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The University of Southern Mississippi

FAMILY, FEUD, AND THE CONDUCT OF WAR IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

by

Elnathan Barnett

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of History

Approved:

Phyllis Jestice

Director

Westley L. Follett

Andrew A. Weist

Susan A. Siltanen

Dean of the Graduate School

December 2011

ABSTRACT

FAMILY, FEUD, AND THE CONDUCT OF WAR IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

By Elnathan Barnett

December 2011

Anglo-Saxon society was built around the concept of feud, and it is clear from history, law, and literature that the twin concerns of family and vengeance remained pillars of Anglo-Saxon society and consciousness throughout the period. Given constant warfare and the cultural and social importance of feuding, it would appear logical that warfare was essentially feud writ large, that conflicts pitted one kin group against another and vengeance for the dead was a major, if not the only, reason for making war. However, royal families often fought among themselves, while wars waged to avenge a death are conspicuous by their absence. Yet, it seems unlikely that a practice with such deep and enduring significance as feuding had no influence upon the conduct of war.

The answer is that while feuding did not determine the conduct of war, it colored it. Family and feud exercised an important influence on the course of warfare, but the effect was subtle. The warband was in part a fictive family, while the ideology of kingship and the nature of warfare meant that personal grievances were not distinct from political rivalries, and that warfare begun over resources or hegemony might easily assume aspects of a bloodfeud. Furthermore, despite a common cultural background, English warriors seldom took prisoners, had no system of ransom, and commonly left slain opponents on the battlefield for the carrion-eaters, practices that probably reflect the insularity and hostility toward those outside the kin group typical of a feuding culture.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Phyllis Jestice, for all her care and patience that she showed throughout process of writing this paper, as well as for her unwavering optimism and many encouraging words. I needed those more often than I cared to admit. I would also like to thank the rest of my thesis committee—Dr. Lee Follett, for his many excellent questions, and Dr. Andrew Wiest, for graciously agreeing to read a thesis concerning a people a millennia older than those he is accustomed to studying.

*Nu scylun hergan hefænricæs Uard,
Metudæs mæcti end His modgidanc*

-Caedmon

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the fifth century AD, a collection of Germanic tribes collectively known as the Anglo-Saxons invaded the isle of Britain and carved out a number of independent kingdoms, driving out or assimilating the native Britons. The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were only rarely at peace, and for the next six hundred years what eventually became known as England was a violent ferment as Anglo-Saxon kings and aristocratic warriors fought the Welsh, Picts, Scots, Norse, and, perhaps most of all, each other. When they migrated, the Anglo-Saxons brought with them the concept of bloodfeud, in which a man was honor-bound to avenge the deaths of his kinsmen. Family, feud, and vengeance were deeply rooted in Germanic culture as a whole—many of the greatest surviving pieces of literature the early medieval period dealt with feud in one way or another—and it is clear from history, law, and literature that the twin concerns of family and vengeance remained pillars of Anglo-Saxon society and consciousness throughout the period.

Given the constant warfare and the cultural and social importance of feuding, it would appear logical to assume that warfare was essentially feud writ large, that conflicts pitted one kin group against another and vengeance for the dead was a major, if not the only, reason for making war. Yet, sources give a picture completely at odds with this formulation. It is not unusual to find nephew pitted against uncle, cousins or brothers at odds, or even sons taking sides against their fathers, while wars waged to avenge a family member are conspicuous by their absence. Warfare between kingdoms was not merely

feuding writ large. Yet, it seems illogical to conclude that a practice with such deep and enduring significance as feuding had no influence at all upon the conduct of war.

The answer, as this thesis will demonstrate, is that while feuding did not determine the conduct of war, it colored it. Family and feud exercised an important influence on the course of warfare, but the effect was subtle. The warband, the primary military institution of the Anglo-Saxons, was in part a fictive family, while the ideology of kingship and the nature of warfare among the English meant that personal grievances were not distinct from political rivalries, and that warfare begun over resources or hegemony might easily assume aspects of a bloodfeud. Furthermore, despite a common cultural background and a warrior population that could move from kingdom to kingdom, English warriors seldom took prisoners, had no system of ransom, and commonly left slain opponents on the battlefield for the carrion-eaters, practices that probably reflect the insularity and hostility toward those outside the kin group typical of a feuding culture. English warfare was largely small-scale, chiefly raiding, and may have been governed by a number of conventions based on formal challenges and notions of fair play. However, ritualistic behavior did not mean that it was neither bloody nor waged with serious intent. There was ample opportunity for death of family members and the desire for vengeance to enter into the equation.

In addition to each other, the Anglo-Saxons fought against a number of other peoples, in particular the Welsh, Scots, and Picts, and after the late eighth century the Norse. The role of the family and feud in these conflicts is complicated by ethnic hatred and rivalries not present in conflicts between different Anglo-Saxon peoples, who shared a common language, culture, and, if Bede was typical, some understanding of themselves

as a single people. Therefore, it seems appropriate to focus for the most part on conflicts between various Anglo-Saxon groups. This focus can best be achieved by confining the examination for the most part to the period of the Heptarchy, between AD 600, when written sources become available, and the coming of the Norse around AD 800, when all but one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms collapsed and campaigns against the Norse became the chief concern of Anglo-Saxon warriors.

However, the sources prevent an exclusive focus on this period. Comparatively few sources from the Anglo-Saxon period have survived to the present, and historians must use all available sources from the whole period in order to reconstruct events and attitudes. The lack of sources makes it particularly difficult to draw solid conclusions about how institutions and attitudes changed. The Anglo-Saxon period lasted roughly six hundred years, and in this time there was considerable change as many small, fairly primitive kingdoms ruled by pagans transformed into a single centralized Christian state of considerable sophistication and wealth. Unfortunately, the relative lack of resources means that while the outline of this process is clear enough, the details remain obscure, including the conduct of warfare. Therefore, it is usually impossible to determine change over time with certainty, and by necessity any study of early English warfare, including this one, must treat the whole era as if it was largely static, even though it was certainly not so.

“Feud” can be used to mean any long-running conflict, and family rivalries could play out in court as well as on the battlefield. However, vengeance for the slain, bloodfeud, was the most important aspect of vendetta in Anglo-Saxon culture as well as the most immediately applicable to warfare on a larger scale, so for the purposes of this

paper, the word “feud” shall be used to refer to bloodfeuds and vengeance for death and injury of family members exclusively.

Warfare was not an exclusively male world. However, the role that women played was distinct from that of men. Women were neither warriors nor avengers, and however deeply they may have grieved for the dead or burned to avenge a wrong they seem rarely if ever to have picked up a weapon to do the deed themselves. Instead, their role was to exhort and incite their menfolk toward action, and to serve the ritual mead that bound the warband together. Accordingly, save when discussing these peculiarly female functions, this paper will use the male pronoun and the word “man” when referring to the average Anglo-Saxon aristocratic warrior, as they have the virtues of both succinctness and accuracy.

The influence of feuding on warfare cannot be understood without an appreciation of family structure and the basic purpose of feuding, and how the former made the latter a considerably more complicated process than it might first appear. Therefore, Chapter I will concentrate on kinship networks and the process of feuding itself, both in terms of how these functioned in Anglo-Saxon society and how they were perceived by contemporaries. Chapter II will examine the institution of the warband and how its composition provided reasons for going to war that had nothing to do with either family or feuding, yet also not only allowed but even slightly encouraged the Anglo-Saxons to apply the mentality of feuding to conflicts that were waged primarily for power or resources. Chapter III will discuss warfare as a whole, arguing that it was seldom if ever primarily waged to avenge a dead family member, but such conflicts often became feuds

in addition to struggles over hegemony and plunder and the treatment of prisoners and the bodies of the dead shows the influence of feuding mentality.

CHAPTER II

FAMILIES AND FEUDS

In order to determine the influence of feuding on Anglo-Saxon warfare, it is first necessary to examine the role of the early medieval English family and the implications its structure had for the way feuds were conducted, as well as the purpose and nature of feuding itself. Family occupied a central place in both Anglo-Saxon society and imagination, yet the boundaries of what constituted kin could be rather ambiguous. Feud functioned to protect individuals while paradoxically keeping violence to acceptable levels, yet despite the cultural duty to avenge a family member, it was a very complicated process, in which individuals could be abandoned and families split. Simple in concept, in practice both family and feud were filled with complexities. However, it was precisely these ambiguities that allowed family and feud to become mixed with warfare over other matters, for the lines between political and personal animosities to blur, and even kinsmen to take sides against each other.

Family

I, miserable with cares, kept to the paths of exile through the winter on the ice-cold sea, deprived of friends and kinsmen - hung about with icicles, while the hail fell in showers around me. . . At times the song of the wild swan had to do as my entertainment, the call of the gannet and the cry of the curlew for men's laughter, and the singing gull for the drinking of mead. Storms battered the cliffs, where the icy feathered tern often answered the damp-feathered eagle's scream. No protecting kinsmen could comfort the destitute soul.¹

The quote above, from "The Seafarer," is a powerful testament to the place of the family in the Anglo-Saxon imagination, synonymous with warmth, security, and

1. Constance Heiatt, trans., *Beowulf and Other English Poems*, rev. ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 117.

conviviality. It formed the core of a man's support group, people who fought beside him in times of trouble, helped pay his fines, and obtained satisfaction for his wrongful death. Conversely, being kinless was a fate to be mourned, as a man without kin was metaphorically cold and lonely, a vulnerable drifter in a hostile world.

A man's kin defined him. Bede, writing from the perspective of an eighth-century Englishman, relates that during the Great Persecution under Diocletian five centuries before, Saint Alban was dragged before a judge for harboring a Christian priest and ordered to sacrifice to idols. Alban, who had converted under the influence of the priest, refused, whereupon the judge grew angry and demanded to know who Alban's family was. Alban, who lived prior to the coming of the Saxons, was of course British, but the English Bede evidently did not think it strange that the judge would ask Alban's lineage before knowing his name.² When an unknown Anglo-Saxon poet retold Genesis in Old English verse, it was the fact that it was his own son that Abraham drove out into the desert that seems to have struck him or her most about the story of Ishmael, as the poet repeats the family connection twice, a stress not seen in the biblical original.³ In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar is glad to see Beowulf because he knew Beowulf's father, whom he had sheltered during a feud, while Beowulf, when introducing himself, announces that he is a kinsman of Hygelac, King of the Geats: his sister's son, as Hrothgar has just explained prior to Beowulf's entrance.⁴

2. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books 1990), (I.7), 52.

3. Laurence Mason, trans., *An Anglo-Saxon Genesis* (Dyfed, Wales: Llanerch Enterprises, 1990), 103.

4. Michael Swanton, trans., *Beowulf*, rev. ed. (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), (lines 371-89, 407-8), 52-3.

Family groups were responsible for both protecting and avenging their members, as well as being responsible for their good behavior. Being kinless meant that a man or woman was vulnerable to attack, and this was enough of a problem that some kings late in the Anglo-Saxon period thought it necessary to set themselves up as acting kinsmen for “strangers,” i.e., those traveling outside their own districts or from outside the kingdom.⁵ Around 700, Ine of Wessex ruled that if a British slave killed an Englishman, his punishment was to be handed over to the dead man’s lord and kinfolk, unless his master or his own kin would pay the wergeld of sixty shillings.⁶ About a century earlier, Aethelberht of Kent included the provision that in the event a man killed another and ran, his kin were liable for half the wergeld, the money paid to the relatives of the dead man in lieu of blood.⁷

Family Structure

Despite the importance of kinship ties, the actual structure of the Anglo-Saxon family did not provide a sharply defined unit. This meant that a man’s duty to kin beyond his nuclear family was not always clear, leaving open the possibility of split loyalties. This lack of clarity in turn made feuding a much more complicated process, and makes it more difficult to draw a firm line between feud and other warfare.

During the early part of the Anglo-Saxon era, kinship was bilateral, meaning that men and women traced their descent through both the female and the male lines. Instead

5. *Laws of Canute*, in A.J. Robertson, trans., *The Laws of the Kings of England From Edmund to Henry I*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), (II.4-4.2), 197.

6. *The Laws of Ine*, in F.L. Attenborough, trans., *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (Cornell University Library, 1922), (74-74.1), 61.

7. *The Laws of Ethelberht*, in Attenborough, (23), 7.

of belonging to a fixed tribe or clan, each individual had a unique set of kin that he or she could call upon in time of need, a small circle overlapping many others like a link of the mail shirt that protected him in battle.⁸ It is likely that for practical purposes kinship was limited to within a few degrees, probably not further than first cousins. This can be deduced from the fact that there are no specialized terms in Old English for various degrees of cousins, so while they sometimes traced their descent through six generations, the cousins accumulated along the way do not seem to have been particularly significant.⁹ Between close kin, it is likely that the relationship between a man and his sister's children had special significance, but apart from that the immediate family was likely the most important.¹⁰

The bilateral kinship structure meant that the Anglo-Saxon social world was not made up of discrete family units, but rather a web of overlapping relationships, probably with a great deal of ambiguity about what responsibilities members of a kinship group had to those who were not part of their immediate, nuclear family.¹¹ *Wergeld*, money paid out to the family of a slain man or woman in to appease a feud, usually seems to have been divided between a man's paternal and maternal relatives, judging by a ninth-century law of Alfred stating that if a nun bore a child and it was slain, the part of the *wergeld* that would ordinarily be paid to her and her relatives would be paid to the king while the

8. Lorraine Lancaster, "Kinship in Anglo-Saxon Society, part I," *The British Journal of Sociology*, 9:3 (1958): 232.

9. Lancaster, "Kinship in Anglo-Saxon Society, Part I," 237-8.

10. Stephen Pollington, *The English Warrior: From Earliest Times to 1066*, revised ed., (Norfolk: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2001), 77-8.

11. William Miller, "Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England," *Law and History Review*, 1:2 (Autumn, 1983): 162-3.

father's kin would receive their ordinary shares.¹² Similarly, payment of *wergeld* was the responsibility of both sides of the family. Alfred also ruled that a man with no paternal relatives who slew another was responsible for a third of the *wergeld* himself, with his maternal relatives responsible for another third and his non-related associates would have to pay the remainder.¹³ Both the benefits and the responsibilities of kinship seem to have been divided between maternal and paternal relatives, though the lack of a clearly delineated and persistent kin group, with its corresponding ambiguity over who was responsible for whom beyond the nuclear family, must have caused problems.

Marriage customs also played a part in the way kin groups functioned, and added another level of complexity when assessing loyalties, thereby adding to the ambiguity surrounding feuding. It does not appear that the early Anglo-Saxons saw a married couple as a single entity: at the end of the seventh century Ine ruled that a man who stole without the knowledge of his family was fined 60 shillings, whereas if his family abetted the crime, they were all sold into slavery.¹⁴ Similarly, the eleventh-century Cnut held only the man responsible for a theft, unless the stolen goods were found locked in a storeroom, cupboard, or chest, as the woman of the house traditionally held the keys for these storage areas.¹⁵

Marriage of close kin seems to have been a recurring practice, despite clerical and royal condemnation. Bede relates that the late sixth-century missionary Augustine's

12. *The Laws of Alfred*, in Attenborough, (8.3), 69.

13. *The Laws of Alfred*, in Attenborough, (30-30.1), 77.

14. *The Laws of Ine*, in Attenborough, (7-7.1), 39.

15. *The Laws of Canute*, in Robertson, (II.76-76.1a), 213-15; Lancaster, "Kinship in Anglo-Saxon Society, Part I," 245.

converts included a number of people who had married their first cousins, and also instances in which a man had married his stepmother after his father's death. Augustine wrote to Rome asking for advice on how to handle such situations, and Pope Gregory advised him that while both those practices were forbidden for Christians, those marriages already entered into prior to baptism ought to be left alone.¹⁶ Much later, in the mid-ninth century, Alfred's elder brother attempted to marry his young stepmother Judith upon his ascension to the throne, to the horror of contemporary churchmen.¹⁷ Both Aethelred II and Cnut forbade the marriage of widows to men within six degrees of kinship—four generations—of their previous husbands.¹⁸ It seems likely that the practice of marrying a widowed stepmother had some particular cultural significance, since it was apparently a common practice prior to Christianity and survived until centuries later. Among royalty a widowed queen may have symbolized the kingdom itself, as well as owning riches in her own right, and perhaps the same was true for humbler folk as well.¹⁹ Similarly, Ethelred and Cnut forbade the marriage of first cousins, indicating that it still occurred often enough to be a concern into the eleventh century.²⁰ One might expect marriages outside the family to be the norm, as a means of extending and increasing ties that could be relied upon in times of trouble, but it is also possible that marriage of first cousins had the effect of tying together members of an extended family who might not

16. Bede, (I.27), 80.

17. James Campbell, Eric John, and Patrick Wormald, *The Anglo-Saxons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 142.

18. *The Laws of Ethelred*, in Robertson, (VI.12), 95; *The Laws of Canute*, in Robertson, (I.7), 163.

19. Michael Enright, *Lady With a Meadcup: Ritual, Prophesy, and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tene to the Viking Age* (Blackrock: Four Courts Press, 1996) 26-32 *passim*.

20. *The Laws of Ethelred*, in Robertson (VI.12), 95; *The Laws of Canute*, in Robertson (I.7), 163.

otherwise have been inclined to support one another, thereby solidifying the unity of an existing group. Of course, it is likely that they married with other considerations in mind as well, such as proximity and property.

One particular type of marriage deserves special mention, because of its significance for feuding: that between two feuding groups in an effort to end hostilities. The reasoning behind such marriages was that since it was shameful to kill within the kinship group, particularly as such a death could not be avenged, joining the two groups together would discourage further violence.²¹ The *Beowulf* poet relates the accidental killing of one prince by his younger brother, who “struck him with an arrow from a horn bow. . . .That was a conflict without compensation, a wicked crime wearying to ponder in the heart; but nevertheless the prince had to relinquish life unavenged.”²² The fact that the death cannot be avenged seems to weigh more heavily with the poet than the death itself.

The problem is that, if the literature is to be believed, reconciling two feuding families through marriage did not work very often. A woman married off to end a feud who ends up caught between two warring families, her birth relatives and her husband or sons killing each other, is practically a stock character in European literature of the time.²³ The best example from the Anglo-Saxon corpus is probably Hildeburh, a Danish woman married to a Frisian king in an effort to patch up a feud. The full story of the feud and its aftermath has not survived, but appears to have been a very well-known tale around 700

21. Joel Rosenthal, “Marriage and the Blood-Feud in ‘Heroic’ Europe,” *The British Journal of Sociology*, 17: 2 (June 1966): 134.

22. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2435-2443), 151.

23. Rosenthal, “Marriage and the Blood-Feud,” 133.

when *Beowulf* was composed, and is mentioned in the latter poem. Hildeburh's plight is tragic:

Hildeburh had no cause to praise the loyalty of the Jutes; guiltless, she was deprived of her loved ones, a son and a brother . . . she was a sad woman! Not without cause did the daughter of Hoc lament the decree of Providence when, after morning came, she could see beneath the heavens the violent slaughter of kinsmen, where earlier she had possessed the greatest of earthly treasure.²⁴

The survivors made peace again, but it did not last, and eventually the Jutes killed Finn, the Frisian king, and took Hildeburh back with them.

Joel Rosenthal suggests several reasons why marriages of this sort failed to keep the peace. One is that marriage brought the two groups into closer contact than they might have otherwise been, creating more friction, while the presence of the woman may have served to remind her relatives by marriage of the feud, particularly if they had not taken their revenge prior to the marriage.²⁵ Another reason he suggests is that the relatively high status of women meant that they did not fully integrate into their new families and kept close connections with their birth families. Continental literature does show women siding with their brothers against their husband's family.²⁶ Anglo-Saxon literature does not have comparable examples of women siding with their brothers against their husbands, but the legal distinction between a husband's responsibility and that of his wife lends support to Rosenthal's thesis.

However, while these factors were probably part of the problem when such marriages failed to end a feud, the chief culprit was probably the structure of the kinship

24. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 1071-79), 85.

25. Rosenthal, "Marriage and the Blood-Feud," 135-6.

26. Rosenthal, "Marriage and the Blood-Feud," 139.

group itself. The kinship group was likely fairly small and the obligations toward various members of the family not clearly defined. Thus, it is likely that not all the members of the family felt a particular connection through the marriage. For example, a man who had seen his brother killed in a feud might not feel particularly obligated to preserve the peace just because his cousin was married to a woman from the offending family. The marriage bond was just one of many in a tangle of different loyalties, and the necessity for revenge a powerful incentive toward violence. The Anglo-Saxons themselves recognized that such marriages did not override the impulse towards vengeance. Beowulf comments regarding another proposed marriage to end a feud between the Danes and the Heathobards: “It seldom happens after the fall of a prince that the deadly spear rests even for a little while—worthy though the bride may be!”²⁷ He adds that the sight of the Danes carrying weapons and treasures taken from fallen Heathobards will eventually stir the latter to revenge, and the feud will inevitably break out again.

There does appear to be some evidence that Anglo-Saxon society began to shift from its bilateral system of kinship toward a more patrilineal system from the mid-tenth century on.²⁸ The shift was fairly subtle, however, and it does not appear to have made much of an impact upon the practice of feud.

Feud

Feud and revenge for the slain occupied a large part of Anglo-Saxon consciousness, judging from the literature they left behind. Beowulf probably spoke for many when he said to Hrothgar in the aftermath the attack by Grendel’s mother, “Do not

27. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines, 2029-31), 131.

28. Andrew Wareham, “The Transformation of Kinship and the Family in Late Anglo-Saxon

be sorrowful, wise man! It is better for anyone that he avenge his friend, rather than mourn greatly.”²⁹ The conflict between Beowulf on one side and Grendel and his mother on the other is cast in terms of a feud: Grendel’s mother comes to avenge the death of her son at Beowulf’s hand by killing one of Hrothgar’s men and later, when attempting to stab Beowulf after he has followed her into the underwater lair, the poet says that her motivation is to avenge her son.³⁰ Hrothgar instantly understands her motivation. After all, she is acting in the best traditions of feuding warriors! In return, Beowulf, after dispatching her, goes looking for Grendel in order to avenge the deaths of Hrothgar’s men, unaware that Grendel has died of his wounds.³¹ Interestingly, Beowulf does not appear concerned with avenging the death of one of his own men, whom Grendel had killed immediately prior to Beowulf’s own struggle. This may be because Hrothgar himself had previously paid wergeld for the man, so perhaps Beowulf considered the matter closed.³² It may also simply be that the poet wished to concentrate on Beowulf’s role as savior of the Danes rather than as avenger of his own feud.

Another glimpse into the Anglo-Saxon attitude toward revenge is provided by Genesis A, a poetic retelling of Genesis contained in a manuscript dating from around 1000.³³ The poet deviated from the original in many respects and sometimes the differences are illuminating. One instance is his version of the story of Lamech. In the

England,” *Early Medieval Europe*, 10:3, (Nov 2001): 376, 381.

29. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 13383-85), 101.

30. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 1337-43, 1545-7), 99, 109.

31. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 1570-80), 109.

32. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 1053-55), 85.

33. Mason, *Genesis*, 5.

Hebrew original, Lamech boasts to his wives that he has been known to take inordinate revenge: “I have killed a man because of my wound, and a young man because of my hurt; for Cain is avenged sevenfold and Lamech seventy-seven.”³⁴ The Anglo-Saxon poet changed this to: “In murder I have slain a certain one among my near relations; I have stained my hand with the gory death of Cain. . . .Well know I that for this shall come at last the sevenfold vengeance of the King of Truth, great according to my crime.”³⁵ Earlier in Genesis, Cain had been afraid that he would be slain for the murder of his brother and to reassure him God had put a mark upon him to protect him, promising that vengeance would be visited sevenfold upon anyone who killed him. Evidently mere revenge, even if disproportionate, did not seem particularly heinous, and so in order to show Lamech’s corruption the poet had him not only kill a close kinsman, but one specially protected by God.

There are enough accounts in the extant historical sources left to see that this preoccupation with vengeance was not simply literary convention. For example, during the reign of Aethelred II (979-1016), Earl Uhtred attempted to kill a man named Thurbrand Hold, a Dane, as part of a deal with a new father-in-law. He failed, and after Cnut’s invasion and rise to power, Thurbrand ambushed and killed Uhtred and forty of his men. Uhtred’s sons retained the earldom, however, and in turn, one of them, Ealdred, was able to return the favor and kill Thurbrand. He and Thurbrand’s son Carl ostensibly made peace, but Carl treacherously killed Ealdred at a banquet in 1038, and the family lost the earldom. After the Norman Conquest, in 1072, King William appointed a

34. Gen. 4:23 (Jay Green, trans).

35. Mason, *Genesis*, 42.

member of Uhtred's family to the earldom, who promptly attacked and killed all of Carl's sons and grandsons as they were feasting, with only a single son escaping. Whether this last son was able to avenge his kin is unknown, as our source, a monk writing circa 1100, does not continue the story. He does, however, allude to other feuds of this kind, indicating that this multi-generational conflict was not an isolated occurrence.³⁶ This feud lasted at least four generations and involved four separate incidents, presumably ending only with the near destruction of one of the families involved, a sequence of events that fits well with the tales from *Beowulf* and other sources.

Feud was not just a literary convention, but a real and very important part of Anglo-Saxon culture and society. It is also an inherently violent activity, and because of its importance influenced other forms of violence. However, the actual process of feuding was far from straightforward, with a number of complications coming arising from royal attempts to regulate it, the structure of the family, and actions that a kin group might take when unable to avenge or protect their own. When assessing the influence of feuding on warfare, it is helpful to first form a picture of how basic feuding worked.

The basic function of feud was to provide security for the individual in the absence of a centralized state with a police force. The assurance that attacking an individual would bring down the wrath of the entire family upon the perpetrator's head discouraged assaults and provided a measure of security in an uncertain world. Legal codes reflect the assumption that kin groups would avenge their own. Aethelred II, when writing up the conditions for an alliance between Danes and English, ruled that if the

36. Paul Hyams, "Feud and the State in Late Anglo-Saxon England," *The Journal of British Studies*, 40:1 (January 2001): 7-8.

peace was violated within a town, the townsmen were to arrest the perpetrators, starting with the kinsmen of the slain who were to “take head for head.”³⁷ Only if the kinsmen were unable to do this was the ealdorman responsible, and after that the king himself.³⁸ Cnut ruled that a man convicted of murder was to be handed over to the dead man or woman’s kin.³⁹

The feud also served to keep the peace in another way, however. Since the family and associates of a man who killed would be drawn into the conflict, either to defend him against the wrath of the slain person’s kin or to provide money in order to settle the feud, they had a powerful incentive to police their own and keep trouble from beginning. Known troublemakers would thus be under constant surveillance by their own families.⁴⁰ Even if a murderer fled the country, his kin were still responsible for him. The law code of Aethelberht of Kent, the first English monarch to convert to Christianity in the late sixth century, states that they should have to pay half the wergeld of the slain.⁴¹ Whether this law was intended to ensure that the kin of those who fled were held responsible for their erring relative or merely limit their liability is difficult to say. Either way, it indicates that families were held responsible for the misdeeds of their members. However, it was possible for families who could not maintain a feud to abandon a

37. *The Laws of Ethelred*, in Robertson, (II.6), 59.

38. *The Laws of Ethelred*, in Robertson, (II.6), 59.

39. *The Laws of Canute*, in Robertson, (II.56), 203.

40. Hyams, “Feud and the State,” 2.

41. *The laws of Ethelberht*, in Attenborough (23), 7.

member in trouble, and the possibility of doing so was probably used as a threat to keep recalcitrant members in line.

Anglo-Saxon kings throughout the period were unable to do away with the feud—it was likely that it was so ingrained into the culture that they never considered doing so—but they did attempt to limit and regulate it in various ways. One means was to limit who was liable for a feud. Ine in circa 700 thought it necessary to rule that the kinsmen of a thief caught in the act must swear not to carry on a feud with the man who caught him. However, if the thief was killed in the act the slayer must publicly declare the killing and that the slain was a thief, lest he be required to pay the thief's wergeld.⁴² Alfred (871- 99) ruled that a man could fight for his lord, and a lord for his man, if attacked, without being legally liable for a feud; likewise, he could fight for anyone related to him by blood against anyone but his lord. He could also legally kill any man he caught in bed or behind locked doors with one of his female relations.⁴³ In addition, if a man was killed resisting arrest for oathbreaking, no wergeld would be paid for him, indicating that his kin had no claims on the killer.⁴⁴ Edmund (939-946) ruled that only the killer himself should be liable for feud, and that if his kin should abandon him and not feed or otherwise assist him, they should be left alone. Anyone who retaliated against the killer's family would lose all his property.⁴⁵ Edmund also desired that both commoners and nobles work together to seize known thieves, dead or alive, and reiterated that no one should carry on

42. *The Laws of Ine*, in Attenborough, (28), 45; (35), 47.

43. *The Laws of Alfred*, in Attenborough, (42.5-7), 85.

44. *The Laws of Alfred*, in Attenborough, (1.5), 65.

45. *The Laws of Edmund*, in Robertson, (II.1-1.3), 9.

a feud with anyone on account of the thief.⁴⁶ Perhaps the idea that thieves were not to be avenged became culturally accepted, as later kings do not repeat the ruling.

Of course, the fact that such rules had to be issued and reissued says something about the way feud was actually conducted. Families protected and avenged kinsmen even when they were thieves, and feud was liable to spring up even if those who killed were simply fulfilling their obligations to their lords and followers. It also appears that the whole kinship group was frequently drawn into a feud and members were targeted even if they personally had done nothing to offend. On the other hand, the laws do seem to indicate that individuals *could* be specifically liable for a feud, and that there was some formal understanding of who was liable and when. It is also a testament to how deeply feud was woven into the fabric of Anglo-Saxon society that kings never attempted to suppress it, only to hedge it about with restrictions.

Feuding could be a very complicated business, however. The nature of the Anglo-Saxon family meant that a man's duties to his kin outside his nuclear family were somewhat negotiable, and the exact amount of support he was expected to give or to receive from a relative probably depended greatly on factors other than the degree of kinship, such as proximity and personality. When a dispute occurred within a kin-group, things grew even more complicated, and members had to choose between different loyalties and interests. Stephen White, in his study of the feud between the sons of the sixth-century Frankish king Clovis and their mother's relatives (who had killed her parents decades before), found that the Merovingians used appeals to kinship as a way of making alliances that were first and foremost politically useful. The sons of Clovis were

46. *The Laws of Edmund*, in Robertson, (III.2), 13.

able to use this feud as a means of establishing alliances and defining factions with a large, extended family.⁴⁷ Despite these political maneuverings, Gregory of Tours considered it a bloodfeud, as in all likelihood did the principals, indicating that political maneuvering and feud were not mutually exclusive.⁴⁸

Using the early Merovingian royal family as an analogy for the average Anglo-Saxon family group has its problems: apart from being royal, they seem to have been an astonishingly fratricidal group. It seems likely that the average kin-group in Anglo-Saxon England was a bit less cutthroat. However, while accounts with the level of detail Gregory provides are lacking for Anglo-Saxon conflicts, it is likely that the same basic dynamic operated when an extended kin network found itself at odds. Feuding was thus often more than not a business of one discrete family unit against another, but rather two different factions based on mutual kinship but held together by personal ties or shared interest in addition to familial ties.

Another fact that made feuding a complicated business was that a family could abandon one of its own if necessary. Both Ine and Edmund make provisions for this option in their laws. The former ruled that freemen did not have to associate with an unfree kinsman, unless they wished to pay wergeld to save him from a feud.⁴⁹ The latter

47. Stephen White, "Clotild's Revenge: Politics, Kinship, and Ideology in the Merovingian Bloodfeud," in *Re-Thinking Kinship and Feudalism in Early Medieval Europe* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 120-22.

48. White, "Clotild's Revenge," 107-9.

49. *The Laws of Ine*, in Attenborough, (74.2), 61.

ruled that if a killer's friends (and presumably kinsmen) formally abandoned him and did not provide food or shelter, they were not liable for a feud.⁵⁰

An example of how such a disavowal worked out in practice can be found in the history of Godwin, an eleventh-century earl whose son Harold became the last Anglo-Saxon monarch. During the reign of King Edward the Confessor (1042-66), Earl Godwin had four grown sons holding lands of their own. One of them, Swegn, was something of a troublemaker and claimed that his real father had been Cnut, one of the previous kings. He aided a Welsh prince in a raid on another English earldom and on his way home either abducted or seduced an abbess, whom he is traditionally said to have kept as a wife for a year before threats from the Church made him turn her loose. In retaliation for the loss of the abbess, he took a number of properties from the Church, whereupon King Edward sentenced him to outlawry. Swegn sailed away to Denmark. Two years later he came back with a small fleet, landed, and sought help from his kinsmen to regain his position. His brother Harold, the future king, seems to have wanted nothing to do with him, so Swegn appealed to his cousin Beorn, but again found no help. He was forced to leave again. Shortly thereafter, Swegn appeared again and persuaded Beorn to help him, but Beorn joined his fleet with only three men, evidently with the intention of aiding reconciliation between Swegn, the king, and the rest of the family rather than fighting on his behalf. Shortly thereafter Swegn murdered Beorn, though exactly why is not known. Harold gave Beorn a lavish funeral and joined the king in declaring Swegn *nithing*, a

50. *The Laws of Edmund*, in Robertson, (II.1.1), 9.

wicked man forever outlawed and shunned. Swegn took the few ships among his fleet that had not left him after Beorn's murder and sailed across the channel to Flanders.⁵¹

It is unlikely that the Anglo-Saxons abandoned their kin very often, or that they regarded such actions very highly. Nevertheless, it probably provided a useful alternative when a family found itself saddled with an irresponsible or incorrigible member who threatened to bring ruin on the entire group. The threat of abandonment probably also served as a check on those members who might otherwise have committed whatever excesses they felt inclined to, secure in the knowledge that their family would protect them and pay for the damages.

The surviving poetry illustrates the difficulties and ambiguities that the Anglo-Saxons encountered in their feuds, and also gives some indication of how they reacted when faced with situations that did not conform to the ideal. By far the richest source of feuding tales is *Beowulf*, the longest surviving poem in Old English. The focus of *Beowulf* is the title character's combats with monsters, and though the language used by the poet for those clashes echoes that of feud it does not provide much nuance. However, a number of feuds between humans mentioned as background material demonstrate what the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy expected from their role models.

The first feud mentioned in *Beowulf* is the slaying of Heatholaf by Ecgtheow, Beowulf's father. Why Ecgtheow did so the poet does not say, but apparently Heatholaf's family was powerful enough that the Geats, Ecgtheow's own people, could not shelter him and he was forced to flee to Hrothgar's court. Hrothgar took him in and paid the

51. Frank Barlow, *The Godwins: The Rise and fall of a Noble Dynasty* (New York: Pearson Education Ltd., 2003), 53-4.

wergeld to resolve the feud.⁵² Implicit in this story is the idea that by fleeing Ecgtheow could keep Heatholaf's people from attacking his. Perhaps he had no close kin there, but the incident does lend credence to the idea that feuds could be avoided by not sheltering an offender. Moreover, it does not appear from the text that leaving to avoid bring a feud on one's kin was necessarily a blameworthy act in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxons.

Another feud contained in *Beowulf* is between two ruling families, that of the Geats and of the Swedes, and shows how political conflict merged with personal and familial animosity. It is here that war and feud mingle, and while the beginnings of the conflict are not entirely explained, it is apparent that it was seen as a feud between two families. However, the picture is complicated by internal rivalries and the willingness of some to cooperate with the opposing family in order to achieve their own ends. The situation is a striking contrast to the "ideal" situation of kin supporting their own, yet the poet saw nothing odd in describing the conflict as a feud. There was no strong dividing line between a feud and war for political ends.

It appears that the animosity between the two peoples began when the Geats under King Haethcyn attacked the Swedes, and apparently captured the Swedish queen. The Swedes under their aged but formidable king Ongentheow pursued and caught them, killed many including Haethcyn, and drove the survivors into a nearby wood. A second Geatish army, led by Hygelac, then appeared and counterattacked, rescuing the Geatish survivors and killing Ongentheow.⁵³ With both kings dead, Haethcyn's brother Hygelac assumed the throne of the Geats and Ongentheow's son Ohthere that of the Swedes.

52. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 459-72), 57.

53. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2921-2981), 175-7.

