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The aim of this thesis is to de-center Christianity from medieval scholarship in a study of canonized northwestern European war narratives from the late antiquity to the late Middle Ages by unraveling three complex theological frameworks interweaved with Scandinavian polytheistic beliefs. These frameworks are presented in three chapters concerning warrior cults, war rituals, and battle iconography. *Beowulf*, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, and additional passages from *The Wanderer* and *The Dream of the Rood* are recognized as the primary texts in the study with supporting evidence from *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eighth-century eddaic poetry, thirteenth-century Icelandic and Nordic sagas, and *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The study consistently found that it is necessary to alter current pedagogical habits in order to better develop the study of theology in medieval literature by avoiding the conciliatory practice of reading for Christian hegemony.

REMOVING THE CHRISTIAN MASK: AN EXAMINATION OF SCANDINAVIAN
WAR CULTS IN MEDIEVAL NARRATIVES OF NORTHWESTERN EUROPE
FROM THE LATE ANTIQUITY TO THE MIDDLE AGES

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Modern pedagogical practices continue the century-old tradition of centering medieval studies on a mosaic foundation of Christian absolutism. Students are faced with a rhetorical wall enforcing perceived notions that England's literary history began with Christianization rather than with an oral tradition predating Christ.¹ Kemp Malone and Albert C. Baugh's canonical 1948 multivolume edition of *A Literary History of England*² demonstrates this fallacy in a short subjective examination of the "heathen" society in early England, contrasting the lack of cultural innovation by pagans with the arrival of a productive and civilized Christian influence from abroad:

The great service which scholarship of the golden age rendered to us and to all men was the preservation and transmission of classical culture. This culture, long in decline, seemed doomed in its ancient western seats, when barbarization proceeded apace. Luckily it found, first in Ireland and then in England, a haven of refuge. Here Christianity soon won the hearts of the heathen, and with the new faith came Mediterranean civilization, of which the Church had made herself the bearer. (13)

The seven-page chapter ambiguously discussing what readers must assume to be regionalized paganism is followed by nearly two thousand pages of a literary history of

¹ St. Augustine began preaching Christian Catholicism at King Æthelbert of Kent's court in 597 A.D. The Kentish and Essex populations were converted as a result of St. Augustine's influence over the Kentish court, and bishops were placed in Canterbury and Rochester in 604 A.D.

² Baugh, Albert C. *A Literary History of England*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948.

post-Christianized England. Baugh even ventures so far as to suggest that scholars have no reason to think that there existed English literature prior to Christianization, as “[c]ertainly no English poems of heathen times have come down to us in the form of runic inscriptions” (21). The passage was accepted amongst medieval scholars until the late 1970s as a result of carefully structured semantics when Baugh proceeds to dubiously acknowledge that “Scandinavian cases of the kind are known” (21). Baugh is here clearly segregating pre-Christian English culture from England’s literary history, producing a fabricated Pagan-Christian binary, when in fact they are mutually inclusive. In other words, one cannot ignore the presence of Scandinavian³ literature in England from a literary history simply because Baugh’s sense of English nationalism refuses to accept non-Christian origins.

Moving forward a quarter of a century, James Wilson’s 1974 edition of *Christian Theology and Old English Poetry*⁴ corroborates Albert Baugh’s fallacy of disregarding pre-Christian influence in England’s literary history in a single volume examination of the canon. In Wilson’s introduction, pre-Christian roots are faintly alluded to in moments of nostalgia regarding a period in history where Christian domination was briefly interrupted by Germanic invasions during the sixth century. When the subject of pre-Christian England does surface, Wilson tends to avoid the topic with either a poor generalization concerning Celtic druidism or the all-to-familiar expression of denial that returns the readers’ attention to the lack of scholarship on pre-Christian English culture.

³ The term Scandinavian is used henceforth as a reference to Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish, and North Germanic cultures.

⁴ Wilson, James H. *Christian Theology And Old English Poetry*. The Hague: Mouton, 1974.

Of course, prospects of a discussion on pre-Christian cultural or narrative influences are already suppressed at this point in Wilson's examination with a preemptive declaration that the Irish Catholic Church was vital in the development of Old English poetry, thereby making Old English poetry Christian by extension (Wilson 13). Wilson focuses on Christianity as the foundational element for medieval literature, furthering Christian absolutism by evading pre-Christian constructs like a Scandinavian oral tradition in northern England that facilitated the establishment of a literary history during Christianization in the south.

Contemporary scholarship, as anthologies printed in the last decade show, is more cautious of being drawn into the fabricated Pagan-Christian binary by focusing on the limitations of organizing a canon around a national language or religion. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt's canonical *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*,⁵ for example, dedicates the entirety of the seventh edition preface to express the editors' concerns about designating the English language as the primary foundation in the organization of the British literary canon. Socio-religious factors are altogether eliminated from the preface in a valiant effort to secularize the process, but the intricate interweaving of literature and religion ultimately persists in the volume on the Middle Ages. Alfred David and E. Talbot Donaldson's introduction to the volume on the Middle Ages revives the long-standing binary. Non-Christian figures are referenced as mere "pagan" counterparts to the Christian whole:

⁵ Abrams, M. H. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: Norton, 2000.

In form and content Old English literature also has much in common with other Germanic literatures with which it shared a body of heroic as well as Christian stories. The major characters in *Beowulf* are pagan Danes and Geats, and the only connection to England is an obscure allusion to the ancestor of one of the kings of the Angles. (Abrams 2)

The passage demonstrates a subtle conflict still lingering in contemporary medieval literary scholarship. Paganism, a generalized term encompassing all regional Celtic and Scandinavian religious practices, is perceived as foreign and disconnected from a literary history of England. On the other hand, David and Donaldson refrain from removing pre-Christian culture entirely from England's literary history. Scandinavian oral traditions are suggested to have contributed moderately to later inscribed works, such as *Beowulf*⁶ and *The Dream of the Rood*⁷ (Abrams 4). Any in depth discussions on how relevant these assimilated works were to the history of English literature or what a pagan oral tradition truly consists of has been marginalized in blanket terminology, as we see with Baugh's "heathenism" and Wilson's term pagan. Scholars have an obligation to investigate the Scandinavian roots that evolved with the establishment of an English literary canon and that is precisely what this thesis intends to accomplish.

The primary canonical works this paper will be examining are *Beowulf* and *The History of the Kings of Britain*⁸ with additional passages from *The Wanderer*⁹ and *The*

⁶ *Beowulf. Beowulf and Judith*. Ed. Elliott V. Dobbie. New York: Columbia U.P., 1953.

⁷ "The Dream of the Rood." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. 7th ed. New York: Norton, 2000. 26-28.

⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Trans. Lewis Thorpe. London: Penguin, 1966.

⁹ "The Wanderer." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. 7th ed. New York: Norton, 2000. 100-102.

Dream of the Rood. They will be referenced with *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eighth-century eddaic poetry, thirteenth-century Icelandic and Nordic sagas, fifteenth-century Arthurian lore, and archeological evidence relevant to identifying the roots of non-Christian passages depicting rituals or iconography. For the purpose of this project, war narratives from these works of the late antiquity through the late Middle Ages are examined and cross-referenced with contrasting theological beliefs to unmask ideological constructs mistaken to originate with Christianization. I chose war narratives for their unique marriage with religion and their inexhaustible popularity in the modern medieval canon.

Focusing on northwestern European war narratives isolates a unique network of socio-religious beliefs regarding the preparation for war, warfare, and death. Within this network, I identify three primary categories of study: warrior cults, war rituals, and battle iconography. Each chapter will illustrate varying regional influences in northwestern Europe with an emphasis on de-centering Christian absolutism. War cult narratives, despite Christianization, retained embedded pre-Christian Scandinavian practices. Pope Gregory set in motion this heterogeneity in the Christian tradition during the late sixth century when he suggested a hybridized system of beliefs: “For things are not to be loved for the sake of the place, but places are to be loved for the sake of their good things.”¹⁰ As we will see in the following chapters, what prospered was not Christianity nor traditional polytheism but an idealized chimeric construct shadowed in the grandeur of Christian idols and intercontinental domination.

¹⁰ Bede. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1999. 43.

Chapter One, titled “Assimilation, Christianization, and Historicization,” discusses how socio-religious constructs are consciously formed into malleable historical objects that have the tendency to alter in moments of cultural assimilation. Christianization during the fifth century and again in the tenth century in northwestern Europe was not accomplished by merely imposing a doctrinal system of beliefs onto an unsuspecting population. When political figures tried to subdue local populations, their efforts were often met with violent revolts. Rather, Christianization was successful because local populations or tribes were capable of seamlessly integrating traditional cult beliefs into the new monotheistic religion. The malleability of the theological construct permitted ideological alterations to coincide with, at times, contradictory beliefs. Some non-Christian customs and objects, such as battle insignia, were so common in war cults that they were simply labeled Christian. Óðinnic iconography, for example, cannot consciously subsist in a Christian society. The objects must either be altered or reclassified to fit the mould of Christian homogeneity. To exemplify the alteration and reclassification of a foreign religious framework in literature, Chapter One concludes with the deconstruction of the Christianized dragon in *Beowulf*.

With the warrior being the most significant figure in war narratives, Chapter Two is dedicated to examining the nature of the warrior cult in *Beowulf* and Bede’s *The History of the Kings of Britain* while discussing how the warrior identity bridges pre- and post-battle rituals to the battlefield. Both canonical texts engage specifically with the warrior cult and are rich with remnants of pre-Christian Scandinavian theology. The discussion begins by exploring the purpose of organizing rituals to fabricate a sense of control over

the unpredictable nature of war. However, the battlefield is a temporal object of history that only exists at a specific time and place. Rituals and battlefields function on two separate planes, which, as the chapter proceeds to expose, are bridged by the warrior identity. Concluding the discussion is an examination of how warrior cults function similarly in both Ódinnic cults and Christianity. The purpose of Chapter Two is to provide an alternate reading – one that is not subjugated to Christian absolutism – to a central figure or trope that functions as a mediating religious agent on the battlefield in medieval literature.

After establishing the agent linking pre- and post-battle rituals to events on the battlefield, Chapter Three proceeds to discuss precisely what battle rituals are and how scholars must read those in *Beowulf* as products of Christianization to unmask their complex Ódinnic or Thor cult origins. The chapter progresses in chronological order with the battle being the central temporal point. I begin with the ritualized feast then continue with a discussion on the practice of spiritualizing the warrior's weapon. The examination explains how a spiritual medium, in this case *Beowulf*, must mediate a ceremony that imbues the weapon with mythical powers. Lastly, Chapter Three concludes with a discussion of the ritualized beheading of the enemy. Like Chapter Two, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an alternate reading of war rituals in medieval literature that shed light on their pre-Christian influences.

Chapter Four, titled “Iconography”, investigates the cultural assimilation of battle iconography depicted in literature of the Middle Ages. Scandinavian and Celtic iconography was systematically reclassified as Christian following inscription, despite

conflicting beliefs regarding the physical objects. Since these iconographic objects for the most part retained their pre-Christian aspects, they may be correctly reclassified as they appear in medieval literature. Chapter Four begins with how battle iconography is generally constructed. Battle iconography is produced by one's conscious perception of a fabricated object with powers to influence events on the battlefield or the ability to enhance the warrior's prowess or fortune. I proceed to examine animal and weapon iconography while highlighting their construction and implementation on the battlefield in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*¹¹, *Beowulf*, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, *The Wanderer*, and the sagas. The chapter provides insight into the production of iconography, the assimilation of battle iconography, and an alternate reading of Scandinavian and Celtic iconography rewritten to compliment a Christian audience.

Each chapter contributes to the project's overall aim to expand scholarship in medieval literary studies beyond Christian hegemony, but this thesis specifically focuses on war narratives to inaugurate the practice of reading for religious plurality in canonical works like *Beowulf* in the classroom. The methods I have chosen to demonstrate how war narratives are composed of intricate frameworks of beliefs are indicative of the comprehensive nature of English studies. Medieval scholars must not feel limited to the study of literature alone. Archeological evidence is fundamental in the greater scholarship of the literary tradition, as they physically represent ideology frequent to the oral tradition that may not be present or consistent in later inscriptive forms. To ignore significant social constructs perceived to be lost during Christianization and yet appear as altered

¹¹ Malory, Sir Thomas. *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Ed. Stephen Shepherd. New York: Norton, 2004.

ideological forms in medieval literature already poses problems when they are misclassified or misinterpreted. Therefore, this project implements archeological evidence in a manner that productively establishes ties between literature and social constructs produced prior to the introduction of literature.

Revisiting war narratives in a manner that questions their initial and subsequent theological interpretations is just the beginning. Medieval literary scholarship as a whole must gradually move away from Christian absolutism. Products of Christianization that have been recorded in medieval literature must be reexamined in greater detail. After revisiting these products of Christianization for centuries, academia must now deconstruct the Christian narratives, utilize unconventional sources and exercise unorthodox research methods in order to better develop the study of theology in medieval literature. Medieval literary courses may then begin to avoid the conciliatory practice of reading for Christian hegemony.

