’Sullivan concluded that feasting in its Irish context throughout the medieval period remained a problematic but omnipresent aspect of society for the medieval Irish:

Feasting was a fundamental, and therefore unavoidable, component of their existence so the laity had to be content with uneasy compromise and endless grappling in Life’s everyday affairs.³⁶

i. The Godly Feast

Extending this last assertion across the spectrum of the entire insular world during the mid-eighth to mid-eleventh centuries, we may suppose a similar mind-set amongst the clerical class throughout based upon the previously cited evidence from various ‘ecclesiastical’ sources. Indeed, we find just such a notion in the letters and homilies written by Anglo-Saxon clerics such as Ælfric, Alcuin, and Boniface.³⁷ Alcuin displays the fine line between acceptable drinking and overindulgence when he likens drunkenness to ‘the pit of hell’ yet at other times writes of his enjoyment of

³² *Penitential of St. Columbanus*, 22, in Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials*, p. 105.

³³ Magennis, *Image of Community*, pp. 57-8, O’Sullivan, *Hospitality in Medieval Ireland*, pp. 185-6, 189.

³⁴ O’Sullivan, *Hospitality in Medieval Ireland*, pp. 185-6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ O’Sullivan, *Hospitality in Medieval Ireland*, p. 185.

³⁷ Magennis, *Images of Community*, pp. 53-7, provides a useful summary; he also recognizes this fine distinction.

wine.³⁸ In the *Life of St. Oswald*, the eponymous saint rejects a life of luxury in which he lives off the labours of others but grants to his monks ‘such great benefactions’ in drink, food and clothing that they ‘were able to serve God without grumbling’.³⁹ Later in the same *vita*, Bishop Oda uses a bottle of blessed wine to revive his dying companion Æthelhelm, described as ‘venerable thegn, one who believed faithfully in God’.⁴⁰ The use of blessed wine in this episode may recall the Last Supper.

The marriage of Cana inspired several hagiographical miracle stories from the tenth century, including one found in the *Vita S. Dunstani* and another in Ælfric’s *Life of St. Æthelwold*.⁴¹ In the first of these King Æthelstan plans to visit a female relative who has entered the religious life at Glastonbury, but his messengers discover that she lacks enough mead for the feast the king will expect. Praying to the Virgin, she finds that her supply of mead miraculously lasts for the entire feast without diminishing below a hand’s breadth.⁴² In the latter source, King Eadred visits St. Æthelwold at Abingdon one day to help plan the construction of the monastery, after which the saint invited the king and his men to dine in the refectory. The king heartily agreed, and a similar miracle to that at Glastonbury occurred:

The king was merry and ordered mead to be supplied in abundance to the guests, when the doors had been closed so no one might hurry away and leave the drinking at the royal banquet. To be brief, the servers drew drink for the feasters the whole day in full measure, but the drink in the vessel could not be used up, except to a span’s length, until the Northumbrians were swinishly intoxicated and withdrew in the evening.⁴³

While this feast certainly seems to be a godly or at least human feast, the ‘swinishly intoxicated’ Northumbrians suggest even feasting in such settings needed to be monitored. Elsewhere the *vita* condemns several ‘evil-living clerics’, who ‘repudiated wives whom they had married unlawfully, and took others, and were

³⁸ Magennis, *Images of Community*, p. 55.

³⁹ Byrhtferth of Ramsey, *The Life of St. Oswald*, II.2-3 and III.8: Michael Lapidge (ed. and trans.), *The Lives of St. Oswald and St. Ecgbine* (Oxford, 2009).

⁴⁰ Byrhtferth of Ramsey, *The Life of St. Oswald*, I.4, p. 23.

⁴¹ A point already noted by Levi Roach, ‘Hosting the king: hospitality and the royal *iter* in tenth-century England’, in *Journal of Medieval History* 37 (2011), pp. 34-46 (37).

⁴² Summarized by Roach, ‘Hosting the king’, pp. 36-7.

⁴³ Ælfric, *Life of St. Æthelwold*, 8, in *EHD I*, pp. 831-9 (834).

continually given over to gluttony and drunkenness.⁴⁴ Thus, we can safely conclude that feasting in the early medieval Insular world was a fact of life, but that one could avoid or lessen sin by avoiding gluttony, drunkenness, feasting for its own sake, in secret or with the wrong people.

ii. The Human Feast

What of the human feast? We may find this in a reputedly much older poem which William of Malmesbury includes in his history as it describes King Athelstan's coronation feast:

Wine foams everywhere, the great hall resounds with tumult, pages scurry to and fro, servers speed to their tasks; stomachs are filled with delicacies, minds with song. One makes the harp resound, another contends with praises; there sounds in unison: "To thee the praise, to thee the glory, O Christ." The king drinks in this honour with eager gaze, graciously bestowing due courtesy on all.⁴⁵

While more raucous, the description in the *FA* of the feast held by the victorious Leinstermen following the battle of Almu in 722 may be another example of a human feast. While it lacks any overt references to dues, contracts and the like, the overall atmosphere remains at least neutral for we read that the victors spent that night 'drinking wine and mead cheerfully and happily after winning the battle, with each of them telling his exploits, and they were exhilarated and gloriously drunk'.⁴⁶ The identity of the Leinstermen as the protagonists of this episode strengthens the likelihood that the author would avoid presenting this as a demon feast.

Readers familiar with the anonymous *Life of St. Dunstan* may recall the incident at the coronation feast of Eadwig, in which the young king chose to leave 'the happy banquet and fitting company of his nobles' so as to disport himself with

⁴⁴ Ælfric, *Life of St. Æthelwold*, 12, p. 835.

⁴⁵ William of Malmesbury, *De Gestis Regum Anglorum*, 133, in *EHD I*, pp. 277-83 (279). Whitelock seems to think the poem is pre-Norman but post-dates Æthelstan's death (*EHD I*, p. 277-9).

⁴⁶ *FA* 178 [722].

his future wife and her mother.⁴⁷ Archbishop Oda of Canterbury saw that this snub ‘displeased all the councillors sitting around’ and so advised that someone retrieve the king “so that he may, as is fitting, be a pleasant companion to his followers in the royal banquet”.⁴⁸ Abbot Dunstan and bishop Cynesige quickly locate their absent monarch and inform him that “Our nobles sent us to you to ask you to come as quickly as possible to your proper seat, and not to scorn to be present at the joyful banquet of your chief men.”⁴⁹ This certainly seems to be a human feast, albeit one saved from ruination by the quick thinking clergymen. Levi Roach insightfully recognized that this feast was a very important social and political act, rather than a mere repast; he also views it as a feast gone wrong (in part anticipating a point I will develop shortly).⁵⁰

iii. The Demon Feast

We can also find further examples of the demon feast. One occurs in the *Life of Boniface* after a group of pagan Frisians martyr the saint and his followers. While looting the camp of the slain holy men the Frisians discover a great store of wine, at which point ‘they began to appease the gluttonous voraciousness of their bellies and to inebriate their sodden stomachs with wine’.⁵¹ We may also recall the feast which the chieftain Sawyl and his accomplices made from the food and drink they seized from St. Cadog’s monastery, as well as their subsequent drunken stupor.⁵² Such a feast may also have determined the fate of Archbishop Ælfheah of Canterbury in 1012. We may remember that the Danes who slew him were ‘very drunk’ due to their consumption of wine brought up from the south, and that they brought the archbishop to ‘their assembly’ before killing him.⁵³ Notice that like the feasts described by *Corus Bescnai*, these demon feasts are populated by those inveterate

⁴⁷ *Life of St. Dunstan*, 21, in *EHD I*, pp. 826-31 (829).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Life of St. Dunstan*, 21, p. 830.

⁵⁰ Roach, ‘Hosting the king’, p. 38-9.

⁵¹ Willibald, *Life of St. Boniface*, in *EHD I*, pp. 715-9 (718).

⁵² *Life of St. Cadog*, 16, in *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, ed. A.W. Wade-Evans (Cardiff, 1944), pp. 24-141 (59).

⁵³ ASC C (D, E) 1012.

wagers of unjust war from the last chapter, pagans and brigands. Indeed, the Vikings in 1012 were likely seen as both by the author of the ASC entry.

Two Irish Christian kings die from the sort of overindulgence one would expect at a demon feast. The king of the foreigners Glún Iarn was killed ‘when drunk by his own slave’ in 989, while Donnchadh ua Cerbaill was slain in 1168 by his serving gillie while drunk.⁵⁴ The two entries certainly find the drunkenness of the two victims relevant; was it ecclesiastical disapproval at their overindulgence? Also, the ease with which both men were slain suggest that they were drinking privately, rather than publicly at a human feast – in such a case the drinking would have been for its own sake. In the early-eleventh century, the king of southern Brega, Gilla Mo-Channa son of Fogartach, died from over-indulgence in a drinking-bout with Mael Sechlainn – an unfortunate loss, as the annalist reports that ‘By him the foreigners were yoked to the plough, and two of them made to harrow after them and sow seed from their satchels’.⁵⁵ Once again, it sounds like improper drinking – a drinking bout does not sound like the formalized or ceremonial drinking implied by the human feast.

II. The Division of Feasts in Heroic Sources

i. The Godly Feast in heroic literature

Having suggested that the tri-partite division of feasting explained in *Corus Bescnai* was a concept familiar to churchmen throughout the Insular world from the mid-eighth to the mid-eleventh centuries, can we apply this model to depictions of feasting within our ‘heroic’ vernacular sources? The godly feast seems relatively absent from the sagas and poetry of this time, in contrast with its frequent appearance within those works intended for a more strictly ecclesiastical audience. We may find a single occurrence, however, in *Beowulf* at the point when Grendel first approached Heorot and found within:

⁵⁴ AU 989.3, AU 1168.4.

⁵⁵ AU 1013.4.

There was the sound of the harp, the clear song of the minstrel. He who could recount the creation of man in far off times, spoke; he told how the Almighty made the earth...⁵⁶

While this scene could result from the poet's attempt to portray the pre-Christian Danes as a 'chosen' people, much like the Old Testament Hebrews (in much the same vein as many Old and Middle Irish sources), a song recounting the biblical story of creation would certainly seem the form of entertainment expected at the Godly feast. This feast (and subsequent ones in *Beowulf*) also appears relatively 'civilized' – an ordered, peaceful and happy affair – rather like Niall's 'sober' feast.

ii. The Human Feast in heroic literature

We may seem some indication of a human feast in the establishment and/or reinforcement of hierarchy through seating at the feast, as well as order of service. *The Drunkenness of the Ulstermen (MU)* describes a feast hosted by the Ulster hero Findtan, at which 'Conchobur ordered the drinking house by deeds and divisions and families, by grades and arts, and by gentle manners, all towards the fair holding of the feast', and where Cú Chulainn occupied 'the hero's seat beside the king'.⁵⁷ *The Gododdin* poet may hint at such when he describes Cynon as rightfully sitting 'in the place of honour'.⁵⁸ Such questions of seating and priority of service reappear in *Beowulf*; when our titular hero first arrives in Heorot, a bench is cleared so that all of the Geats may sit together.⁵⁹ Later, when Wealhtheow makes a circuit of the hall to serve mead she first offers the cup to Hrothgar, then 'both tried warriors and youths' and finally the guest Beowulf.⁶⁰

The *curadmír*, or 'champion's portion' may have acted as another method of enforcing the proper hierarchy at the feast. Modern scholars have long recognized that this practice is epitomized in a number of the Irish heroic tales, with many viewing the contest as a real life institutionalized practice of the ancient Celts which

⁵⁶ *Beowulf*, ll. 89-98, p. 39.

⁵⁷ *The Drunkenness of the Ulstermen, EIMS*, pp. 195-6.

⁵⁸ *The Gododdin*, CA.xxxvi, ll. 1-4.

⁵⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 491-4, p. 57.

⁶⁰ *Beowulf*, ll. 620-4, pp. 63-5.

continued into historic times. Kenneth Jackson provides a brief description of this prize:

It was the right of the best hero present to carve the chief carcass for the diners, and this was a practical as well as a symbolic privilege, since the carver was expected to give himself the best joint of meat, the *curadmír* or “Champion’s Portion” [...] Naturally several warriors might demand the privilege, and to make this good each abused the other, quoting discreditable stories about past disgraces which had befallen his rival.⁶¹

The ‘champion’s portion’ may also appear in some Welsh sources. In *The Gododdin* we read that one warrior ‘Firm in guarding the ford, he was proud / When his was the prize portion in the hall.’⁶² In one of the Taliesin *englynion* we read:

This hearth – grey lichen hides it.
It would have been more accustomed to fierce, fearless
swordfighting for its food.⁶³

The poet may allude here to a warrior earning his food through service in battle, although Rowland views this as a reference to a fight amongst the warriors in the hall for the *curadmír*.⁶⁴ We shall return to the concept of fighting for the champion’s portion towards the end of this chapter – when we shall address the possibility that concerns and dissatisfaction with one’s seating and service at such events could result in violence.

iii. The Demon Feast in heroic literature

Perhaps not surprisingly, we find few instances of the demon feast in heroic literature, and those we do discover are populated with reprobates like the *macc bais*, pagans and Vikings. Take for instance the *OE* quasi-saga *Judith* which we discussed earlier in connection with the abandonment of Assyrian commander Holofernes by

⁶¹ Kenneth Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 21-2.

⁶² *The Gododdin*, CA.xciii. ll. 7-8.

⁶³ *The Hearth of Rheged*, ll. 13-5, in *EWSP*, p. 482.