Sometime later, Ohthere died and his brother Onela replaced him, but Ohthere's sons, Eanmund and Eadgils, rebelled against their uncle and fled overseas to the Geats. Hygelac had been killed while raiding the Franks and been succeeded by his son Heardred, who probably thought the opportunity to replace the Swedish king with an ally too good to miss and gave Eanmund and Eadgils shelter.⁵⁴ Onela attacked the Geats and slew both his nephew Eanmund and King Heardred. Heardred left no son to succeed him, so the throne passed to his uncle Beowulf. The surviving Swedish prince, Eadgils, was still among the Geats and Beowulf continued supporting his effort to displace his uncle Onela, which was eventually successful.⁵⁵ Peace between the two peoples lasted until Beowulf's death, but the poem ends with the foreshadowing of further violence.⁵⁶

The story of this conflict, with which the poet evidently expected his listeners to be familiar, makes no clear distinction between personal feuds between families and warfare waged for political ends. The conflict is described as "feud" several times, despite the fact that it is between two kingdoms, and the poet describes Beowulf as taking vengeance for the death of Heardred when Onela was slain.⁵⁷ It seems that the language of feud was the vocabulary that resonated most strongly with the aristocratic warriors who made up the intended audience, and while poetry is more likely to emphasize the personal over the political, the poem does strongly suggest that the Anglo-Saxons tended to think of conflict in personal terms.

54. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2379-2390), 149, 203-4.

55. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2391-2396), 149.

56. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2999-3008), 177-9.

57. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2395-6), 149.

An interesting incident within this larger feud demonstrates how politics and duties to avenge kin could clash. The man who killed the exiled Swedish prince Eanmund was named Weohstan. Weohstan was a Geat, a relative of Beowulf as a matter of fact, but at the time was fighting on the side of the Swedes. After killing Eanmund, Weohstan presented the captured weapons and armor to Onela, and with them a dilemma: His own nephew had been killed in battle by one of his own men while fighting on his behalf. Onela chose to give the weapons and armor to Weohstan, ignoring the ties of kinship in favor of the duties of lordship.⁵⁸ Weohstan later returned to the Geats, and his son, Wiglaf, aided Beowulf in his last fight with the dragon and succeeded him as king. Onela's actions make perfect sense from a political standpoint, of course, but it is notable that the poet includes the incident in a "heroic" poem, specifically notes that Onela chose not to pursue the feud, yet does not indicate his choice was considered shameful. Such a situation was familiar to his audience, and while it was understood that Onela's decision was a violation of his duty to avenge his kin it was not considered dishonorable—political circumstances and other loyalties could override the duty to pursue a feud without undermining the principles behind it.

Beowulf is not history but fiction, even though some characters may have been based on historical personages, but the events described probably reflect how feuds were pursued and understood, even if idealized. The feuds in *Beowulf* do not present the "heroic" picture one might expect from a piece of epic poetry. Instead of straight-forward narratives of heroes bloodily avenging their kin, there are instances of men fleeing from feud and being saved when their host pays wergeld to end it, nephews fighting against

58. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2612-2619), 159.

their own uncle alongside the kin of those who killed their grandfather, and a king faced with the prospect of rewarding one of his own men, whose kin are on the other side, for killing his own nephew. The situations portrayed are reminiscent of the events in Bede, and perhaps it is no coincidence that *Beowulf* may have been composed around the same time in the early eighth century.⁵⁹ The stories that formed the background to *Beowulf* were probably traditional and well known to the intended audience, so it is unlikely that the poet invented them to mirror recent history, but anyone listening at the time would probably have recognized the pattern. The presence of such stories indicate that the audience was well aware of the complexities that feuding could bring about and at least to a certain extent accepted them as a part of a heroic world. It also indicates that the dividing line between political and personal conflicts was not always clear, and that the Anglo-Saxons did not see anything odd about portraying the events above, in all their ambiguity, in terms of a feud between two kin-groups.

Perhaps the greatest feuding story of all at the time was that of Finn and Hengest, which today survives only in a condensed version in *Beowulf* and a fragment of a much longer poem. It was clearly a well-known tale in its day. The surviving fragments tell a tale of a feud between two peoples, the Jutes and the Danes, that broke out in the court of the Frisian king Finn. Finn was married to a Danish princess, Hildeburh, but evidently had Jutes in his own household, who remembered their enmity with the Danes. When Finn's brother-in-law, the Danish king, came to visit over the winter, violence broke out in which both the Danish king and Finn's son were slain. Hildeburh was thus forced to bury both her brother and her son at the same time, while the surviving Danes made an

59. Swanton, notes to *Beowulf*, rev. ed. (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 3-6.

agreement with Finn to join his household. While Finn may not have been personally involved in the recent bloodshed, the ignominy of accepting the leadership of the man whose retainers had slain their lord was too much to bear, and the surviving Danes broke the treaty, killed Finn, and took Hildeburh back to Denmark.⁶⁰ Interestingly, the leader of the surviving Danes was named Hengest and may have been identified with the Hengest who invaded Britain and founded one of the earliest English kingdoms there in 449, making this story of particular interest to the Anglo-Saxons.⁶¹

The tale is not a happy one, nor even a triumphant one, but one of divided loyalties and a cycle of violence spun out of control that destroys almost everyone. Moreover, the summary in *Beowulf*, sung by the bard in Hrothgar's hall in the celebrations after the death of Grendel, serves as a foreshadowing of other feuds. Even with Grendel and his mother out of the way, Hrothgar's children will be displaced by their uncle and the great hall will burn, destroyed in a feud with the Heathobards, another instance where the line between a conflict between kingdoms is presented as a feud between two royal families.⁶² The other feuds the poet alludes to act as foreshadowing as well. There is a profound sense of inevitable doom throughout the poem, with allusions pointing toward the coming death in battle or feud of almost everyone mentioned.

Hrothgar's hall will burn, Hygelac will be slain in battle, and after Beowulf's death the

60. Michael Swanton, introduction to *Beowulf*, rev. ed., (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 196-7; J.R.R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode* (London: HarpersCollins Publishers, 2006), 159-62.

61. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest*, 161; Michael Swanton, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 13.

62. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 80-85), 39; Swanton, introduction to *Beowulf*, 17,19; Swanton, Notes to *Beowulf*, 201.

Swedes will attack again and the Geats will disappear from the face of the earth.⁶³ The understanding of feud in *Beowulf* is tragic: the necessity for revenge remains unquestioned but the consequences are portrayed as inevitable destruction, a cycle of violence impossible to escape from once started.

Conclusion

Family and feuding were joined at the hip in Anglo-Saxon England, and together provided one of the most important pillars of Anglo-Saxon society. Feud functioned first and foremost as a way to protect the individual and to provide a check on violence, and the duty to avenge a kinsman or woman was a matter of honor. However, bilateral families meant that there were no fixed clans, and thus beyond the nuclear family the responsibility a man owed his kin was somewhat negotiable. This ambiguity, added to the ability to abandon a wayward kinsman if the price of protecting him was too high and the necessities of politics, meant that feud was more than a simple matter of one well-defined kin-group against another.

The picture grows more complicated yet when other loyalties, particularly the warband, could compete with the family. The literature suggests that despite the heavy cultural emphasis on vengeance and supporting one's kin, the Anglo-Saxons were aware that circumstances sometimes dictated otherwise and did not automatically consider failure to pursue a feud dishonorable.

The consequence of this ambiguity was that there was no clear dividing line between feud and other kinds of warfare. The presence of split loyalties, of divided kin-

63. Swanton, Introduction to *Beowulf*, 25-26.

groups, and quarrels over resources and power did not preclude the presence of feud as well, nor did they keep the Anglo-Saxons from seeing them as feuds.

CHAPTER III

THE WARBAND

The other great secular institution of Anglo-Saxon society was the warband, the household troops of kings and other nobles who in return for food, lodging, and gifts of weapons, land, and treasure, made up the personal armies of the magnates. These warbands were the basic military organization in pre-Viking Anglo-Saxon England, and in such a warlike society assumed great social and cultural significance. They also provided the only real competition to the family for loyalty, and took over many of functions of a kinship group, particularly the all-important function of revenge. The warband, by acting as a substitute for the family while also providing the foundation for larger-scale warfare, helped blur the distinction between war and feud. In addition, despite the emphasis on family ties in Anglo-Saxon culture, it is not uncommon to find members of royal families at war with each other, usually cousins or nephews and uncles, but even at times fathers and sons. The role of the warband as a fictive family probably gave the participants in such a struggle the ideological or emotional cover for what would otherwise have been an unconscionable breach of honor, a set of alternative loyalties that could be honorably upheld when politically convenient. Since kinship was already somewhat negotiable, this would not have been too much of a mental leap. Thus, the warband provided a way for feud to become intertwined with warfare both by making the primary military unit a fictive family, complete with the duty to avenge the lord if he was slain, and by providing an alternative to biological kinship that allowed kinsmen to fight one another without completely ignoring the principles of feud. In this way, the warband

allowed the idea of feud to greatly influenced warfare, even as it was waged for other reasons.

Organization and Significance

In the first century AD, the Roman historian Tacitus described the German chiefs as maintaining bands of followers, as both a sign of prestige and a source of military strength. These bands consisted of ambitious young men who sometimes came from far away to seek admission into the retinue of renowned chiefs and who fiercely competed for status among themselves. In return for the chance to win treasure and status these men were loyal unto death, counting it a disgrace to return alive from the battlefield if their lord was slain. Tacitus adds that the constant need for plunder to sustain these warbands kept them in a constant state of warfare.⁶⁴ Apart from his claim that men were expected to die on the battlefield if their lord was slain, which does not seem to have been quite true for the Anglo-Saxons and which may not have been entirely accurate even in his own day, Tacitus' general description jibes very well with the picture of the warband that is portrayed in English sources.

However, while the warbands that invaded Britain in the fifth century probably closely fitted Tacitus' description, by the time written sources become available there was a new factor, land ownership, complicating the picture.⁶⁵ The warband was probably divided into two groups, the younger warriors called *geogub* ("youth" in the singular

64. Cornelius Tacitus, *The Complete Works of Tacitus : The Annals. The History. The Life of Cnaeus Julius Agricola. Germany and its Tribes. A Dialogue on Oratory*, Trans. Alfred Church (New York: The Modern library, 1942), (ch. 13-14), 715-16.

65. Stephen S. Evans, *The Lords of Battle: Image and Reality of the Comitatus in Dark-Age Britain* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1997), 27.

[Latin *iuvenis*])⁶⁶ and older, more experienced men designated *dugub* (“doughty” [Latin *comes*]).⁶⁷ *Geoguba* were unmarried and likely lived in their lord’s households, while the *dugubas*, having proven themselves, had been granted land enough to support a family and were married.⁶⁸ Some examples of this dynamic can be found in *Beowulf*, in which the title character is granted land by his uncle after returning victorious from killing Grendel. Beowulf may have already owned land, as the next passage states that both he and Hygelac held “inherited land” though the poet is unclear whether this means that Beowulf had inherited land or that both now held land that had belonged to their mutual ancestors.⁶⁹ Regardless, since the previous passage claims that prior to his triumphant return Beowulf had not been highly regarded by those around him, the poet probably intended the gifts of gold and land Beowulf received to indicate a change in status: the despised *geogub* had proven his worth and had been promoted to *dugub*.⁷⁰ Likewise, Hygelac gave land and treasure to Eofer and Wulf as a reward for killing the Swedish

66. The letters thorn (þ) and eth (ð) are pronounced as “th” in Modern English. Some modern renditions make a distinction between them, thorn being used to indicate an unvoiced fricative, as in Modern English “cloth” and eth to indicate a voiced fricative, as in “clothe,” but since the Anglo-Saxons used them interchangeably this paper will do likewise. See: *Sweet’s Anglo-Saxon Primer*, 9th ed. Revised by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953; reprint, 1994), 2 (page citations are to the reprint edition); Bruce Michell, *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995; reprint, 1996), 20 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

67. Guy Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, Warfare and History, ed. Jeremy Black (London: Routledge, 2003), 58; Pollington, *The English Warrior*, 41.

68. Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, 58.

69. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2190-2201), 138-9.

70. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2183-2188), 138-9. How this characterization of Beowulf’s life prior to his expedition to the Danes was meant to fit with his earlier boast of swimming for over five days and crossing half the length of the Baltic Sea while slaying nine sea-monsters is difficult to see. Either Beowulf’s kin were very difficult to please or the poet tried to include one traditional motif too many.

king Ongentheow.⁷¹ The poem “Deor” reveals that poets, whose works were instrumental in establishing reputations and thus were valued men, were also granted land, and it also reveals that this land could be revoked, as the poem is a lament by a poet whose lands have been taken from him and given to another poet.⁷² It seems unlikely that a poet, once granted lands, would have been spent all his time on them, for doing so would have defeated the purpose of having a poet in the first place, and it seems likely that even *dugubas* would have spent part of their time in company with their lord and thus continued to take part in the rituals that bound the warband together.

Kings were not the only men who raised their own warbands; other aristocrats had their own followings that they led into battle. Whether these included *dugubas* who had been granted enough land to raise their own followings does not seem to be answerable from the available sources, though the fact that Hygelac’s gifts of land to Beowulf included a hall hints that Beowulf may have raised his own warband thereafter.⁷³ On the basis of Ine’s Code and analogy with seventh century Francia Guy Halsall seems to suggest that a royal warband was essentially a system of smaller warbands, each landed retainer bringing with him a number of landless men who looked to him for reward. These sub-warbands would be in addition to the royal warband proper.⁷⁴ Those aristocrats who were already wealthy could recruit men without royal assistance: Guthlac in his wild

71. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2989-2998), 176-7.

72. Richard Hamer, trans., *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London: Faber and Faber Limited., 1970; reprint, Glasgow: Robert MacLeHose and company, 1977), (lines 35-42), 92-3 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

73. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2190-2201), 138-9.

74. Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, 57-8. That is what he appears to be arguing, though he is very unclear here.

youth raised a warband while still in his teens and went raiding, apparently on his own account.⁷⁵ These aristocratic warbands formed the basis of larger armies when the king required one, or could go to war on their own, as did Guthlac. Bede records that Penda's army at the Battle of Winwaed in 655 was made up of thirty "legions."⁷⁶ He also notes that at the Battle of Degsastan in 603, Theobald, the brother of King Ethelfrith of Northumbria, was killed along with all his following despite apparently being on the winning side. The evident potential for a warband to be cut off and destroyed completely suggests that individual warbands fought as units within a larger army.⁷⁷

In addition to the warbands, there is also the vexing problem of the *fyrð*.⁷⁸ The *fyrð* was the entire population of a kingdom eligible for military service, but who exactly was eligible is unclear. Early historians believed that all free men were liable for military service, that the Anglo-Saxons were a nation in arms. More recent scholarship indicates that by the time written records are available military service probably consisted of logistical support, and that the actual fighting was carried out by the warbands. Warbands thus remained the most important military institution in Anglo-Saxon England until the Viking invasions of the ninth century, and because of this had an important influence on warfare.

75. Felix, *The Life of Saint Guthlac*, in *Anglo-Saxon Saints and Heroes*, trans. Clinton Albertson (New York: Fordham University Press, 1967), (ch. XVI-XVII), 176.

76. Bede, (III.24), 183; Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, 57.

77. Bede, (I.34), 97; Evans, 35.

78. The earliest use of the word appears to be in Ine's Code around 700, but was doubtless in use earlier. Earlier law-codes, the resource most likely to mention such things, confine themselves to setting fines for various breaches of the king's peace, the amount of compensation for various injuries, and similar matters, and do not touch on military organization.

While the main focus of this paper is on the period between AD 600 and 800, it is worth examining later developments in large part because the poem “The Battle of Maldon,” an important if problematic look at the mentality of Anglo-Saxon warriors, was composed much later around the turn of the first millennium. Around 800, the Anglo-Saxons began shifting from the warband, based on personal prestige and ties, to a sort of proto-feudal system, in which landowners were required to provide a certain number of men, which in turn led to the creation of a standing army under Alfred the Great that rotated men between home, garrison duty, and the field army.⁷⁹ By the reign of Aethelred and the Battle of Maldon, this system had evolved into a number of regional armies led by the ealdormen and composed of men who owed military service for the land they held from their superiors.⁸⁰ Because of this transformation, some scholars have suggested that the picture of Byrhtnoth’s followers in “The Battle of Maldon,” reminiscent of a warband, is anachronistic.⁸¹ However, as Stephen Pollington points out, a wealthy man like Byrhtnoth was likely the immediate lord of many of the men he led into battle, and his position as ealdorman meant that he acted as proxy for the king when the *fyrd* took oaths of allegiance, leading to a strong sense of loyalty between him and his subordinates.⁸² It is even possible that the old bonding rituals were still carried out—after all, the institution of the warband had existed for at least seven hundred years prior to the change in organization and it would have not died out overnight. Even in the heyday of

79. Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, 102-6.

80. Pollington, *English Warrior*, 106.

81. Rosemary Woolf, The ideal of Men Dying with Their Lord in the *Germania* and *The Battle of Maldon*, “*Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976): 67.

82. Pollington, *English Warrior*, 106.

the warband, a significant proportion of warriors had land on which they presumably stayed part of the time. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to believe that some of the ethos of the old warband system may have remained, even some two hundred years later, and thus “Maldon,” if used with caution, is still useful as evidence for the mentality of Anglo-Saxons warriors.

Fictive Kinship

The importance of the warband as a military institution meant that its peculiarities helped determine the nature of Anglo-Saxon warfare. One aspect of this was its role as a substitute family, which, while not transforming all warfare into glorified feud, ensured that matters of vengeance remained a factor and, paradoxically, may have made it easier for royal families to squabble among themselves without repudiating the cultural emphasis on kinship.

The problem that the Anglo-Saxons faced when forming warbands was the high value they placed on kinship, which probably meant that men and women had difficulty completely trusting those outside their own families. However, in order to be effective, members of the warband had to be able to trust each other with their lives despite different familial backgrounds. The Anglo-Saxons responded to the problem by creating a fictive kinship between the members of the warband. This fictive kinship allowed the warband to usurp the role of the family in both emotional significance and the all-important duty of vengeance, and thus provided the means by which the bloodfeud influenced and became intermingled with wars of royal and aristocratic aggrandizement.

No surviving Anglo-Saxon text explicitly draws a comparison between the family and the warband, nor does any text speak of members of the same warband as brothers or

use any other terminology to indicate that the English consciously considered the warband a substitute family. There is evidence that the warband functioned as such, however. First, the rituals to establish group identity connected with the warband may have had their origins in marriage rites and seem to have continued the marriage analogy both by maintaining the connection between ritual alcohol consumption, which played an important role in forming bonds between the lord and his retainers, and by giving women an important role in these rituals, particularly the lord's wife. Second, both poetry and history indicate that the warband held an equal place to kin in loyalty and emotional significance, although disentangling the two is complicated by the fact that many warbands included warriors who shared biological kinship with each other and the lord. Finally, the members of the warband were honor-bound to avenge their leader's death if he fell in battle, thereby taking over at least in part a responsibility of the kin-group. The Anglo-Saxons continued to make a distinction between biological kinship networks and warbands, yet the evidence indicates that in practice the line between the two was frequently blurred.