CHAPTER II

ASSIMILATION, CHRISTIANIZATION, AND HISTORICIZATION

Northwestern Europe during the late antiquity to the early Middle Ages largely consisted of small tribal factions with varying polytheistic cults. Tribes often clashed in periods of interregional war, blood feuds, or seasonal raiding. Marriage between families belonging to neighboring tribes was also common to expand trade, land, and / or familial wealth. When tribes interacted with each other, their theologies naturally intermingled. Then with the arrival of Christianity in the region during the fifth century and again in the tenth, specialized individuals, monks or bishops, deliberately interweaved Christian doctrine with the religions of native populaces in order to expand the Catholic empire. Foreign beliefs and practices that complemented native ideologies were assimilated to produce something entirely new to the people.

Assimilation produces a wholly foreign theological framework from that of the original. What was foreign to the people becomes foreign to the pre-assimilated belief or practice following ideological alterations. The process of conforming the belief or practice to the conventions of the native theology is necessary for integration into any culture. Alterations may be as miniscule as the inclusion of a ceremonial dance or as crucial as redefining the function of a primary god. The regional population may not alter the theological framework at all, and yet they will acknowledge it as one of their own. Thor cults of western Scandinavian tribes, for example, mirrored eastern Óðinnic cults.

Other than acknowledging Thor as the primary god rather than Óthin, the two cults are nearly identical except for varying agricultural or hunting customs dependent on the geographical location of the tribes. Opposition between native thought and foreign thought is essentially removed – a process similar to Hegel’s understanding of self-realization:

Consciousness has, *qua* self-consciousness, henceforth a twofold object—the one immediate, the object of sense-certainty and of perception, which, however, is here found to be marked by the character of negation; the second, viz. itself, which is the true essence, and is found in the first instance only in the opposition of the first object to it...Self-consciousness presents itself...as the process in which this opposition is removed, and oneness or identity with itself is established. (*Phenomenology* 220)¹²

Rather than a tribe or regional population consciously recognizing its distinct religious identity by negating the perceived opposition of what it is not, multiple consciousnesses render the opposition of what is foreign useless or unnatural to construct a unique framework entirely local. Thus medieval religion in the northwest, perhaps religion generally, must then be understood as a culturally malleable construct vulnerable to assimilation.

Christianizing the northwest, in particular Britain, required leniency when assimilating and adapting to societies still primarily practicing Celtic and Scandinavian polytheism. Although Rome had already declared Britain wholly Christian by the late six

¹² Hegel, Georg W. *The Phenomenology of Mind*. Trans. J. B. Baillie. 2nd Ed. London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1977.

century, Bede reveals in his eighth-century chronicle *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* that Christian practices were always respondent to change:

But it is my wish that if you have found any customs in the Roman or Gaulish church or any other church which may be more pleasing to Almighty God, you should make a careful selection of them and sedulously teach the Church of the English, which is still new in the faith, what you have been able to gather from other churches. (43)

The inscribed discussion between Augustine, bishop of the Kentish Church, and St. Gregory of Rome exposes how these varying forms of religion appear from region to region throughout Europe. Enforcing foreign practices in a community ultimately fails, as was the case with Trondheim during King Hákon the Good's rule in the tenth century.¹³

¹³ King Hákon the Good of Norway attempted to Christianize the Trondheim region in 934 by declaring the region Christian and by baptizing the agrarian tribes:

He began by saying that it was his bidding and his request, addressed to freeholders and husbandmen alike, of high and low estate, and so to all the people, young men and old, rich and poor, women as well as men, that all should let themselves be baptized and believe in one God, Christ, the son of Mary, and stop all idolatry and heathen worship; that they should keep holy every seventh day, abstaining from work, and fast every seventh day. (*Hákonar* 108)

Despite being enforced by the king of Norway – a position divine in the Christian tradition since the late sixth century, the decision to Christianize ultimately lies in the hands of regional tribes. Immediately following King Hákon's speech, the people revolted. Trondheim chieftains argue that the foreign practices, such as asceticism, deprive the general populace of their cultural livelihoods (*Hákonar* 108). The dispute between the king and the regional powers inevitably degenerated into raids and violent persecutions:

[W]hen Yuletide approached, the eight chieftains who had most to do with the sacrifices in the whole Trondheim District arranged for a meeting between them... These eight men engaged themselves that the four from the outer districts were to destroy the Christianity [their was], and the four of the inner districts were to force the king to sacrifice. The men from the outer parts sailed with four ships south to Mær, killed three priests, and burned down three churches, then returned. (*Hákonar* 111)

Trondheim remained segregated regionally with varying cults, which were so imbedded in common cultural practices that these rituals dictated one's livelihood. A framework of beliefs so close to one's agrarian lifestyle would naturally be difficult to abolish. King Hákon failed to realize this, and only King Óláf would succeed in Trondheim with unmatched violence.

Abrupt indoctrination oftentimes results in revolt. Gregory instead advocates gradual assimilation of foreign practices by adapting regional beliefs. Christianity, as Gregory suggests, differs greatly from one region to the next, and accommodating the varying practices that are “pleasing to Almighty God” will ultimately establish ecclesiastical dominance. Therefore, it is imperative that medieval scholars examine religion regionally rather than as a collective unit.

With religion segmented geographically, native theological art forms must be differentiated regionally from within canonical medieval works like *Beowulf* and *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Art plays a significant role in externalizing religious thought:

Through the Religion of Art spirit has passed from the form of substance into that of Subject; for art brings out its shape and form, and imbues it with the nature of action, or establishes in it the self-consciousness which merely disappears in the awesome substance and in the attitude of simple trust does not itself comprehend itself. This incarnation in human form of the Divine Being begins with the statue, which has in it only the outward shape of the self, while the inner life thereof, its activity, falls outside it. (Hegel *Phenomenology* 750)

Notions of religion or aspects of the divine are externalized in corporeal form, which consists of paintings, sculptures, and, above all, literature. The process of externalizing religious thought also produces iconographic objects, which then inherit qualities of the spiritual – a theological framework of beliefs regarding the divine. There may not even exist an original form for the product to represent, and yet these iconographic objects are acknowledged reproductions of some corporeal object that once existed in history.

Historicization of religious thought constructs a subjective narrative object – one that may never have existed in the first place.¹⁴ For example, Yggdrasil, the Norse world tree, is reputed to have contributed to the creation of the first humans: Ask and Embla.¹⁵ Óthin had also hung on Yggdrasil as a sacrifice to himself in order to acquire omniscience. Both of these perceived historical stories acknowledge the existence of Yggdrasil as matter of fact. A narrator accepting Norse creationism or Óthin's deification must also accept the existence of Yggdrasil. The narrator may not be aware of this declaration of historicity by association, but Yggdrasil is constructed as a historical object an audience can now experience in its externalized narrative form.

A historicized theological notion like Yggdrasil lacks a corporeal form to stabilize its conceptual framework – a structured existential system of beliefs defining Yggdrasil. No one, for example, can alter Gaius Julius Caesar, who is historically a male who ruled Rome in the first century B.C. There is physical precedence for the historical object

¹⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The German Ideology* introduce the phenomenon in the production of history in a discourse on historical materialism. History is altered consciously and unconsciously to impose modern thought on earlier history (Marx 122). The production of iconography or written works is a modern practice that translates prior religious history by materializing the ideology. Producing these material forms speculatively distorts the original theological concepts by carving a face for the divine, shaping a mythological weapon in clay, etc., but overall by human intervention. Marx and Engels warn that later history is inevitably “made the goal of earlier history” (122). This form of history also appears in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* as reflective history:

The second mode of history may be called reflective. It covers more than just those events which were actually present to the writer; it depicts not only what was present and alive in this or that age, but that which is present in spirit, so that its object is in fact the past as a whole. (16).

Narrators are not obligated in this category to record strictly the actions and presence of corporeal forms. Ideological constructs are also historicized. Like Marx and Engels, Hegel explains that “the writer approaches it in his own spirit, which is different from the spirit of the object itself; everything therefore depends on the maxims, ideas, and principles which the author applies both to the content of his work...and to the form of his narrative.” (*Lectures* 16). Reflective history is entirely subjective, which poses a serious problem for modern scholars interpreting medieval literature.

¹⁵ Ask (*Askr* or “Ash Tree”) and Embla were formed by Óthin from the wood of Yggdrasil and given life.

recorded in literature. Rome's emperor cannot exist in narratives as anything other than Gaius Julius Caesar. Yggdrasil, in contrast, exists and continues to exist only as a recorded theological belief. This instability is crucial to its assimilation in foreign regions. Olloudius, a Celtic-Scandinavian war god of northern Britain, shows how the instability of a historicized theological notion facilitates the process of assimilation.¹⁶ Warriors were associated with a localized war god, native to the region following assimilation, with, what scholars must assume exists, an oral history. Olloudius' oral history would be communicated amongst the populace to maintain the notion that the god aids warriors on the battlefield. What was once an Óðinnic war cult belief regarding Óðin became either an entirely new English war god or imbued a lesser-known English hunting god with Óðinnic features. Similar ideological forms were constructed at a far greater rate during the move to Christianize northwestern Europe during the tenth century, which appears in length in the canonical works examined in the following chapters.

However even with the gradual assimilation of all Scandinavian cults, Christianity hardly became the dominant mode of thought when one examines the heterogeneity of continuing religious practices. In *Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar*, Snorri Sturluson clearly acknowledges King Ólaf's failure to entirely remove himself from common Scandinavian

¹⁶ Olloudius' name derives from the Latin *ollo-vidios*, accepted by scholars as the "Great Tree" (Ross 172). Although Anne Ross suggests the god's name originates with common associations with trees when referring to warriors, it is more likely warriors inherited aspects of the war god. Olloudius, taking into consideration Scandinavian influence in the region, is an adaptation of the Scandinavian war god Óðin. The theory is further supported by the etymology of Olloudius – an obvious reference to Yggdrasil, which is synonymous with Óðin in the Scandinavian tradition. Olloudius illustrates how a historical object, Yggdrasil, survives within a foreign population by undergoing ideological alterations to adapt to regional beliefs while also exemplifying the malleability of theological frameworks.

pre-Christian rituals: “Then Ólaf [Tryggvason] himself sought him out and spoke with him and asked what he would prophesy concerning whether he would attain a kingdom or be fortunate otherwise” (170-171).¹⁷ Mystics appear sporadically in Christian narratives, but King Ólaf’s desire to seek a seer in order to know whether he will attain materialistic wealth is contradictory to the Christian tradition. Romans similarly masked pre-Christian war cult practices when in need of showing superiority both physically and spiritually:

The Romans considered their battle-insignia to be among the *sacra*, and could bring along in combat the statues of the gods. With Constantine’s conversion, the cross and the sign in whose name the emperor had conquered his rival Maxentius took the place of the older signs. Soon Christian armies carried relics of the saints into battle – a behavior attested in the West by the sixth century, and like so many other practices standing between cult and politics, emerging in full light thanks to Carolingian legislative activity. (Buc 190-191)¹⁸

Christian iconography and sacred relics essentially become as important as armor and weaponry in battle, providing divine protection and enhanced physical abilities – a long-standing practice tied to Scandinavian theology in the northern regions of Europe and Greco-Roman mysticism in the south. The lack of conformity is the most crucial aspect of religion in literature scholars must first acknowledge in order to produce an accurate study of regional cults.

¹⁷ Sturluson, Snorri. *Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar. Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*. Trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin: U of Texas P, 1964. 144-244.

¹⁸ Buc, Philippe. “Political Rituals and Political Imagination in the Medieval West From the Fourth Century to the Eleventh.” *The Medieval World*. Ed. Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson. London: Routledge, 2001. 189-213.

Before proceeding to the warrior cult in early war narratives, it is best to look at the fallacy of reading for Christianity rather than regional theology with *Beowulf*. Being a canonized war narrative, *Beowulf* deserves a greater critique to refine current pedagogical practices.¹⁹ The seemingly random interpolation of praises for the Christian deity and conflicts arising from attempts made to Christianize certain aspects of the Scandinavian narrative has produced a complex palimpsest in need of unraveling. Continuously praising the Christian deity serves a specific purpose in the narrative: to remind the audience the degree with which everyday activities are embedded with the workings of Christ.²⁰ A contemporary Christian audience would then ideally acknowledge some spiritual link between their own actions with that of the deity. These interpolated Christian passages do not necessarily interact with the text. In other words, the same agent facilitating Christian homogeny within the text is also an isolated function segregated from the narrative. These passages may be entirely removed from the narrative without affecting continuity and / or subject matter, and should be considered carefully by future editors while certainly investigated by scholars looking for an oral history predating *Beowulf*'s inscription. Their disjointed nature also often conflicts with the narrative, as is the case with the red dragon.

¹⁹ The NCTE Committee on Classroom Practices in Teaching English in 1985 included *Beowulf* as the primary canonical text when lecturing on medieval works in *Literature—News That Stays News: Fresh Approaches to the Classics*. Purdon and Wasserman suggest in their 1993 paper “If the Show Fits: Teaching *Beowulf* with Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” that *Beowulf*’s place in the medieval canon “opens up an approach to the medieval text which has the advantage of considering the text’s features in anthropological and cultural terms, issues foregrounded in multicultural classes” (Purdon 312). The National Council of Teacher of English has regarded *Beowulf* as part of the medieval canon for more than two decades.