⁶⁴ *EWSP*, p. 569.

his men. Earlier in the poem Holofernes holds a great wine-feast to which he invited all of his *thegns*:

Then to the feast they went to sit in pride
At the wine-drinking, all his warriors
Bold in their war-shirts, comrades in his woe.
There were deep bowls oft to the benches borne,
Cups and full jugs to those who sat in the hall.
[...]
Much bidding the bench-sitters bear their part
Well in the feasting. So the wicked one
Through the day drenched his followers with wine,
The haughty gift-lord, till they lay in a swoon⁶⁵

Holofernes forces his warriors to keep drinking until they pass out in the hall from too much drink, at which point he retires to his tent where the Jewish heroine Judith ostensibly awaits him. Unfortunately for the Assyrian, not all works out according to his plans as he has become rendered insensible by drink and barely reaches his bed before collapsing, at which point his would-be victim Judith beheads him with his own sword.⁶⁶ As we saw earlier, this results in the destruction of his own force as they flee upon discovering his decapitated corpse. As an *OE* composition with a good deal of ‘heroic’ innovation from the biblical original it reflects current strands of thought regarding drunkenness and wicked feasting – the wicked fail to prosper, drunkards come to a bad end, and the two are often the same group!

Malcolm Godden has concluded that the author wished to portray the Assyrians in this story as a type of ‘warrior society’, with their captain Holofernes representing a ‘perversion of the traditional war-leader’ in his determination to force his own men to drink ‘to their own destruction’.⁶⁷ Godden argues that as such the feast in *Judith* departs from its positive and established role in other Old English works such as *Beowulf*, *Maldon* and *The Wanderer*.⁶⁸ While Godden may be correct in this assumption, I think one should remember the pagan identity of the feasters

⁶⁵ *Judith*, ll. 15-9, 27-30, in Albert S. Cook and Chauncey B. Tinker (eds.), *Select Translations from Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1935), p. 122.

⁶⁶ *Judith*, ll. 61-111, in *Select Translations from Old English Poetry*, pp. 123-4.

⁶⁷ Malcolm Godden, ‘Biblical literature: the Old Testament’, in *TCCOEL*, pp. 206-226 (221).

⁶⁸ Malcolm Godden, ‘Biblical literature’, p. 220.

noted above – it seems *Judith* automatically attributes demon feasting to pagans and ‘bad people’ in a manner similar to those sources created for an ecclesiastical audience.

In *The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn and the Only Jealousy of Emer*, Emer paints a picture of over-indulgence resulting in indolence and lethargy when she attempts to rouse Cú Chulainn to action:

“Long sleep is a draught added to satiety;
Weakness is next to death.
Throw off sleep, the peace that follows drink,
Throw it off with great energy.”⁶⁹

While Cú Chulainn eventually rises from his bed, the message seems clear here – drinking to excess leads to feebleness and defeat, while moderation leads to those things coveted by warriors, victory and valour.

In all, it seems that we don’t have much evidence for Godly or demon feasts in the heroic poems and sagas, while the human feast seems slightly better represented. Yet such conclusion remains quite premature, as we shall see towards the later parts of this chapter. For the time being I would like to take a brief discursion into the connections between drinking and violent death in this literature.

III. Connections between Drink and Death in Heroic Literature

Some of the artists responsible for the vernacular heroic literature made exceedingly clever use of double-entendres or symbolism between feasting/drinking and death or killing. The widespread use of the ‘beasts of battle’ – that is, battlefield scavengers such as eagles, ravens and wolves devouring the corpses of the slain, is justifiably well known. We may find other instances, however, which more directly equate blood to drink – such as Thord Kolbeinsson’s claim in one of his lays that ‘The wolves enjoyed the grey beasts’ ale’ following a battle.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn*, in *EIMS*, pp. 164-5.

⁷⁰ Thord Kolbeinsson, *Eiríksdrápa*, 14: *EHD I*, p. 307. In fn. 6, Whitelock identifies this ale as blood (*EHD I*, p. 307).

Ifor Williams made an early observation of such poetic art in *The Battle of Gwen Ystrad*, when he pointed out the ambiguous meaning of the line ‘Their lords marvel at Idon’s lavish wine; / Waves wash the tails of their horses.’⁷¹ Jarman saw it as a ‘savage and grotesque sarcasm’ if translated as ‘their lords were drunk on Idon’s plentiful wine’ rather than ‘Their lords wondered at Idon’s rich wine’.⁷² Looking throughout the works of the Insular world during these centuries will reveal more such play with words. The work *The Head of Urien* appears to give a neat double-entendre when the poet tells us that ‘I carry a head from the side of the hill and on his lips is fine foam of blood.’⁷³ Normally one would expect the foam from beer or ale on the lips of a drinker – but here the drink is replaced by blood.

This imagery like the beasts of battle appears throughout the Insular world. We may recall King Hrothgar’s description what happened to those warriors who tried to stand against Grendel:

“Then in the morning when day dawned, this mead-hall, noble court, was stained with gore, all the bench-boards drenched with blood, the hall full of gore fallen from swords.”⁷⁴

The bench-boards, normally stained by spilled beverages, are now coated with blood; the hall of mead is now a hall of gore. In the Irish *Tryst after Death* we read that the hero Donall was ‘he of the red draught’ and that:

The three Eogans, the three Flanns, they were
renowned outlaws;
By each of them four men fell, it was not a
coward’s portion’⁷⁵

This second bit of verse returns to the idea of the champion’s portion (here described as ‘not a coward’s portion’), strengthening the possibility that the ‘red draught’ of Domnall may refer to the blood he shed in battle.

⁷¹ *The Battle of Gwen Ystrad*, ll. 21-2.

⁷² Jarman, ‘Taliesin’, in *A Guide to Welsh Literature, Volume I*, pp. 51-67 (59).

⁷³ *The Head of Urien*, 18; in Rowland (ed. and trans.), *EWSP*, pp. 477-8 (478).

⁷⁴ *Beowulf*, ll. 484-7, p. 57.

⁷⁵ *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry*, translated by Kuno Meyer (London, 1913), ll. 41-2, 45-8, p. 10.

The Gododdin maintains its superlative treatment of alcohol amongst the Insular literature of the late first millennium with its shared vocabulary of battle and drinking. Just to give a few examples, the warrior Cibno mab Gwengad serves as ‘battle’s speckled wine-steward’, Gwaednerth fab Llywri would lift a spear ‘like a glass of sparkling wine’ and the hero Ithael ‘was as greedy for corpses / as for quaffing mead or wine’.⁷⁶ Perhaps the most sanguine of these *awdlau* includes the boast:

Were it wine, the blood of all those you struck dead,
You’d have plenty for three years and four:
You’d make short work of it for your steward.⁷⁷

These connections between drink and drinking on the one hand and fighting and death on the other may originate from a more widespread concept found lurking within Old English literature, one which may also bear a connection to the *talú medd* emblem – the *poculum mortis*, or ‘cup of death’. While most scholarship has concentrated upon this image within its Anglo-Saxon context, it may have a more widespread application. Before continuing, however, this device warrants a brief historiography. In the mid-twentieth century Carleton Brown formulated a powerful argument for the existence of the ‘cup of death’ within the thought-world of Anglo-Saxon clergy, tying it to the phrase *ealuscerwen* found in *Beowulf*.⁷⁸ He did not connect it directly to the vows made by Beowulf, but merely argued that both the phrase ‘bitter beer-sharing’ (as found in *Andreas*) and ‘mead-distribution’ (*meoduscerwen*) were figurative terms used to refer to a ‘fatal catastrophe’.⁷⁹

Some later authors have seen behind this mere symbolism; for instance Enright argues that Germanic literature equated sharing out drink with joy and prosperity, and hence their opposites (such as bitterness and loss) demanded the inverse act of the distribution of a ‘poisonous’ drink, or the *poculum mortis*.⁸⁰ Russom on the other hand believes that the *poculum mortis* seen in heroic literature is a Christian reflection on a pre-Christian tradition found throughout Germanic

⁷⁶ *The Gododdin*, CA.ciii, l. 7, CA.lxv, ll. 7-8, CA.lxxi B, ll. 5-6.

⁷⁷ *The Gododdin*, CA.xx B, ll. 4-6.

⁷⁸ Carleton Brown, ‘*Poculum Mortis* in Old English’, *Speculum* 15 (1940), pp. 389-99 (394-5).

⁷⁹ Brown, ‘*Poculum Mortis* in Old English’, p. 395.

⁸⁰ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p. 95.

societies, in which a human sacrifice or executed criminal is given an intoxicating ‘last drink’ before death.⁸¹ He refers to this as a ‘whetting cup’ and suggests that a variant was used to exact vows from warriors in the hall (and from which are derived the cups Wealhtheow offers Beowulf in Heorot, as we shall discuss shortly).⁸² Russom also concludes that Christian writers retained the death-cup motif but cast it in a negative light as it was ‘intimately associated’ with pagan rituals.⁸³

P.L. Henry tied *ealuscerwen* and *meoduscerwen* directly to the *talû medd* concept without considering the ‘cup of death’, with the argument that *ealuscerwen* and *meoduscerwen* originally referred to ‘the bitterness of the chieftain’s ale to men who have to pay with their lives for it’ and only later came to mean in more general terms ‘dire distress’.⁸⁴ Just as the mead in *The Gododdin* was bitter because the men paid for it through loyal service which led to their deaths, so too did the mead at Heorot result in the death of those Danish warriors who accepted it and stood by their lord to endure the ravages of Grendel.⁸⁵ Jenny Rowland added the *poculum mortis* to this mental connection between alcoholic drink and bitterness, with the former device as one largely derived from the real-life ideal that warrior who received mead or drink from his lord would often die as a result. While she claims like Henry that the connection of drink with ‘death, bitterness, terror’ arose primarily from the heroic milieu in which the acceptance of drink became a symbol ‘for the contract between lord and man’ with its potential consequences, she admits that Christian usages of the drink of death may have reinforced such thinking.⁸⁶

The *Exeter Riddle Book* includes a rather powerful riddle which includes the following lines:

I vomit forth the broth
Of fatal, piercing poison that erewhile
I swallowed.

⁸¹ Russom, ‘The Drink of Death in Old English and Germanic Literature’, pp. 175-80.

⁸² Russom, ‘The Drink of Death in Old English and Germanic Literature’, pp. 182-4.

⁸³ Russom, ‘The Drink of Death in Old English and Germanic Literature’, pp. 183-4.

⁸⁴ P.L. Henry, ‘Beowulf Cruces’, *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Sprachforschung* 77 (1961), pp. 140-59 (153-4). Henry cites Ifor Williams’s *Early Welsh Poetry* (1954), pp. 67-8, as well as G. Williams, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry*, (1953), p. 20). Note, however, that Henry does not mention the ‘cup of death’ directly, merely tying *talû medd* directly to ‘bitter beer-sharing’ and ‘mead-distribution’.

⁸⁵ Henry, ‘Beowulf Cruces’, pp. 154-7.

⁸⁶ Rowland, ‘OE *Ealuscerwen* / *Meoduscerwen*’, p. 10.

[...]
He makes dear purchase of the treacherous draught,
The full, stern cup which robs him of his life!⁸⁷

While the translator gives the correct answer to this riddle as ‘a bow’, the riddle-crafter seems to have been familiar with the image of the dreaded *poculum mortis*. The phraseology of the last two lines even implies an exchange in which the mead costs the imbibor his life. Could this indicate an awareness of *talú medd* as well? Such an observation may not directly provide the pedigree of the *poculum mortis* motif, but this riddle does hint that the *talú medd* and *poculum mortis* had become connected by the late-tenth century, at least in the thoughts of the scribe who composed or copied this piece of verse.

Sometimes, an author uses the drink of death as a metaphor for death in battle, with the protagonist serving as the cup-bearer or lord who provides the drink to his opponents. When Fer Rogain spies out Da Derga’s hostel in *TBDD* he warns his fellow reavers that Conall Cernach’s ridged spear will ‘serve the drink of death to many’, and that the Lúin of Celtchair wielded by Dubthach Doeltenga will ‘serve drinks of death to a multitude tonight’.⁸⁸ After he escapes from the hostel, Conall Cernach uses this same metaphor for slaying when he displays his hacked-up weapon arm and boasts ‘Many there are unto whom it gave drinks of death tonight in front of the Hostel’.⁸⁹ The enemy warriors, instead of the usual or customary hospitality ascribed to the hall in much of the vernacular literature of this period, received a far more bitter reward when they attempted to enter the hall to fight. G.V. Smithers at an early date noted this metaphor but restricted himself to the Old English context, causing him to suspect a Germanic origin.⁹⁰ Smithers also recognized the identity of the warrior as the link between the two aspects of the metaphor, both as the most frequent member of society to participate in battle and as one of the primary

⁸⁷ *The Bow*, ll. 8-10, 13-4: Cook and Tinker (eds. and trans.), *Select Translations from Old English Poetry*, p. 73.

⁸⁸ From Gantz’s translation in *EIMS*, pp. 89 and 97. Stokes translates the first instance totally differently and renders the second as the plural ‘drinks of death’ (*TBDD*, pp. 301-2).

⁸⁹ *TBDD*, p. 329.