Mead, Women, and Ritual

Ritual consumption of alcohol—mead, a beverage made from fermented honey, is the drink mentioned most in the literature—played a major part in cementing bonds between fighting men and their lords and reinforcing the hierarchy within it. Michael Enright, in *Lady with a Mead Cup*, argues that the Proto-Germanic word for a warband, **druhtiz* (Old English *dryht*), is etymologically related to the word for a bridal procession, the common thread between the two being the induction of new members into

a kin-group.⁸³ A difference of several hundred years lay between when the word originated, probably some time in the Iron Age, and Anglo-Saxon England from 450 on, so etymology is not a reliable guide to how the Anglo-Saxons after the migration understood the warband, but it is suggestive of the origins of the warband.

In addition, it is certain that mead continued to have a particular significance within Anglo-Saxon culture, as the symbol of the ties between lord and men. In the “Finnsburh Fragment,” the poet remarks that he has never heard of any warriors repaying their lord for their mead (by fighting well) better than the warriors of Hnaef.⁸⁴ Alcohol was also linked with formal oaths and promised of great deeds.⁸⁵ In *Beowulf*, Beowulf’s kinsman Wiglaf scolds the faint-hearted retainers who left Beowulf to fight the dragon alone with only Wiglaf’s aid by reminding them of the oaths they swore while drinking mead to repay the gifts they received with loyal service.⁸⁶ Earlier in the poem, Wealhtheow, Hrothgar’s queen, is described as serving Hrothgar mead, then bringing the cup around until she arrives where Beowulf is sitting, whereupon she publicly thanks God for sending the Danes a deliverer and thereby induces Beowulf to formally repeat his oath to kill Grendel or die trying. After hearing this, Wealhtheow is pleased and returns to sit by her husband.⁸⁷ It is likely that the poet is alluding to a formal ritual designed to reinforce the hierarchy within the warband and to cement oaths, with mead serving as the

83. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 71-2. Enright does not always put the asterix, indicating a hypothesized rather than an extant form, before *druhtiz*, but from context it is clear that it is a reconstructed word, not one found in extant writings.

84. Hamer, “Finnsburh Fragment,” (lines 37-40), 38-39.

85. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 18.

86. Swanton, *Beowulf*, 2631-2646, 161.

87. Swanton, *Beowulf*, 611-41.

ritual glue. By the Anglo-Saxon period, the warband as an institution had been established for hundreds of years and it is possible that the original purpose of ritual drinking as a means of establishing fictive kinship had faded as the warband became a significant part of English culture in its own right. There is nothing in the extant sources that demonstrates that they explicitly equated membership in a warband and kinship. Nevertheless, it appears that the liquor ritual still served to cement the bonds within the warband and so functioned in much the same way.

The need to bind the members of a warband together was a vital concern, for in addition to its military role, the warband offered a way to bring outsiders into society. It was not uncommon for warriors to come from outside a lord's territory in order to find employment; one of the benefits of fame was that a reputation for success and generosity attracted outside talent. This dynamic was well established well before the Anglo-Saxon period; Tacitus mentions that in times of unrelenting peace and quiet adventurous young men would leave their own tribe and seek out opportunities to win fame and loot in the service of foreign chieftains.⁸⁸ The whole first part of *Beowulf*, wherein the title character hears of the depredations of Grendel and sails from his home (probably the island of Gotland near Sweden) over to Hrothgar's kingdom in Denmark in order to win fame for himself by killing the monster, can be understood as a reflection of this practice. The watchman who hails him when he first makes landfall recognizes that Beowulf and his companions are not a raiding party, and when informed of their reason for coming accepts it as legitimate and leads them straight to Hrothgar. Evidently the idea that a man might travel overseas in search of opportunities to win fame was familiar enough that the

88. Tacitus, *Germany*, (ch. 14), 716.

poet could expect his listeners to accept the watchman's conduct as plausible.⁸⁹ More historically, Bede states that King Oswy of Northumbria in the seventh century was generous to high and low alike, and won such fame due to his kingly nature "that nobles came from almost every province to enter his service."⁹⁰ The Life of Saint Guthlac, when relating his less-than-saintly early life, mentions that Guthlac raised a warband of his own as a young noble, "collected from all quarters and from different races."⁹¹ Later, King Alfred of Wessex devoted a sixth of his annual revenues to recruiting and supporting foreigners in his court.⁹² Not all these foreigners were warriors, though. Among the foreigners Alfred recruited was the Welsh priest and scholar Asser, who later became his biographer, and who praised Alfred's generosity just as one of his warriors might have.⁹³

Women, while they did not form part of the warband themselves, nevertheless played a major role in ensuring its smooth function. In a family setting, it appears that women often acted as inciters, shaming and exhorting men to vengeance and violence. There is less evidence for such a role for women in the warband, but extant sources suggest that women continued to act as goads and judges for male action. In addition, they also helped reinforce the hierarchy through participation in mead-drinking rituals,

89. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 237-319), 45-9.

90. Bede, (III.14) 166.

91. Guthlac, (ch. XVII), 176; Evans, *Lords of Battle*, 57. To preserve the reputation of the saint, the hagiographer claims that after devastating all in his path, Guthlac would restore a third of the loot to the survivors.

92. Richard P. Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Longman, 1998), 188-9.

93. Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other Contemporary Sources*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), (ch. 79, 81), 93-7.

possibly helped soothe quick tempers and keep frustration, jealousy, and rivalry from breaking out into violence, and in short acted as the symbolic center of the fictive family.⁹⁴

Tacitus claims that German women of his own day often followed their menfolk into battle, providing food and encouragement, and that traditional stories indicated that women had been able to rally wavering armies by appealing to the warriors not to allow the women to be taken captive; Tacitus notes that Germans held women in higher regard than did the Romans.⁹⁵ Gregory of Tours, without evident disapproval, mentions two separate instances in which women left their husbands and attached themselves to men whom they considered mightier; Enright interprets Gregory's inclusion of these stories as evidence that women's praise was considered important in establishing a man's reputation.⁹⁶

Female participation in the warband went beyond mere exhortation. Women, particularly the lord's wife, were also a part of the mead drinking rituals, and seem to have performed a set ritual that involved offering mead to the lord first, and then proceeding to serve the rest of the warband, presumably in order of rank. Wealhtheow is described as doing this in *Beowulf*: "The noble woman gave the goblet first to the guardian of the East Dane's homeland Then the lady of the Helmings went about everywhere among both tried warriors and youths, passed around the precious cup."⁹⁷

94. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 22, 42-3.

95. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 58-9; Tacitus, *Germany*, (ch. 7-8), 712-13.

96. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 56-9.

97. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 611-21), 63.

Later, after Beowulf has slain Grendel and the overjoyed Hrothgar is contemplating making Beowulf his heir, she again presents her husband the king with a cup and appeals to him not to disinherit her two young sons in favor of the hero of the hour, after which she goes to where Beowulf himself is sitting. She⁹⁸ then presents him with a cup and a bracelet, praising him and imploring him not to attempt to gain the Danish throne.⁹⁹ The longer version of the “Gnomic Verses,” also known as “Maxims I,” also mentions the lord’s wife presenting the cup to her husband first, and then to the rest of the warband in turn.¹⁰⁰ Given the importance of mead drinking to the communal life of the warband, the participation of women in this ritual made them a vital part of the institution. It also helps highlight that the warband was as much a social institution as it was a military one, and provides additional evidence that warbands functioned as a fictive family.

Vengeance and the Warband

The second indication that the warband functioned as a fictive family was the duty of the members to avenge their lord should he be slain in battle, a clear instance in which the idea of feuding entered into warfare. There is a historiographic controversy about this requirement, however. In *Germania*, Tacitus claims that it was “an infamy and a reproach for life (for a retainer) to have survived the chief, and returned from the

98. The poem uses a passive verb, “a goblet was carried to him . . . and twisted gold was presented with good will” so it is not immediately clear if Wealhtheow is doing the presenting. However, given that the poem is following her actions both prior to and after this section, and Wealhtheow bids him to enjoy and make good use of the gifts, it is logical to conclude that even if she did not present them to Beowulf with her own hands she is presiding over the action and the gifts are from her. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (1192-1194), 91.

99. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 1160-1231), 89-93.

100. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 35.

field.”¹⁰¹ Around nine hundred years later, a battle fought between Viking raiders and a defending Anglo-Saxon force led by the earl Byrhtnoth led to the defeat of the Anglo-Saxons, the death of Byrhtnoth, and subsequently the deaths of a number of his men who chose to fight on after Byrhtnoth fell. The battle also inspired a poem, which only partially survives, called “The Battle of Maldon.” The surviving fragment focuses around two different decisions, the decision of Byrhtnoth to allow the Vikings free passage across a river in order to fight a straightforward battle and the decision of some of his remaining troops to stand and fight to the death rather than flee after Byrhtnoth was slain. It is not difficult to see similarities between the description in Tacitus and the events of the poem, and for decades scholars simply assumed that the ethos that Tacitus described survived more or less intact at least until the end of the tenth century.

However, this interpretation is seriously flawed. Rosemary Woolf was the first to question it in 1976, pointing out that there was little evidence that the ideal was present during the period between Tacitus in the first century and the composition of “The Battle of Maldon” shortly after 991. Nevertheless, she believed that the ideal of dying alongside a fallen lord *was* present in the poem, and sought out a reason for this odd revival in the heroic ideal.¹⁰² She finds this reason in the influence of the Norse (ironically enough, given the villains of the poem are Vikings) poem “Bjarkamál,” which contains the story of the last stand of the warband of Hrolf Kraki, a legendary eighth-century Norse king, and the desire of the poet to transform a rather humiliating defeat into a moral victory and

101. Tacitus, *Germany*, (ch. 14), 715-16.

102. Rosemary Woolf, “The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lords in the ‘Germania’ and the ‘Battle of Maldon,’” *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976): 63, 72.

an illustration of heroic will.¹⁰³ However, since Woolf's article, the date of "Bjarkamál" has been reevaluated and scholars now believe that it postdates "The Battle of Maldon," and therefore, as Roberta Frank points out, it cannot have formed the inspiration for "Maldon." Like Woolf, Frank rejects the idea that there was a continuous strand of Anglo-Saxon thought that demanded a retainer die alongside his lord, but she also rejects Woolf's argument that such a strand existed in Scandinavia, and argues that the emphasis given to the decision of Byrhtnoth's followers to fight on after his death was a reflection of the emerging feudal order and a new emphasis on "individual, voluntary Christian fidelity."¹⁰⁴

Woolf's argument that the Anglo-Saxons did not generally hold the notion that a man was obliged to die alongside his lord is probably correct, but neither her nor Frank's attempt to explain the apparent similarities between Tacitus and "Maldon" are very convincing. There is a far simpler solution, however: the primary goal expressed in "The Battle of Maldon" is vengeance, not annihilation, and the deaths of Byrhtnoth's followers are a consequence of their refusal to flee before doing their duty, not an aim in and of itself. "Maldon" is then consistent with the rest of Old English literature and ceases to be an anomaly in need of explanation. It also makes it more likely to have actually happened, something that neither Woolf nor Frank seriously consider.

Once one ceases to view Old English literature through the lens of Tacitus, the emphasis in Old English literature on vengeance is fairly clear. One of the things about

103. Woolf, "The Ideal of Men Dying," 78-8, 81.

104. Roberta Frank, "The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in *The Battle of Maldon: Anachronism or Nouvelle vague*." In *People and Places in Northern Europe, 500-1600: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*, ed. I. Wood and N. Lund, (Rochester, NY: Woodbridge, 1991), 98-105.

Beowulf that has puzzled scholars is the fact that the protagonist, otherwise the ideal warrior, survives the disastrous raid on the Frisians that resulted in the death of Hygelac, his uncle and king. However, the poem records that he killed the Frank who came to strip the body, and it is likely that the listeners understood this Frank to be Hygelac's killer; therefore Beowulf, having avenged his lord, could escape with honor.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, when Wiglaf recounts the war between the Geats and the Swedes, he recalls one instance where the Swedish king Ongentheow attacked a Geatish raiding party, killing its leader Haethcyn, but the survivors did not die on the battlefield with their lord. Instead, they were driven into a wood and surrounded; and only escaped death when Haethcyn's brother Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle, arrived with reinforcements and forced the Swedes to retreat.¹⁰⁶ There is no hint that either Wiglaf or the poet considered the survival of Haethcyn's retainers to be dishonorable, and the death of Ongentheow at the Geats' hands shortly thereafter seems to have satisfied the need for vengeance. In the Finnsburh story, the retainers of the slain king Hnaef were willing to make a truce with Finn, who was probably not directly responsible for the killing, but honor demanded vengeance and when the time came they broke the truce and slew Finn and those responsible for the death of Hnaef.¹⁰⁷

Historical sources indicate that this duty to avenge a dead lord was not just a literary motif. While during the fighting between Cynwulf and Cynheard the deaths of both leaders also lead to the annihilation of both their warbands, the reason for the

105. Woolf, "The Ideal of Men Dying," 70; Swanton, *Beowulf*, 2497-2509, 153-5.

106. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2922-2981), 175-7.

107. Woolf, "The Ideal of Men Dying," 69-70; Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest*, 160-62.

decision of both warbands to fight to the death was that the terms offered them would have meant serving their lord's killer in the case of Cynwulf's retainers or abandoning their lord in the face of enemy attack in the case of Cynheard's.¹⁰⁸ This emphasis on loyalty in the face of danger is consistent with the ideals expressed elsewhere, and while there are examples from Continental and Scandinavian historical or quasi-historical sources of retainers avenging their lords at the cost of their own lives, the emphasis is on vengeance against the particular man who had killed their lord, not the defeat of an enemy army or desire to die *per se*.¹⁰⁹

A few passages in "The Battle of Maldon" seem to indicate that some of the warriors who remained after the death of Earl Byrhtnoth were seeking death, but these passages do not indicate that all those who remained to fight did so specifically to die and leave open the possibility that others might not follow the same path. The clearest example of a warrior actively seeking a battlefield death is the narrator's statement that Offa had vowed prior to the battle that both Byrhtnoth and he should return home safely, or that both would fall.¹¹⁰ This seems to have been an individual vow, and probably was not a usual part of the relationship between a lord and his followers, otherwise the poet would not have mentioned it. Another man who elects to die is Byrhtwold, an older warrior and probably a relative of Byrhtnoth, but his decision comes only after Byrhtnoth is already dead. Furthermore, the statement that the poet ascribes to him, "Here lies our leader in the dust, the hero/ Cut down in battle. Ever must he mourn/ Who thinks to go home from this battle-play. /I am an aged man. Hence I will not, / But I intend to die

108. Woolf, "The Ideal of Men Dying," 70-1.

109. Woolf, "The Ideal of Men Dying," 75.

beside my lord,” clearly leaves open the possibility that others might survive, and is motivated by personal considerations.¹¹¹ Alfwin also states his resolution that he will not be reproached for leaving the army after Byrhtnoth had been slain, which may indicate a desire to die with his lord or could simply mean that he will not flee even in that desperate situation.¹¹²

The other men who give their reasons for standing and fighting indicate that they are attempting to avenge their lord or die trying. Leofsunu declares his intention to avenge his lord, and that he will not be reproached for leaving the battle, while Dunnere simply declares that everyone should take revenge for Byrhtnoth’s death without regard for their own life.¹¹³ Edward declares that he will never retreat now that his lord is dead, and the narrator relates that he “broke the ranks and fought against those men /Until he had avenged his patron nobly/ Among their foes before he too lay dead.”¹¹⁴ The narrator portrays the remaining troops praying that they might avenge their lord and slay their foes.¹¹⁵ Finally, the narrator characterizes the troop as a whole as determined to avenge their lord or die in the attempt.¹¹⁶

Both the narrative and many of the words put into the mouths of the men who chose not to run are primarily concerned with vengeance, even though they know it will

110. Hamer, “The Battle of Maldon,” (lines 289-94), 66-7.

111. Hamer, “The Battle of Maldon,” (lines 316-19), 68-9.

112. Hamer, “The Battle of Maldon,” (lines 220-4), 62-3.

113. Hamer, “The Battle of Maldon,” (lines 244-59), 64-5.

114. Hamer, “The Battle of Maldon,” (lines, 277-9), 66-7.

115. Hamer, “The Battle of Maldon,” (lines 262-64), 65-7.

116. Hamer, “The Battle of Maldon,” (lines 207-8), 62-3.

be at the cost of their own lives. There are those who do seem to be seeking death, but while it is possible that there are two different ideals being espoused, it seems more likely that the duty for vengeance formed the context for the decision to fall alongside Byrhtnoth. Woolf points out that one difference between the duty of vengeance found in other poems and that in “Maldon” is that vengeance is directed against the whole of the enemy army, not just against the individual who struck the fatal blow.¹¹⁷ Therefore, the expressed desire not to outlive Byrhtnoth may be more of a desire not to return home having failed in their duty to avenge him than a desire to die with him *per se*, though admittedly Offa’s vow is difficult to reconcile with this position. Regardless, the preponderance of evidence points toward vengeance as the primary consideration, and so Offa’s vow, which has no parallel in English literature, must be understood as the exception that proves the rule, an example of loyalty that went far beyond the call of duty.

By the time “Maldon” was composed, the Anglo-Saxon army was no longer based around the warband, though it is likely that the men described as standing their ground after Byrhtnoth’s death had a personal relationship with him. Byrhtwold, judging by his name, was likely a kinsman. If the picture given of their decision to stay is in fact anachronistic, then it can be taken as indicative of earlier custom. However, since it is possible that the old bonding rituals survived despite the change, it may reflect contemporary attitudes and indicate the survival of an older ethos. Either way, when it is viewed alongside the rest of Old English poetry and history, the emphasis on avenging one’s lord is consistent with earlier practice, and it seems certain that while it was not

117. Woolf, 76.

dishonorable to leave the battlefield alive after the death of one's lord, a retainer was to avenge him if at all possible and certainly not switch his allegiance to his lord's killer. This did not mean that a war became a feud once a lord was slain, as the original reasons for the conflict still remained in force. Nevertheless, the addition of the motive of vengeance added a new dimension to a pre-existing conflict, and guaranteed that ideals behind feuding would be present even in warfare over power and resources. In addition, since much of the importance of the family came from its responsibility to avenge its members, the emphasis on avenging a dead lord means that in this particular area the warband took over one of the fundamental functions of the family, thereby acting as a fictive family itself.