²⁰ *Beowulf* 478b-479; 570; 685b-687; 700b-702a; 705b-707; 810; 927-928a; 1057; 1271-1273a.

Despite the desire, particularly my own, to associate the gold-hoarding dragon with the great red dragon of Christian apocalyptic lore, Scandinavian origins and disjointed Christian narrative interjections produce conflicting metaphorical objects incapable of negotiating a homogeneous theological base. Aligning “evil” figures to the great red dragon of apocalyptic lore is, after all, a long-standing Christian tradition – one that would be familiar to the *Beowulf* scribe. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, is described as “the great dragon that lieth in the midst of his rivers” (*Ezekiel* 29:6). Nebuchadnezzar similarly inherits aspects of the dragon that brings death (*Jeremiah* 51:34). These references to the dragon-beast are later consolidated in the first-century Christian addition *The Book of Revelation*. With the scribe’s inclination to parallel the inhuman in *Beowulf* with Christian lore, one would naturally interpret the dragon as another biblical figure prominent in the Christian tradition. The *Beowulfian* dragon, in fact, derives from the *Reginsmōl*, which is just one of several varying tales concerning Sigemund’s life that was never properly reconstructed into an epic:

wordum wrixlan.	spel gerade, Welhwylc gecwæð
þæt he fram Sigemundes ellendædum, Wælsinges gewin, Para þe gumena bearn Fæhðe ond fyrena,	secgan hyrde uncupes fela, wide siðas, gearwe ne wiston, buton Fitela mid hine,
Ponne he swulces hwæt eam his nefan, æt niða gehwam	secgan wolde, swa hie a wæron nydgesteallan;

hæfdon ealfela	eotena cynnes
sweordum gesæged.	Sigemunde gesprong

æfter deaðdæge	dom unlytel,
syþðan wiges heard	wyrn acwealde,
hordes hyrde.	

(*Beowulf and Judith* 873b-887a)²¹

Sigemund and the dragon also appear in numerous written accounts – like the Volsung Saga, strongly suggesting that the Scandinavian lore had been widespread and well maintained prior to inscription. *Beowulf* continues the Scandinavian tradition with a clear reference to the Norse sagas, which, in turn, reflects the foreshadowed existence of the gold-hoarding dragon that will kill the warrior king. However, the Norse reference is merely one aspect that establishes a concrete link between the *Beowulfian* and the Scandinavian metaphorical beast.

The dragons in *Beowulf* and in Scandinavian lore are physical representations of greed:

eald uhtsceaða	Hordwynne fond opene standan,
----------------	----------------------------------

²¹ He told what he'd heard
repeating in songs about Sigemund's exploits,
all of those many feats and marvels,
the struggles and wanderings of Wael's son,
things unknown to anyone
except to Fitela,

...
They killed giants, their conquering swords
had brought them down. After his death
Sigemund's glory grew and grew
because of his courage when he killed the dragon,
the guardian of the hoard. (Beowulf 873b-886a)

se ðe byrnende	biorgas seceð,
nacod niðdraca,	nihtes fleogeð
fyre befangen;	hyne foldbuend

swiðe ondrædað.	He gesecean sceall
hord on hrusan,	þær he hæðen gold
warað wintrum frod,	ne byð him wihte ðy sel.
Swa se ðeodsceaða	þreo hund wintra
heold on hrusan	hordærna sum,

eacencræftig,	oððæt hyne an abealch
mon on mode;	(<i>Beowulf and Judith</i> 2270b-2281a) ²²

The dragon exists for the purpose of guarding the hoard from invaders. No one else is to touch the gold trinkets for fear of incurring its wrath. And when a slave, Wiglaf, steals a lone goblet, the dragon begins to pillage the countryside in what the audience may assume to be a jealous rage in order to retrieve the lost treasure (*Beowulf* 2287-2311).

The Norse saga varies slightly with the inclusion of a human-to-beast transformation:

Then died Hreithmar; but Fáfnir took all the gold. Regin asked for his share of the inheritance after his father; but Fáfnir said no to that...Sigurth stayed with Regin. He

²² Then an old harrower of the dark
 happened to find the hoard open,
 the burning one who hunts out barrows,
 the slick-skinned dragon, threatening the night sky
 with streamers of fire. People on the farms
 are in dread of him. He is driven to hunt out
 hoards under ground, to guard heathen gold
 through age-long vigils, though to little avail.
 For three centuries, this scourge of the people
 had stood guard on that stoutly protected
 underground treasury, until the intruder
 unleashed its fury; (*Beowulf* 2270b-2281a)

told Sigurth how Fáfnir lay on the Gnita Heath in the shape of a dragon and had the Helm of Terror, of which all living things are a-dread. (*Reginsmól* 257)²³

Rather than a dragon occupying a stone structure housing a hoard of gold, Fáfnir transforms into the shape of a dragon as a result of his greed. *Reginsmól* is essentially an originary tale of the hoard dragon, the physical embodiment of greed, predating *Beowulf* and subsequent war narratives. With the hoard dragon complimenting Christian lore, assimilation was inevitable regardless of the overt non-Christian beliefs regarding the metaphor.

Dragons of northwestern Europe in general derive from a palimpsestic theological concept constructed quite possibly from Judaic lore. Late Neolithic archeological finds in Gallehus and Gundestrup show a steady inclusion of a giant serpent when in reference to the Celtic-Scandinavian horned gods of agrarian tribes.²⁴ By the Viking Age, the mythical serpent undertakes megalithic proportions, becoming what is presently known as the world serpent or Mithgarth-worm (Jörmungand). Jörmungand appears in *Völuspó* as a serpent encircling the world:

Fares Hrym from the east,	holding his shield;
the Mithgarth-worm	in mighty rage
scatters the waves;	screams the eagle,

²³ *Reginsmól. The Poetic Edda*. Trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin: U of Texas P, 1928. 252-260.

²⁴ Davidson discusses the Scandinavian find in Gundestrup, Denmark in reference to the Celtic horned god holding a giant serpent at bay with its left hand, but lacks a definitive translation of the stone slab that appears to be an icon commonly used in agrarian rituals (77). The second archeological find, unearthed in the Germanic village of Gallehus, is a series of carvings in horn-like objects depicting varying stages of a lost Scandinavian narrative (Davidson 85). All but two of the scenes include large serpents interacting with local gods during hunting rituals.

his nib tears the dead; Naglfar loosens. (42)²⁵

The creature floods the world during the Ragnarök, washing away the corpses on the battlefield. An archeological find in Hørdum Ty, Denmark from the tenth century depicts Thor fishing Jörmungand from the sea – a popular Norse theme drawn from the ninth-century eddaic poem *Hymiskvida* and skaldic poems by Bragi Boddason (Davidson 133).²⁶ In both instances, the creature strongly resembles Judaic lore concerning Leviathan. Book of Job depicts Leviathan as an easily perturbed beast²⁷ incapable of capture by human strength and tools alone, including a fishhook.²⁸ Leviathan is later associated with evil incarnate, often literally translated to be a dragon:

In that day the Lord and His sore and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the slant serpent, and leviathan the tortuous serpent; and He will slay the dragon that is in the sea. (*Isaiah* 27:1)

The Lord will slay the beast in order to free the world's sea from its torturous wrath. A Christian scribe quite familiar with the Judaic narrative, having been Christianized by the second century, would naturally associate any other similar narratives with that of Isaiah and Job. However, the Mithgarth-worm should be distinguished from its origins. The Scandinavian lore was clearly segregated from Judaic lore long before the eddaic poems were recorded. On the other hand, scholars should not altogether ignore Jörmungand's

²⁵ *Vǫluspá. The Poetic Edda*. Trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin: U of Texas P, 1928. 1-16.

²⁶ Davidson, H. R. E. *Pagan Scandinavia*. Ed. Glyn Daniel. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967.

²⁷ *Job* 3:8

²⁸ *Job* 40:25

and, consequently, the *Beowulfian* dragon's Judaic roots. Instead, both theological objects should be explored in tandem when lecturing on the significance of the fire-breathing creature that ends the Anglo-Saxon warrior's reign.

Like any foreign theological construct, the *Beowulfian* dragon cannot subsist in a narrative altered to fit Christian conventions. Christ must aid Beowulf to rid the unholy creature and lift the magic from the treasure hoard (*Beowulf* 3054-3057a). Christianizing the non-Christian narrative is a customary process of re-inscription that appears across a wide variety of early war narratives in northwestern European literature. The process has for centuries masked crucial historical objects by projecting a fabricated theological definition that is wholly Christian, which, in effect, constructed complex palimpsests in need of deconstruction. However, Christianization has also illustrated that aspects of the war cult recorded in early narratives must be explored as heterogeneous religious history produced by numerous and often conflicting beliefs. The following chapters will accomplish these objectives with the warrior cult, war rituals, and battle iconography.

CHAPTER III

THE WARRIOR

A single figure stands at the center of the subject of war: the warrior. With medieval war narratives like *Beowulf* and *The History of the Kings of Britain* revolving around the warrior, there is a need to dedicate the appropriate time and material on exploring the significance of the warrior identity. More specifically, the field of medieval studies must focus on the diachronic elements that develop, maintain, and historicize the warrior. The warrior does not exist unless there is a battlefield, a battlefield cannot be marked before the prophecy of war is foretold, and neither achieves historicity, transcending temporality, without a scribe. War narratives maintain the existence of the warrior. They are primary nodes in a macrocosmic network of war that interweaves centuries of cultural, political, and religious traditions together. And yet despite absolute control over the textual universe all socio-religious practices – battle rituals and the production of iconography – operate through the warrior to influence events on the battlefield, as depicted in war narratives.

Before examining how the warrior ties socio-religious practices to the battlefield, a precise definition of religion should first be established. Clifford Geertz, DuBois explains, “sees religion as a meaning-making enterprise, the social construction and maintenance of a system of understandings and symbols that imposes order on the chaos

that is the true reality of the universe” (31).²⁹ This imposition of order facilitates the need to establish a system of ritualistic practices perceived by practitioners to influence events on the battlefield. Controlling the chaos of war, eliminating the unpredictability of death and defeat, would ideally result in victory. Of course, even Scandinavian seers like Skeggi in *Kormak's Saga*, which I will discuss shortly, etching runes on weapons to enhance the warrior or northern hunters capable of morphing into Óðinnic shape-shifting berserks understood the inevitability of defeat. When death is imminent, ritualistic prophecies offer a sense of control of the unknown. Control, however, should not be thought synonymous with exclusivity or homogeneity, as it is a mere illusion of power over nature.

The collection of meanings Geertz alludes to derives from a vast market of theological beliefs and religious practices presumably originating from pre-Indo-European nomadic tribes. To claim this system of understandings wholly Christian, Greco-Roman or Scandinavian polytheism is naïve, despite efforts to declare spontaneous originality. Religion, particularly northwestern European polytheism, remained during the Middle Ages a palimpsest of assimilated interregional rituals and symbols. The anthropomorphic system was constructed among chimeric categories of power, such as the establishment of professional classes. Scholars may safely assume from archeological finds in northwestern Europe, specifically in southern Norway and Finno-Ugric regions, that shamanism arose from Scandinavian hunting and gathering tribes during the early Neolithic period (Davidson 23). Shamans, much like monks and priests five centuries

²⁹ DuBois, Thomas A. *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999.

later, established and maintained a system composed of intricate religious practices. The practices predate the shaman, but the imposition of a power structure governing an organized system of beliefs inevitably transcends individual practice. A collective emerges for the sole purpose of formalizing the existence of the system that is religion. In other words, the shaman is a fabricated power symbol created through the organization of beliefs. The shaman cannot exist without an organized system unifying individual practices, and an organized system cannot exist without the unification of individuals to form a religious collective. War cults, and the greater organized religion of war, thrive as a result of a quite similar symbolic agent: the warrior.

Warriors serve as mediating agents of power to establish and maintain the religion of war, undertaking qualities spanning from the mythological to the omnipotent. They are merely worldly entities until a system establishes a criterion for specialization. This system relies wholly on a unique synchronous event. The battlefield morphs an individual's identity into that of a warrior while the warrior transforms a natural geological space into a historical object. Battlefields are merely tracks of land until a scribe records or oral tales include an event that depicts a violent conflict between two or more people(s). By transforming the natural space into an object of war, the scribe or raconteur consequently redefines the individuals in combat. One may misinterpret this process to be natural, but in fact it is an act of historicizing artificial constructs. There are no warriors or battlefields beyond narratives. They exist as a result of one's interpretation of a natural event, which is historicized by the act of inscription or oral communication. Historicizing objects of war – the warrior and the battlefield – permits a collective to visit

and revisit these artificial constructs. Once a collective acknowledges the existence of a warrior identity and battlefields, a system of beliefs concerning these objects may then manifest into battle rituals and battle iconography. It is important to note that the warrior identity only exists within the macrocosmic universe of war and is restricted entirely to the battlefield. Outside the battlefield, the individual is stripped of his classification.

These natural limitations on self-consciousness pose a dilemma for humans: some form of compensation must be sought in order to substitute the warrior beyond the battlefield.