⁹⁰ G.V. Smithers, ‘Five Notes on Old English Texts’, *English and Germanic Studies* 4 (1951-2), pp. 65-88 (72-3).

recipients of the liquor served in the hall during feasts (the latter as an act of potential ‘social significance’).⁹¹

IV. *Talu Medd*, Vows and the Lady with a Mead Cup

At this juncture, we may return to the theme of *talu medd* armed with our discoveries in the last several sections – that ecclesiastically-trained authors may have conceived of all feasting as falling into three categories, that the Godly and human feast could sometimes fail and that there was a shared imagery between drinking in the hall and fighting, beyond *talu medd*. We may also examine two important appurtenances to ‘earning his mead’, the swearing oaths over drink and drink service by the leading noblewoman in the hall.

i. *Talu Medd* – ‘Earning his Mead’

Many earlier critics have discerned a dark undercurrent present within this motif as it is presented in the literature, in which the author will frequently conjure forth a tone of disquiet over the fatal consequences that arise from the acceptance of ‘mead’ in return for military service, although they seldom connect it like Rowland to the *poculum mortis*.⁹² In the *englyn Marwnad Cynddylan* the titular prince ‘paid dearly for the beer of Tren’; elsewhere in the *Heledd* poems it becomes clear that Cynddylan may have fallen in battle while defending Tren.⁹³ In *The Gododdin*, we find warriors who partook of mead that was not only described as ‘yellow’ or ‘sweet’ mead, but also ‘ensnaring’; later this beverage receives the sobriquets of both a warrior’s ‘portion’ and his ‘poison’.⁹⁴ Whilst forced to acknowledge this discordant note, most historians ascribed it to a bittersweet realization of the inevitable deaths that resulted when warriors fulfilled their oaths and sacrificed their lives to defend

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Evans, *Lords of Battle*, pp. 61-2, 108-9; others appear elsewhere.

⁹³ *Lament for Cynddylan*, ll. 7-9, *MWP*, p. 89-91 (89).

⁹⁴ From *The Gododdin*, CA.xi, l. 3, CA.viii, l. 2, and CA.xv, ll. 8-9, *MWP*, pp. 46-8.

lord and land.⁹⁵ Roberta Frank sees this ‘reciprocity between a lord’s mead and his retainers’ blood’ as a poetic device common to both Anglo-Saxon and Welsh poetry (as well as that composed in many other languages), but unlike many others she recognizes that it is a common image, not necessarily a common reality.⁹⁶

Questions remain regarding *talû medd*, however. In particular, how much does the image of ‘earning one’s mead’ differ from the ‘reality’, and why would the authors consistently use alcoholic drink as the ultimate symbol of reward or payment for military service, rather than any of the other possible rewards for military service such as slaves, jewellery, livestock, heirlooms or land? According to the accepted argument, we will never hear that a given warrior has ‘earned his slaves’ through faithful service or ‘earned the sword of Athelstan’ by dying for his lord. This suggests that the authors are singling out the consumption of mead for purposes beyond a bald recapitulation of a real-life exchange or an as an arbitrary symbol of the lord-follower relationship. What could the motif ‘earning one’s drink’ symbolize? We will address this fundamental question shortly, but before proceeding I believe we must first address two possible concerns regarding the use of *talû medd* within the ‘heroic’ literature – is mead the only alcoholic drink singled out for use, and is the motif ubiquitous throughout the literature?

A dispute has already emerged regarding the first question, particularly within Anglo-Saxon scholarship. Christine Fell reached three major conclusions in an early foray into this question, two of which are of primary interest at present.⁹⁷ First, she concluded that mead in Old English and Old Norse poetry carried powerful emotive aspects; as an ‘archaic and rare’ drink in historical times, it became in her words ‘very closely linked with the loyalties and patterns of the heroic code, a code which looks much more to an ideal past than an actual present, and in which the relationship between loyalty and the provision of drink is neatly underlined by *Wealtheow*’.⁹⁸ Secondly, she observed that poets themselves were more concerned

⁹⁵ BWP, p. 65, Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 95-7, Rowland, ‘OE *Ealuscerwen* / *Meoduscercwen*’, p. 2

⁹⁶ Roberta Frank, ‘*The Battle of Maldon and Heroic Literature*’, in *TBOM 991*, pp. 196-219 (200-1).

⁹⁷ The third conclusion was that in Old English the word *beor* referred to a potent drink made from fermented honey and various fruit juices which boasted an alcohol content of up to 18% (Fell, ‘Old English *Beor*’, pp. 76-95 (90-1)).

⁹⁸ Fell, ‘Old English *Beor*’, pp. 80-1.

with the technical demands of their poetry (such as rhyming and alliteration) than with giving an accurate representation of exactly what beverage was quaffed in the hall.⁹⁹ Thus, Fell proposes that mead was the heroic drink of choice due to its prestigious connections with ideas of loyalty but that in many cases this image would not reflect real-life alcohol consumption in the period in which the surviving poetry was composed.

Magennis disputes Fell's first conclusion when he asserts that drinks such as wine and beer could also carry associations of 'loyalty and heroism', but he agrees with her hypothesis that considerations of verse frequently overruled any desire to accurately depict the exact drink presented to fighting-men of the war-band.¹⁰⁰ Despite Magennis's arguments and Fell's admission, however, many recent scholars have not completely abandoned their belief in the existence of a hierarchy of drinks with mead occupying the top spot. As an example, Stephen Evans notes the occasional use of other drinks in the same capacity of *talû medd* but he contends that mead remained the most commonly encountered drink in this equation.¹⁰¹ Irish and Welsh scholars tend to view medieval consumption of mead as very much alive.¹⁰² Catherine O'Sullivan flatly stated that mead was an 'ancient Indo-European intoxicant' which was the chosen beverage at medieval Irish feasts.¹⁰³ Marged Haycock also upheld mead as the 'top drink in literature' with wine a 'close second', and added that 'Mead in the early Welsh poetry is the central symbol of the sustenance of the war-band, its solidarity and community of purpose.'¹⁰⁴

Haycock undermines her own argument, however, when she amply demonstrates the vast rhyming and alliterative superiority of the Welsh word for mead, *medd*, over that for ale, rendered variably as *cwr(w)f*, *cwr(y)f* and *cwrw*. The word *medd* alliterates with the Welsh word meaning 'to get drunk', 'yellow', 'sweet' and 'honey', while simultaneously serving as a homophone for *medd* in the sense of

⁹⁹ Fell, 'Old English *Beor*', p. 82.

¹⁰⁰ Magennis, *Images of Community*, pp. 45-6. See also Hagen, *A Second Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food & Drink, Production & Distribution*, pp. 204-6.

¹⁰¹ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p. 95, and Evans, *Lords of Battle*, p. 106.

¹⁰² O'Sullivan, *Hospitality in medieval Ireland*, p. 86.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Haycock, 'Where Cider Ends, There Ale Begins to Reign', pp. 6, 7 and 13. For evidence for her first assertion, she cites various Welsh law texts which equated mead four times the value of ale, as well as later poems (p. 7).

‘possession’ or ‘dominion’ – both of which could relate to concepts of sovereignty.¹⁰⁵ Lenited and nasalized, *medd* could even become identical to *bedd*, meaning ‘grave’.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, puns could frequently occur in Irish works between *laith*, ‘drink’, and *flaith*, ‘sovereignty’.¹⁰⁷ So, mead may have emerged as the war-band drink *par excellence* simply by dint of its verse properties. Its natural rhyming with *bedd* would only help amplify its connection with death in battle.

So, we can suggest that mead may have attained its position by dint of being an alcoholic drink consumed in the hall which has fortunate rhyming properties. What about the distribution of the statements in the ‘heroic’ literature to the effect that a warrior ‘earned his mead’ – does this appear universally throughout the source material? A quick look at the major works of heroic literature in the Insular world reveals that this may not be the case. For instance, we fail to discern it within the Taliesin poetry with two possible exceptions. The first of these occurs in the poem *The War Band’s Return* when the poet writes that one may find at Urien’s court ‘Throughout one year one steady outflow: Wine, bragget, mead, valour’s reward.’¹⁰⁸ While the statement that warriors ‘earned’ their mead does not appear in the source verbatim, I admit that the intention of the poet’s metaphor of ‘valour’s reward’ for drink seems pretty clear – that the drink provided served as a reward for bravery upon the battlefield, or a symbol for other rewards. Likewise, *In Praise of Rheged* contains the lines ‘I too was made drunk by mead-drink / From a dauntless bold man, fierce in pursuit’.¹⁰⁹ Here someone, likely Urien, gave the poet drink but the verses fail to attach this to military service.

Moving on to the remaining references, the first is the Heledd’s poet wry comment that Cynddylan paid for the mead of Tren. Another work, the *Armes Prydein*, utilizes a more ironic form of *talû medd*:

The high king’s stewards will not win praise,
Nor Saxon stalwarts, savage though they be,
No delight in getting drunk at our expense
Without paying the fate for as much as they gain,

¹⁰⁵ Haycock, ‘Where Cider Ends, There Ale Begins to Reign’, pp. 11-2.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p. 264.

¹⁰⁸ *The War Band’s Return*, ll. 1-2, *MWP*, pp. 41-2 (41).

¹⁰⁹ *In Praise of Rheged*, ll. 29-30, in *The Triumph Tree*, p. 86.

With sons orphaned and others stiff with cold.¹¹⁰

While we have no direct statement to the effect that a warrior earns his drink, the poet's argument that Saxon warriors should pay with their lives for 'getting drunk' at the expense of the Welsh would suggest that these men took on the risks of military service in return for alcoholic drinks. In a twist, the poet hopes the enemy warriors will only earn their mead when they are slain. As a final bit of Welsh evidence from outside of *The Gododdin*, we have a rather straightforward line of verse from *Canu Llywarch Hen* translated by Jenny Rowland which implores its subject, 'O warband, do not flee. After mead do not seek disgrace.'¹¹¹ Once again the direct formula is avoided, but the meaning remains very clear.

I could not find a single *direct* reference to earning one's mead in *Beowulf*, despite Jackson's assertion to the contrary. He draws attention to Wiglaf's attempt to rally his fellow thegns to face the dragon (a quote which we reviewed earlier in connection with the more general image of loyalty):

"I remember the occasion on which we drank mead, when in the beer-hall we promised our lord, who gave us these rings, that we would repay him for the war-equipment, the helmets and hard sword, if any such need as this were to befall him."¹¹²

While Jackson argues that Wiglaf's boast constitutes evidence of the notion that a warrior should 'earn his mead', one can see from a careful reading of this passage that the warriors actually owe their lord loyalty in return for the battle equipment he has granted them, not the mead he provided in the hall – rather, the drink acts as an adjunct to the agreement, particularly as the men made 'promises' over the drink. This would support Rowland's assertion that tangible items appear more prominently than drink as the proper reward for a loyal and effective warrior in Old English verse. We see this again when the poet describes the rewards which Beowulf receives from Hrothgar following his success against Grendel:

¹¹⁰ *Armes Prydein*, ll. 99-103, *MWP*, pp. 115-20 (117).

¹¹¹ Rowland, 'OE *Ealuscerwen* / *Meoduscercwen*', p. 3.

¹¹² *Beowulf*, ll. 2633-8, p. 161.

Then, as a reward for victory, Healfdene's brand presented Beowulf with a golden banner, decorated war-standard, a helmet and coat of mail; many saw a famous costly sword carried before the hero. Beowulf partook of a goblet in the hall; he had not need to be ashamed in front of the marksmen for that gift. I have not heard of many men more heartily giving to others on the ale-bench four such treasures decked with gold.¹¹³

While the second sentence alone may lead one to view the drink in the goblet as 'the gift', the preceding and subsequent sentences show that it is far more likely that 'the gift' actually refers to the four items Beowulf received – the banner, war-standard, armour and sword

The *talū medd* motif may not be entirely absent from *Beowulf*, however.

Wealhtheow may hint at such a symbolic exchange when she tries to threaten Beowulf into leaving Heorot so as to leave the way clear for her sons' succession:

"Here every warrior is true to the other, gentle of heart, faithful to the leader of men; the thanes are united, the nation quite prepared, the noble men, having drunk, will do as I ask."¹¹⁴

Wealhtheow here boasts to Beowulf that the warriors in the hall will support her against Beowulf should he choose to ignore her plea that he support her sons' accession to the throne rather than his own. The warriors will do as she says because they have 'drunk'; while this may simply indicate a lack of hesitation to engage in ill thought-out violence due to inebriation, her earlier references to faithfulness likely indicates that the men will feel impelled to support her and/or Hrothgar because they have accepted drink from her hands.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ *Beowulf*, ll. 1020-9, p. 83.

¹¹⁴ *Beowulf*, ll. 1228-31, p. 93.

¹¹⁵ We will discuss Wealhtheow's role as cup-bearer shortly. Glosecki translates the relevant lines quite differently than most critics, leading him to see no hostility on the part of Wealhtheow (Stephen O. Glosecki, 'Beowulf and the Queen's Cup: Determining the Danish Succession', in Magennis (ed.), *The Power of Words*, pp. 368-96). Russom sees the duty of the warriors as 'no more than an acceptance of hospitality with consequent obligations' (Russom, 'The Drink of Death in Old English and Germanic Literature', p. 182). Helen Damico, Michael Enright and Stephen Evans all see Wealhtheow threatening Beowulf with the *talū medd* obligation the warriors in Heorot owe her, but Enright and Evans see these as empty words, with the war-band only owing reciprocal loyalty to Hrothgar (Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 23-4, Evans, *Lords of Battle*, p. 107). Damico on the other hand sees her threat as very real, with Wealhtheow commanding the obedience of the warriors in the hall to the same degree as Hrothgar (Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (Madison, 1984), pp. 23, 40).