The Warband as a Community

The third set of evidence for the warband as a fictive family is the way it took over some of the emotional and cultural aspects of the family. The warband formed the center of a warrior's social life, and the hall, where the rituals that knit the community together took place, became the symbol of comfort and conviviality in Anglo-Saxon thought.

The hall was the center of communal activities in the warband, and it appears to have become a metaphor for the warband itself. Along with such things as feasting, drinking, and gift-giving, which took place in the hall itself, "hall-joys" also included such activities as hunting, horse-racing, and games, which for reasons of space are unlikely to have been carried out within the hall itself, but were part of the social life of the warband.¹¹⁸ The *Beowulf* poet uses this metaphor to good effect, and in doing so

118. Evans, *Lords of Battle*, 93, 97.

highlights the centrality of the hall in Anglo-Saxon aristocratic culture. The poet begins by relating how Heorot, Hrothgar's hall, was built and then how the monster Grendel was incensed at seeing the joy of the men in the hall, joy he could never share, and out of spite began his campaign of terror against them. Similarly, the dragon burns Beowulf's hall after being provoked by the theft of the goblet.¹¹⁹ In both cases, particularly the former, the poet uses the hall as a marker for happiness and content, a symbol of goodness that is disrupted by marauders and that the hero must restore.

The use of the mead-hall as a symbol of comfort and contentment is not unique to the *Beowulf* poet, and is found in several other works. Bede's famous swallow analogy uses the hall in the same way, comparing the life of a human to a swallow that flies into the mead-hall on a winter's day: "In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or what follows, we know nothing."¹²⁰ The speaker goes on to endorse converting to Christianity, as the new religion could provide answers to this mystery. Bede's primary interest is not in the hall or the warband but the conversion process, and story may be apocryphal. Nevertheless, that he expected this analogy, contrasting the comfort of the hall to the hostile winter, to move his contemporaries indicates that the hall as a metaphor warmth and comfort was familiar to them.

119. Evans, *Lords of Battle*, 102-3; Swanton, *Beowulf*, (Lines 64-114, 2334-27), 37-41, 145.

120. Bede, (II.14), 129-30.

In the poem “The Ruin” the poet reflects melancholically on the ruins of a Roman city, probably the town of Bath, invoking the splendors of the past, which the poet imagines in the terms of his own society. He writes of “mead-halls, filled with human pleasures,” inhabited by “A host of heroes, glorious, gold-adorned / Gleaming in splendour, proud and flushed with wine, / shone in their armour, gazed on gems and treasure,” contrasted with the city in its current state, with walls falling down and the tiles falling off the roofs.¹²¹ In the poem “The Wanderer” the narrator contrasts the discomfort and loneliness of his current condition as an exile who has lost his lord and position as a retainer—his lord has died, though under what circumstances is not explained—with the activities and companionship he enjoyed as a retainer. Outside of the warband, the warrior is forlorn and friendless. The author of “The Wanderer” underlines the importance of the warband by equating the warband and kinship, lamenting his lack of kin in one verse, then moving seamlessly into wistfully remembering the life he lived as a member of a warband and mourning the loss of his lord, then again bemoaning his lack of kin. It is probable that he is referring to his blood relatives, not just other members of the warband, when he speaks of his kinsmen. However, narrator speaks of kinsmen, fellow retainers, and lord in much the same way. All are part of the good life he has lost.¹²²

The emotional place the warband held, the emphasis on vengeance, and the nature and origin of the mead-ritual that bound it together as a community taken together indicate that the warband functioned as a surrogate family, even if the Anglo-Saxons do not seem to have explicitly equated the two. The role of the warband as a fictive family,

121. Hamer, “The Ruin,” 23, (lines 31-37), 27-9.

122. Hamer, “The Wanderer,” (lines 19-57), 175-7.

particularly the duty to avenge a dead lord, probably helped contribute to the tendency of the Anglo-Saxons to see feud in larger conflicts and helped ensure that the ideals that lay behind feud would influence how they approached warfare.

Conflicts of Loyalty and War Between Kin

Under certain circumstances, warriors might find themselves forced to choose between loyalty to kin and loyalty to their lord. It is a testament to the importance of the warband that they often chose to fight their own relatives rather than break their oaths to their lords, yet the decision was not an easy one. The cases that survive indicate that personal loyalties, considerations of kindred and feud, were intertwined with political concerns, and that there was no clear dividing line between warfare waged for political and personal goals.

The most famous example of this ambiguity is the Cynwulf-Cyneheard incident. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in the year 754 King Cuthred of Wessex died and was replaced by a kinsman named Sigeberht. Sigeberht evidently was unpopular, for a year later, another member of the royal family named Cynewulf and “the councilors of Wessex” removed Sigeberht from the throne for unspecified offenses.¹²³ Cynewulf then became king of Wessex, while Sigeberht was later killed by a herdsman in retaliation for killing an ealdorman. Sixteen years later, Cynewulf decided that Sigeberht’s surviving brother, Cyneheard, was a threat and needed to be driven from his kingdom. Cyneheard, hearing that King Cynewulf was visiting a woman accompanied by only a small number of retainers, decided to act preemptively and attacked the house in which the king was staying, killing him before his retainers could respond. Cyneheard then gave those of the

123 Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 47.

king's retainers present a chance to join him, but they refused and fought to the death, save one British hostage who was gravely wounded. Word of the king's death spread quickly, and the members of the dead king's warband who had not accompanied him responded fast enough to catch Cyneheard still at the house the next day. Cyneheard offered the angry men money if they would help place him upon the throne, pointing out that among his own men there were relatives of the king's retainers who did not wish to leave him. The king's retainers refused the offer, saying that their lord was dearer than any kinsman, and then offered to let any of their kinsmen serving Cyneheard leave. Those among Cyneheard's men who had relatives with the king said that they had offered the same bargain to those retainers killed with the king, who had not taken it, and that they too would stay by their lord, Cyneheard. Then the king's men attacked and killed Cyneheard and all his men, save one badly wounded man who was the godson of the ealdorman leading the attack.¹²⁴

At first glance, this story seems to indicate that loyalty to one's lord trumped considerations of kinship. However, a closer examination reveals a more complicated picture. In all cases men chose to fight and kill their kinsmen rather than be disloyal to their lords, indicating that kinship was not always the supreme tie. Indeed, the only man who did survive from among Cyneheard's warband was the godson, not the blood relative, of the attacking leader. However, as Paul Hyams points out, the fact that both sides offered to let their kinsmen go indicates that they thought that there was a possibility that their kinsmen might accept the offer and that some other solution might

124. Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 47-8.

have been found. Neither loyalty to one's lord nor to one's kin was automatically superior.¹²⁵ Also, it is interesting that Cyneheard coexisted sixteen years with the man who had deposed his brother, and was only moved to attack him when his own position was threatened. This may be at least partially explained by the fact that Cyneheard and Cynwulf were also kin, albeit more distant. Unfortunately, the *Chronicle* does not specify the exact relationship. In addition, it is possible that some of both Cynwulf's and Cyneheard's retainers were related to their lords as well as to each other, in which case they were choosing to "honor one kinship tie over another."¹²⁶

A second story, this time from the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, concerns the death of a prince. After the death of Cnut in 1035, multiple sons were eligible for the throne. The earl Godwin, one of the most powerful nobles in England, initially supported Harthacnut at the instigation of the queen-mother Emma, in opposition to Harold Harefoot, another of Cnut's sons by a different woman, who had gained considerable support from the rest of the country. Harthacnut was engaged in a war in Scandinavia, however, and made no effort to return to England, and in time Godwin was convinced to switch his support to Harold. Queen Emma, determined that one of her children would rule, shifted her support to two of her other sons, Alfred and Edward, who were also outside the country but responded quicker than Harthacnut. Godwin and others were not happy to have them return, however, and Godwin captured Alfred along with several of his men and turned them over to Harold's supporters, who blinded Alfred and executed

125. Hyams, "Feud and the State," 6-7.

126. White, "Kinship and Lordship in early medieval England: The story of Sigebert, Cynwulf, and Cyneheard," in *Re-Thinking Kinship and Feudalism in Early Medieval Europe* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 11.

his men. Alfred died of his injuries. Later, after Harthacnut finally returned to England, Godwin attempted to regain his favor and defended his actions towards Alfred by claiming that he was merely acting under Harold's orders.¹²⁷ While political needs undoubtedly provided the primary motivation both for Godwin's overture and for Harthacnut's acceptance, acting under orders was clearly considered enough of a defense that it could serve as a plausible excuse during political realignment. Interestingly, Godwin later got into trouble with Alfred's brother Edward, who had become king by that time, and one source, the *Vita Edwardi Regis*, claims that the memory of Alfred's death played a role in Edward's hostility towards Godwin. This evidence suggests that acting under orders was not sufficient excuse to erase the memory of Godwin's actions and that resentment still lingered. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* has an entirely different account of the reasons behind Godwin's fall from favor, however, and it is quite possible that Edward's motivations were had little to do with his brother's death.¹²⁸

Disputes among royal families often pitted one close relative against another, a clear break from the duty to protect and avenge kinsmen, but one that was not uncommon. The frequency with which these conflicts appeared indicates that while feud did influence warfare, it did not determine it.

The career of the Northumbrian king Oswy included a number of these familial conflicts. After the death of King Oswald in 642, the tenuously united kingdom of Northumbria seems to have split back into the two originally independent kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira, with Oswy, brother of the previous king, ruling Bernicia, while his

127. Barlow, *The Godwins*, 40-43.

128. Barlow, *The Godwins*, 56-7.

second cousin Oswin ruled Deira. Oswy seems to have had some difficulty with malcontents within his borders, as Bede records that Oswy's own son along with his nephew, the son of the previous king, attacked him, though Bede does not give any details and is vague about the dates of these events. Oswy also clashed with Oswin, whom Bede describes as an extremely good and popular king. The two eventually raised armies against each other, but Oswin, realizing that he was outnumbered, disbanded his army and lay low at the house of a trusted noble. Unfortunately, the noble turned out to be unworthy of his trust and betrayed him to Oswy, who had him executed. Bede describes this deed as a treacherous murder and Oswy later built a monastery as atonement for this deed. The villainy in the eyes of contemporaries seems to have been the betrayal and execution rather than the slaying of a kinsman, as Bede hardly mentions their relationship.¹²⁹

Oswy continued to have troubles with his family. Northumbria and the kingdom of Mercia had been at war for a long time, Northumbria getting the worst of it. The Mercian king Penda, one of the last pagan holdouts, had accumulated an impressive score of dead enemy kings in his wars with Northumbria and others, including both Oswy's father and brother, and was evidently a formidable foe. His son, Peada, however, seems to have been at odds with his father. Peada ruled the Middle Angles, evidently a sub-kingdom in Mercia, and went to Oswy and asked for the hand of his daughter. Bede says that he was influenced to enter into this alliance, which included converting to Christianity, by his friendship with Oswy's son Alchfrid, who had married Peada's sister

129. Bede, (III.14), 164-5.

Cyniburg.¹³⁰ Bede does not tell us how Alchfrid had come to marry the daughter of his family's long-standing foe. Perhaps the marriage was part of a peace treaty that otherwise went unrecorded. If so, Cyniburg was a "peace-weaver," the poetic term for a woman married off to a rival to end a feud, and, true to form, shortly found her blood relatives at war with her husband and his family.

Two years later, Penda moved against Northumbria. Oswy tried to buy him off, but Penda refused and declared his intention of wiping out the entire population of Northumbria. This was probably hyperbole, but is indicative of the deep enmity between the two kingdoms. Oswy, having no other choice, went to meet him on the field of battle. Alchfrid was at his side, but another son, Ethelwald, had defected to Penda and guided Penda's troops, though he withdrew from the actual battle, possibly to avoid fighting directly against his own father and brother. As it happened, Oswy won the ensuing battle, inflicting very heavy losses on Penda's army. Bede does not say outright that Penda was slain, but he does say that after Penda's death Oswy ruled both Mercia and Northumbria, giving South Mercia to his son-in-law Peada.¹³¹ It is possible that Penda was killed and that Bede assumed that his readers did not need it spelled out for them. Unfortunately Bede does not supply us with more details of the political maneuverings that lay behind these events, but the glimpses he gives, such as friendship between Peada and Alchfrid despite the fact that the former's father had killed and mutilated the latter's uncle, the marriage of Alchfrid and Cyniburg, and the alliances between both Oswy's and Penda's children with

130. Bede, (I.14), 165.

131. Bede, (III.24), 183-5.

their fathers' foes, indicate a complicated system of loyalties and interests that transcended a straightforward model of enmity and vengeance toward the family foes.

Oswy's quarrelsome family was not unique. Two brothers among King Sigbert's kin, believing that he was too lenient on offenders and too quick to forgive injuries, killed him sometime around 650.¹³² At the battle between Penda and Oswy, one of the kings fighting on Penda's side was Ethelhere of the East Angles, despite the fact that Penda had previously killed Ethelhere's brother Anna in battle.¹³³ After Oswy's death, his son Egfrid, who had been a hostage at the time of Penda's death succeeded him. Mercia had since regained its independence and Egfrid clashed with the Mercian king Ethelred, losing his young brother Elfwin in the conflict. Bede notes that Ethelred had married Elfwin's sister Osthryd, another case of conflict between two families related by marriage. Both peoples had loved Elfwin, so his death caused the rift between the two sides to grow deeper. Fortunately, writes Bede, Archbishop Theodore was able to negotiate a peace, and Ethelred paid wergeld for Elfwin to ease the tensions. Bede says the peace lasted many years.¹³⁴

The conflicts that Bede records show a picture quite different from merely one family fighting against another. He provides multiple instances of close kin taking different sides, some even aligning themselves with traditional enemies, in a complex and shifting political environment. Considerations of kinship and revenge were not entirely absent: Bede relates that a nobleman named Imma, when captured during one of these

132. Bede, (III.22), 180; D.P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1991), 94, 97.

133. Bede, (III.24), 184.

134. Bede, (IV.5), 212, (IV.21), 240.

conflicts, claimed to be a peasant to avoid execution. After Imma was persuaded to reveal his identity, his captor remarked that he would kill Imma as vengeance for the death of his kinsmen in the battle, had he not previously promised Imma his life in return for candor.¹³⁵ However, the number of intra-familial conflicts does indicate that kinship was not an overriding concern when choosing sides in a war. Evidence also suggests that the literary conventions about “peace weavers” had a historical basis, as there several instances of marriage between warring kin, and these women must have been torn between their two families.

The frequency with which royal families fought among themselves raises the question of how participants were able to reconcile these attempts to secure power at the expense of their own kin with their culture’s preoccupation with family ties. It is tempting to assume that the importance of supporting kinsmen was more theoretical than actual and that grand ideals had little influence on decisions when power and resources were at stake. However, while it is certain that there is some truth to that assertion, human nature being what it is, it is hard to believe that a culture that produced as its highest expression of ideals poetry preoccupied with kinship ties, loyalty, and vengeance as a matter of honor could simply ignore them when politically convenient. Added to the evidence found in law and history that kinship ties were not merely a poetic trope but played a very important part in Anglo-Saxon social and political life, the evidence strongly suggests that kinship cannot be dismissed as unimportant even in cases of intrafamilial conflict.

135. Bede, (IV.22), 241-2.

A more satisfying, if more complicated answer, is that kinship groups could be ambiguous enough that conflicts could be rationalized. Because of the bilateral structure of the family, the relationship of a man with his cousins and other members of his kin group outside his nuclear family was not always clear. In addition, because the warband functioned in part as a surrogate family, it probably provided an alternative means of support, both emotionally and materially, to those who found themselves in conflict with their biological kin. When the warband also contained family members, the loyalties grew even more complicated. Under these circumstances, it was not so much a matter of choosing loyalty to family over the desire for material gain as it was choosing which particular set of loyalties to uphold. By stressing one set of loyalties over another, a man could pursue power and wealth at the expense of a kinsman without dishonoring himself. Therefore, even in conflicts between close kin, the importance of kin and vengeance remain present even in conflicts between kin, even if suppressed.

Gift-Giving

The warband was more than a fictive family, and one particular aspect of its structure that had little to do with family deserves to be explored due to its influence on how war was conducted. Along with drinking mead, with which practice it was closely associated, gift-giving served as a means of reinforcing hierarchies and cementing the bonds between a lord and his men. Gifts of treasure and weapons, along with food, lodging, and of course liquor, were the warriors' compensation in lieu of regular pay. Not too surprisingly, archeological finds of imported luxury goods and manufacturing sites for fine metalwork tend to be royal centers, reflecting not only proximity to those most

able to afford them but also the importance of such artifacts to warbands.¹³⁶ Apart from their material worth, gifts had the dual function of honoring those to whom they were given while reinforcing the superiority of the giver. Gifts of gold and weapons were a formal way for the lord to honor a warrior before his peers, and thus had a value far beyond the objective worth of the objects.¹³⁷ In *Beowulf*, after the defeat of Grendel Hrothgar shows his appreciation by giving Beowulf lavish presents: a gold-decorated standard, a sword, a helmet, a coat of mail, horses, and ornamented horse-trappings. All these things are described in loving detail, an indication of how important the poet and his audience considered these gifts. The poet adds that Beowulf had no cause to be ashamed before the assembly for the gifts—presumably if Hrothgar had not given gifts commensurate with Beowulf’s deeds it would have been considered a slight.¹³⁸ The importance of these honors to the Anglo-Saxons is perhaps best shown by Bede’s story of the pagan priest who converted to Christianity because, despite his devotion to his gods, the king gave others greater honors than him.¹³⁹ The story may be apocryphal, but Bede evidently considered it plausible that a man might switch religions in frustration over lack of honors, indicating the importance such recognition had for the Anglo-Saxons.

Gifts also often reinforced the status of the giver as well. As hinted in the *Beowulf* poet’s comment that Beowulf was not shamed by Hrothgar’s presents, gift-giving had a reciprocal nature. A gift required a gift in return. If the giver was of higher rank than the

136. Evans, *Lords of Battle*, 132-3.

137. Evans, *Lords of Battle*, 111.

138. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 1020-49), 83-5.