Upon losing the artificial identity, the historicized warrior inherits fantastical qualities to substitute the living entity. As a result, warriors in battle narratives become inhuman. The most subdued form of this transformation is the berserk. King Arthur in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, for example, turns berserk: “When the greater part of the day had passed in this way, Arthur went berserk, for he realized that things were still going well for the enemy and that victory for his own side was not yet in sight” (217). Frequent also in Scandinavian sagas, the berserk is understood to be either a form more human than human or of a supernatural animal. In *Egil’s Saga*, the warrior’s transmutation may result in either form: “It is said that people who could take on the character of animals, or went berserk, became so strong in this state that no one was a match for them, but also that just after it wore off they were left weaker than usual” (48).³⁰ The passage implies that the warrior becomes inhumanly strong during battle. Northern tribal warriors were even known to shape-shift when turning berserk during battle.³¹ Berserks, in truth, are

³⁰ *Egil’s Saga*. Trans. Bernard Scudder. London: Penguin, 2004.

³¹ Invading Viking warriors in Icelandic Sagas are often associated with beastly transformations, shape shifting, that eliminate all traces of humanity – a common motif that appears in earlier literature, such as

fabricated entities substituting the human warrior to compensate for the hollow identity restricted entirely to the battlefield. In more extreme cases, the warrior undergoes the process of deification.

As the individual becomes further segregated from the battlefield, the warrior often transcends the worldly in a manner that reflects regional theology. The beginning of this process, however, does not occur restrictively within war narratives. Prior to the deification of the warrior, regional hunting deities assume characteristics of war gods. Cocidius, for example, seamlessly transitions from hunting god to war god during the later Neolithic period. However, plaques excavated in Northumberland show that the deity lacked any singular classification (Ross 170).³² Cocidius was celebrated and called upon in either fashion depending on the situation. Similar theological alterations occur with the Romano-Celtic hunting god Nodons native to Gloucestershire.³³ Whether the transition from hunting deity to hunting / war deity occurs before the establishment of a war god or if Cocidius and Nodons altered as a result of Greco-Roman influences during

with Grendel in *Beowulf*. However, instances of shape shifting among allies were thought to be ancestral assets crucial to warfare (*Egil* 42).

³² Ross, Anne. *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition*. New York: Columbia U.P., 1967.

³³ Anne Ross follows an etymological trail from a series of iconographic objects found in Gloucestershire to expose the degree Nodons altered from hunting god to war god:

A statuette of the Roman god was found [at Cockersand Moss] before 1718. It was inscribed and the text was read by Stukeley as follows: *Deo Marti Nodonti Aurelius...cinus sig(illum)*. With it was found a smaller, cruder statuette with an inscription reader *Deo M(arti) N(odonti) Lucianus colic(io) Aprili Viato /ris v.s.* He seems also to have been equated with Mars at Lydney where his chief role as a healer-hunter is attested. One inscription found there reads *D.M. Marti Nodonti Fl. Blandinus Armatura v.s.l.m. D(eo) M(arti)*. Again, another inscription reads *Pectillus votum quod promissit deo Nudente M(arti) dedit.* (178-179)

Nodon's later association with the Greco-Roman war god Mars shows a theological shift concerning how he was both depicted and interpreted through religious practices in the regional cult.

periods of hostile occupation is yet definitive. Anne Ross argues that majority of Celtic gods in northwestern Europe either considerably change in recognition of or derive from varying interpretations of Mars:

It is clear that the Celts would be attracted to the cult of Mars the warrior for at least two reasons. They were a people devoted to warfare and to single combat, and their tribal organization would ensure a multiplicity of divine warriors. (Ross 169)

Ross, on the other hand, underestimates the cultural significance of native deification. Extended occupational forces may enforce indoctrination of foreign theological practices, but, as chapter one discusses with the attempt to assimilate Christian doctrine in Scandinavian culture, native deities, iconography, and ritualistic practices tend to persevere. Nevertheless, the establishment of a war god must precede the deification of the warrior in order for substitution to occur in medieval narratives.

A product of euhemerization, such as Thor, substitutes the temporal entity now stripped of its warrior identity within war narratives. Thor is a Scandinavian theological being constructed initially in the image of man, who, according to the *Poetic Edda*, is the divine child of Óthin and Fjörgyn (*Edda Vsp.* 48).³⁴ Ellis Davidson explains, “The cults of Odin and the Vanir were already flourishing in Vendel times, but that of Thor seems not to have become dominant until the Viking period, and to have reached its height in the tenth and eleventh centuries, leaving a vivid mark on the surviving literature” (Davidson 132). As the cult of Thor evolved during the Viking age, the deity inherited

³⁴ *The Poetic Edda*. Trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin: U of Texas P, 1928.

the image of Tror – King Priam of Troy’s immediate relative (Orchard 352). Distinct facial features were bestowed to replace ambiguous representations in the form of iconography depicting the presence of the unworldly. Thor’s hammer or Mjöllnir, once the sole representation of Thor, became the mythological possession of a fair-headed man in northern Scandinavian cultures and a burly redheaded man in the southern Celtic regions (Orchard 352). This asymmetrical relationship between the deity, whose duty is to protect the earth and, consequently, humans, and Tror melds the mythological with the historical. The product of this process is the historicizing of a regional deity: euhemerism. The newly established object of history, Thor, may then compensate for the loss of an entity unable to fulfill the role of warrior beyond the battlefield. Thor can always be the warrior, whereas man is limited to the temporal boundaries also dictating mortality. The transcendental nature of the divine warrior also fashions an aspect of the primary god that exists solely for the religion of war.

Primary gods, progenitors of races and religions, at times appear as warriors within war narratives. Óthin, the Norse progenitor of the human race, is depicted as a military leader in the *Ynglinga Saga*:

Óthin was a great warrior and fared widely, conquering many countries. He was so victorious that he won the upper hand in every battle; as a result, his men believed that it was granted to him to be victorious in every battle. (7)³⁵

³⁵ Sturluson, Snorri. *Ynglinga Saga. Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*. Trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin: U of Texas P, 1964. 6-50.

Rather than an omnipotent war god dictating the fates of soldiers devoted to the Ódinnic cult, Óthin appears in the saga as a warrior dependent on his prowess. On the other hand, Óthin, like Thor and Christ, originates in the form of a mortal man who inherits qualities of a sky god following his death and cremation. The *Ynglinga Saga* clearly refers to a period prior to Óthin's deification in the oral tradition. Óthin is commonly invoked later either as a hunting or war god (Sturluson *Ynglinga* 7). However, the primary god's warrior identity owes more to his central role in the prophesized cataclysmic battle at the end of the world, the Ragnarök, than prior accounts of military leadership.

Jesus Christ's adaptation to the war cult follows a similar methodology: "The imminence of the Last Judgment, combined with the total, ineluctable justice of the Lord led to the further conception of Jesus as a warrior, grimly prepared to carry out the work of his Father, in heaven, hell, or earth" (DuBois 62). Of course, the divine Christian warrior was not limited to Scandinavian cultures. In *Beowulf*, Christ is repeatedly invoked prior to battle for strength and is even linked to warriors' fates on the battlefield: "Ac him dryhten forgeaf / wigspeda gewiofu, Wedera leodum," (*Beowulf and Judith* 696b-697).³⁶ *Dream of the Rood* also uses the term "warrior" or "beorn" in reference to Christ while depicting the crucifixion.³⁷ The adaptation and assimilation of primary gods in the warrior tradition shows the extent of influence the war cult impeded on the social construction of religion depicted in medieval literature. However, altering the nature of the warrior from mortal entity to sacred or supernatural being serves a more practical

³⁶ But the Lord was weaving
a victory on His war-loom for the Weather-Geats. (*Beowulf* 696b-697)

³⁷ "Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte" (Vercelli 42a).

purpose than mere fortune. War narratives implement the warrior identity as an agent facilitating the production and employment of theological constructs.

The warrior weaves pre- and post-battle rituals with the battlefield. The religion of war revolves around the existence of a central figure, and, to establish this connection between the worldly and the spiritual, the warrior, as mentioned before, undergoes either deification or transformation. After all, a mortal entity would not be in a position to interact directly with the omnipotent. The physical and the metaphysical operate on two different planes forever segregated by temporality. Once the object of history, the warrior identity, is established consciously, a medium is constructed or reconstructed to facilitate interaction between the physical and the metaphysical. War narratives serve as this medium, but interaction is purely spectatorial. The event will always be disjointed from the audience. Narratives can only depict the interaction between the worldly and the spiritual. Replicating the event is beyond the bounds of the physical and sometimes the sensible.

Those constructing the narratives will oftentimes exemplify the gap between the warrior and the audience by exaggerating the possible. Geoffrey of Monmouth, for example, utilizes various authorial methods while depicting pre- and post-battle rituals to demonstrate the limitations of war narratives:

Brutus stood before the altar of the goddess, holding in his right hand a vessel full of sacrificial wine mixed with the blood of a white hind, and with his face upturned towards the statue of the godhead he broke the silence with these words: 'O powerful goddess, terror of the forest glades, yet hope of the wild woodlands, you who have the power to go in orbit through the airy heavens and the halls of hell, pronounce a judgment which concerns the earth. Tell me which lands you wish us to inhabit. Tell

me of a safe dwelling-place where I am to worship you down the ages, and where, to the chanting of maidens, I shall dedicate temples to you.' (Geoffrey 65)

Brutus' elaborate ritualistic sacrifice to the Greco-Roman gods concludes with a personal encounter with Diana in a dream. The inscribed interaction between the mortal and the goddess then guides the Trojan descendents to an island in the west where they will continue raiding and conquering. Geoffrey cannot reproduce the conversation between Brutus and Diana, but the narrative does offer an opportunity for the audience to consciously experience secondhand the interaction between the physical and the metaphysical. Another demonstration occurs later in *The History* with a post-battle ritual:

Cassivelaunus was greatly elated when he had won this second victory. He issued an edict that all the British leaders should assemble with their wives in the town of Trinovantum to do honour to their country's gods who had given them victory over so mighty an Emperor. ...Sacrifices of various kinds were made and many cattle were killed. They offered forty thousand cows, a hundred thousand sheep and so many fowl of every kind that it was impossible to count them. (Geoffrey 113)

Geoffrey's exaggerated number of sacrifices would simply endanger the populace by severely reducing their food supply and economy. Cattle and sheep were vital commodities that could not be flamboyantly slaughtered for a single victory. Geoffrey's exaggeration of the account must instead be interpreted metaphorically as the temporal chasm between the war narrative and the audience. On the other hand, it is this gap that permits the physical and metaphysical to interact beyond the limitations of the worldly.

The warrior operates within the temporal fissure for the purpose of linking the natural with the spiritual in war narratives, as the two passages above clearly illustrate.

There is no better example of a supernatural warrior acting as a religious agent than Grendel from the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. The warrior identity, every characteristic that fashions Grendel throughout the narrative, is often dismissed to focus on his ambiguously monstrous features. Grendel is always a warrior, and one must not misinterpret the warrior identity as anything more than a social construct. The human entity, likely a Scandinavian warrior, has merely been transformed into the perceived supernatural. In a contemporary historical perspective, any coast on the North Sea faced the constant threat of raids and interregional warfare to establish hierarchical power structures determining annual tribute and contributive military strength.³⁸ Grendel's monstrous appearance is a conscious reaction to the psychological torment begot by repeated accounts of terrorization on a vulnerable society by a common enemy. Scholars may begin deconstructing Grendel with his introduction as a human raider rather than a demonic creature:

gyddum geomore,	þætte Grendel wan
hwile wið Hroþgar,	heteniðas wæg,
fyrene ond fæhðe	fela missera,
singale sæce,	sibbe ne wolde

³⁸ “[T]he initial tribute payment represents a ritualized economic acknowledgment of the differences in advantage between the two groups, after which normal trading may ensue” (DuBois 25). Though DuBois is referring to socio-political hierarchies between northern Scandinavian countries during the Viking Age, an identical system of power appears repeatedly in *Beowulf* with Beowulf's complex relationship with the Shields. Not only is tribute paid from one kingdom to another of greater political and / or military status, soldiers were loaned in times of war or raiding.

wið manna hwone mægenes Deniga,
feorhbealo feorran, fea þingian, (*Beowulf and Judith* 151-156)³⁹

Raiding was a common ritualized practice for northern tribesmen for both the purpose of acquiring interregional recognition or wealth and compensating for food shortages during winter.⁴⁰ Furthermore, one would not expect a creature incapable of anything more than satiating its bloodlust to be associated with feuds, peacemaking, or *wergeld*.

 Ic ðæs modceare
Sorhwylmum seað, siðe ne truwode
Leofes mannes; ic ðe lange bæd

 wihte ne grette,
 sylfe geweorðan
 (*Beowulf and Judith* 1992-1997a)⁴¹
 Guðe wið Grendel.

³⁹ Sad lays were sung about the beset king,
the vicious raids and ravages of Grendel,
his long and unrelenting feud,
nothing but war; how he would never
parley or make peace with any Dane
nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price. (*Beowulf* 151-156)

⁴⁰ Raiding compensated “agricultural livelihoods”, which is clearly depicted by Sveinn Asleifarson’s raiding customs in *Orkneyinga saga*:

Sveinn spends the winter with his eighty-odd men at his home on Gairsay, planting crops in the spring. Once the sowing is done, he leaves with his men for raids in the Hebrides or Ireland, returning at midsummer to reap and store again. (DuBois 20)

Raiding customs also appear throughout the gamut of Scandinavian sagas and western European narratives, including *The History of the Kings of Britain*, *Beowulf*, and *Le Roman de Brut*.