The Battle of Maldon (TBOM) also lacks any overt instances in which a warrior is said to earn his mead, but the fragment *Fight at Finnsburh* does contain the reference noted earlier by Jackson, in which the poet praises Hnaef's followers for their performance:

Never have I heard tell in mortal strife of sixty conquering fighters bearing themselves better and more worthily, nor ever did men pay better for the shining mead than did his liegemen yield return to Hnaef.¹¹⁶

Talu medd is absent from most of the Ulster Cycle, although it does appear in the Irish saga *The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu (TESU)* with a rather nasty twist. After Conchobor murders the sons of Uisliu (thereby betraying the guarantees of Fergus, Dubthach and Cormac), Deirdriu laments in a poem:

“Fair Fergus betrayed us
after bringing us across the sea;
he sold his honour for beer,
his great deeds are no more.”¹¹⁷

Here we have perhaps the most outright example of ‘Earning one’s mead’ in the Irish sagas, albeit in a negative form – while Fergus did not earn his drink through death or even participation in battle, Deirdriu believes that he chose the beer provided by Conchobar over his oaths to her and the sons of Uisliu. Thus, Deirdriu turns the motif on its head, at least in terms of the currently prevailing view of ‘earning one’s mead’ as a positive action, as Deirdriu views Fergus’s actions in return for drink as dishonourable ones.

From amongst the Scandinavian poetry set in an Insular context, we can find a few scattered and mostly obscure references to the concept of ‘earning his mead’. In *The Death-Song for Eirik Bloodaxe (Eiriksmaal)*, the skald presents the slain king Eirik approaching Valhalla, at which point Odin says:

“I woke the Einherjar
Told them to get up,

¹¹⁶ *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment*, translated by John R. Clark Hall, p. 139.

¹¹⁷ *The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, in Gantz, p. 266.

To strew the benches,
 To clean the beer-casks,
 Valkyries to bear wine,
 As if a lord was coming.”¹¹⁸

It seems clear that the skald envisions Eirik receiving wine in the mead hall of Odin as part of his reward for valiant efforts as a warrior; as in Heorot, a woman (here a valkyrie) serves the drink to the slain hero. Unlike most other examples of the notion *talv medd*, however, Eirik receives his mead after his death in battle, not beforehand. We may also see two examples in the *Thorfinnsdrapa* but these more likely present the lord drinking rather than his men.¹¹⁹

Finally we may return to *The Gododdin*, the source *par excellence* for both references to alcohol, and earning one’s mead – the so-called A version contains over fourteen direct instances in which the subject(s) earned his drink and/or fought for drink, twelve in which subject(s) drink prior to battle, and ten which ascribe dangerous or sinister qualities to alcoholic beverages.¹²⁰ The B version contains a slightly different composition of alcohol-related *awdl*, with only four direct references to the subject(s) earning or fighting for mead, five which present the warrior(s) as attacking after drinking, and none which ascribe any dangerous qualities to drink. Also, three *awdl* from *The Gododdin* (one in the A version, two in the B version) present food or feasting as the reward for a warrior, with one of these very likely referring to the aforesaid champion’s portion – ‘Firm in guarding the ford, he was proud / When his was the prize portion in the hall.’¹²¹ Another records of its subject, ‘Since he feasted, he bore great hardship’.¹²²

It seems, then, that this ideal of a warrior earning his drink really only blossoms into its fullest expression within *The Gododdin*; while we have seen that this motif is by no means restricted to the work, the suggestion by Jenny Rowland

¹¹⁸ See *Eiríksmal*, ll. 5-10, in *The Triumph Tree*, p. 150.

¹¹⁹ See *Thorfinnsdrapa*, ll. 1-8, in *The Triumph Tree*, p. 170.

¹²⁰ For the first group see *The Gododdin*, CA.ii, CA.iv, CA.v, CA.xx A, CA.xxx, CA.xxxi, CA.xxxiv, CA.xxxv, CA.xxxix A, CA.lxii, CA.lxiii A, CA.lxxviii, CA.lxxxi, and CA.lxxxix. For the second, see *The Gododdin*, CA.iii, CA.ix, CA.xiii, CA.xxi, CA.xxii A, CA.xxv, CA.xxxii, CA.lix, CA.lx, CA.lxi A, CA.lxxxiv, and CA.lxxxvi. Finally, for the final group, see *The Gododdin*, A.viii, A.xi, A.xv, A.xxx, A.lx, CA.lxi A, CA.lxxiv, CA.lxxviii, CA.lxxxiv, and CA.lxxxvi. Note that the third group in some cases crosses over with those *awdl* in the first two groups.

¹²¹ *The Gododdin*, CA.xciii, ll. 7-8. The other two instances are CA.lxxvii and CA.ci.

¹²² *The Gododdin*, CA.lxxvii, l. 7.

and Marged Haycock that it stands out due to its treatment of drink and drinking may have some merit.¹²³ Interestingly, Haycock writes in a footnote found within ‘*Where Cider Ends, There Ale Begins to Reign*’ that she agrees with John T. Koch’s assertion that this utilization of drink and drinking appears most clearly expressed in the ‘B2’ text (the eighteen final *awdl* of the B text) – an argument for which, as noted above, I find little support due to the far greater number of references to drink and drinking within the A version of *The Gododdin*, even when one considers its overall greater number of *awdlau*.¹²⁴

As a last note, I would like to also present some evidence from outside of the medieval Insular context. Dwight Heath, a sociologist studying various cultures throughout history, has argued that ‘Drinks were used to recognize and reward service and to instill or reinforce solidarity and loyalty among subordinates’.¹²⁵ He specifically notes the use by the ancients of ‘exotic and imported beverages’ for feasting, which acted to forge clientage and win authority.¹²⁶ Apparently, a host who ‘lavishly serves drinks usually anticipates some sort of eventual reciprocity’.¹²⁷ While Heath’s conclusions may give some support to the view that the authors of the vernacular sagas and poems which we are examining simply present ‘the truth’, I believe it still necessary to proceed with our primary questions regarding the use of *talû medd* by the primary sources – why do the authors use drink as a symbol of service (particularly in certain sources) and what else could it stand for?

ii. Boasts and vows made over drink

¹²³ Jenny Rowland wrote ‘The acceptance of mead and other drinks at the feast and its ramifications is a major motif of *The Gododdin*’ (‘OE *Ealuscerwen* / *Meoduscerwen*’, p. 2), while Marged Haycock viewed *The Gododdin* as just one of a number of poems in which ‘drinks and drinking [possess] an absolutely central function’, and later argued that ‘In *The Gododdin*, it [mead] is the defining characteristic of the hall at Edinburgh, constantly referred back to and allied with the idea of joint fosterage’; we will address the second part of her statement later (‘*Where Cider Ends, There Ale Begins to Reign*’, pp. 5, 13). When she refers to joint fosterage, I believe she may be referring to some of Enright’s theories regarding the war-band’s method of creating solidarity, addressed shortly.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, fn. 40 on p. 13.

¹²⁵ Dwight B. Heath, *Drinking Occasions: Comparative Perspectives on Alcohol and Culture* (New York, 2007), pp. 187.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

As an ancillary to the subject of earning one's mead, I would also like to discuss the phenomenon found in vernacular saga and poetry of heroes or warriors making boasts and vows over drink. While it does not necessarily transmit a notion of accepting drink in payment, the drink boast or vow made over it serves almost as a contract, at least in terms of these sources, that a warrior will perform certain actions or die in the attempt. Let us look at several examples in our primary sources.

“When I put to sea, occupied an ocean-going boat with my band of men, I resolved that I should once for all carry out the wish of your people, or else fall in slaughter, fast in the grip of the enemy. I shall achieve this deed of heroic courage, or else meet my final hour in this mead-hall.”¹²⁸

With these words, Beowulf has committed himself to either slay Grendel or die trying. Apparently earlier would-be heroes made similar boasts in Heorot to their ultimate detriment, as Hrothgar relates:

“So often champions, drunk with beer, have vowed over the ale-cups that they would await Grendel's attack in the beer hall with terrible blades. Then in the morning when day dawned, this mead-hall, noble court, was stained with gore, all the bench-boards drenched with blood, the hall full of gore fallen from swords. I had all the fewer faithful men, dear companions, for death had taken them off.”¹²⁹

We have already seen part of this quote in connection with images connecting drink and blood, but there is another salient point here. In this case, the boast made proved disastrous, but we must also notice the reference to drunken champions committing themselves to slaying Grendel. Thus, while making vows over drink may be part of the human feast, doing so when one's faculties are dimmed by drink may not qualify as a proper human feast.

Such promises are not unique to *Beowulf* or even to late Anglo-Saxon poetry – in many instances, the alcoholic drink serves as a powerful ritual component in the making of boasts, promises and vows, at least in the realm of heroic poetry of every society in the insular world of the time. Several *awdl* in the A-version of *The Gododdin* hint at a similar practice of swearing vows, although these verses remain

¹²⁸ *Beowulf*, ll. 632-8, p. 64.

¹²⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 480-8, p. 57.

more open to interpretation than those found in *Beowulf*. For example, the poet recalls how Tudfwlch the Tall ‘drank up the mead-carousal at midnight’, and that when he later rode to battle ‘no great man whose boasts were so expansive ... sped forth to Catraeth’.¹³⁰ Another *awdl* may point to the mind-set mentioned previously in regard to *Beowulf*, that a boast may lead to either fulfilling one’s pledge or dying in the attempt – in this instance the poet tells his audience of how the warrior Ywain ‘fell headlong into the depths, the skilful chief did not hold to his intention’.¹³¹ His ‘intention’ could refer to a boast previously made according to Jackson, although the obscurities in the verse and its context do allow for other interpretations such as his flight in battle before his death.¹³² Finally, we have *awdl* CA.lxix B, in which the poet tells us that on Friday, ‘carcasses were calculated’.¹³³ Jackson sees this entire *awdl* as a literal or symbolic recounting of the build-up to the Battle of Catraeth, with this particular line serving as a euphemism for boasting – the warriors were already promising to kill a certain number of enemy warriors in the upcoming contest.¹³⁴ I am not fully convinced that this *awdl* serves the purpose that Jackson claims, a point I will address more fully soon, but if his assessment is correct then this would once again hint at a connection between drinking and the making of boasts in the hall.

As noted earlier, *TBOM* makes extensive use of such vows – in this case, promises made over drink by Byrhtnoth’s retainers, which only some members of the war-band proceed to fulfil successfully. After Earl Byrhtnoth perishes in *TBOM*, Aelfwine the son of Aelfric attempts to rally the war-band, beginning his exhortation with an urge for them to recall their vows: “Remember the times that we often made speeches over mead, when we raised pledges while sitting on a bench, warriors in the hall, about fierce encounters.”¹³⁵ The context seems clear; in the past, Byrhtnoth’s men had often made promises over mead to accomplish some action during future ‘fierce encounters’. After reminding the warriors of the past vows they had made,

¹³⁰ This from Jackson’s translation of CA.xiii, in *GOSP*, p. 120. Clancy’s version lacks some of the thrust, with the same lines rendered ‘He guzzled mead-suppers at midnight’ and ‘There hurried to Catraeth / No great man with aims / So expansive over mead;’ (*MWP*, ll. 2, 5-7, p. 47).

¹³¹ *The Gododdin*, CA.lxxii, l. 2, translated in *GOSP* on p. 144. Clancy’s version reads ‘the ready lord will not do as he designed’.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *The Gododdin*, CA.lxix B, l. 7. Jackson’s translation is similar – ‘corpses were counted up’ (*GOSP*, pp. 109-10).

¹³⁴ *GOSP*, pp. 109-10.

¹³⁵ Donald Scragg, ‘The Battle of Maldon’ in *TBOM 991*, pp. 26-7.

which may have impelled them to fight more bravely or attempt deeds they otherwise wouldn't have, Ælfwine urges them to fight on, to avenge Byrhtnoth, and states that he will revenge his lord or die – a sentiment precisely expressed by Beowulf in his pledge to Wealhtheow.

The Anglo-Saxon sources have received the most attention in this regard (particularly the first citation from this section involving Beowulf's boast over the cup provided Wealhtheow), with most previous commentators observing such actions in the sagas and poems as simple reflections of reality.¹³⁶ Hugh Magennis and Tom Shippey discuss the importance of 'boasts over liquor (*beot*)' and 'vows made while drinking' in literature, although it is not clear if they view these practices as mirroring real life.¹³⁷ Jenny Rowland, speaking generally of early medieval Welsh society, argued that the feasts given by a lord gave a warrior the chance to make 'heroic vows or boasts', which went beyond the basic 'tacit contract' of *talú medd* between lord and man.¹³⁸ As an interesting aside, Jenny Rowland thinks that such speeches 'helped to bind the warrior more fully with his fellows', a point which may connect to the next ritual we shall discuss, in a few paragraphs.¹³⁹

While I think that some of these findings have merit, I believe that the vows and other utterances made over drink could also serve as a literary device of the same nature as the *talú medd* motif – that it allowed an author or poet to cast his protagonists, the war-band, as men who were not engaged in negative or sinful demon feasts, but rather men who feasted to establish important social contract, promises and agreements, with the concomitant reduction in the sinfulness of their activities. Several reviewers have become fascinated by the identity of the cup-bearer in several of these literary situations – often, the queen or leading noblewoman of the court acts in this role, much as Wealhtheow does in *Beowulf*. This further

¹³⁶ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 17-8, Evans, *Lords of Battle*, pp. 97-9, 107, Nicolas Jacobs, 'The Old English Heroic Tradition in the Light of Welsh Evidence', p. 11, Jenny Rowland, 'Aneirin, The Gododdin', in Thomas Owen Clancy and Murray Pittock (eds.), *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, Volume One: From Columba to the Union (until 1707)* (Edinburgh, 2007), pp. 63-71 (74).