139. Bede, (II.13), 129.

person to whom the gift was given, it could be repaid by loyalty; if of lower rank, by a favor.¹⁴⁰ Giving a gift too valuable for the recipient to return was a means of establishing authority. Land probably subordinated the recipient for life, as it was impossible to repay in kind, and served to bind a warrior to a lord more or less permanently.¹⁴¹ This dynamic held true even outside the warband; when Alfred defeated the Norse leader Guthrum and made a treaty with him, the gifts he gave were probably intended to reinforce his superiority.¹⁴²

Gift-giving was so integral to the practice of lordship that it became a symbol of ruling. The “Gnomic Verses,” a collection of somewhat obscure maxims, states that “Noble companions must urge on the prince/ While young to battle and to treasure-giving,” and “the king in hall/ Must share out rings.” Such maxims were truths as evident to the poet as “Warrior must be valiant,” “the wolf must live in wood/ Wretched and lonely,” and “The thief shall work in dusky weather. Monster / Shall live alone on land among the fen.”¹⁴³ In the short poem “The Husband’s Message,” calling the wife of an exiled noble to join him overseas, the messenger promises that when she joins her husband she will sit next to him in the hall and dispense treasures to his men.¹⁴⁴ The Old English verse retelling of Genesis relates that the sons of Lamech “dispensed the

140. Pollington, *English Warrior*, 44.

141. Enright, *Lady With a Mead Cup*, 20-1. Though it was possible for a lord to take back land, as “Deor,” mentioned above, demonstrates.

142. Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 165.

143. Hamer, “Gnomic Verses,” (lines 14-6, 18-9, 28-9, 42-3), 110-13.

144. Hamer, “the Husband’s Message,” (lines 32-4), 81.

treasures: they begot children: great was their wealth,” as a way of saying that they prospered.¹⁴⁵

The practice of gift-giving and the honor it bestowed reinforced the hierarchy within the warband itself, and probably led to intense competition and jealousy between the rank and file.¹⁴⁶ This trait was not unique to the Anglo-Saxons, as the Roman author Tacitus notes that there was a strict ranking system within the German warbands of his own time, while the late Roman historians Ammianus Marcellinus and Procopius note that the Heruls and the Taifali respectively had probationary periods for newly-inducted young warriors. Continental warbands of later periods continued to have an internal hierarchy, shown through seating arrangements.¹⁴⁷ It is interesting to speculate on how this dynamic may have influenced Anglo-Saxon warfare, given that the shield-wall, which relies on cooperation, seems to have been standard the standard battlefield formation of the time. Hard information is lacking, however, as the histories give little detail about actual battles, while the poetry tends to focus on individual action. The continued use of the shield wall indicates that however intense the rivalries within the

145. Mason, *Genesis*, 68.

146. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 20. The most obvious example of jealousy is Unferth in *Beowulf*, whom the poem describes as unwilling that anyone would win greater honor than he. However, the role of Unferth is somewhat difficult to decipher, and it is possible that he is acting as a formal challenger in order to establish Beowulf's credentials. Enright believes that he and Wealhtheow are cooperating in order to entrap Beowulf into promising to destroy Grendel and argues that Wealhtheow is portrayed negatively in the poem. This interpretation is partially based on assigning great significance to the meaning of Wealhtheow's name - "Foreign Slave." However, at least some of the characters in *Beowulf* are historical, notably Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle, and it seems likely that the poet was working with traditional names, historical or otherwise. If one does not assume that the poet meant the name pejoratively, then it is difficult to argue from the text that Wealhtheow was not a sympathetic character. That jealousy and rivalry existed within the warbands is not difficult to believe, but whether Unferth is simply a champion unwilling to be outdone by an interloper or is acting in a more formal role is remains unclear.

warband, they were not so serious as to make the Anglo-Saxons unable to act cooperatively in battle.

The practice of gift-giving and the fierce rivalries it engendered provided powerful incentives for war. Monarchs and lords needed a supply of luxury goods to redistribute to their warriors if they wished to retain them or recruit more, and warriors craved opportunities to demonstrate their worth, as it was only by demonstrating their skill, courage, and loyalty that they could increase their social and economic status. Successful warfare offered the opportunity to satisfy both, and thus the structure of the warband itself became an important driver for warfare.

Conclusion

Because the warband was the primary military organization in Anglo-Saxon England, its structure had an important influence on warfare. The practice of gift-giving and the necessity for young warriors to prove themselves became major drivers of warfare, and doubtless underlay a great deal of conflict. Neither of these incentives were connected with feuding, and their importance indicates that feud was not the primary reason for warfare. However, the warband also acted as a fictive family, as evinced by the ritual drinking of mead and the participation of women to cement ties, the transference of the duty of vengeance from the lord's kin to his retainers, and the emotional place, on par with the family, that the warband held in Anglo-Saxon poetry. In this role, the warband aided the introduction of feuds into warfare driven primarily by other motivations in several different ways. Most obviously, the retainers' duty of taking vengeance for their

lord linked warfare and vengeance, regardless how the conflict originated. More subtly, warbands helped complicate issues of loyalty without providing a clear alternative to familial ties, thereby allowing members of the same kin group to war against each other without calling into question the importance of familial ties. While the warband was more than a fictive family and warfare was rarely if ever driven primarily by feud, the nature of the warband helped blur the distinction between political rivalry and private vengeance and allowed feud to influence warfare.

CHAPTER IV

FEUD AND THE CONDUCT OF WAR

Feud was not the primary driver of warfare in Anglo-Saxon England. Instead, the conduct of war—the goals for which they fought, the means by which they sought to reach those goals, and the conventions that regulated their actions—was the result of many different factors. Ideology demanded that kings and aristocratic leaders alike prove their abilities as warriors. The social and economic realities behind the practice of gift-giving meant that they needed a continual supply of treasures to distribute and to provide ample opportunities for their subordinates to demonstrate their loyalty and skill at arms. When combined with rivalries between kingdoms and disputes over resources and hegemony, these impulses ensured that Anglo-Saxon England remained in a continual ferment of raiding and low-level warfare punctuated by larger, bloodier clashes in which kings gained land and glory or died violently. These conflicts were in all likelihood were seldom driven entirely by the desire for vengeance, but the potential for issues of personal honor and bloodfeud to enter rivalries that began over resources or power was probably high. Therefore, feud and the mindset that lay behind it added a new dimension to preexisting conflicts, providing another motive to continue hostilities and influencing the way they were perceived by participants. In addition, despite a common culture, Anglo-Saxon treatment of captive warriors and the bodies of slain enemies demonstrate implacable hostility to the point of executing prisoners and boasting of leaving corpses for the carrion-eaters. This attitude can only be explained by the influence of feuding upon Anglo-Saxon culture, and demonstrates the pervasive influence of feud on Anglo-Saxon warfare, even that waged for reasons other than vengeance.

“Ritual War”

Warfare and violence of all kinds was endemic in Anglo-Saxon England. Bede records that it was proverbial in his own day that during King Edwin of Northumbria’s reign as *bretwalda* (high king) a woman and her child might travel anywhere alone without fear of harm.¹⁴⁸ The fact that Bede and his contemporaries thought this noteworthy indicates that such tranquility was very unusual, and that normally travel was a great deal more dangerous. Guy Halsall in his article “Anthropology and the Study of Pre-Conquest War and Society: The Ritual War in Anglo-Saxon England,” on the basis on comparisons from modern anthropology, postulates that Anglo-Saxon warfare was usually “ritual,” not waged with intent to destroy the enemy but to maintain the existing social order. His thesis can be broken down into four separate but related arguments. The first is that violence was ubiquitous in Anglo-Saxon society but chroniclers and historians only recorded a very small amount of it. Most common was small-scale warfare: raiding, ravaging, and small battles between aristocratic warbands, which he dubs “ritual.” Only rarely did warfare escalate to the point that they attempted to decisively crush their enemy, which he designates “non-ritual.”¹⁴⁹ Stephen Pollington takes this idea and extends it a little further to encompass violence as a whole, proposing a scale of violence starting with brawling as the lowest intensity, with feuding as more intensive, then long-term rivalry between regions or tribes that might eventually lead to the most intensive

148. Bede, (II.16), 134.

149. Guy Halsall, “Anthropology and the Study of Pre-Conquest War and Society: The Ritual War in Anglo-Saxon England,” in *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology, 1989), 160-3.

type conflict: open warfare.¹⁵⁰ Second, Halsall argues that there were clear and defined boundaries between differing levels of violence, most notably between ritual and non-ritual warfare.¹⁵¹ His third argument is that warfare was governed by an informal code of conduct that made it somewhat formalized.¹⁵² The fourth suggestion is that warfare was not always very bloody, even in pitched battles, though Halsall does not suggest that it was bloodless and this is a fairly minor point in his overall argument.

While conclusively proving that something existed but was not recorded is very difficult, scattered evidence from histories, law, and poetry supports Halsall's point that there was a great deal of low-level warfare that was never recorded. However, his formulation of ritual warfare must be tempered with the observation that raiding, the most common type of warfare, undercut the opposing monarch's authority by demonstrating his inability to protect his own, so raiding must be understood as a long-term threat to the enemy, not always simply a nuisance or a way of gaining revenue. Similarly, the high death rate of leaders indicates that warfare could be quite dangerous for the elite, more so than in later centuries. Therefore, while Halsall's formulation has much to recommend it, it probably draws too great a distinction between low-level and high-intensity conflict, and underplays the seriousness of warfare of all intensities.

Halsall relies heavily on analogies from modern anthropology, and recent critic Ian Stephenson is correct to identify this as a weakness, though in all fairness to Halsall he never tries to draw more than broad parallels between the Anglo-Saxons and the very

150. Pollinton, *English Warrior*, 203.

151. Halsall, "Ritual War," 165

152. Halsall, "Ritual War," 165-7.

undeveloped societies that he uses as analogies.¹⁵³ His primary argument is that there was a distinct difference between “ritual warfare,” such as raiding, harrying, and skirmishing, intended to acquire loot, reinforce group cohesion by providing a common foe, and give opportunities for warriors to distinguish themselves, and “non-ritual war.” Non-ritual war was far rarer, much more serious, and intended to gain land or power or destroy a threat.¹⁵⁴ Some of the conventions Halsall suggests were the paying of tribute as a means of buying off an invader, a challenge to a fair fight, and perhaps a formal announcement to the border guard. Halsall sees evidence for the last in the coast watcher of *Beowulf* and suggests that the reeve Beaduhard’s death at the hands of Vikings in 789 was not due to his misidentification of the raiders as merchants, but because his challenge was to outsiders unfamiliar with the usual ritual.¹⁵⁵ This idea of a formal challenge is a little tenuous, but the rest seems fairly well founded.¹⁵⁶ Bede does mention that Oswy tried to offer tribute to Penda rather than fight, and it was only when Penda refused and declared his intention to slaughter the entire Northumbrian people that Oswy attacked and defeated him at Winwaed.¹⁵⁷ That formal challenges to a fair fight might be made and accepted is demonstrated by “The Battle of Maldon.” Regardless of how one interprets the “Maldon” poet’s intent, it is evident from the poem that both English and Norse were familiar with

153. I.P. Stephenson, *The Late Anglo-Saxon Army* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2007), 27-8.

154. Halsall, “Ritual War,” 168-70.

155. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 54-5.

156. Halsall, “Ritual War,” 164-5.

157. Halsall, “Ritual War,” 164; Bede, (III.24), 183.

formal challenges to combat.¹⁵⁸ When the Vikings found themselves unable to cross the ford in the face of English opposition, they asked to be allowed to cross unopposed. They could have hardly expected such a request to be entertained if there was no existing tradition of such challenges. Unfortunately, there are no other examples from either history or Anglo-Saxon literature extant for comparison. The Norse sagas provide some examples, most notably the account of the Battle of Brunanburh in *Egil's Saga*, in which King Athelstan challenges the invading Norse and a field is picked out and formally marked days before battle is joined. The account is rather fanciful and doubtlessly includes a fair amount of embellishment, not surprising given that it was written down some three hundred years later, and cannot be considered evidence on its own. The account of Maldon does suggest that the saga writer did not make up his account of Brunanburh out of whole cloth, however, and even if no such challenge was issued at Brunanburh it may be based on real practice.¹⁵⁹ In addition, Halsall suggests that the

158. J.R.R. Tolkien in a controversial essay suggested that the use of the word *ofermod*, only used elsewhere in relation to Satan's fall and which he translated as "overweening pride," indicated that the whole poem was a criticism of Beorhtnoth's hubris in allowing the Vikings to cross, and by extension, a criticism of the heroic ideal. Implicit in this argument is the assumption that the challenge and Beorhtnoth's acceptance of it was unusual. Modern historians have largely rejected this interpretation, to the point where they even seem to question the idea that the poet was criticizing the decision to accept the challenge. Tolkien's reading of the poem seems unlikely, and depends far too heavily on a single word. On the other hand, to claim as Eric Christiansen does that the poet was praising Beorhtnoth's pride is equally untenable - the poet was clearly critical of the decision to accept the challenge. This does not mean that the challenge to a fair fight was unusual, as it is unlikely that the Vikings would have tried such a ploy if they did not believe that the challenge might be accepted. Even Beorhtnoth's decision to let the Vikings cross for a formal battle is unlikely to have been due to pride alone, for if he had not accepted, the Vikings would have continued to ravage the lands on the far side of the river while if he won the battle the Viking army, with its back to the river, would have been utterly destroyed. The poet was writing with hindsight about a catastrophic defeat, and his criticism is probably no more than an acknowledgement that Beorhtnoth would have been better off not accepting the challenge. See J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Berhnoth Berhthelm's Son," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York; Ballantine Books, 1966), 21-7; Pollington, *English Warrior*, 207; Eric Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 184, footnote.

159. Bernard Scudder, trans., "Egil's Saga," in *Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Ornlouf Thorsson (New York: Viking, 1997), 82-3. According to the saga Athelstan agreed to give up the whole kingdom if defeated and once the challenge was given the invading army was honor-bound to cease ravaging the

reason that why so many recorded battles took place near rivers or other prominent landmarks was because they provided a convenient place from which to offer battle.

There is one instance in 1006 in which a Norse army remained by a prominent landmark, a barrow, for two weeks, evidently waiting for the English to muster a response.¹⁶⁰

Overall, Halsall's thesis seems sound in that there is evidence for a distinction between low-level warfare such as raiding and more formal battles, and in that there was likely a set of mores that regulated warfare. His contention that endemic warfare was comparatively bloodless seems somewhat less convincing, however. Raiding and skirmishing may not have been particularly dangerous,¹⁶¹ but he may be underestimating the death toll of formal battles and overstating the dividing line between the two types of warfare. As he himself notes, Anglo-Saxon weaponry was certainly designed to be as efficient as possible.¹⁶² Furthermore, some of the evidence for ritual warfare seems better suited to non-ritual warfare. The challenge at Maldon was made in the context of non-ritual warfare and led to a bloody battle. If there really were traditional routes for invading armies, as some of Halsall's place-name evidence suggests, and invading armies

countryside. Athelstan then delayed his arrival and engaged in insincere negotiations until all his forces could be gathered. The saga also completely ignores the presence of the Scots.

160. Halsall, "Ritual War," 166-7; Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 137.

161. At least for the warriors engaged in it. For the people who were raided it might be considerably more serious, of course. There is little scholarship on this, and it would be interesting to know exactly what the plunder consisted of, as it could hardly consist only of the luxury goods, gold, and weaponry so prized by the aristocratic warbands. Slaves are a possibility, but if the Anglo-Saxon kings and nobles were regularly carrying off each others' people, raiding might be considerably more destructive than Halsall's model postulates. Another possibility is cattle. While cattle raiding does not seem to have had the cultural significance among the English that it did in Celtic societies, Anglo-Saxon legislation does contain numerous references to cattle theft, though whether this is in reference to warfare or brigandage is unclear. Raiding, a simple process on the surface, is evidently considerably more complex than it appears and needs more study than it has hitherto received.

162. Halsall, "Ritual War," 168.

were often challenged by a watcher whose job it was to carry a formal challenge, such stereotyped behavior would seem to point toward formal battles, not raiders whose primary aim, one would expect, was to acquire loot rather than to engage enemy forces. In sum, the evidence indicates that even warfare with the potential for serious bloodshed could be carried out with some ritual aspects.

Halsall's thesis of ritual war, while broadly correct, cannot be taken to mean that warfare in Anglo-Saxon England was not a serious business with the potential of loss of life. Because of this, there was a high potential for personal vendettas, for feud, to enter into a conflict the death of a leader or other important figure. In addition, feuding is by nature a back and forth process, with each side avenging an injury in turn. Constant, low-level warfare, raid and counter-raid, easily dovetails with this pattern, and while details are lacking it seems likely that an element of retaliation was crept into long-term rivalries. The mentality of *lex talionis*, which lay behind feuding, thus added an additional motive alongside the economic and social rewards that raiding could bring. Feud and the ideals that lay behind it influenced all levels of warfare, and there was no strict delineation between private and political rivalries.

Motives for War

Warfare as a Sign of Social Status

Feud was only one of many influences on warfare, and other factors were probably more important, at least in the initial stages of a conflict. One of these factors was the importance of warfare as a mark of rank. Warfare was linked to social status, though the parameters are obscure and seem to have changed over time. In the initial migrations, it is likely that traditional hierarchies and considerations of birth became

much less important than ability, and those who were strong enough to seize power became rulers.¹⁶³ After the initial settlements, however, fighting seems to have become the preserve of the elite.¹⁶⁴

Among the evidence for the importance of warfare to the self-identity of this elite are the weapons found among their grave goods from the era prior to widespread conversion to Christianity. Initially, grave goods were thought to be the same weapons that the deceased used in life, so archeologists and historians tended to assume that they represented a fair approximation of the numbers and equipment of fighting men. Recently, however, it has been recognized that weapon burials are symbolic, not simply the possessions used in life, and with this has come the realization that buried weapons are not necessarily representative of what the deceased carried into battle.¹⁶⁵ However, they do indicate that social and ethnic status was closely linked to weapons and warfare.¹⁶⁶

That weapons buried with the dead had a symbolic function can be deduced from the patterns of burial. Children, when they were buried with weapons, were usually given arrows, while interment with *seaxs*, the knives that gave the Saxons' their ethnic name,

163. Evans, *Lords of Battle*, 43.

164. Heinrich Harke, "Early Anglo-Saxon Military Organization: An Archeological Perspective," in *Military Aspects of Scandinavian Society in a European Perspective, A.D. 1-1300*, ed. A.N. Jorgensen and B. Clausen (Copenhagen, 1997), 95; Evans, *Lords of Battle*, 43.