⁴¹ Your undertaking
cast my spirits down, I dreaded the outcome
of your expedition and pleaded with you
long and hard to leave the killer be,
let the South-Danes settle their own
blood-feud with Grendel. (*Beowulf* 1992b-1997a)

The Geats' iron weapons, which have always brought them success in warfare, cannot pierce the hellish spawn. Grendel's armor surpasses modern technology, which suggests that the armor is unnatural. The creature's weapon, depicted here as a claw, is also beyond the realm of the worldly, being invulnerable to the common warrior. Only Beowulf's inhuman strength can match the supernatural warrior's mystical armor and weapon, demonstrating that one supernatural warrior may invoke another.

Beowulf not only undergoes a more subdued form of transformation within the war narrative, he exists in response to Grendel. For Beowulf to enter the narrative, Grendel must be constructed in such a manner that he operates beyond a mortal's limitations. Thus Grendel becomes unstoppable:

Swa ða mælceare	maga Healfdenes
singala seað,	ne mihte snotor hæleð
wean onwendan;	wæs þæt gewin to swyð,
laþ ond longsum,	þe on ða leode becom,
nydwracu niþgrim,	nihtbealwa mæst. (<i>Beowulf and Judith</i> 189-193) ⁴⁴

At this point, any warrior may enter the narrative to battle the supernatural being. The average warrior may not survive the battle, but there should be some effort made to rid Heorot of Grendel. However, the narrative lacks any individual account of resistance

⁴⁴ So that troubled time continued, woe
that never stopped, steady affliction
for Halfdane's son, too hard an ordeal.
There was panic after dark, people endured
raids in the night, riven by the terror. (*Beowulf* 189-193)

until the introduction of “the mightiest man on earth” (*Beowulf* 197b).⁴⁵ There can be no opponent for Grendel other than another supernatural being. Beowulf serves as the heroic construct – the eternal warrior. He exists because Grendel exists, so the problem is not just a matter of strength or skill.

A warrior can only exist on the ephemeral plane of the battlefield, but Beowulf is constructed in the war narrative as being the epitomic symbol of the eternal warrior. To resolve this paradox, he becomes more human than human:

selfe ofersawon, ða ic of searwum cwom,
 fah from feondum, þær ic fife geband,
 yðde eotena cyn ond on yðum slog
 niceras nihtes, (*Beowulf and Judith* 419-422a)⁴⁶

Common men are incapable of successfully raiding troll nests and slaughtering mythical sea beasts, so his accomplishments are unnatural. Recurring associations with unnatural feats is key in establishing Beowulf. The absence of the natural is so important to retain the warrior identity that bodily descriptions of Beowulf are substituted in the narrative with armor. When body parts do appear in the war narrative, they are wholly fixed to the action of battle – detached from any physical description of Beowulf. The historical entity, Beowulf, essentially operates between the physical and metaphysical plane to

⁴⁵ se wæs moncynnes mægenes strengest (*Beowulf and Judith* 197).

⁴⁶ They had seen me bolstered in the blood of enemies
 when I battled and bound five beasts,
 raided a troll-nest and in the night-sea
 slaughtered sea-brutes. (*Beowulf* 419-422a)

fulfill the warrior identity in the narrative, reflective of Grendel's own supernatural nature.

Despite the warrior's true origins as a historicized artificial construct, war narratives implement the identity in order to organize the system of beliefs regarding warfare. Ódinnic cults may have survived throughout the ages by integrating religious practices into daily life, but the cult could only survive as long as Óthin remained the organizing agent. Christianity is no different. Without a central deity, Christian cults would degenerate into aimless specialized societies until they are inevitably dissolved. The religion of war must revolve around a central figure, and the warrior fulfills that role. Every religious aspect of war, particularly war rituals, existed and continued to exist because of their mutual associations with the warrior.

CHAPTER IV

WAR RITUALS

After discussing the volatility of theological frameworks in northwestern European war narratives – the ease with which these objects of history were assimilated during Christianization – and then identifying the warrior as the mediating agent permitting religious practices to operate on the battlefield, I will now proceed to exemplify the need to read beyond the Christian mask, a blanket of Christian references in medieval literature, in this case *Beowulf*, facilitating misinterpretation, and deconstruct the fabricated Pagan-Christian binary with the first major category of religious practices regarding warfare. War rituals are organized ceremonies composed of a series of prescribed actions or procedures aimed at influencing the outcome of battle. They are extremely vulnerable to assimilation when one population interacts with another, as Chapter One points out, and must be acknowledged as composites of varying practices from foreign sources. These rituals cannot be accurately labeled Christian or ‘pagan’. They are heterogeneous constructs with origins spanning from one region and culture to another, suggesting a need to read each war ritual in a manner that explores every coherent aspect to accurately interpret those that appear in medieval literature.

One of the most common pre-battle rituals that take place in the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* is celebratory feasting. The practice’s consistency in literature from the sixth to the late fifteenth century, particularly in war narratives, shows how widespread the

customary act of feasting was in Europe.⁴⁷ The feast must not be interpreted simply as a gathering of warriors and chieftains to indulge on the bountiful. It is a ritual. Thomas DuBois defines a ritual as being “an enacted communication that may be intercepted or shared by other humans but that is directed primarily toward an efficacious god or intermediary” (122). *Beowulf* preserves this tradition on two different occasions, yet they both follow an identical arrangement.

The ritualized feast in *Beowulf* opens with what I will term a battle sub-narrative. Battle sub-narratives are different from war narratives, as they are microcosmic in nature and structured more after the Greek epic tradition. *Beowulf*, at the opening of the first feast, begins his battle narrative in *medias res*. Breca and *Beowulf* are on the open sea, racing towards the distant shoreline, where the rough waters sweeps *Beowulf* into a nest of mythical sea beasts (*Beowulf* 532b-549). The competition begins as a battle to prove *Beowulf*’s strength and endurance, but turns into a battle for his life. Granted *Beowulf* begins the narrative in response to Unferth’s mockery, but Sigemund’s narrative begins in *medias res* as well at the opening of the second feast (*Beowulf* 883b). Both battle narratives end sharply without finite conclusions, leaving the audience desiring more of *Beowulf*’s adventures in Finland or King Heremod’s misadventures with his brothers.⁴⁸ There are no continuations to the tales in *Beowulf*, because the battle sub-narratives are insignificant in the greater perspective of the ritual. They serve only as a ceremonial opening to the ritualized feast, much like a national anthem. *Le Morte d’Arthur* invokes

⁴⁷ Celebratory feasting appears across a wide array of works from *Beowulf* and *The History of the Kings of Britain* to late fifteenth-century French Arthurian romances.

⁴⁸ King Heremod’s narrative can be found in the *Volsung Saga* while a greater account of Sigurth and Fáfnir can be extracted from the *Fra dauða Sinfjǫtla*, *Gripisspǫ*, *Reginsmǫl*, and *Fáfnismǫl*.

the battle sub-narrative in a similar manner in order to commence a celebratory feast at the round table.⁴⁹ The procedure is so important to the feast that Geoffrey of Monmouth's Merlin prophecies allude to the sub-narratives in a description of Lucius' coming: "The Boar shall be extolled in the mouths of its people, and its deed will be as meat and drink to those who tell tales" (Geoffrey 172). Once the battle sub-narrative is finished, the feast continues to the ceremonial act of distinguishing rank.

A designated female with influence within the domicile, reflecting the seeress or shaman class, oversees a process in *Beowulf* of defining the hierarchical socio-political structure during the feast. The ceremonial act is accomplished by one of two methods: either by seating arrangement or by passing an object originating with the king to symbolize unity. In *Njal's Saga*, Gunnhild, Njal's mother, establishes each warrior's rank by directing the seating arrangement: "She gave him a prominent seat, and he stayed with the king over the winter, well respected" (9).⁵⁰ Wealhtheow, on the other hand, uses a goblet of mead:

⁴⁹ The custom, as Sir Kay defines it in *The Sankgreal*, is to experience some fantastical adventure prior to feasting:

Than the Kynge bade haste unto dyner. 'Sir,' seyde Sir Kay the Stywarde, 'if ye go now unto youre mete ye shall breke youre olde custom of youre courte, for ye have nat used on thys day to sytte at your mete or that ye have sene some adventure.' (Malory 8b-12)

Of course, King Arthur does not actively participate in the adventures brought forth to the round table prior to feasting. He is merely the audience for the battle narratives told at a later date, suggesting that the feast is preemptory to celebrate the success of the knight(s) involved. The immediate adventure, in this case the tale of the sword in the stone at the bottom of a river, is only the prelude to the battle narrative that encompasses the entire story. To the reader, the entire narrative is a subnarrative that contributes to the larger biography of King Arthur. The tale begins in *medias res* with the biblical legend of the Holy Grail (Malroy 39b-41), and concludes with the intention of continuing the Arthurian saga.

⁵⁰ *Njal's Saga*. Trans. Robert Cook. London: Penguin, 2001.

grette goldhroden guman on healle,

 ond þa freolic wif ful gesealde
 ærest Eastdena eþelwearde,
 bæd hine bliðne æt þære beorþege,
 leodum leofne.
 ...
 Ymbeode þa ides Helminga
 duguþe ond geogoþe dæl æghwylcne,
 sincfato sealde, oþæt sæl alamp
 þæt hio Beowulfe, beaghroden cwen
 mode gepungen, medoful ætbær; (*Beowulf and Judith* 614-624)⁵¹

After the poet establishes Wealhtheow as an influential figure in the domicile by expressively illustrating her opulent accessories, she passes the goblet first to the king. The act establishes Hrothgar's political and social supremacy, the symbolic head of the greater body.⁵² This is why Wealhtheow then proceeds to pass the goblet to the king's forces rather than immediately to the distinguished Beowulf. Beowulf is always segregated from the symbolic body of the kingdom. Even during the second feast, his seating position between the king's sons does not alter his socio-political position.

⁵¹ Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted
 the men in the hall, then handed the cup
 first to Hrothgar, their homeland's guardian,
 urging him to drink deep and enjoy it
 because he was dear to them.

...
 So the Helming woman went on her rounds,
 queenly and dignified, decked out in rings,
 offering the goblet to all ranks,
 treating the household and the assembled troop,
 until it was Beowulf's turn to take it from her hand. (*Beowulf* 614-624)

⁵² Patriarchies traditionally designated a socio-politically superior male figure, husband or king, as the "head" while other persons were considered the collective body. The misogynistic ideology reinforced gender boundaries while maintaining male supremacy.

Wealhtheow is the only person capable of redefining Beowulf's rank by performing a second ceremony. However, Wealhtheow clearly refuses and verbally declares her objections in a speech directed at Hrothgar (*Beowulf* 1168-1186). Beowulf could never accept a greater position anyway, because the elevation in rank would disrupt the warrior identity. And, as mentioned before, Beowulf cannot exist as anything other than the mythical warrior. Thus the feast concludes with a closing ceremony, which also defines the function of the ritual.

Heorot's first feast serves as a pre-battle sacrificial rite to the mythical warrior while the second is a sacrificial feast to the dead. The final ceremony following the actual act of feasting, which ironically is nearly absent from the ritual, defines the nature of the sacrifice. For the first feast, the conclusive rite is the act of blessing the mythical warrior:

oppæt semninga

sunu Healfdenes	secean wolde
æfenræste;	wiste þæm ahlæcan
to þæm heahsele	hilde geþinged,
siððan hie sunnan leoht	geseon ne meahton,
opðe nipende	niht ofer ealle,

scaduhelma gesceapu	scriðan cwoman,	
wan under wolcnum.	Werod eall aras.	
Gegrette þa	guma oþerne,	
Hroðgar Beowulf,	ond him hæl abead,	(<i>Beowulf and Judith</i> 644b-653) ⁵³

53 until soon enough
 Halfdane's heir had to be away
 to his night's rest. He realized
 that the demon was going to descend on the hall,
 that he plotted all day, from dawn-light
 until darkness gathered again over the world

Invoking a deity is not essential for blessing, but the connotation is that one exists to aid the superior figure. In this case, the superior figure is King Hrothgar. The deity aiding Hrothgar varies according to regional theology. For example, the deity aiding the king could be Othin if one were to acknowledge the Scandinavian Ódinnic cult influence on the Anglo-Saxon epic. Otherwise, one could interpret the deity to be Christ due to the overt Christian elements. Nonetheless, the ritual is a feastial sacrifice to Beowulf.