¹³⁷ Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London, 1972), p. 121, Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 47.

¹³⁸ Rowland, 'Aneirin, The Gododdin', p. 74

¹³⁹ Ibid.

modification of the motifs of ‘earning one’s drink’ and the proclamation of vows deserves a brief analysis.

iii. Lady with a mead cup

Helen Damico was one of the first literary critics to propose that Wealhtheow’s circuit of Heorot with mead cup in hand went beyond a mere act of service. She drew attention to the fact that the author described the vessel which Wealhtheow proffered to Beowulf as a *ful*, which in Old English simply meant a ‘goblet’ or ‘cup’.¹⁴⁰ In Old Norse, however, it could also refer to a special vessel used at ‘heathen sacrificial feasting, over which sacred oaths were pledged’, with later saga evidence depicting warriors swearing a vow over such cups once they were consecrated and then draining it.¹⁴¹ She speculates that Wealhtheow’s presentation of the *ful* to Beowulf combined with his subsequent boast and quaffing of its contents formed just such a ritual, one ‘critical’ to the story.¹⁴² Geoffrey Russom similarly describes the vessels which Wealhtheow offered Beowulf as ‘whetting cups’, which demanded a vow from their drinker that would display for the approval of the presenter ‘such heroic virtues as bravery, generosity, and loyalty’.¹⁴³

Enright proposed a far more radical explanation for Wealhtheow’s cup presentation, arguing that it actually recalls a real-life communal drinking ritual which served as a form of ‘communion’ for the war-band, thus helping to create a fictive kinship amongst the war-band’s members and establish its internal hierarchy.¹⁴⁴ He also claimed that such rituals, as they were essentially pagan in character, were actively discouraged by churchmen.¹⁴⁵ John M. Hill agrees with

¹⁴⁰ Damico, *Beowulf’s Wealhtheow*, p. 54. If correct, this may also affect dating of *Beowulf* – such a Scandinavian cultural icon may be more ‘at home’ in a post-Viking *Beowulf*.

¹⁴¹ Damico, *Beowulf’s Wealhtheow*, pp. 55-6, 75.

¹⁴² Damico, *Beowulf’s Wealhtheow*, pp. 55-6, 75. She also draws attention to the fact that both Wealhtheow and the *ful* only appear twice throughout the many drinking scenes in Heorot as further evidence that the former occasions are special (pp. 22-3).

¹⁴³ Russom, ‘The Drink of Death in Old English and Germanic Literature’, p. 182.

¹⁴⁴ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p. 16.

¹⁴⁵ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 16-7. Indeed, he sees the presentation of this practice in written sources such as *Beowulf* as actually more restrained than in reality due to clerical disapproval of the pagan ideas and customs evident in such ritual, with the war-band as the last societal hold-out

Enright regarding the creation of a kinship link between a lord and those who accept drink from him, writing that as Cynewulf's loyal followers 'accepted mead from Cynewulf' and refused Cyneheard's overtures, so they 'keep to the drink confirmed kinship and reciprocity of the mead-hall, heatedly upholding the law of retainer-kinship with their lord and king'.¹⁴⁶

Enright ascribes a particular importance to the role which the queen or wife of the war-band's lord plays in this communion ritual through her presentation of the cup.¹⁴⁷ In essence, he suggests that she acts as one of Hrothgar's tools in maintaining order in his court through establishing hierarchy without unduly ruffling any feathers. Stephen Glosecki also looked to this presentation ritual by Wealhtheow and agrees with Enright that she participates in a bonding ritual that reflects on a one-time reality – he cites the famous *Maxims I* quotation and various wills for Anglo-Saxon noblewomen as proof that 'gold-adorned drinking vessels were clearly associated with noblewomen'.¹⁴⁸ Glosecki disagrees heartily, however, with Enright's estimation of Wealhtheow's power as he believes that Wealhtheow is the true arbiter of rank within Heorot and that this indicates a historic reality.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, he proposes that the coastguard, Wulfgar, and Unferth all 'bristle' at Beowulf's boldness, and that Wealhtheow essentially 'puts him in his place' by serving him last.¹⁵⁰ His first and third arguments seem quite speculative, while the second goes against the evidence reviewed in Chapter 3, which demonstrated that the coastguard and Wulfgar are both quite well-disposed toward Beowulf from the very beginning.

Both Damico and Glosecki attempt to tie Wealhtheow to the Norse valkyries through this mead-cup ritual, as the latter were typically portrayed as offering drinking horns to heroes in Valhalla.¹⁵¹ Damico suggested as well that Wealhtheow recalls several historic and legendary warrior queens, although she relies upon Saxo

against Christianity (pp. 97, 125, and 146). Although note that he earlier claims that writers modeled the behavior of their characters upon that expected by their audience (pp. 41-2).

¹⁴⁶ Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*, pp. 83-4.

¹⁴⁷ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 5-7, 10-12, and 16.

¹⁴⁸ Glosecki, 'Beowulf and the Queen's Cup', pp. 372-5.

¹⁴⁹ Glosecki, 'Beowulf and the Queen's Cup', pp. 376-9 and 392.

¹⁵⁰ Glosecki, 'Beowulf and the Queen's Cup', pp. 379-80.

¹⁵¹ Damico, Beowulf's Wealhtheow, pp. 6, 19, 24-5, 40 and 73, Glosecki, 'Beowulf and the Queen's Cup', p. 395.

Grammaticus's version of essentially pre-historic Scandinavian history in this regard.¹⁵² Additionally, while Elene may be a 'warrior queen', one may wish to remain wary of describing Judith or Juliana in the same way, or interpreting Bede's famous statement regarding Pictish royal succession as an argument for ruling queens in Pictland.¹⁵³ David Wyatt in his recent book *Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain, 800-1200*, has emphasized Wealhtheow's name (which means roughly 'foreign slave') to suggest that such a background is not totally incongruous for a warlord's partner, nor that such an origin would bar her from serving the role Enright initially proposed, that of an aide to her husband's rule of his war-band.¹⁵⁴

Concentrating further upon the use of a woman as a cupbearer in general, however, we have some interesting analogies within our vernacular literary sources. In the saga *Fled Bricrenn (FB)* the three contenders for the champion's portion – Loegaire, Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn – journey to Connacht so that King Ailill and Queen Medb can judge who deserves the honour. As they approach, Medb not only sends naked women to meet the dangerous newcomers and prepares vats of cold water (as noted previously in Chapter 4), but also orders 'Strong ale and sound and well-malted, warriors' keep' for the heroes.¹⁵⁵ We may find an echo of the practice investigated by Enright, in that a princess or woman of the court presents the mead to the warriors. Also, the phrase 'warriors' keep', while not stating outright that the drink is pay, certainly could be interpreted in such a manner – does it keep the warriors healthy, or in attendance?

A second presentation ritual occurs later in the same story when Medb and Ailill decide to prevent violence at their own court by meeting each contender for the champion's portion in private and declaring him the victor. They reward each hero with a drinking cup to serve as the proof of his victory, instructing him to present it as such back in Ulster.¹⁵⁶ Of course, they have already judged the warriors – Loegaire receives a bronze cup with a silver bottom, while Conall Cernach receives

¹⁵² Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow*, pp. 6, 19, 24-5, 40 and 73.

¹⁵³ Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow*, pp. 24-5. Like many others, she ignores the 'when the matter is in doubt' regarding succession through the female line among the Picts.

¹⁵⁴ David Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain, 800-1200* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 113-4, 183.

¹⁵⁵ *Fled Bricrend*, VIII.53: George Henderson (ed. and trans.), *The Feast of Bricriu* (London: 1899), p. 67.

¹⁵⁶ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p. 270 argues that the primary purpose of this presentation is to avoid violence.

one of silver with a gold bottom and Cú Chulainn, their clear favourite, receives a gold cup with ‘birds chased in precious stones at the bottom’, as well as a ‘dragon-stone’.¹⁵⁷ All three cups are presented by Medb to the prospective champion, ‘full of luscious wine’ – which Loegaire and Cú Chulainn drain immediately on the spot!¹⁵⁸ Koch saw this presentation ritual as ‘central’ to the ‘traditional themes’ of the tale from which *FB* sprang, in which Medb performs her ‘etymological function’ of ‘she who intoxicates’.¹⁵⁹ Koch continues, ‘The man who has been tested and proved most worthy must be recognised by the woman whose function it is to choose and reward with the libation in the hall.’¹⁶⁰

Koch may be correct regarding Medb’s importance in this ritual; as often noted by past scholars, Medb’s name is related to the Old Irish word for ‘mead’ and often interpreted as ‘she who intoxicates’ or ‘she who is intoxicated’; the character also may possess an association with sovereignty due to the ‘alcohol-filled cup’ which the ‘woman of sovereignty’, gives to a prospective king to signify his right to kingship.¹⁶¹ While O’Sullivan refers to this view as a ‘well-known’ one, I wonder if Medb’s name grew out of the happy accident of the close connection between the Irish words for drink, *laith*, and sovereignty, *flaith*, noted earlier.¹⁶² One final note on this particular episode – when first summoned to receive his cup, a surly Cú Chulainn kills the messenger with a thrown *fidchell* piece. Medb then arrives and places her arms around his neck – in this scene, it appears Cú Chulainn has symbolically replaced Ailill as her lord.¹⁶³ Such a notion receives further support from his acceptance of the mead cup from her hands and her subsequent visit to his lodgings that night.¹⁶⁴ Medb’s daughter Fínnabair appears in a similar role in *TBC I* when she plies Fer Diad with drinks in an effort to turn him against Cú Chulainn.¹⁶⁵ Michael Enright, however, sees it as an indication that Fínnabair had chosen Fer

¹⁵⁷ *FB*, X.59-62, pp. 77-9.

¹⁵⁸ *FB*, X.59-62, pp. 77-9.

¹⁵⁹ Koch, ‘*Fled Bricrenn*’s Significance’, p. 33.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Mostly taken from O’Sullivan, *Hospitality in medieval Ireland*, p. 71, as well as Koch, ‘*Fled Bricrenn*’s Significance’, p. 33. Between them, they draw heavily from MacCana (1955-6 1958-9 and 1983), Enright, (1996), Jaski, (2000) and McCone (1996).

¹⁶² O’Sullivan, *Hospitality in medieval Ireland*, p. 71.

¹⁶³ *FB*, X.61, pp. 77, 79.

¹⁶⁴ *FB*, X.63, p. 81.

¹⁶⁵ *TBC I*, p. 196.

Díad as her chosen suitor and that her ‘liquor service’ was a preliminary to marriage, rather than the incorporation of Fer Díad into Medb’s personal war-band (as opposed to the more general Connacht army of seventeen separate forces).¹⁶⁶

As Enright suggests that the drink in the war-band’s communion serves as a substitute for blood, Haycock hinted at such an interpretation when she wrote of the use of wine within *The Gododdin* and speculated that it may have been chosen for ‘its colour and the Eucharistic precedent’, although she did not pursue this line of research.¹⁶⁷ We noted earlier the two very similar *awdlau* in which the poet stated ‘Cibno will not say, after battle’s furor, / though he took communion, that he had his due’.¹⁶⁸ These lines have been cited for many years as evidence that *The Gododdin* emerged in a Christian society, as its heroes engage in Christian practices such as communion.¹⁶⁹ Those who disagree with this interpretation usually view the verses in question as either a mistranslation of ‘sharing’ as ‘communion’ or as a later clerical contamination to a largely non-Christian work.¹⁷⁰ Interestingly, we also find warriors in our literary sources often drinking from highly decorated vessels created from or adorned with precious metals (as one may recall from the many descriptions of such activity presented thus far).¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p. 265.

¹⁶⁷ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p. 16, Haycock, ‘Where Cider Ends, There Ale Begins to Reign’, p. 13.

¹⁶⁸ See *The Gododdin*, CA.lxiv A, ll. 7-8, CA.lxiv B, ll. 7-8.

¹⁶⁹ For views that it simply meant Cibno was a Christian, see Jackson, *The Gododdin*, p. 113 and Ceri W. Lewis, ‘The Historical Background of Early Welsh Verse’, in *A Guide to Welsh Literature, Volume I*, 3rd Revised Edition, edited by A.O.H. Jarman and Gwilym Rees Hughes (Cardiff, 1992), pp. 11-50 (37). Jarman also seems to lean toward this view, although he is not certain (*Y Gododdin*, pp. lvi-lvii), while Jenny Rowland argues that these references as nominal, but mostly original and fitting into a society which combined ‘heroic virtues’ with Christian ones (Rowland, ‘Aneirin, The Gododdin, p. 75).

¹⁷⁰ Such as John T. Koch, who saw ‘sharing’ as ‘more consistent with one of the pervasive themes of the elegies’, in which the hero ‘received his mutual share from his lord and court’ (*The Gododdin of Aneirin*, edited by Koch, p. 152). Simon Evans believed all such Christian references within *The Gododdin* were entirely alien insertions by a later religiously-minded monk or scribe (A.O.H. Jarman (ed. and trans.), *Y Gododdin*, pp. lvii-lviii).