165. Harke, "Anglo-Saxon Military Organization," 93.

166. As a side note, this new understanding of weapon graves should lead to a reappraisal of Anglo-Saxon tactics and weaponry. In particular, until recently, the absence of archery equipment was taken mean that the Anglo-Saxons did not use bows often, an assessment that was strengthened by the absence of English archers on the Bayeux tapestry. If arrows were primarily buried with children, however, the relative lack of arrowheads and other archery equipment cannot be taken as evidence that bows were not used, and the inclusion of an archer in "The Battle of Maldon," along with a reference to volley fire in *Beowulf* may indicate that Anglo-Saxon warfare was closer to Continental practice. In addition, the lack of

was reserved for adults.¹⁶⁷ Elite burials that include a sword, axe, or seax, contain the most grave goods, particularly drinking cups. They also show the highest amount of labor expended in their construction, and contain strong bodies above average size.¹⁶⁸ In the earliest years of English settlement in Britain, the fifth and sixth centuries, weapons are found only in Anglo-Saxon graves, while nearby British graves have no weapons. This pattern may indicate that burial with weapons was an ethnic marker and did not mean that the deceased was a warrior.¹⁶⁹ By the seventh and eighth centuries weapon burials bore no correlation to injuries from weapons, while the number of graves of middling status containing weapons dropped by half.¹⁷⁰ While it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from the evidence, it appears that participation in warfare became the preserve of the elite during the seventh and early eighth centuries, about the same time that written sources begin to appear.¹⁷¹ Whether as an ethnic marker or a mark of status, weapons, and by extension warfare, was part of a man's identity, and this was a powerful incentive toward warfare.

Warfare continued to be linked with the upper strata of society in later centuries as well. For example, King Alfred's translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* uses English words for "warrior" to designate the elite.¹⁷² The Anglo-Saxon vernacular

buried helmets and armor does not indicate that the average warrior was unarmored while alive.

167. Harke, "Anglo-Saxon Military Organization," 93.

168. Harke, "Anglo-Saxon Military Organization," 95.

169. Harke, "Anglo-Saxon Military Organization," 96.

170. Harke, "Anglo-Saxon Military Organization," 96.

171. Harke, "Anglo-Saxon Military Organization," 100.

172. Pollington, *English Warrior*, 29.

translation of Genesis portrays Abraham, who was a wealthy man, using a sword instead of a knife while attempting to sacrifice Isaac, as well including a great deal of poetic rhetoric concerning battle that is not present in the original.¹⁷³

Political and Economic Factors

Ideology and self-image aside, successful warfare could bring rich rewards to successful kings, and these rewards constituted a powerful incentive to go to war. Among these incentives were expanding or defending a kingdom, extending influence, and exacting tribute.

The acquisition of territory was an important reason for waging war, and, judging by the language of the sources, it seems likely that this could mean more than merely extending the monarch's sphere of influence. In the "Gnomic Verses," the poet's remark that foes must fight for land is intended to indicate a constant of human behavior, and both the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Bede indicate that prior to the advent of the Vikings, Anglo-Saxon kings did occasionally take land both from each other and from the Welsh.¹⁷⁴ For example, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that in the year 571 Cutha, the brother of King Ceawlin of Wessex, captured four Welsh villages, while in 577 Ceawlin captured three "cities" from the British, killing three kings in the process.¹⁷⁵ In 584, Ceawlin captured several more settlements, though the *Chronicle* goes on to add that he went back to his own territory afterwards; perhaps he merely looted and did not hold the

173. Mason, *Genesis*, 83-5, 105-6.

174. Hamer, "Gnomic Verses," 113.

175. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 19.

captured villages.¹⁷⁶ The continual expansion of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms at the expense of the Welsh lasted for many centuries, and it is not surprising that capturing land was a feature of these campaigns. However, English kings occasionally captured land from each other as well, as in 779 when King Offa of Mercia and Cynewulf of Wessex clashed at Benson, with the result that Offa took Benson from Cynewulf.¹⁷⁷ In 823 Egbert of Wessex, after defeating Beornwulf of Mercia, sent a detachment of troops to Kent under his son in order to drive out King Baldred. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* claims that the people of Kent were happy to switch their allegiance as the rulers prior to Baldred had been relatives of Egbert's.¹⁷⁸

Capturing land, particularly from the Welsh, was part of Anglo-Saxon warfare. However, given the almost constant fighting, the relative paucity of such accounts probably indicates that taking direct control of territory was not very common. It seems more likely that extending influence was more typical. Bede claims that Edwin of Northumbria brought the whole population of Britain, both Anglo-Saxon and Welsh, under his sway, including the Isles of Anglesey and Man.¹⁷⁹ Edwin cannot have ruled all this territory directly, and what Bede probably means is that Edwin was able to force all

176. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 20. There is some confusion over names here. Version A states that it was a Cuthwulf who captured the settlements in 571 and died the same year, and that Cutha was killed in battle in 584 at Battle Wood; whereas E gives the name Cutha for both 571 and 584. Swanton suggests in footnote 8, page 18, that Cutha may have been a variant or nickname for Cuthwulf.

177. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 51-2.

178. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 60-1.

179. Bede, (II.9), 117-8.

other rulers to acknowledge his supremacy as *bretwalda*, a title indicating overlordship, though what advantages beyond prestige it may have held is unclear.¹⁸⁰

One way that control could be extended into a neighboring kingdom without taking direct control was to depose its king or drive him into exile and install another, more amenable, ruler. One example of this practice occurred in 644, when King Penda of Mercia drove King Coenwahl of Wessex into exile and replaced him with another man. The reason for this move was that Coenwahl, who was married to Penda's sister, renounced her and took another wife. Whether he acted for personal or political reasons Bede does not say, though it is probable that the repudiation was political, perhaps as part of a change in alliances. Coenwahl fled to the court of King Anna (a man, despite his name) of the East Angles, and three years later was able to regain his kingdom.¹⁸¹ In 1063, at the very end of the Anglo-Saxon period, Earl Harold Godwinson invaded Wales and induced the Welsh to kill their own king Gruffydd, after which Harold installed Gruffydd's two brothers as kings in his place in exchange for hostages, tribute, and oaths of fidelity.¹⁸²

The desire to impose tribute was another reason for waging war. Apart from providing additional income, paying tribute was considered a sign of subservience and thus lent prestige to the recipient. Therefore, exacting tribute could be an end in itself. The *Life of Wilfrid* records that the Mercian Wulfhere went to war with the Northumbrians with the goal of humiliating them and forcing them to pay tribute. Eddius

180. Campbell, *et al.*, *The Anglo-Saxons*, 53-4.

181. Bede, (III.7), 154; Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 27, 32.

182. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 90-1.

Stephanus, the hagiographer, seems to regard Wulfhere's motivations as more aggressive than normal warfare, though he may be merely indulging his evident bias in favor the Northumbrians. As it happened, Wulfhere was defeated by King Ecgfrith, who forced him to pay tribute in his turn.¹⁸³

War and Kingship

Apart from the rewards successful warfare offered, the ideological foundation of Germanic kingship required that the king be a successful war leader. This was not the ruler's only role, of course. Tacitus claims that in his day the Germans had two different kinds of leaders—a king whose role was largely religious, and one who was responsible for leading the people into battle. Of course, it is possible that these different roles were not mutually exclusive, and could have been united in one man in some cases. By the sixth century, the Merovingian Franks had kings who were both war leaders and whose persons were considered sacred, thereby combining both roles, and other Germanic peoples seem to have done the same, although the “sacral“ aspects of kingship seem more muted as a rule.¹⁸⁴ Christianity added its own ideas of proper kingship, most notably the responsibility of the king to safeguard and support the Church and to encourage Christianity within his kingdom. None of these developments, however, superseded the fundamental requirement that a king be a competent warrior.

Beowulf opens with an encomium to the Danish king Scyld Scefing, who, we are informed, conquered the surrounding peoples, striking terror and reducing them to

183. Evans, 129-30; Eddius Stephanus, “The Life of Bishop Wilfrid,“ in Albertson, (ch. XX) 119-20.

184. J.M Wallace-Hadrille, *Early Germanic kingship in England and on the Continent: The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary Term 1970* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1971), 14-15, 18-20.

tributaries, and thereby earning the poet's judgment that he "was a great king."¹⁸⁵ Toward the end of the poem Wiglaf mourns Beowulf's death and predicts that the Geats' enemies will descend upon them when they hear of the hero's death. Beowulf had been a good king, keeping the kingdom secure against attack, and with his death the Geats were very vulnerable to a host of external foes with long-standing grudges.¹⁸⁶ Nor was this emphasis on royal prowess and aggression simply a poetic relic of the pagan past; the coming of Christianity did little to curtail royal aggression. If anything, the Church reinforced it by stressing the duty of the monarch to enforce peace and linking victory with divine favor. On the Continent, the Merovingian Franks identified themselves with the Israelites of the Old Testament and saw their wars against their pagan neighbors as part of their divine mission to further Christianity.¹⁸⁷

While the Anglo-Saxons do not seem to have identified themselves so explicitly with the children of Israel, their attitudes toward warfare were very similar. As Bede saw it, the proper role of a king was both to attack his external enemies and to encourage Christianity and peace within his own borders, a peace that was maintained by the sword.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, success in battle was seen as a consequence of divine favor. Bede links Oswin's victories with his piety, while the *Life of Wilfrid* is quite explicit in claiming that Ecgfrith's early military successes were a consequence of his righteous life,

185. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (line 11), p. 34-5.

186. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 2999-3006), (3150-3155), p. 176-9, p. 184-5.

187. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, 49-50, 48-9.

188. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, 95.

as indicated by his good relations with Wilfrid, while later, when there was strife between them, the king suffered significant reverses.¹⁸⁹

Bede and Eddius Stephanus, Wilfrid's hagiographer, were churchmen, and thus can be expected to have pushed a particularly ecclesiastical vision of royal responsibility. How the kings themselves viewed their place in society is much more difficult to determine, as few have left any record of their own thoughts. Alfred the Great (871-99) did, however, and his own understanding of his responsibilities, as indicated in his translations and commentaries on Latin works, as well as the laws he promulgated, seems to jibe with the clerical perspective. He saw God as a king analogous to himself—he used the Old English word *dryhten*, the lord of a warband, as a title for Jesus—and evidently considered himself God's thegn.¹⁹⁰ He also believed that part of being a good king was to expand his kingdom at the expense of the neighbors, and that success in that realm was a sign of God's favor.¹⁹¹

In sum, both pagan tradition and Christian conceptions of kingship demanded that kings engage in warfare. Combined with a socio-political structure that demanded constant opportunities for warriors to earn recognition through feats of valor and the necessity for a constant stream of wealth with which to reward them, this ideology virtually guaranteed that warfare would be common.

189. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, 63-4, 83-4; Bede, III.2, 144-5; Eddius Stephanus, "Life of Wilfrid," in Albertson, 118-9.

190. Wallace Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, 144-5; Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 220-1.

191. Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 256.

The Death of Kings

One consequence of the king's particular responsibility to act as war leader and the ubiquity of warfare was that kings died in battle quite often, as did other leaders. While records are not complete enough to be certain what proportion of kings died in arms, both poetry and history attest that, while death in battle was not the fate of all or even most kings, the possibility was quite real. When one recalls that of all the monarchs of England since the Norman conquest, only one, Richard III, died on the battlefield, the contrast is striking. Anglo-Saxon monarchs had a much more personal stake in the outcome of major battles than did later monarchs. The higher death rate, when combined with the cultural impulse toward feud and the warband's duty to avenge a dead leader, meant that aspects of feuding could easily enter into conflicts, even those initially waged for quite different reasons.

Such a conflict was the long-running rivalry between Northumbria and Mercia under king Penda, in which several generations of Northumbrian kings died violently in succession. King Edwin died in 633, along with one of his sons, while Bede tells us that another son was "compelled to submit to Penda" (presumably as a hostage) and later executed.¹⁹² Edwin was succeeded by two members of a rival family, who were both slain shortly later by Penda's ally, the British king Cadwalla, one in battle and the other by treachery during a meeting.¹⁹³ Edwin's nephew Oswald was next upon the throne, and was also slain in battle with Penda after an eight-year reign.¹⁹⁴ Oswald's brother Oswy also

192. Bede, (II.20), 140

193. Bede, (III.1), 143-4.

194. Bede, (III.7), (III.9), 153, 157.

clashed with Penda, who spurned Oswy's offer of tribute and declared his intention of wiping all the people of Northumbria from the face of the earth, or so Bede claims. Forced to fight, Oswy defeated Penda and his allied kings in 655 near the Winwaed river, killing thirty of Penda's allied leaders, including the king of the South Saxons, Ethelhere. Bede does not record Penda's death, so it is uncertain if he died in the rout, but if not he seems to have died shortly afterward as Bede records that Oswy ruled over both Northumbria and Mercia for a few years.¹⁹⁵

The successive slaughter of Northumbrian kings seems to have been unusual, but the death of kings in battle was not unique to this particular extended conflict. Bede notes that around 635 king Penda also invaded East Anglia, and in the ensuing battle killed both the current king Egri, and the former king Sigbert, who had retired to a monastery but was induced to accompany the East Anglian army in an effort to boost morale.¹⁹⁶ In 685 the Picts killed the Northumbrian king Ecgfrith was killed along with most of his army.¹⁹⁷ Both Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* record that Osred of Northumbria was killed in 716, but the only detail provided is in the Peterborough manuscript (E), which notes that his death occurred "to the south of the border."¹⁹⁸ Since he is recorded as having been killed, not merely dying, by both documents, and he was evidently in Mercian territory, it seems reasonable to conclude that he was involved in warfare at the

195. Bede, (III.24), 183-5.

196. Bede, (III.18), 171-2.

197. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 39.

198. Bede, (V.22), (V.24), 321, 328; Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 42-3.

time.¹⁹⁹ In 823 the East Angles killed king Beornwulf of Mercia, who earlier that year had been defeated by the West Saxons at Ellendun but escaped the battlefield alive. The East Anglians had recently made an alliance with Wessex against Beornwulf, so while the *Chronicle* gives little detail, it again seems reasonable to assume that Beornwulf died fighting, though whether in pitched battle or some other encounter remains unknown.²⁰⁰ Other deaths are recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but with so little detail that it is impossible to be certain whether they were the result of warfare or assassination, or even who slew them. There are also a few records of leaders other than kings dying in battle, such as the battle between the ealdormen Ethelmund and Weohstan in either 798 or 800 (the Peterborough Manuscript has the former date, the Winchester manuscript the latter) in which both were slain.²⁰¹ Another example is the deaths of the ealdormen Ealhhere and Huda in 853 against the Vikings, though whether in victory or defeat the *Chronicle* does not tell us.²⁰²

The danger kings faced in battle should not be exaggerated, of course. Those who did not die in battle far outnumber those who did, and not every major battle resulted in the death of the defeated leader. Beornwulf managed to escape Ellendun unscathed, as noted above. In 675 Wulfhere and Aescwine fought, but neither appear to have been slain, while in 715 Ine and Ceolred battled without either losing their lives.²⁰³ Both

199. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 43. See footnote 18.

200. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 60-1.

201. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 57-8.

202. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 65-6.

203. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 35, 42-3.

engagements are likely to have been major encounters, as it is likely that small-scale conflicts were very common but rarely recorded. Most of those who are recorded as dying violently did so facing King Penda of Mercia, so it is possible that the high fatality rate was a consequence of the tactics he employed, and not typical of Anglo-Saxon warfare in general. On the other hand, Bede provides a wealth of detail not found in other sources, most notably the usually very laconic *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and since Bede was particularly interested in the struggle between Northumbria and Mercia, due to its significance for the spread of Christianity and possibly because he himself was a Northumbrian living only a few generations later, it is possible that these series of wars stand out simply because it is the only long rivalry about which we have any sort of detail prior to the invasion of the Vikings.

There is no link between feuding and the idea that the king was required to fight and the dangers he faced, which underscores the fact that most warfare was not initially driven by a desire to avenge a death or injury. On the other hand, warfare over resources and prestige probably easily escalated into more personal conflicts, and given the possibility of death on the battlefield it is not difficult to believe that what might have started out as a simple attempt to gain loot and prove one's fighting ability easily shaded into feuds as personal honor was affronted by setbacks and relatives were slain. As Richard Fletcher points out in reference to feuds among the eleventh-century aristocracy, politics and feud were not mutually exclusive, particularly in a culture that set a high premium on personal and family honor.²⁰⁴ Feud could thereby insinuate itself into

204. Richard Fletcher, *Bloodfeud: Murder and Revenge in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 52.

conflicts that began for quite different reasons, and thus, while not driving conflicts, added another, more personal aspect.

A possible example of this appears in *Beowulf*, in which the conflict between the Geats and the Swedes is portrayed as a feud between the two kingdoms, but may have been started by Geatish raiding for treasure. While fictional, the poem does suggest that such conflicts were viewed as feuds, driven as much by personal animosities and the desire for vengeance as any other motive, rather than purely political contests over resources or power. Beowulf's uncle, Hygelac, was a historical character, and Gregory of Tours mentions his last and fatal raid against the Franks, though Gregory says he was a Dane.²⁰⁵ The *Beowulf* poet also mentions the raid and the outcome, but chose to focus on the aspects that most resemble a personal feud, namely Beowulf's vengeance for Hygelac's death and his successful escape, and largely ignores the political aspect of the raid.

In addition to evidence from *Beowulf*, a few historical instances hint of a political conflict becoming a bloodfeud after the death of a royal kinsman. One of these was King Ceawlin's and his brother Cutha's 584 campaign against the Welsh. The *Chronicle* tells us that Cutha was killed in battle against the Welsh, and that Ceawlin, despite taking many towns and much plunder, returned home "in anger."²⁰⁶ Bede's account of the death of Elfwin in 679 is more solid evidence than the *Chronicle's* brief entry. Bede records that in the conflict between Northumbria and Mercia, Elfwin, who was the brother of King Egfrid of Northumbria, was much loved by both sides, and his death in battle

205. Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorp (New York; Penguin Books, 1974), (III.3), 163-4.

deepened the enmity between the two sides. Peace was only established after Bishop Theodore brokered a treaty that included *wergeld* for Elfwin.²⁰⁷ Bede's statement that the death of Elfwin caused the hatred between the two sides to increase, as well as the payment of *wergeld*, is a clear indication that the conflict had become a feud, at least in part.

Raiding

Pitched battles were probably fairly rare, but low-level warfare, particularly raiding, was a constant of life. Raiding could be, and certainly was, carried out for a variety of reasons unrelated to feuding, notably in an effort to gain loot and in order to opportunities for warriors to distinguish themselves without risking too much if something went wrong. The importance of raiding for loot and glory indicates that warfare was not primarily driven by vendetta. However, raid and counter-raid also fit the rhythm of most feuding, which tended to a back-and-forth pattern, and while there is no direct evidence, it is likely that an element of retaliation often crept in.