The final ceremony concluding the second feast is also a continuation of an earlier ceremony, foreshadowing the fate of Aeschere and other thanes too insignificant to cite:

	þær wæs symbla cyst;
druncon win weras.	Wyrð ne cuþon,
geosceaft grimme,	swa hit agangen wearð
eorla manegum,	syþðan æfen cwom
ond him Hroþgar gewat	to hofe sinum,
rice to ræste.	(<i>Beowulf and Judith</i> 1232b-1237a) ⁵⁴

Although the feast is not presently dedicated to the dead, the narrator suggests a relationship between the libation and those fated to die. The ceremony is essentially molded in the narrative as an object of foreshadowing, and it is this non-temporal nature

and stealthy night-shapes came stealing forth
under the cloud-murk. The company stood
as the two leaders took leave of each other:
Hrothgar wished Beowulf health and good luck, (*Beowulf* 644b-653)
⁵⁴ Men were drinking wine
at that rare feast; how could they know fate,
the grim shape of things to come,
the threat looming over many thanes
as night approached and King Hrothgar prepared
to retire to his quarters? (*Beowulf* 1232b-1237a)

that permits the feast to be a sacrifice for the thanes not yet dead. However, the ritual is not whole in this passage. In fact, the concluding ceremony is linked to a previous sacrificial ceremony for those Grendel killed:

ða gyt æghwylcum	eorla drihten
þara þe mid Beowulfe	brimlade teah
on þære medubence	maþðum gesealde,
yrfelafe,	ond þone ænne heht
golde forgyldan,	þone ðe Grendel ær
mane acwealde,	(<i>Beowulf and Judith</i> 1050-1055a) ⁵⁵

Labeling Hrothgar a chieftain or *eorla* shows the remnants of *Beowulf* as tribal lore rather than a national epic. As the chieftain, Hrothgar is obligated to pay the Geats, who have proved far more powerful in combat, a tribute. The ritualized practice surfaces quite frequently in Scandinavian and early English literature from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries, exemplifying the social significance of the economic practice to abate continuing warfare. Following the tribute, *wergeld* is paid for the death of his thane. The depicted sacrificial rite is commonly misinterpreted as a result of scholarly focus on the burial practices of more socially renowned and wealthier individuals. A thane belongs to his or her lord, so naturally the price of the thane's life would transfer to Beowulf rather than directly into a burial mound. Burial feasts, on the other hand, are commonly

⁵⁵ The chieftain went on to reward the others:
 each man on the bench who had sailed with Beowulf
 and risked the voyage received a bounty,
 some treasured possession. And compensation,
 a price in gold, was settled for the Geat
 Grendel had cruelly killed earlier— (Beowulf 1049-1054)

distributed between the funeral attendees and the dead.⁵⁶ The size of the victual sacrifice is determined by the socio-political status of the deceased, so the significance of the term *cyst* in describing the feast must not be underestimated.

Following the feast, the next ritualistic ceremony to take place in *Beowulf* is the spiritualization of the warrior's weapon. A supernatural force or a medium alters the nature of the warrior's weapon for the purpose of either enhancing its effectiveness or diminishing an opponent's ferocity. Pre-Christian Scandinavian tribes, for example, invoked Óthin in the process of carving runic verses to enhance weapons:⁵⁷

In the period of Maglemose culture, men could already produce geometrical and abstract patterns built up from lines, dots, curves and circles. They are unlikely to have been purely decorative, and were presumably meant to add to the efficiency of weapon or tool, or to defend against hostile powers. (Davidson 26)

The growth of shamanism also produced altered forms of the Óddinic ritual. Rather than invoking a war god, shamans exercised their ability to guide animal spirits to enhance particular characteristics of a weapon. Skeggi, a shaman in *Kormak's Saga*, reluctantly furnishes Kormak with a sword possessed by the spirit of a snake to enhance its bite:

The sun is not to shine on the pommel of the sword hilt, and you are not to wield the sword unless you're getting ready for combat; but if you do find yourself on a

⁵⁶ "Classical authors and medieval Irish storytellers alike testify to the importance of ceremonial feasting among the Celts, and emphasize the significance of the chieftain's portion, the selected joint of meat which went to the most distinguished warrior" (Davidson 68-69).

⁵⁷ Óthin was sacrificed when he willingly hung himself from Yggdrasil in order to acquire the same knowledge as the gods, which included the ability to read and write runic verse. He is credited for giving the regional tribes the ability to use these runes. An account of Óthin's sacrifice may be found in the *Hávamöl*.

battlefield, sit by yourself and draw it there, hold out the sword blade in front of you and blow on it; then a little snake will crawl out from under the hilt. Turn the sword sideways and make it possible for him to crawl back under the hilt. (25)⁵⁸

Although a greater description of the sword does not appear in the saga, it is likely that the snake spirit is held in the hilt of the sword by a carved runic verse or a rune for “snake” at the bottom – precisely where Kormak is to guide the spirit. By the early Middle Ages, Christianity had adopted the ritual. Dominique Barthélemy, in an examination of Chivalric rituals, explains, “From the ninth century on...bishops and priests might bless swords – whether those of kings, counts, defenders of churches in general” (220).⁵⁹ A Christian medium, like the shaman, is here used to invoke Christ in order to aid the warrior on his conquest. With the ritual prevalent throughout the history of the war cult, naturally some form appears in *Beowulf*.

Beowulf conducts a traditional ceremony, a blood sacrifice, in order to spiritually enhance his weapon. After acquiring a mystical sword associated with Scandinavian lore,⁶⁰ Beowulf sacrifices Grendel’s mother:

⁵⁸ *Kormak’s Saga. Sagas of Warrior-Poets*. Trans. Rory McTurk. London: Penguin, 2002. 5-67.

⁵⁹ Barthélemy, Dominique. “Modern Mythologies of Medieval Chivalry.” *The Medieval World*. Ed. Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson. London: Routledge, 2001. 214-228.

⁶⁰ The carvings in the hilt of the mystical sword, noted to be a relic associated with the race of giants, depict scenes from the *Völuspá*:

Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt,
that relic of old times. It was engraved all over
and showed how war first came into the world
and the flood destroyed the tribe of giants.

...

In pure gold inlay on the sword-guards
there were rune-markings correctly incised,
stating and recording for whom the sword
had been first made and ornamented

He gefeng þa fetelhilt, hreoð ond heorogrim	freca Scyldinga hringmæl gebrægd,	
alders orwena, þæt hire wið halse banhringas bræc. fægne flæschoman; Sweord wæs swatig,	yrringa sloh, heard grapode, Bile al ðurhwod heo on flet gecrong. secg weorce gefeh.	(<i>Beowulf and Judith</i> 1563-1569) ⁶¹

On this occasion, the warrior acts as the medium – an entirely acceptable role for an entity that commonly conducts post-battle rituals. Cassivelaunus, as was previously explained in Chapter Two, hosts a post-battle blood sacrifice while fulfilling the warrior identity (Geoffrey 113). The medium or Beowulf, enraged like a berserk, slits the neck of the sacrificial beast, dowsing the sword in its blood. Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother should not be interpreted as the purpose of the conquest. She is simply the sacrifice:

	Næs seo ecg fracod ac he hraþe wolde guðræsa fela to Westdenum ðonne on ænne sið,
hilderince, Grendle forgyldan ðara þe he geworhte oftor micle	
þonne he Hroðgares	heorðgeneatas

with its scrollworked hilt.

(*Beowulf* 1687-1798a)

⁶¹ So the Shieldings' hero hard-pressed and enraged,
took a firm hold of the hilt and swung
the blade in an arc, a resolute blow
that bit deep into her neck-bone
and severed it entirely, toppling the doomed
house of her flesh; she fell to the floor.
The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated. (*Beowulf* 1563-1569)

sloh on sweofote,	slæpende fræt	
folces Denigea	fiftyne men	
ond oðer swylc	ut offerede,	
laðlicu lac.		(<i>Beowulf and Judith</i> 1575b-1584a) ⁶²

Beowulf is now going to test the sword's combat proficiency following the sacrifice.

Either the battle with Grendel's mother was not significant enough to prove the worth of the sword or the narrator has wholly altered the interpretation of the act. In the perspective of traditional war rituals, the latter compliments the mythological nature of the sword's origins. The purpose of the conquest is revenge for the killing of his thane, which, coincidentally, concludes the blood ritual and begins the ceremonial beheading.

Another common post-battle ritual in war narratives is the severing of the enemy's head. Beheading is in fact a transposition of a body part for the purpose of glorifying the warrior. The head is no longer a biological object. During the ritual, the head is displaced from its general function and recast as an object of war or a trophy for the victorious warrior. The transposition of the head from body part to trophy is best depicted in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthurian account of the battle at Mont-Saint-Michel: "[King Arthur] ordered Bedevere to saw off the giant's head and to hand it over to one of their squires, so that it might be carried to the camp for all to go and stare at" (240). Peace and

⁶² Now the weapon was to prove its worth.
 The warrior determined to take revenge
 for every gross act Grendel had committed—
 and not only for that one occasion
 when he'd come to slaughter the sleeping troops,
 fifteen of Hrothgar's house-guards
 surprised on their benches and ruthlessly devoured,
 and as many again carried away,
 a brutal plunder. (Beowulf 1576-1584a)

victory cannot be celebrated without the symbolic trophy. After all, severing the head was also judged to be the proof of death. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, Hook refuses to acknowledge the shape-shifting berserk's death until "he dealt two or three blows to Grettir's neck" (185).⁶³ However, the adoption of the war ritual faced some disruption during Christianization. While the ritual was accepted in Geoffrey of Monmouth's narrative accounts for the monstrous, an additional peculiar emendation accompanied the act in narratives to protect Christian corpses – at least in narratives written by those who protested post-mortem bodily division. These emendations were often labeled miracles, particular in *Njal's Saga*: "Then they took King Brian's body and laid it out; the king's head had grown back on the trunk" (303). In some cases, the headless Christian warrior is even capable of reattaching his or her severed head.⁶⁴ The narratives imply that a Christian's corpse must remain whole and undefiled by the enemy.

Beowulf performs the ceremonial beheading with the ritually enhanced sword in order to avenge the death of his thane and celebrate the victory with some proof of death. At the conclusion of the blood ritual, Beowulf proceeds to avenge the death of his thane:

	He him þæs lean forgeald,
reþe cempa,	to ðæs þe he on ræste geseah
guðwerigne	Grendel licgan
aldorleasne,	swa him ær gescod

⁶³ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*. Trans. Bernard Scudder. London: Penguin, 2005.

⁶⁴ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, includes an alternate form to the war ritual. Following beheading, the green knight, an overt Christian symbol in the tale, lifts his severed head and leaves Arthur's court (*Gawain* 444-459). The narrative does not depict the reattachment, but the conclusion is evident due to the head's continued animation.

hild æt Heorote. Hra wide sprong,
syþðan he æfter deaðe drepe þrowade,

heorosweng heardne, ond hine þa heafde becearf. (*Beowulf and Judith* 1584b-1590)⁶⁵

Grendel's death does not complete the revenge. The enemy must undergo a bodily division in order to transpose the head into an object of war. Beowulf's revenge is essentially materialized in the form of a trophy. Like Arthur, Beowulf presents the trophy to the terrorized community in order to prove the death of the tyrant and to formalize his victory:

on þæm wælstenge	feower scoldon
to þæm goldsele	weorcum geferian
	Grendles heafod,
oþðæt semninga	to sele comon
frome fyrdhwate	feowertyne
Geata gongan;	gumdryhten mid
modig on gemonge	meodowongas træd.
ða com in gan	ealdor ðegna,

dædcene mon	dome gewurþad,	
hæle hildedeor,	Hroðgar gretan.	(<i>Beowulf and Judith</i> 1637b-1646) ⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Beowulf in his fury
now settled that score: he saw the monster
in his resting place, war-weary and wrecked,
a lifeless corpse, a casualty
of the battle in Heorot. The body gaped
at the stroke dealt to it after death:
Beowulf cut the corpse's head off. (*Beowulf* 1584b-1590)

⁶⁶ It was a task for four
to hoist Grendel's head on a spear
and bear it under strain to the bright hall.
But soon enough they neared the place,

The arrival of the material trophy marks the conclusion of the ritual. Hrothgar and those who suffered the recurring raids from the inhuman warrior may celebrate before the object of their terror – a burden too heavy for a single warrior to carry alone. Once placed on display in Heorot, the nature of the object is negated when it is developed into a positive form of historicization. The severed head is an agent historicizing Beowulf's feat. Beowulf's glorious victory will forever be associated with the existence of Heorot that was once under siege.

The passages interpreted above also allude to the unique relationship a system of war rituals has with the warrior. While the warrior may act as an agent in the production and maintenance of these rituals, the identity relies at the same time on these rituals to sustain its *raison d'être*. They exist for one another rather than parallel with each other. In other words, the warrior and the war ritual are existentially complementary. Isolating the warrior identity is the most prevalent nature of each and every ritual within the religion of war. Feasting honors the unnatural prowess of the warrior; spiritual weaponry aids the warrior in battle; and the ceremonial beheading of the enemy historicizes the mythical warrior's feat. In every instance, war rituals revolve around the process of segregating the warrior from the natural. Moreover, the existential association with the warrior establishes the defining link to the battlefield. Rarely do these rituals take place on the battlefield, so there is no temporal connection between one and the other. And yet the

fourteen Geats in fine fettle,
 striding across the outlying ground
 in a delighted throng around their leader.
 In he came then, the thanes' commander,
 the arch-warrior, to address Hrothgar:
 his courage proven, his glory secure.