¹⁷¹ As an interesting aside, a number of exceptional drinking vessels such as the Bute Mazer and the 12th century drinking bowl from the Dune treasure survive from the later middle ages. Scholars have noted that these items tend to overshadow many contemporary utensils in their craftsmanship and quality, but were by no means rare – even families of ‘middle rank’ likely owned multiple examples. If correct, this could provide further evidence for the widespread existence of such items outside of literature in the early medieval Insular world, as well as the continuing importance of social drinking long past the period studied by this dissertation. For more information, see Geoffrey Barrow, ‘The Social Background to the Bute Mazer’, in *Medieval Art and Architecture in the Diocese of Glasgow*, edited by Richard Fawcett (London, 1998), pp. 122-32 (122-7), Virginia Glenn, ‘Court Patronage in

Could Enright and his colleagues be correct in supposing that public drinking could foster group cohesion and that such ceremonies actual existed in reality? Various anthropological and sociological studies around the world do provide evidence for such rituals. Dwight Heath looked at a number of societies and concluded that group drinking could ‘foster or express social unity’, with toasting as the ultimate expression of this sentiment.¹⁷² Looking to West Africa, van den Bersselaar reports that prior to colonization tribal elders would often incorporate palm wine in a ritualistic manner in all important ‘social contracts’ and occasions, using it to communicate with various gods and ancestors and thus reinforcing their ‘secular power’.¹⁷³ During the days of the slave trade many of the African slave traders sought to obtain European liquor, which they would then distribute within their own social group to secure clients – an exchange some scholars believe bound the recipients ‘socially and spiritually’ to those who distributed the liquor.¹⁷⁴ Dmitra Gefou-Madianou theorized that ‘all male’ drinking events led to the creation of ‘a sense of solidarity and unity’ amongst the participants, which in turn promised a ‘spiritual intoxication’ that stressed sharing, egalitarianism, and intimate relationships among ‘the men who achieve this state of *methexis* (communion).’¹⁷⁵ Her use of the word communion is quite interesting, all the more so because Stephen Wilson in ‘The Magical Universe’ wrote that receiving communion of any sort generally represents ‘a communion literally with one’s neighbours’.¹⁷⁶

Furthermore, there seems to exist some evidence that drinking or a specific drink can become attached to a distinct group within society, even to the point that the group in question actively fosters the connection. As Andrew Sherratt wrote,

Scotland 1240-1340’, in *Medieval Art and Architecture in the Diocese of Glasgow*, pp. 111-121 (115-6).

¹⁷² Heath, *Drinking Occasions*, pp. 172-3.

¹⁷³ Dmitri van den Bersselaar, *The King of Drinks, Schnapps Gin from Modernity to Tradition* (Leiden, 2007), p. 39.

¹⁷⁴ van den Bersselaar, *The King of Drinks*, p. 47.

¹⁷⁵ Dmitra Gefou-Madianou, ‘Introduction’, in *Alcohol, Gender and Culture*, edited by Dmitra Gefou-Madianou (London, 1992), pp. 1-34 (11-3).

¹⁷⁶ Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe, Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London, 2000), p. 464.

Participation in such activities is often a defining characteristic of membership in larger communities or associations [...] the form [...] is often emblematic of their identity, constitution, and structure.¹⁷⁷

Heath also argued that in some places ‘drinking almost serves as an emblem of membership in a social group’.¹⁷⁸ Apparently, in many ‘early’ societies, alcoholic beverages (due to their ‘irregular availability and scarcity value’) took on ‘symbolic functions as a new way to define status’ and were used by the elite to distinguish themselves from the rest of the populace.¹⁷⁹

Interestingly, just as Enright theorized ecclesiastical disapproval for his posited ‘war-band communion ritual’, van den Besselaar found Christian censure of various non-Christian rituals utilizing alcohol in contemporary West Africa due in part to an identification of gin with African traditional religion.¹⁸⁰ A symbol of indigenous belief and/or religion, the consumption of gin in a ritualistic context serves as ‘an essential element of local African traditions’, even as an ‘emblem’ of traditional religion.¹⁸¹ A look at the Irish penitentials reveals a similar concern with pagan ritual connected to consumption; the *Penitential of St. Columbanus* shows great concern for laymen who have ‘eaten or drunk besides temples’ or ‘communicated at the table of demons’, particularly if he did so ‘in worship of the demons or in honour of idols’.¹⁸² Yet, I wonder if such a drink ritual became a syncretistic with Christianity, a clerically-censured derivation from the Eucharist – Heath noted that in some types of ‘folk-Catholicism’ that drunkenness is viewed as a devout act that gives proof of the participants dedication to Catholicism – despite official church disapproval of such departures from orthodoxy.¹⁸³ It seems likely that such rituals or at least sentiments existed in the mead hall from the sheer amount of corollaries from the ancient, medieval and modern worlds, from civilized and ‘primitive’ societies.

¹⁷⁷ Andrew Sherratt, ‘Alcohol and its alternatives: symbol and substance in pre-industrial cultures’, in *Consuming habits: global and historical perspectives on how cultures define drugs*, edited by Jordan Goodman, Paul E. Lovejoy and Andrew Sherratt (London, 2007), pp. 11-45 (12).

¹⁷⁸ Heath, *Drinking Occasions*, p. 174.

¹⁷⁹ Heath, *Drinking Occasions*, p. 185.

¹⁸⁰ van den Bersselaar, *The King of Drinks*, pp. 238, 241.

¹⁸¹ van den Bersselaar, *The King of Drinks*, p. 7.

¹⁸² *Penitential of St. Columbanus*, 24; Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials*, p. 105.

¹⁸³ Heath, *Drinking Occasions*, p. 176.

This leads us back to the concept of *talú medd*. Could our ecclesiastically schooled authors have sought to utilize the language of the human feast to concentrate upon the concept of the mead as payment or a device to further cement the lord-retainer relationship, while brushing over its real-life role in fostering group identity in the mead-hall? The lines immediately preceding those which stated that Cibno took communion lend further credence to this notion; in one version we read ‘Mead payment in mead-horns, / It was made good by corpses’ while the other reads ‘Retribution for mead-payment, / It was made good by corpses’.¹⁸⁴ This further suggests that not only did he not take part in the Christian ceremony of communion, but that the author was at pains to contextualize his ‘communion’ in terms of his arrangement with his lord. This seems to fit better than the alternative, that the author of these *awdlau* subjected Cibno to an ever so slight bit of ridicule, comparing his subject’s drinking before battle to the sacred drinking at the end of a church service, perhaps even exploiting the war-band’s identification with dying for mead or heavy drinking.

I believe that our evidence suggests that *talú medd* and its ancillaries – the practice of making boasts or vows over drink, and the use of ‘the lady with the mead cup’ to reinforce the hierarchy within the war-band established by seating – correlate heavily with sections of the description of a human feast as seen in *Corus Bescnai*, in which I have italicized some of the relevant terms:

Mutual obligation of the Féni in feastings (and) refectation. The propriety of *service regarding hosting*, encampment, *pledge*, *assembly*, *vengeance*, *posse* and *vigilante action*, serving God, *furthering the work of a lord* and of everyone for his lord, for his kin, for his abbot. *Protecting his lord* with every enrichment and benefit according to God and man as regards good conduct, good law, good attention ... Attending to the *warding off of every loss from his lord*.

I propose that the use of *talú medd*, vows over drink and ritualized service by a lady of the court all served as devices by which the poet could paint the feasting and drinking of the war-band as human feasts. Thus, while the feasts in which the aristocratic war-band partook may have differed little from those attended by

¹⁸⁴ CA.lxiv A, ll. 5-6 and CA.lxiv B, ll. 5-6.

díbergaig, pagans and the like, the authors could stress that their heroes were not such men. Instead of indulging in the great sin of the demon feast, they merely partook in a very slight amount of sin as part of a human feast. Once again, we see the use of a literary device to separate the Christian and legitimate war-band, the practitioners of just war, from the rabble of pagans, brigands and low-born men who engage in unjust war. Likewise, the loose woman, camp follower or pagan queen becomes through the device of the lady with a mead cup a legitimizing agent, reinforcing the ordered and contractual nature of the whole affair. This does not necessarily disallow real-life social practices such as the communion of the war-band or making vows over drink, but it does argue for a purposeful justification of the war-band's violent activities through painting them as a result of human feasting.

IV. The Failed Human Feast

A great deal of our literature describes a phenomenon which I call the 'failed human feast' – essentially, a scenario where the intended goals of the human feast have completely failed. These may include some of the more overt elements of the demon feast, but I would suggest that all have become just that by their very failure. One of the more common scenarios involves a feast that disintegrates into rivalry, insults and outright brawling due to unresolved questions of hierarchy and status within the war-band or court. This is rather ironic, in that one of the main goals of the human feast is to determine and reinforce such a pecking order, and such hostility often ignites over the mechanisms used to express proper hierarchy, such as seating and the order of service within the hall.

i. Fights over questions of hierarchy

For a particularly good example of the sort of trouble which could result from such unresolved questions we can turn to the saga *The Tale of Macc Da Thó's Pig*. We have previously noted the palpable hostility when the Connachta and Ulaid arrive at the same feast only to find they have both been promised the same dog by

the hosteller Macc Da Thó. The hosteller then prepares a feast for his guests with a giant pig as the main course, at which point the two sides engage in a long boasting contest to determine who has the highest status as a warrior and thus possesses the right to carve this carcass (and thus the *curadmír*). Eventually Conall Cernach emerges as the victor and temporarily establishes the hierarchy of the hall, but this breaks down when he stints the share of meat given to the Connachta:

They thought their share small; they rose, the Ulaid rose, and everyone hit someone. Blows fell upon ears until the heap on the floor reached the centre of the house and the streams of gore reached the entrances. The hosts broke through the doors, then, and a good drinking bout broke out in the courtyard, with everyone striking his neighbour.¹⁸⁵

Some modern scholars have seen such a fracas as the real life fallout which could result from competition over the *curadmír*. As Kenneth Jackson appended to his description of this practice:

Sometimes, though, the opponent could not be put down with words, and then they came to blows, and the right of the Champion's Portion might then only be gained by one killing the other.¹⁸⁶

In some cases, the violence which disrupts a human feast is unplanned, at least by the host, with matters ruined only by the behaviour of some or all of the participants. In the tale *The Wasting Sickness of Cu Chulainn and The Only Jealousy of Emer*, the Ulaid would hold an annual great feast so as to give each warrior a chance to boast and exhibit his rather ghoulish trophies. The poet states

The warriors put the tongues of those they had killed into their pouches – some threw in cattle tongues to augment the count – and then, at the assembly, each man spoke in turn and boasted of his triumphs. They spoke with their swords on their thighs, swords that turned against anyone who swore falsely.¹⁸⁷

While Conchobar (the king of the Ulaid) seems unthreatening here, the readiness of the participants to commit illegitimate violence against other members of the same

¹⁸⁵ *The Tale of Macc Da Thó's Pig*, in *EIMS*, pp. 186-7.

¹⁸⁶ Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition*, pp. 21-2.

¹⁸⁷ *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, p. 155.

kingdom over boasts of homicide seems to form a neat capstone to a feast that has transformed from one which helps determine hierarchy and establish contracts, to a vainglorious exercise which results in murder and violence.

O'Sullivan takes this imagery relating to such brawls within the literary sources as indicative that in real-life medieval Ireland guests were very sensitive about receiving their proper seat and portion of food and alcohol, and that 'one simple mistake or minor oversight could lead to a bloody brawl [or] battle'.¹⁸⁸ Additionally, while she ascribes the *curadmír* to 'very early Celtic custom', she suggests that as it appears in works such as *FB* and *SMMD* it portrays an 'anxiety over the distribution of food for fear of insulting guests and inflamed egos', which she believes would have been very familiar to audiences well into later medieval Ireland.¹⁸⁹ She furthermore argues that various Irish legal and literary sources give such a predilection to violence within the hall as the reason why weapons were not allowed into the king's banqueting halls.¹⁹⁰

ii. The black feast

We find a failed human feast in *Historia Brittonum* (*HB*) in the form of a meeting over a peace treaty in which one side has prepared treachery. Hengest and Vortigern arrange a feast over which they can discuss making a peace treaty between the Saxon and Britons. Both leaders and about three hundred men from each side attend this banquet, and all are to enter the feast hall unarmed to prevent any outbreaks of violence. Unfortunately for the Britons, each Saxon concealed a dagger upon his person, and once their hosts become heavily intoxicated they leapt upon the now enfeebled Britons, with deadly results.¹⁹¹ While the Britons expected a human

¹⁸⁸ O'Sullivan, *Hospitality in medieval Ireland*, pp. 92-3. As evidence she cites *Fled Duin na nGédh*, in which several insults of this nature lead to the battle of Mag Rath, as well as *TB* and *SMMD*; in footnote 147 she draws upon Posidinius's account to illuminate the 'historical truth' upon which such behaviour is based.

¹⁸⁹ O'Sullivan, *Hospitality in medieval Ireland*, p. 24.

¹⁹⁰ O'Sullivan, *Hospitality in medieval Ireland*, pp. 93-4; she cites an Old Irish legal poem in Binchy, 1971, pp. 152-68, and tenth-century poem in K. Meyer, 1912a, 157-8, and 'Tidings of Conchobhar mac Nessa', translated by Stokes 1910, pp. 26-9.

¹⁹¹ *HB* III.46, p. 32.

feast, the event was from the start a demon feast due to the treachery intended from the very beginning by the Saxons.