Raiding was the most common form of warfare in the Anglo-Saxon period, and even with the tendency of chroniclers to ignore all but major battles, it is well attested in the sources. Some instances, such as in 661 when Wulfhere, Penda's son, raided the Isle of Wight, were probably recorded because they had some long-term effect. In Wulfhere's case, his raiding apparently led to some sort of submission from the inhabitants of Wight because he then turned control of Wight over to King Aethelwald of the South Saxons.²⁰⁸

206. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 18 (note 8), 20.

207. Bede, (IV.21), 240.

208. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 33.

Another raid with similar significance for contemporaries was the Northumbrian expedition against the Irish in 684, recorded by Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Bede was appalled. He admired the Irish greatly for their scholarship and faith, and condemned the English who spared “neither churches nor monasteries.” Accordingly, he saw King Ecgfrith’s death at the hands of the Picts the next year as God’s retribution for this unprovoked attack on a righteous and unoffending people.²⁰⁹ Other entries in the *Chronicle* indicate that in later periods kings sometimes used raiding as a collective punishment against their own subjects. For example, in 1041 King Harthacnut raided Worcestershire in retaliation for two of his housecarls who had been slain while collecting taxes, while in 1048 Edward the Confessor ordered Earl Godwin to harry his own lands after a number of Norman visitors were killed during an altercation.²¹⁰ Godwin refused. The relationship between king and earl was already strained, and according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it was Godwin’s refusal to punish his people for defending themselves that led to his and his whole family’s exile shortly thereafter, whereupon they quickly turned to raiding the coasts of England themselves in an ultimately successful attempt to force the king to allow them to return.²¹¹

Most entries that describe raiding are less dramatic, and there is little to explain why those particular raids were recorded. Some of them may have been unusually destructive, or they may be a result of the source material on which the authors of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the main source for such records, were relying. An otherwise

209. Bede, (IV.26), 254; Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 39.

210. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 162, 173.

211. Barlow, *The Godwins*, 56-65.

unremarkable raid might have had local significance and been recorded in now-lost annals, and was later included for the sake of completeness by the compilers of the *Chronicle*. The best evidence that much small-scale warfare went unrecorded comes from the entry for 871 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* itself: “In that year there were 9 national fights (*folcgefeoh*t) fought against the raiding-army in the kingdom south of the Thames, besides those forays which Alfred, the king’s brother, and a single ealdorman and the king’s thegns often rode upon, which were never counted.”²¹² The entry is not conclusive, since the main thrust of the entry emphasizes the unusually large amount of fighting that happened that year, and one could argue that the smaller forays were not recorded for that year simply because there were so many larger battles. On the other hand, it does prove that the *Chronicle* did not always record smaller-scale actions, even when the king’s brother led them, and the use of the special term *folcgefeoh*t to indicate a battle that drew upon the resources of the whole kingdom indicates that the English made a distinction between such efforts and other types of warfare. When read in the context of Anglo-Saxon society, poetry, law, and analogy with other cultures, this evidence strongly suggests that small-scale warfare was much more common than a casual reading of the entries might suggest.

It is also worth noting that, prior to the later tenth and eleventh century, kings led almost all of the recorded raiding and similar activity.²¹³ The one exception was the 684

212. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 72-3. The Peterborough Manuscript reads slightly differently: “and ealdermen and king’s thegns, often rode upon.”

213. After 950 or so raiding, and other activity, led by non-royal leaders is much more in evidence. This is probably due to two different factors. First, events were being recorded much closer to when they occurred, and as a result the entries are much more detailed. The second reason was that with the unification of England under a single ruler, the monarch was forced to delegate more responsibility to the great nobles, particularly when it came to regional defense, and their military actions were correspondingly

Northumbrian raid on Ireland, which was led by one Bert, whose rank is not recorded by Bede.²¹⁴ The connection between the conduct of the English raiders and the defeat and death of Ecgfrith the next year explains its inclusion, leaving open the possibility that raiding led by uncrowned leaders was simply not recorded. There are also a few entries for pitched battles in which ealdormen led armies, all of which clashes seem to be distinguished for bloodiness or because they also involved royalty. Since it is unlikely that these represent the only military activity led by non-royal aristocrats, this also suggests that much warfare went unrecorded.

Poetry has many of the same problems as the historical sources: While raiding is attested, the poets' interest in personalities and the fall of kings and kingdoms means that more mundane aspects of warfare are only mentioned in passing. In addition, most of the surviving poems are not the type of long narrative in which such details would normally occur. The exception, of course, is *Beowulf*, which is both mostly narrative and complete. *Beowulf* focuses primarily on the titular character's struggles with monsters, with rivalry between rival kingdoms and factions as the backdrop. Under these circumstances it is not too surprising that raiding and small-scale warfare are not mentioned very much, as they would seldom provide the necessary drama for the poet's purposes. Nevertheless, raiding is not entirely absent. Hygelac was killed while raiding Frisia. The poet largely ignores the reasons that brought him there in favor of extolling Beowulf's virtue and prowess, but the poet's reticence can be seen as a confirmation of raiding. His audience did not need to have the reasons for Hygelac's journey to the land of the Frisians spelled out for them,

more significant to the chroniclers. In this sense, the earls took the place of the kings of the Heptarchy, and it is difficult to see the change as evidence either for or against a change in ideology or way of war.

and there is no hint either in *Beowulf* or in Gregory of Tours that Hygelac was after anything but loot (in contrast to the complicated, ongoing feud with the Swedes, involving an attempt to intervene in a Swedish dynastic struggle).²¹⁵ More positive evidence is found in the coast watcher's greeting, in which he indicates that the Danes kept a continual watch over the coast "so that no enemies might harry the land of the Danes with shipborne force."²¹⁶ He also adds that Beowulf had made an open approach to the land, as a friend might. Evidently raiders usually did not wish to announce their presence, and the arrival of a ship full of armed warriors, unable to give the usual passwords yet not acting hostile, was unusual.²¹⁷ Altogether, while *Beowulf* gives little indication of how common raiding was compared to major battles, it does confirm that raiding took place and strongly suggests that it was common enough that the poet could take its existence for granted while concentrating on more dramatic strife.

In addition to gaining loot, raiding could also function as an attack on the authority of a king, and thus was potentially a serious threat to a monarch if allowed to continue with impunity. This could be true whether the raiders had intended to undermine the opposing ruler were just looking for plunder, and the threat doubtless varied depending on how much damage they did, who in the kingdom they hurt, and other factors. The ideology of kingship demanded that a king successfully defend his people, and if he was unable to do so he might find his subjects switching their support to another

214. Bede, (IV.26), 254.

215. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines, 2200-8, 2354-2368, 2910-2921), p.13-89, 146-7, 172-5.

216. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 236-45), p.44-5.

217. Swanton, *Beowulf*, (lines 236-57), p.44-7.

man. For example, Halsall suggests that the Mercian king Ethelbald's death at the hands of his own warband in 756 may have been connected with his defeat in a major battle against Wessex four years earlier.²¹⁸ Raiding thus posed a threat beyond the actual destruction caused, and sometimes was enough to cause a ruler to come to terms with an opponent.²¹⁹

Honor and politics were thus intertwined, so it would be a mistake to draw too firm a distinction between personal and political motivations for war. The dearth of details for the process of raiding means that it is impossible to prove that raiding between kingdoms became as much a personal feud as a political maneuver, but it seems exceedingly likely that it often did. Jesse Byock, when examining the Icelandic Sagas, points out that many of the feuds these tales relate begin as disputes over resources—land, a beached whale—and as tempers become inflamed and a killing occurs become struggles to maintain personal and familial reputation and respect from the community by avenging the slain.²²⁰ While the sagas are unreliable in relating exact events, the patterns of feud they reveal are probably accurate, and can be used as an analogy for Anglo-Saxon society, with due allowance for a different political system. Therefore, it seems likely that while raiding may have usually begun as a way to gain resources, as the honor and authority of a ruler was threatened ideas of feud and retaliation began to influence his actions. In this way, the mindset behind feud influenced how a ruler responded, even if raiding continued to be driven primarily by economic or political concerns.

218. Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, 29.

219. Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, 138.

220. Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 208.

Treatment of Prisoners and the Slain

The area in which feud appears to have had the most obvious influence on the conduct of war was in the treatment of captives and the dead. When fighting each other, and to a lesser extent when facing the Norse, English warriors faced foes who shared with them a common culture and way of war. Moreover, warriors could and did move from area to area to join the warbands of successful kings, so a warband could be composed of men from a variety of backgrounds. However, these shared values and even origins did not translate into mercy for an opponent. Prisoners are conspicuous in the sources by their absence, and on the rare occasions when they do show up in the record they are invariably treated poorly. Only two kings are mentioned as having been captured. The first was Oswin of Northumbria. After the death of Oswald in battle against Penda in 642, his brother Oswy and his second cousin Oswin succeeded him, splitting the kingdom between them. While the exact nature of this arrangement is not clear from Bede's account, it did not last long and the relationship between the two deteriorated into open warfare. Oswy was able to raise a much larger army, and when this disparity became evident Oswin disbanded his own forces and went into hiding. However, Oswin's host betrayed him and the single retainer who remained with him into Oswy's hands, and Oswy had them executed.²²¹ Contemporaries were shocked. Bede condemns the killing in no uncertain terms, and in later years Oswy built a monastery as atonement. Bede's reaction might indicate that execution of an opposing leader was unusual, but might also be in large part a reaction to the circumstances under which Oswin was captured, the memory of Oswin as a notably good monarch, and the fact that it was an internal conflict

221. Bede, (III.14), 164-6.

within Northumbria. Oswin and Oswy were also kin, though since they were not close and Bede does not mention their relationship it probably had little effect on how he viewed the killing. The other king to be taken captive was King Praen of Kent, whom King Ceolwulf of Mercia captured in 798. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* relates that Ceolwulf returned to Mercia with Praen in tow and there “had his eyes put out and his hands cut off.”²²² Despite Bede’s disapproval of Oswin’s execution, the fact that, while many kings died in battle, only two rulers are mentioned in the sources as being captured and both were either killed or mutilated indicates that it was not common practice to take kings prisoners or treat them gently afterward.

The most illuminating account of a captive is found in Bede. In 679, a certain Northumbrian thegn by the name of Imma was knocked unconscious in a battle with the Mercians. When he recovered, he found himself lying among the slain, and while trying to find help was captured. He lied about his rank, claiming that he was a peasant who had been engaged in bringing supplies to the Northumbrian army. He was then held in chains while his injuries healed. After a time, his dress and manners betrayed his station, but only after his captor promised that no harm would come to him did he admit that he was a nobleman. His captor remarked that Imma deserved to die in retaliation for the death of his captor’s kin in the recent battle, but since he had been promised his life he would be allowed to live. The Mercian then sold him into slavery. It was only when Imma’s chains kept miraculously falling off that the slaver trader allowed Imma to ransom himself.²²³

222. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 56-7. Only manuscript F tells of the mutilation. (IV.22), 241-3.

The grim attitude toward captives this story reveals was the result of a society that emphasized loyalty to a kin group, fictive or otherwise, to the exclusion of other ties, and demanded vengeance for wrongs done against a man's kin. Miracles apart, Bede's account offers a number of insights into how the Anglo-Saxons dealt with prisoners, and even if the events are distorted it was close enough to reality that Bede could accept it as plausible. Ceorls, the free lower classes, were taken as prisoners, but given that Imma felt compelled to lie about his status, it seems likely that noble warriors could expect worse treatment. In contrast to the situation during the High Middle Ages and afterwards, high rank may have made one less rather than more likely to survive captivity. Furthermore, even after capture a prisoner could be executed in revenge, and even when his life was spared, instead of being allowed to ransom himself, as later knights could, he was sold into slavery. One suspects that had Imma really been a commoner he would have met a similar fate. Bede, incidentally, gives no indication that he saw the conduct of Imma's captor as particularly reprehensible. Bede's point was that Imma had been miraculously rescued from a perilous situation, not that the Mercian was unusually cruel. The apparent lack of any system of ransom for captured warriors, in contrast with later centuries, is also noteworthy. The feuding mindset, with all its hostility and suspicion toward those outside the kin-group, provides the only real answer to why the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, despite a common social class, culture, and a tendency to engage in low-level, ritualized warfare instead of habitually seeking out the enemy for total destruction, did not develop a code of conduct that included mercy towards a captured enemy.

Anglo-Saxon aristocrats were not particularly concerned with taking prisoners, at least not among their peers, and their unyielding hostility extended to the slain as well.

Enemy dead usually seem to have been left on the field for scavengers to eat. The ending of “Battle of Brunaburh,” composed shortly after Athelstan’s victory in 937, exults in the number of enemy slain and lists the various animals—raven, eagle, war-hawk, and gray wolf—that could be expected to feast upon the corpses that Athelstan and his army left behind.²²⁴ In *Beowulf*, when the Swedes defeated a Geatish army, killings its king and leader and surrounding the remnants trapped in a wood, they taunted the survivors by promising to kill them all and hang some upon “gallows-trees as sport for the birds.”²²⁵ Whether they would be hanged dead or alive is not clear, but obviously the Geats could expect no mercy in life or death. Sometimes the treatment of dead enemies was even worse: After killing King Oswald in 642, Penda cut his forearms and head off and nailed them to a stake. There they remained for a year before Oswald’s successor Oswy recovered them.²²⁶

In short, during this era there was no sense shared identity or sympathy between opposing warriors that would have led to extending mercy to a beaten opponent, despite the fact that they shared a common language and culture, usually the same religion, and even were known to move from kingdom to kingdom, so regional differences were less important. This does not mean that they did not feel some kind of sympathy with the members of other warbands—they certainly enjoyed tales of great warriors from other ethnicities—but it did not extend to treating prisoners or slain enemies with gentleness. This attitude seems to be connected to the influence of feuding on warfare—Imma’s captor not only saw the battlefield deaths of his kin as necessitating vengeance, he was

224. Hamer, “The Battle of Brunanburh,” (lines 60-73), 44-7; Swanton, *Beowulf*, (2927-2945), 174-5.

willing to execute enemy warriors to fulfill it. More generally, bloodfeuds are fixated on killing the opposing side, not something that fosters a sense of mercy toward an opponent. The harshness of Anglo-Saxon warfare seems part and parcel of the feuding mentality, with its emphasis on a tight knit community of kin and associates and antipathy and suspicion toward those outside the kin-group and the necessity for vengeance.

The story of Imma proves that at least some Anglo-Saxon warriors saw the death of their kin in battle in the same light as a feud between two families, and suggests that the tendency of the *Beowulf* poet to portray all conflict in terms of personal vendetta was not just poetic convention but reflected the mentality of his audience. This, along with the other evidence for the treatment of defeated enemies and the limited evidence from Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for political conflicts taking on an extra dimension of feud upon the death of a leader, is a strong indication that warriors and kings alike did tend see at least an element of personal feud in political rivalries. This, in turn, helps fill the gaps in the evidence when examining the motives behind low-level warfare, and suggests that it is entirely appropriate to assume that an element of retaliation often entered into motives behind raiding along with the desire for wealth and prestige even though hard evidence is lacking.

Conclusion

Anglo-Saxon England was a land of strife and conflict, with near-constant violence ranging from opportunistic brigandage to bloody clashes in which kings died and the fortunes of entire kingdoms hinged. Most of this warfare was small-scale, much

226. Bede , (III.12), 163.

of it raiding, and gave ample opportunity for personal animosity, concerns of honor, and the mentality of retaliation that undergirded feud to enter conflicts that were begun and primarily driven by more material concerns, such as the desire for fame and plunder. Larger-scale warfare was also probably motivated primarily by material concerns, as one king attempted to extend his rule or eliminate a threat, but could be personally dangerous to leaders and their families, so the potential for political rivalries to become a bloodfeud was present as well. The poetry that survives tends to depict even large-scale conflicts as feuds between rival dynasties, and while some of this portrayal probably reflects the priorities of the storyteller, it is likely that it reflects an element of truth as well. Despite a common culture and a shared way of life, English warriors showed scant mercy to their opponents, rarely taking prisoners and leaving the dead for scavengers to pick over, practices that reflect the antipathy toward all outside the kin-group common in feuding cultures. Feud seems to have rarely if ever been the primary cause or driver of conflict, but its influence was never far away.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Anglo-Saxon war was not merely feud writ large, and the impulses that drove kings and warriors to conflict seem to have been primarily material and political—the lust for treasure and land, the desire to fulfill the ideological requirements of kingship, and defense of their possessions and freedom against aggressors. Despite these factors, they carried the mental framework of family and feud to these conflicts, and thus feud exercised a sometimes subtle influence on the conduct of war.

The nature of warfare allowed feud to insinuate itself into conflicts. The majority of warfare was low-level, chiefly raiding for plunder, while large battles were comparatively rare. While details about raiding are few, it seems likely that a series of raids and counter-raids could easily take on the aspect of a vendetta, the more so because raiding, unanswered, could undermine the authority of a ruler. The larger battles were rarer but evidently bloody, and in these a large number of kings died violently. While details are scarce, the potential for disputes over land, resources, and power to escalate into personal vendettas was high, and there are occasional hints of this happening.

In the absence of a strong state and judicial system, individuals relied on their kin for protection, and this system ensured that familial ties and loyalty became pillars of Anglo-Saxon society. However, this emphasis on kindred posed a problem when trying to form warbands composed of men from different backgrounds. The solution, whether consciously conceived or not, was to turn the warband into a fictive family, bound together by oaths and the ritual consumption of liquor served out by the lord's wife. The warband also took on the duty of avenging their lord if he was slain. The surviving poetry

shows that the warband held a similar place in the affection of an aristocratic warrior as did his family, and in some cases it is difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. It is this dynamic, along with the somewhat ambiguous borders of the Anglo-Saxon family, that helps explain why royal families could end up fighting among themselves despite the high premium put upon familial ties. It also explains why, despite sharing a common culture, there seems to have been no sense that a member of an opposing warband was someone very much like themselves and should be treated kindly if captured or slain.

Feud remained a presence in Anglo-Saxon culture throughout the entire Anglo-Saxon period, and left its mark on many different aspects of their society, including war. The relationship was not always a happy one. The specter of feud, both its necessity and the inevitable destruction it brought in its wake, haunts *Beowulf* and other poems, yet its presence could not be banished at will. It informed the way the Anglo-Saxons understood the world, and when at war they interpreted their experiences through its lens and acted accordingly.

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