(*Beowulf* 1637b-1646)

ceremonies exist to affect the events on the battlefield. War narratives resolve this temporal asynchrony by operating the ritual through the warrior, so that it may still function on the battlefield.

War rituals span innumerable post-nomadic Scandinavian tribal cultures and continued to persevere following Christianization. Even following the domination of Christian doctrine, Óddinic war rituals found a place in the macrocosmic universe of war far into the Middle Ages. War narratives generated this portal across cultures and religions, providing that interpretation was lenient enough for assimilation. They were not campfire tales for a naïve community. War narratives were regarded as histories of prior successes – perhaps, even guides to secure future victories. Rituals conducted throughout the early Neolithic period were still emulated during the ninth century and revived again in Icelandic sagas during the thirteenth century. If the ritualistic practices were thought meaningless in a social context or ineffective on the battlefield, they would not have survived more than six millennia. Their prolonged practices across cultures in spite of doctrinal divergences offer some testimony to the greater argument that religion must be explained as a network of interregional systemic beliefs, historicized in some medium, deriving from evolved remnants of prior cultural practices.

CHAPTER V

ICONOGRAPHY

A chief problem with interpreting war rituals in medieval literature lies with the narrator's tendency to alter or completely transform the ceremony, leaving the practice wholly foreign in neighboring regions. For example, Scandinavian bog sacrifices in Denmark, though little is known concerning the practice, is argued to be an Óðinnic ritual, but the practice and the purpose of the ritual alters significantly when depicted in Arthurian lore. Weapons, armor, and, in the case of the Tollund peat bog in Jutland, human cadavers were sacrificed when tossed into local bogs to ward off misfortune.⁶⁷ The sacrifices were initiated to thwart drought, poor trade, invading forces, and natural disasters, but there is evidence that the practice was also a common offering to Óðin in the east and, following greater migration to the west, Thor.⁶⁸ In the Vulgate Cycle⁶⁹ and

⁶⁷ Taking into consideration the plethora of uses rituals served in Scandinavian cultures, it would be detrimental to the study to fixate on any one misfortune.

⁶⁸ The purpose of each bog sacrifice, with the exception of those honoring the gods, can generally be distinguished by the nature of the sacrifice:

The large offering-places are not entirely given up to battle sacrifices, and that at Thorsbjerg included gold rings, many small personal possessions, pottery, wooden objects and textiles. However, weapons make up a large part of the Danish finds, including swords, spears, coats of mail, shields, and bows-and-arrows; these are found together with horse trappings, wagons, tools, farming implements, vessels, cloths and jewelery, and a number of boats. (Davidson 70)

Agrarian sacrifices show an inclination to deviate from that of honoring the gods to more impending matters, such as drought, famine, or other natural disasters. War gear, on the other hand, may be a sacrifice to the contemporarily worshipped war god or for future successes in battle, or even both. Current archeological evidence, however, has yet to show any definitive links between the sacrifice and the purpose of the sacrifice.

Malory's later Arthurian works, Excalibur inherits a mythical or divine nature as a bog sacrifice. The ritual is inverted. Rather than Arthur sacrificing a sword to thwart misfortune, misfortune is thwarted by retrieving the sword from the bog – as though the practice enhanced the sword's ability. Both rituals serve the same purpose, despite the narrators' alterations, and yet they are entirely foreign to each other. The former remains a pagan ritual while the latter is read as Christian mysticism. Battle iconography, on the other hand, is far more stable than rituals in war narratives during the Middle Ages.

Scandinavian iconography remained for the most part unchanged during the process of assimilation into English culture and later Christianization. Narrators were more inclined to de-emphasize certain aspects of an iconographic symbol rather than alter its form. The cross is a superlative example, as it changed from a symbol of torture to a symbol of Christian salvation following crucifixion. This phenomenon can be explained by examining the unique process in which iconography is consciously constructed then reproduced in corporeal form or transcribed. The production process strongly echoes Hegel's theory of identifying the self through the conscious merging of the essence and the entity:

For since the essence of the individual form—universal life—and the self-existent entity *per se* are simple substance, the essence, by putting the other within itself, cancels its own simplicity of its essence, i.e. it sunders that simplicity; and this disruption of fluent undifferentiated continuity is just the setting up, the affirmation, of individuality... *The simple substance of life, therefore, is the diremption of itself into shapes and forms, and at the same time the dissolution of these substantial*

⁶⁹ The Vulgate Cycle is a collection of French Arthurian tales from the early thirteenth century believed to be primary sources for Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

differences; and the resolution of this diremption is just as much a process of diremption, of articulating. (Emphasis mine, *Phenomenology* 223)

Like universal life, the melding of the essence or the idealized form constructed from a collection of beliefs regarding the iconography and the corporeal object representative of the spiritual constructs a seemingly simplistic, though truly complex, iconographic object. Essence is ambiguous and should be noted to be synonymous with conceptual projection. It is not the soul of the object. Conceptual projection suggests a collection of ideas formulated to define an object differentiated from the consciousness of an individual whereas soul is a metaphysical or abstract object mirroring the entity. One is projective while the other is reflective. That is not to say that the corporeal form of the iconography does not reflect human biology or function. The cult of the head clearly demonstrates that iconography may inherit human form.⁷⁰ Iconography is, instead, first constructed on a conceptual basis prior to its reproduction in corporeal form.

Animal iconography and sacred relics best illustrate the process by which iconographic objects are produced and historicized. Objects of both categories originate with natural phenomenon. The essence of animal iconography derives from carefully constructed mythological frameworks associating certain aspects of animals with either

⁷⁰ Anne Ross examines one of the earliest iconographic forms in proto-Scandinavian cultures:

Since man's earliest religious awareness, the human head has been a focus of superstitious interest, and many peoples have, at a certain stage of their development, observed special rites in connection with the head. These include severing the head from the body after death and decorating it with whatever material was available. For example, the discovery of Mesolithic skull groups in a cave at Ofnet, Bavaria, provides clear evidence for the veneration of the human head. The skulls were arranged in two groups of twenty-seven and six, with ochre and shell-ornamented skull-caps. The heads had apparently been severed from the bodies after death. (62)

human function or, like sacred relics, greater-than-human configurations of reality. They may enhance the warrior's prowess or skill, aid in prophesizing the outcome of battle, or even foretell future misfortunes. Since iconography represent or reflect natural phenomena associated with physical entities, they inherit natural forms. The merging of the essence and the corporeal form thus produces an object capable of interacting with the warrior. Unlike magical items, however, the process of invoking the supernatural from iconography does not always include a ceremony.

The supernatural is housed in the corporeal form to innately provide supernatural power. A magical item, such as Shamanic paraphernalia,⁷¹ must be invoked by calling the animal spirits to the object. So there is a distinct difference between the two categories, despite the tendency to brand certain iconography magical. Furthermore, an iconographic object is not limited to the form of a material icon.⁷² The object may be purely textual. As such, the object would not have a true corporeal form. Lacking a corporeal form does not negate the formalization of the essence of the iconography. Just as the warrior identity becomes a historical object in narratives, iconography becomes an object, regardless of whether or not a material form exists, through a narrative medium.

Historicizing the essence of an iconographic object while lacking a corporeal form is a rare example of, what I will term, the stand-alone complex (or fallacferogenesis). The

⁷¹ Shamans used a number of different "magical" tools in order to successfully perform rituals that will either benefit the tribe or curse an enemy. The staff, one of many Shamanic tools, is dressed in the richest materials in the region, such as bones of mythical birds, precious stones, and / or rare metals (Høst). There is not an independent identity for the staff, as it relies entirely on the Shaman's existence. In other words, a warrior could not carry the staff for the purpose of aiding him in battle. The staff is instead a tool to draw in the power of animal spirits or nature in order to perform rituals (Høst).

⁷² A material icon is here referred to as an object with a corporeal form, like a tablet, statue, or figurine – an object one is capable of comprehending through the somatic senses.

stand-alone complex is a process through which an object of history, reflecting the nature and form of an object that never existed beyond a conceptual form, is constructed in a narrative medium⁷³ and only formalized following a false reproduction. The process echoes the general nature of euhemerism and exomologesis, but differs by the fact that the historical object inevitably leads to the production of iconography. Of course, there is no origin for the new object. Even though the iconography is reproduced into a corporeal form, there was no true object prior to its appearance in the narrative medium. The replicated object is actually the original object masked by the myth that it has some historical precedence. This phenomenon becomes more problematic when the replicant is accepted to be supernatural, inheriting a mystical quality equal to that of the original that never existed in the first place. After all, the evidence supporting the iconographic object's supernatural power relies on a historical account of its predecessor's success.

Thor's hammer, Mjöllnir, became iconographic for western Scandinavian cultures as a result of fabricated historical origins, an example of the stand-alone complex. As a primary god with the duties of protecting common yeoman, one of the likeliest objects symbolizing Thor and his strength would be something significant in an agrarian culture. Mjöllnir, a powerful hammer wielded to destroy frost- and mountain-giants, was thus used:

Sá hann þá Þór í ámóði; fór han ákafliga ok reiddi hamarinn ok kastaði um langa leið at Hrungni. Hrungrnir foerir upp heinina báðum höndum ok kastar í mót; moetir hon hamrinum á flugi, ok brotnar sundr heinin, fellr annarr hlutr á jörð, ok eru þar af orðin

⁷³ Narrative mediums are here regarded to be any form of communication. They can be oral tales, inscriptions on tools or weapons, prose, or poetry.

öll heinberg; annarr hlutr brast í höfði Þór, svá at hann fell fram á jörð; en hamarrinn Mjöllnir kom í mitt höfuð Hrungni ok lamði hausinn í smá mola, ok fell han fram yfir Þór, svá at fótr hans lá of háls Þór. (DuBois 162)⁷⁴

Mjöllnir appears often in battles with various giants like Hrungr in order to either protect yeomen or aid Thor in defending his reputation. To hold Mjöllnir, Thor must wear a pair of iron gloves, perhaps, a reflection of the transition to iron tools among Scandinavian tribes during the late sixth century B.C. Naturally, accounts of Mjöllnir are purely fabricated historical accounts of a common tool. Although the hammer may be used as a weapon of war, traditionally the tool was limited to the construction of housing structures or boats.⁷⁵ Construction may be understood to be synonymous with protection, development, and prestige. The purpose of building a house or boat, for example, is to protect the occupants from the elements of nature while the act itself suggests some civilized development within a society. The number of structures built reflects one's wealth and power, which in turn determines his or her influence in the community. The hammer thus becomes a crucial element in an agrarian society. On the other hand, an object's importance in a society does not rationalize its later sacred inheritance. Only when the ordinary tool is associated with Thor does the supernatural appear in narratives.

⁷⁴ Hrungr saw Thor in his rage; he strode out furiously and swung the hammer, throwing it from afar at Hrungr. Hrungr lifted his whetstone up with both hands and threw it in return, hitting the hammer in the air and broke into pieces: one part fell to earth and from that came all flint; the other hit Thor's head, so that he fell to the earth; but the hammer Mjöllnir hit Hrungr in the middle of the head and smashed his brain housing into pieces, and he fell over on top of Thor so that his feet lay on Thor's neck. (DuBois 162)

⁷⁵ Hammers were regular bog sacrifices in Scandinavian cultures, and deposited with sharpened iron pivots and nails.

Mjöllnir exists strictly in narrative form, originating from a theological framework redefining the common hammer. Human consciousness constructed a system of beliefs defining a supernatural weapon for Thor. Mjöllnir became something more than an internal figment of one's imagination when it was recorded in eddaic poetry and Scandinavian sagas, materializing the essence of Thor's hammer. The weapon was historicized. Others could read or hear what Mjöllnir looked like, how it aided Thor and civilization, and what it symbolized. As far as the audience was concerned, Mjöllnir existed at one point in history or presently with Thor in Asgard.

With a general knowledge of Mjöllnir, worshippers of Thor began constructing corporeal iconographic objects. Pendants, rings, amulets, and stone structures were built in what was believed to be Mjöllnir's image to encapsulate the same mythical nature. The iconography inevitably became representative of the agrarian god Thor and later associated with the Christian cross during Christianization in the late eleventh century. More importantly, the iconography has no predecessor. Worshippers replicated an imaginative form to encapsulate a theological framework of beliefs. These corporeal forms stand alone in their creation, despite the notion that they are reproductions or variations of some original form. Although most iconography has some original form and stable definition, the stand-alone complex clearly occurs. Thor's hammer is one of the rare instances where battle iconography was fabricated from an artificial historical object. Mjöllnir also introduces the first of two primary categories of battle iconography that appear in war narratives: weaponry and animals.