As an aside, the vernacular literature does not always show such a reluctance to allow weapons into the hall; while Beowulf and his men were told to leave their shields and spears outside Heorot upon their arrival, they certainly possess them later that night when Grendel arrives, as Beowulf's men attempt to use their swords upon Grendel.¹⁹² It seems more likely that they were only forbidden such items while still potentially dangerous strangers. Further evidence for the presence of weapons within the hall comes from *TBDD*, when the ships carrying the massive host of *díberga* lands on the shores of Ireland near Da Derga's hostel and create such a noise that they 'shook Dá Derga's Hostel so that no spear nor shield remained on rack therein, but the weapons uttered a cry and fell all on the floor of the house'.¹⁹³

Returning to the concept of a feast planned with malice, we find that Bricriu prepares a feast for the Ulaid with the goal of formenting trouble, and indeed, it quickly degenerates into a three-way fight between the leading contenders for the *curadmír*.¹⁹⁴ Some of the invited guests for Bricriu's feast clearly recognize the opportunity for trouble to arise during such a feast, particularly with a hostile host – Fergus and some of the other Ulaid initially refuse to attend because they realize their host will foment strife within their ranks, leading to conflict and death.¹⁹⁵ The feast in *SMMD* is likewise planned in bad faith, in that Macc Da Thó's wife suggests it as a way to avoid offending the Ulaid or Connachta, instead allowing them to slaughter one another.

iii. The lady with the *poculum mortis*

Just as some ostensibly human feasts were arranged by the host to achieve evil ends, sometimes the lady with a mead cup falls back into the role of a wicked woman. In a previous chapter we briefly discussed an episode found in *TBC I*, in

¹⁹² *Beowulf*, ll. 794-805, p. 73.

¹⁹³ *TBDD*, p. 54.

¹⁹⁴ *FB*, II.14-6, VI.43, pp. 15-7, 43.

¹⁹⁵ *FB*, I.5-6, pp. 5-7. Bricriu only prevails over their fears by threatening to cause the breasts of the women of Ulster to beat against one another until they become putrid.

which Queen Medb uses her daughter Finnabair in an attempt to woo the warrior Fer Diad to fight his foster-brother of Cú Chulainn – an event which Kenneth Jackson believed that the authors would view as fratricide.¹⁹⁶ Fer Diad refuses all of the rewards which Medb offers, even when she throws Finnabair into the bargain, only finally agreeing when she lies to him and claims that Cú Chulainn besmirched his bravery.¹⁹⁷ Yet, all the while Finnabair constantly plied Fer Diad with goblets and cups of alcoholic beverages; I wonder if the author was indicating that the alcohol had impaired Fer Diad's faculties to think rationally, and thus Finnabair's proffered drinks facilitated a horrible crime.¹⁹⁸

Another one of Cú Chulainn's foster-brothers, Fer Báeth, met a similar end at an earlier point in the story, when Medb offered him the same girl in marriage and '...plied [him] with wine until he was intoxicated'.¹⁹⁹ This episode has not passed unnoticed by previous critics, although they have arrived at different conclusions regarding its meaning and importance; I see an interesting possible analogue here with an earlier instance of a girl serving alcoholic beverages in an attempt to turn a man from his previous allegiance, and/or perform a desired service by the girl's parent. Hengist's beautiful daughter fulfils a similar task in *HB* when we read that the cunning warlord specifically brought her to Britain to enchant Vortigern. Hengest prepared a great feast to which he invited the tyrant and his officers, and ordered his daughter to supply the guests with wine and ale until they were rendered completely drunk. The plan succeeds and a besotted Vortigern falls in love with the girl, resulting in dire consequences to the Britons.²⁰⁰ As an aside Deirdriu speaks of the death of Noísiu as her fault and expresses this through the motif of a woman serving mead, lamenting that as she seduced him, 'For him I poured out – hero of heroes - / the deadly drink that killed him.'²⁰¹

¹⁹⁶ Kenneth Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition*, pp. 10-1.

¹⁹⁷ *TBC I*, p. 196.

¹⁹⁸ *TBC I*, p. 196. There also seems to be an element of seduction here, for the passage continues '...it was she who gave him three kisses with every one of the cups; it was she who gave him fragrant apples over the bosom of her tunic. She kept saying that Fer Diad was her beloved, her chosen lover from among all the men of the world.' (ll.2585-7, p. 196)

¹⁹⁹ *TBC I*, p. 196. Note that Bart Jaski touches on this briefly, noting that Finnabair 'serves them so much alcoholic drink that they accept the deal' (Jaski, 'Cú Chulainn, gormac and dalta of the Ulstermen', *CMCS* 37 (Summer 1999), pp. 1-31 (26)).

²⁰⁰ *HB* III.37.

²⁰¹ *The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, in *EISD*, p. 264.

iv. Alcohol fuelled violence

Beowulf hints several times throughout its length to outbursts of violence in the hall connected to alcohol consumption. Early in the poem the warrior Unferth verbally attacks Beowulf, claiming that the young hero engaged in a foolhardy swimming contest with another youth by the name of Breca, only to lose.²⁰² Beowulf's response gives some reason for Unferth's challenge: "Well, Unferth my friend, drunk with beer you have talked a great deal about Breca, told of his adventure."²⁰³ Later Unferth treats Beowulf quite well, even lending him a weapon to fight Grendel's mother; the poet seems to ascribe his earlier hostility to the drink, for 'When he lent the weapon to the better fighter, surely the son of Ecglaf, skilled in strength, did not remember what he had said previously when drunk with wine.'²⁰⁴ Unferth may have been fortunate that Beowulf kept a cooler head when intoxicated, for the poet later describes our hero as a model for restraint and good behaviour, boasting that 'never did he slay the companions of his hearth when drunk'.²⁰⁵ Is the author painting a picture of an environment where most lords occasionally get raging drunk and kill a few followers? One may consider the oft-quoted lines from the Old English gnomic poem *The Fortunes of Men*:

The edge of the sword drives out life from another on the mead-bench, from the angry ale-swiller, the man full of wine. He has been too free with his words.²⁰⁶

Drinking may have helped to re-ignite the Dane-Heathobard feud, for as we noted previously that an old warrior deep in his cups would pressure Ingeld into resuming hostilities.

²⁰² *Beowulf*, ll. 499-528, p. 59.

²⁰³ *Beowulf*, ll. 529-32, p. 59.

²⁰⁴ *Beowulf*, ll. 1465-8, p. 105.

²⁰⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 2179-80, pp. 138-9. Note other author interprets this as Beowulf not slaying his companions while *they* are drunk. The first interpretation seems more likely – a drunk lord would be more likely to slay his followers than a sober lord killing his drunk followers. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p.19, also notes the implications of this compliment.

²⁰⁶ *The Fortunes of Men*, ll. 48-50, in T.A. Shippey (ed.), *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 61.

A further entry in the *The Ruined Hearth* suggests another oddity ‘This hearth, with its blanket of grey, more common, once, on its floor mead, and drunken men pleading’.²⁰⁷ Could this merely refer to some of the supplicants come to visit Urien – or more worryingly, the pleading of men unable to stand due to their intoxication or perhaps even beaten after a bout of fisticuffs with their fellow warriors, now lying on the floor? Also, in the *Instructions of King Cormac*, the eponymous speaker says that as a lad he was ‘mild in the mead hall’ and ‘not boastful though [he] was a good fighter’.²⁰⁸ One of the *Triads of Ireland* states: ‘Three things that make a wise man foolish: quarrelling, anger, drunkenness’.²⁰⁹ While a bit gnomic, it certainly hints at a connection in the mind of its author between drinking and intra-group violence. Enright argues that while the drinking ritual that he has hypothesized was designed to bolster the war-band’s cohesiveness, the hall was in reality a place subject to periodic outbursts of alcohol-fuelled violence.²¹⁰

The possibility of drunkenness leading to increased aggression in the warrior also appears in the A-text of *The Gododdin*, in which the poet speaks of the warrior Llifiau, telling the reader ‘My kinsman, my very gentle one, does not cause us anxiety, unless it were because of the feast of the harsh dragon; he was not excluded from the mead-drink in the hall.’²¹¹ While this could be taken to indicate that Llifiau is gentle until he enters battle, the phrasing seems to imply a lack of wisdom or self-control, perhaps suggesting that he becomes dangerously aggressive when he drinks. Another possibility could be that Llifiau is in the habit of making dangerous boasts or enemies while drunk, both of which could result in later bloodshed that could have been avoided had he not been drunk. While outside the hall, we find a real-life example of intoxication leading to disaster when Ualgarg ua Ciardai and Niall ua Ruairc made a foray into Gailenga and encountered ‘a few nobles of Mael Sechnaill’s household who had been drinking at the time and were intoxicated’.²¹²

²⁰⁷ *The Fall of Rheged*, 11, in *MWP*, p. 80.

²⁰⁸ *Instructions of King Cormac*, ll. 6 and 17, p. 105 and 106, from Kuno Meyer (1913).

²⁰⁹ Meyer, p. 25, no. 195.

²¹⁰ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 18-9. Note that he heavily uses the description of Clovis’s antics of betrayal, trickery and murder from *Historia Francorum* in this argument.

²¹¹ *The Gododdin*, CA.xxii A, in *GOSP*, p. 125.

²¹² AU 1013.2. CS 1013 tells a simplified version, stating that they ‘having been drinking ... offered battle to them out of arrogance.

The nobles ‘arrogantly gave battle’ to the raiders and lost badly, with the heir designate of Temair, two lesser kings, and many others not named slain in the resulting fracas.²¹³

In the Welsh context, one of the *Gododdin* warriors receives similar praise as Beowulf for moderation, as ‘He was wise and refined and proud; / He was not rude to fellow-drinker.’²¹⁴ Two linked *awdl* in *The Gododdin*, however, may hint at the negative of such behaviour and present a breakdown of civility and peace during a feast such as we observed in the Irish material. The B-text version reads in full:

Stewards could not bear the hall’s clamour.
From the war-band, an outburst of fighting
Like a roaring fire when kindled.
Tuesday, they donned their comely war-gear;
Wednesday, their common cause was savage;
Thursday, envoys were pledged;
Friday, carcasses were calculated;
Saturday, unhindered their working as one;
Sunday, crimson blades were shared by all;
Monday, men seen hip deep in bloodshed.
The *Gododdin* say that after long hard labour
Before Madawg’s tent on their return
[There would come but one man in a hundred.]²¹⁵

Most reviewers of *The Gododdin* believe that this verse merely describes the preparations for the expedition to Catraeth terminating with the battle itself; as noted earlier, Jackson and Jarman believed that the line ‘on Friday carcasses [corpses] were counted up’ simply referred to boasting just prior to the battle.²¹⁶ I believe a thorough reading of this *awdl* hints at something much more sinister – particular when one compares this line to its analogue in the closely related *awdl* CA.lxix A, which reads

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ *The Gododdin*, CA.lxxv A, ll. 3-4.

²¹⁵ *The Gododdin*, CA.lxix B. Also, Kenneth Jackson’s version: [Even] the court-officers could not bear the [shouts of] praise in the hall, at the contention of the bodyguard, a contention which was suppressed (?), like a blazing fire at its kindling. On Tuesday they put on their fine armour, on Wednesday their common purpose was bitter, on Thursday envoys were pledged, on Friday corpses were counted up, on Saturday their united deeds were unrestrained, on Sunday red blades were distributed, on Monday streams of blood were seen up to the knees. The men of *Gododdin* tell that when they returned to Madog’s tent after the long fatigue [of battle] there came no more than one man out of a hundred.’ (*GOSP*, p. 109).

²¹⁶ Jackson, *GOSP*, pp. 108-9, and Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, pp. lx-lxi.

‘Friday, carcasses were carried off’.²¹⁷ This lends credence to the assertion that the warriors were not boasting of future action against an enemy, but rather that the respective sides of an earlier outburst of violence were tallying up the number and importance of those warriors that they had lost as a result, perhaps for purposes of vengeance or wergild. The phrase ‘an outburst of fighting, like a roaring fire when kindled’, which the stewards could not bear, gives the impression that a round of boasting or insults got out of hand and lead to the drawing of blood and probable fatalities.

The following lines give the impression that all of the involved parties prepared for a fight to decide matters, with one or two futile attempts to check the spiralling violence or feud during the week – attempts which failed, to judge by the bloodbath which ensued on Monday. In real-life cases of such events, the drama would probably take longer than a week to unfold, perhaps with the week-long duration of this episode serving to stylize the affair, the whole matter really resolving itself in the mind of the poet over a season, like the events from the *Fight at Finnsburgh* as presented in *Beowulf*. In these last few instances from *Beowulf* and *The Gododdin*, a well-intentioned human feast eventually lost all moral worth due to some form of sin, such as gluttony or wrath, leading to the consequent outbreak of violence and rendering the entire affair a demon feast.

V. Conclusion

So, having come to the end of our long discussion of feasting, drinking and hall-life as presented in hagiographical and historical sources, and then comparing it to the heroic literature, I believe we can make some general statements. First, it seems quite likely that ecclesiastically-educated authors throughout the Insular world were familiar with three forms of feasting, which to use the Irish titles were the Godly, human and demon feast. While hagiographical material tends to present the war-band as heavily involved in the sort of feasting that churchmen would call demonic, the heroic poems and epics avoid portraying their subjects in this manner.

²¹⁷ *The Gododdin*, CA.lxix A, l. 6.

This leads us to our second point. The authors of our heroic sources took several possible real-life practices, such as the ‘communion of the war-band’, reciprocity between a lord and his warriors and the making of vows and oaths, and transformed these into the language of the human feast. In this manner, they magically altered the feast of Áed Allan to the gathering at Heorot. Instead of a hall full of roaring thugs and brigands engaged in gluttonous excess and waited on by their camp-followers and mistresses we have a properly ordered hall that serves to reinforce the hierarchy and fellowship of the war-band, in which all drinking takes place as part of the attendance, service and relationship strengthening human feast, the lady with a mead cup now serving a laudable role.

In this way, the heroic literature brings its attempt to redefine the war-band as military men engaged in just war to completion. The human feast features the oaths and vows which Gildas complains that the kings and warriors of his own day quickly forget. It also cements the connection of its participants to the legitimate authority on whose behalf they fight. Similarly, the communion of the war-band can become refigured as a method of establishing a lord-follower relationship between the lord and his war-band. But when the human feast fails it does so spectacularly and becomes a demon feast – which is our third point. For if the bonds of loyalty are shattered after the feast, what purpose did it serve? Likewise, if vows or oaths remain unfulfilled, if questions over hierarchy lead to its breakdown, or if the whole endeavour was entered into in bad faith on the part of one or both parties, then the any benefit from the feast is rendered null and void.

Chapter Seven – Conclusion

We have now reached the end of our comparison of the heroic image and historical reality of the Insular war-band during the Viking Age within the parameters set down in the Introduction of this thesis. We recognized at the outset that a general failure existed in secondary literature (with a few limited exceptions) to consider the context of the heroic literature when using it as a source for information on the war-band – that it does not serve as a dumb record for the workings of society, either for the era it depicts or that in which it was created. I believe that our comparison of this heroic image as found in the poetry and sagas of Viking Age with the war-band as recorded in histories, legal codes and the archaeological record has amply demonstrated the wide gulf between the two, and discerned the primary motivation for the portrayal chosen by the authors of the heroic literature.

In Chapter 2 we investigated the size of the war-band and quickly found that this was expressed quite rarely in specific numbers in any of our written sources, literary or otherwise. More intriguingly we also discovered that the heroic sources often drew from a very specific set of numbers when describing the number of warriors in a war-band or the number of casualties in a battle – typically three, nine, twelve, twenty-seven, thirty, fifty, sixty, one hundred and fifty, and three hundred. Not only does this diminish the likelihood that these numbers are accurate reports of the size of a contemporary war-band, but also suggests that these choice are not solely determined by the demands of poetry. Rather, we found that many of these drew directly from a Classical or Biblical exemplar. Clearly, the authors evoked this heritage to cast their subjects in a certain light. Perhaps even more surprisingly, when we returned to the historical and legal sources we found some of these same numbers in common use. As a result, we were able conclude that the numbers given by most sources during this era have little or nothing to do with how many warriors were really present – rather, they serve as a shorthand indicating the nature of the forces present and whether they were protagonists or antagonists.

Keeping this idea that the creators of the heroic literature sought to extol or denigrate their subjects in mind, we next turned to the identity of the men who composed the war-band in Chapter 3. The heroic material clearly described the war-band and particularly its heroes in aristocratic and occupational terms, to the point of stressing their difference from the ‘base-born’ and ‘mere serving men’. Yet other sources betray such a notion, in that both secular aristocrats and free commoners could participate in warfare. This left us with the question of why the authors of the heroic literature would choose to portray their subjects in such a manner. While they may have simply concentrated upon the more important members of the war-band or tailored their composition to appeal to their audience, another option also presented itself.

During our period, the ideology of the Three Orders began to spread, with its strict division of society into three groups – those who prayed, those who fought and those who laboured. This same ideology may have tied into a more general concept of just war which was circulating throughout Europe with renewed vigour at the time – only men from a dedicated warrior caste should fight, while others should remain immune from warfare *and* refrain from participation in it. In this regard, the heroic literature served to cast its subject, the war-band, as engaging in just war by dint of its social class. A glance back to Chapter 2 hints that those war-bands tailored to the same size as a Biblical or Classical exemplar practising just war could be seen as engaged in the same form of warfare.

Keeping to the theme of just war, we proceeded to examine the relationship of the war-band with society as a whole in Chapter 4, particularly in its role as the defender of the non-combatants according to the Three Orders – the church and the common people. Our investigation of the heroic literature and its subsequent comparison to other source material such as annals, histories and law codes once again revealed a major dichotomy. The heroic literature and the other sources frequently single out the private or illicit war-band as persecutors of both the church and other non-combatants, but they diverge in their depiction of the royal or legitimate war-band. While the heroic sources invariably depict this group as ‘the defender of the land’, friend of the clergy and punisher of outlaws, our hagiographical material (also literary in part) makes little distinction between the

royal and private war-band; both *díbergaig* such as the Uí Corra and royal warriors from Gwynedd could bother and belabour saint and peasant. The historical sources give the most balanced viewpoint, in which the war-band could alternately protect or plunder, rescue or murder ecclesiastic and laity. In this regard, Gildas's much earlier use of just war and its negatives rang quite true. It seems quite clear that the poets and writers responsible for our heroic literature went out of their way to cast their heroes as practicing just war in the most overt ways possible, leaving the pursuit of unjust war to their enemies, typically foreign, pagan or low-born. Not only were our protagonists from the proper class to fight, but they also fulfilled their role in protecting the innocent, their neighbour and the church as part of the quest for just war.

In Chapter 5 we turned to questions of loyalty, specifically the motif of men fighting to the death on behalf of their lord and its ancillary of exacting revenge for their slain lord. We also delved into the shadowy reversal of these ideals when we looked at the phenomenon of such men murdering their own lord. As we briefly discussed, many commentators have taken the imagery of the heroic literature as depicting the truth of the war-band attitudes towards such matters. Yet the image in poetry and saga once again diverged from that in other textual sources. While some men did indeed fight to the death in the latter, it seems likely that in many instances they were no longer in a position to retreat, flee or even surrender. As a result, the heroic image of men dying with their lord could have been part of an attempt to make the best of a battlefield loss.

Such behaviour in the heroic epics and lays may have also possessed Christian overtones with allusions to martyrdom and fidelity, again suggesting an attempt to present the war-band as waging just war. Our look at revenge was even more informative – it seemed quite clear that in many cases, revenge was grasped at as a legitimizing strategy to justify the war-band's violent actions as instances of just war demanded by past injuries. Not surprisingly, the heroes in the literary source never turn on their lords, with even the concept of such betrayal only discussed in its most negative sense in a few of these. The annals from the same time period on the other hand demonstrate quite clearly the dreary frequency with which a lord met with just such an end, while the law-codes saw the problem as serious and horrific enough

to penalize heavily. In the context of just war, those who commit such offences have reduced themselves to the levels of pagans, brigands and criminals. Not only could their actions draw a comparison with the archetypal betrayals from the Old and New Testament, but by their action they have negated their defence for engaging in just war by following a legitimate authority.

These concepts of fighting to the death and taking revenge formed the segue to Chapter 6, in which we returned to the concepts of vows and earning one's mead as fortifying agents for fighting to the death in our investigation of warriors in the hall setting. Before proceeding into this subject in depth we defused the possible misapprehension that the Church disapproved of all feasting and consumption of alcoholic beverages. While the penitential material made it clear that the Church did indeed take a dim view of drunkenness, gluttony and overindulgence, other ecclesiastical sources hinted at a three tier system of 'godly', 'human' and 'demon' feasts. We then returned to the concept of earning one's mead, as well as the classical interpretations that this once again represented either a real life practice or that the mead stood as a symbol for the rewards of loyal service by a warrior to his lord, before turning to the division of feasts once again. While the Godly feast was typically given by clergy, the 'demon' feast was clearly an affair at which the negative examples of the war-band – the *díbergaig*, *fianna*, brigands, pagans, Vikings and the like – could be found. These were feasts of excess, held for no reason other than gluttony and drunkenness. The 'human' feast on the other hand served to cement loyalties and oaths, establish proper hierarchy and the like amongst the secular nobility. Here we find the proper home for *talú medd* and the like – while it may have originated from a recognition of a 'communion' type ritual in which drinking fostered the fellowship of the war-band, in the hands of our authors it became a means by which they could cast their heroes as entering into legitimate relationships with royal or aristocratic authority, and once again guaranteeing that they were engaged in just war when they fought at their lord's command.

Throughout this entire thesis we see the theme of just war. I believe that this continuing philosophy influenced the surviving heroic poems and sagas, with the authors clearly drawing upon a number of devices to show their audience that the violence in which their heroes partook was such warfare. This begs the question –

‘Why?’ I suggest two primary motivations. First, to rehabilitate earlier heroes and stories which had developed or remained popular over the preceding centuries, which they essentially overhauled to fit into a Christian context. Second, this depiction of heroes engaged in just war served as an inspiration for those very warriors whom the clergy urged to observe the Peace of God and support the power of legitimate rulers. While we may see earlier attempts to limit the effects of warfare (i.e. *Lex Innocentium*), this use of just war in heroic stories and compositions occurs throughout Western Europe at the very time that our sources were committed to their surviving manuscripts.

The heroic literature bears the hallmarks of its age, a late eighth through eleventh century in which warfare and violence were being incorporated into a new social ideology which looked toward and further developed just war, and with it the Three Orders and Peace of God. While the surviving heroic poems and sagas may not have originated as apologia for the new order, they certainly became vehicles for it at the hands of their ecclesiastically trained and influenced authors. In an attempt to legitimize the violence committed by their subjects they took recourse in the idea of just war; as we demonstrated at various points throughout the thesis, the church viewed unjust war as anathema, while just war was a necessary evil. Thus, the heroic literature, written in its current form in a Christian society, has attempted to fit the war-band in with Christian notions of just war in an attempt to make it tolerable to the Church and the rest of society.

Appendix

Conversion between Ifor Williams's reference system to Gododdin awdlau and that proposed by Jackson/Clancy

Jackson/Clancy	Williams
B.1	CA.lxxix B
B.2	CA.lv B
B.3	CA.li C
B.4	CA.lxxxvii B
B.5	CA.xliii B
B.6	CA.xliv B
B.7	CA.liv B
B.8	CA.xc
B.9	CA.xci
B.10	CA.xcii
B.11	CA.xxiii B
B.12	CA.xx B
B.13	CA.xxii B
B.14	CA.lxiii D
B.15	CA.lxiii B
B.16	CA.lxiii C
B.17	CA.xciii
B.18	CA.xxvi B
B.19	CA.xciv
B.20	CA.lxi B
B.21	CA.xcv
B.22	CA.xcvi
B.23	CA.xcvii
B.24	CA.li B

B.25	CA.xlv B
B.26	CA.xcviii
B.27	CA.xcix
B.28	CA.c
B.29	CA.lxix B
B.30	CA.xl
B.31	CA.xli
B.32	CA.lxxi B
B.33	CA.lxx B
B.34	CA.ci
B.35	CA.xlv C
B.36	CA.lxiii E
B.37	CA.lxxv B
B.38	CA.cii
B.39	CA.lxvi B
B.40	CA.lxiv B
B.41	CA.ciii
B.42	CA.lxvii B

A.1	CA.i
A.2	CA.ii
A.3	CA.iii
A.4	CA.iv
A.5	CA.v
A.6	CA.vi
A.7	CA.vii
A.8	CA.viii
A.9	CA.ix
A.10	CA.x
A.11	CA.xi
A.12	CA.xii

A.13	CA.xiii
A.14	CA.xiv
A.15	CA.xv
A.16	CA.xvi
A.17	CA.xvii
A.18	CA.xviii
A.19	CA.xix
A.20	CA.xx A
A.21	CA.xxi
A.22	CA.xxii A
A.23	CA.xxiii A
A.24	CA.xxiv
A.25	CA.xxv
A.26	CA.xxvi A
A.27	CA.xxvii
A.28	CA.xxviii
A.29	CA.xxix
A.30	CA.xxx
A.31	CA.xxxi
A.32	CA.xxxii
A.33	CA.xxxiii
A.34	CA.xxxiv
A.35	CA.xxxv
A.36	CA.xxxvi
A.37	CA.xxxviii
A.38	CA.xxxix A
A.39	CA.xlii
A.40	CA.xliii A
A.41	CA.xliv A
A.42	CA.xlv A
A.43	CA.xlvi
A.44	CA.xlvii

A.45	CA.xlviii
A.46	CA.xlix
A.47	CA.l
A.48	CA.li A
A.49	CA.lii
A.50	CA.liii
A.51	CA.liv A
A.52	CA.lv A
A.53	CA.xxxix B
A.54	CA.lvi
A.55	CA.lvii
A.56	CA.lviii
A.57	CA.xxxvii
A.58	CA.lix
A.59	CA.lx
A.60	CA.lxi A
A.61	CA.lxii
A.62	CA.lxiii A
A.63	CA.lxiv A
A.64	CA.lxv
A.65	CA.lxvi A
A.66	CA.lxvii A
A.67	CA.lxviii
A.68	CA.lxix A
A.69	CA.lxx A
A.70	CA.lxxi A
A.71	CA.lxxii
A.72	CA.lxxiii
A.73	CA.lxxiv
A.74	CA.lxxv A
A.75	CA.lxxvi
A.76	CA.lxxvii

A.77	CA.lxxviii
A.78	CA.lxxix A
A.79	CA.lxxx
A.80	CA.lxxxi
A.81	CA.lxxxii
A.82	CA.lxxxiii
A.83	CA.lxxxiv
A.84	CA.lxxxv
A.85	CA.lxxxvi
A.86	CA.lxxxvii A
A.87	CA.lxxxviii
A.88	CA.lxxxix

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