Weapon iconography is perhaps the most narrow and limited category of the two. Those in the appearance of divine weaponry spans across every polytheistic and monotheistic religion in northwestern Europe, but they are rarely disassociated with a primary deity. Without the ability to serve an individual purpose – one that may aid the warrior without the invocation of a primary deity, there can only be a limited number of variations. Besides Mjöllnir in the western Scandinavian tradition, there was Óthin's spear, Gungnir, in the east. Little physical evidence has surfaced regarding Gungnir, and even those remain, for the most part, ambiguous in form and origin. Gungnir, Andy Orchard suggests, may be a derivative from the lore of Óthin's sacrifice:

In Snorri's *Yngling Saga* both Odin and the god Njörd mark themselves with a spear to dedicate themselves to Odin, and similar dedications are widely witnessed in the sources. Odin's practice of dedicating himself to himself is echoed in the account of his acquisition of the runes, as described in the eddic poem *Hávamál*, while the association of Odin and the spear seems genuinely old. (157)

Weapon iconography reproduced in the image of Gungnir was normally mere decorative spears and bog sacrifices dating back to the fourth century with runic dedications to Óthin (Orchard 157). Like Mjöllnir, Gungnir seems to have served more as a representative object than a medium to invoke the primary god's power. On the other hand, present evidence sorely lacks the capacity to explain how natives specifically regarded and even interacted with these spiritual objects. It is quite possible that sacrificing a reproduction of Gungnir enchanted all spears used in warfare or granted all warriors superior strength

and intelligence. The theory does have some precedent in later uses of battle iconography in the Christian tradition.

The earliest form of Christian battle iconography to appear in war narratives of northwestern Europe is the cross. Since the moment the symbol of torture was assimilated into Christian theology as iconography representative of persecution, salvation, and, ultimately, Jesus Christ, various reproductions in both corporeal and narrative forms arose. As weapon iconography, the cross has appeared in war narratives as a sword, shield, and spear. Thangbrand, a militant missionary sent from Norway to Christianize Iceland during the end of the tenth century, wielded the cross in opposition to a berserk during a demonstration to prove the effectiveness of Christian mysticism:

The berserk came charging through the door with his weapons. He advanced into the room and walked at once through the fire which the heathens had blessed and came up to the fire which Thangbrand had blessed, but did not dare to walk through it and said that he was burning all over. He swung his sword towards the benches, but on the upswing it struck fast in the crossbeam. Thangbrand struck him on the arm with his crucifix and a great miracle happened: the sword fell from the berserk's hand. (*Njal* 179)

Thangbrand's cross, nothing more than a pendent or amulet, was capable of successfully defending the yeomen from a raging berserk. The miniscule size of the cross is important here to demonstrate the extraordinary power it has as a result of its association with Christ. In the "Dispute Between Mary and the Cross", the cross, imbued with the power of Christ, is referred to as a shield to protect Mary in the violent world:

Ladi to make þe deuel dredi,
 God schop me a scheld; schame to schilde,
 Til lomb of loue dyede;
 And on me ȝeld þe gost wiþ vois;
 I was chose a Relik chois,
 Þe signe of Ihesu cistes crois,
 Þer dar no deuel a-byde: (258-264)⁷⁶

Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of the people blessed the cross in such a manner that the object may take various forms in order to continue protecting humanity beyond the initial crucifixion.

Spear iconography, on the other hand, lacks the same direct association with Christianity as the sword and the shield. The female narrator from *The Wanderer*⁷⁷ explains:

Eorlas fornoman asca þry
 þe wæpen wæl gifru – wyrd seo mære – ond þas stanh leoðu stor
 mas cnyssað. Hrið hreosende hrusan bindeð – wintres woma
 – þon won cymeð, nipeð niht scua, norþan onsendeð hreo
 hægle fare hæleþum on andan. (Exeter 1b-5a)⁷⁸

Ash-spears may be interpreted in either the Ódinnic or the Christian tradition. After all, both Yggdrasil and the Christian cross are claimed to have been or originated from an ash

⁷⁶ “Dispute Between Mary and the Cross.” *Legends of the Holy Rood: Symbols of the Passion and Cross-Poems*. Ed. Richard Morris. London: N. Trübner & Co., 1871. 131-149.

⁷⁷ Exeter, Exeter Cathedral Library, MS Codex Exoniensis, f. 78a.

⁷⁸ “The ash-spears’ might has borne the earls away—weapons greedy for slaughter, Fate the mighty; and storms beat on the stone walls, snow, the herald of winter, falling thick binds the earth when darkness comes and the night-shadow falls, sends harsh hailstones from the north in hatred of men” (*Wanderer* 101-102).

tree. And the spears' humanistic desire for slaughter should not mechanically eliminate the kenning's association with Christian iconography. Sivert Hagen argues that Yggdrasil is in fact a variation of the ash-tree from Christian lore:

So also the Norse ash-tree *Yggdrasill* is a symbol of the world. The myth is a fine example of that poetic process through which foreign and strange elements have been almost perfectly assimilated and recreated. The poets have made it so much their own that for centuries men have believed it to be an independent and original creation of the Germanic or Norse imagination. (8)⁷⁹

If Yggdrasil is, as Hagen claims, merely a replica of the Christian ash-tree, then the ash-spears are wholly Christian battle iconography associated with the holy cross. However, Hagen's argument relies entirely on two critical suppositions that may not corroborate the theory: that the etymology of *Yggdrasill* suggests that the kenning had not existed prior to the Viking Age and that there were tales similar to that of *Be Holy Rode* prior to the thirteenth century depicting a Christian world tree.

Dating the origins of *Yggdrasill* solely by its etymology poses serious problems Hagen fails to acknowledge: the cultural significance of the world tree in deifying Óthin and the lack of runic evidence to support the theory. First of all, Yggdrasil acts as a medium in the process of deifying Óthin. By sacrificing his body to himself on Yggdrasil, Óthin gains the wisdom of the runes:

⁷⁹ Hagen, Sivert N. "The Origin and Meaning of the Name Yggdrasill." *Modern Philology* 1.1 (1903): 57-69.

I ween that I hung on the windy tree
 all of nights nine,
 wounded by spear, bespoken to Óthin
 bespoken myself to myself,
 upon that tree of which none telleth
 from what roots it doth rise. (*Hávamál* 139)⁸⁰

The process elevates the human entity to the realm of the spiritual through the mysterious world tree. Óthin thus becomes a socially acceptable primary god in the Scandinavian tradition. Evidence of this deification appears repeatedly in pre-Christian runic verse and various pre-Christian iconographies.⁸¹ If images of the deified Óthin and Yggdrasil predate Christianity, obviously the idea of the world tree cannot be borrowed from Christian lore. It is more likely that Christianity assimilated Yggdrasil into narratives of the Fall just as missionaries attempted to Christianize Mjöllnir by declaring the iconographic objects mere variations of the cross.

The world tree, being the birthplace of the human race, would be a rather lucrative mythical element to integrate into Edenic lore. According to the *Poetic Edda*, Ask and Embla were fetched from the ash-tree Yggdrasil (*Völuspá* 9). However, the most significant feature of Yggdrasil is its size. Ymir grew the world tree that reaches the heavens for the purpose of creating all life on earth, a perfect Eden for the race of giants. Nothing is more compatible to the Christian tradition than an element of nature that can

⁸⁰ *Hávamál. The Poetic Edda*. Trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin: U of Texas P, 1928. 17-47.

⁸¹ The "Tollund Man" of Jutland, acknowledged as being an Óðinnic sacrifice symbolizing Óthin's own hanging on Yggdrasil, has been carbon dated to approximately 400 B.C. (Highfield). Common burial practices from the early Bronze Age also show that those of wealthier dispositions were buried in hollowed oak trees, suggesting a possible return to one's origins (Davidson 44). Humans were thought to have been created from the trunk of Yggdrasil, and the fact that oak trees were used establishes an argument that Yggdrasil's classification as an ash-tree was a Christian concoction.

express the grandeur of God. By the thirteenth century, the world tree began appearing in tales of the rood. Of course, the world tree's role in the origins of the human race were replaced by a greater depiction of the object's magnificence:

He bi-heold eft sone in atte 3ate; þat treo eft sone he seih,
 Swiþe feir hed and i-woxen vp to heuene an heih;
 A-nowarde he sayh a 3ong smal child; in smale cloþes i-wounde;
 Þe Roote of þe treo him þhou3te tilde a-doun to helle grounde; (*Hou* 77-80)

Not only does the world tree reach Heaven, the top-most branches carry a small child foreshadowing Jesus' coming. And the roots of this enormous tree reach into the depths of Hell where Seth sees his brother Abel. The tree here serves a much different purpose than Yggdrasil. Rather than an originary object from which the earth sprouted, the world tree in the Christian tradition is a symbolic link between the supernatural and the natural.

Interestingly enough, it is the world tree that made the Fall possible that ties Heaven, Hell, and earth together in one fantastical story written for the purpose of exemplifying what humanity will never be capable of experiencing again. There is presently no known source for this transformation of the Christian ash-tree other than fragmentary Scandinavian references to the world tree. On the other hand, the Óddinic world tree may have inherited aspects of the ash during the era of Christianization to accommodate the growing Catholic empire. The point being that there will likely never be a definitive conclusion to the classification of ash weaponry. Therefore, it is safe to say that references to weaponry carved out of the ash may either be representative of the Óddinic

or the Christian tradition. One can conclude that in either case the ash-tree, an overt association to iconography representing a primary god, is converted into battle iconography.

Beowulf continues the tradition of including weapon iconography with the same sword Beowulf wields to sacrifice Grendel's mother. Hrothgar clarifies the sword's Ódinnic origins with allusions to the significance of runic inscriptions in Scandinavian cultures:

Swa wæs on ðæm scennum	sciran goldes	
Purh ond gesæd	hwam þæt sweord geworht,	
Irena cyst,	ærest wære,	
Wreoþenhilt ond wrymfah.		(<i>Beowulf and Judith</i> 1694-1698a) ⁸²

Even with the inscription edited from the manuscript during the Christianization of the narrative, the sword had already been defined as a historically Ódinnic object:

Geseah ða on searwum	sigeeadig bil,	
Eald sweord eotenisc,	ecgum þyhtig,	
Wigena weorðmynd;	þæt wæs wæpna cyst,	
buton hit wæs mare	ðonne ænig mon oðer	
to beadulace	ætberan meahte,	
god ond geatolic,	giganta geweorc.	(<i>Beowulf and Judith</i> 1557-1562) ⁸³

⁸² In pure gold inlay on the sword-guards there were rune-markings correctly incised, stating and recording for whom the sword had been first made and ornamented with its scrollworked hilt. (*Beowulf* 1694-1698a)

The passage clearly associates the weapon with the race of giants predating humanity. Taking into consideration Scandinavian lore, the sword may either belong to the Æsir or the dwarves. Dwarves, according to Scandinavian tradition, were not normally known for their honorably prowess, so a weapon that is revered in a war narrative is unlikely to have originated with the race of Dwarves.⁸⁴ The inscription was likely a dedication to a god of the Æsir, and, following tradition, a dedication specifically to a primary god – Óðin or Thor. Once the sword served its purpose in aiding Beowulf exact his revenge on Grendel, the blade melts (*Beowulf* 1605b-1607a). This is another important passage to differentiate Óðinnic and Christian battle iconography.

Christian battle iconography is not normally destroyed in European war narratives in the Middle Ages, as these objects are forever imbued with Christ's blessing. They either outlive the warrior as a sacred relic or undergo some form of burial ritual to be resurrected again at a later date, as is with the case of the Spear of Longinus in *Pe Holy Rode* and *Balyn and Balan* in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (14-19). In this respect, Christian iconography has a unique association with Christ. They cannot be utterly destroyed, because Christ is omnipotent. The Æsir are powerful, but polytheistic religions rarely construct omnipotent gods. Ymir, the progenitor of the race of giants, was slaughtered, which is believed in Scandinavian cultures to have created the world. The primary god's

⁸³ Then he saw a blade that boded well,
a sword in her armory, an ancient heirloom
from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon,
on that any warrior would envy,
but so huge and heavy of itself
only Beowulf could wield it in a battle. (*Beowulf* 1557-1562)

⁸⁴ Snorri Sturluson explains in the *Völuspá*, "The dwarfs had first acquired form and life in the flesh of Ymir and were at that time maggots, but through a decision of the Æsir they acquired consciousness and wit and had the appearance of men, although they live in the ground and in rocks" (Orchard 93).

mortality is essential to the tale of origins, and the death of Óthin and Thor in the Ragnarök will ultimately result in the end of the world. An iconographic object narrowly associated with a vulnerable god must also inherit the same traits. Beowulf's sword then may safely be concluded as wholly Scandinavian rather than Christian.

Animal iconography, the second category of battle iconography depicted in war narratives, derives from a primary or secondary god, but the object does not necessarily represent the god. The object instead becomes a symbolic form of the mysticism an animal is believed to have inherited from a god. Hegel explains:

The human form strips off the animal character with which it was mixed up. The animal form is for the god merely an accidental vestment; the animal appears alongside its true form, and has no longer a value on its own account, but has sunk into being a significant sign of something else, has become a mere symbol.
(*Phenomenology* 714)

Considering the significance of sacrificing animals to regional gods for good hunting or raiding in the Scandinavian tradition, naturally the sacrifices would inherit some mystical aspect. This mysticism must reflect human function to be successfully compatible with the god, who is fashioned in the image of Man. After all, the animal is only mystical as a result of its association with a god during the sacrificial act. Gradual acceptance of the sacred animal at a regional scale eventually diminishes the conceptual boundaries segregating the god from the animal. The god inherits aspects of the animal and the animal inherits aspects of the god. They become one in a process of assimilation, and yet they are always differentiated in form. Cult worshipers recognize the animal as a

reflection of its physical form, so the animal and the god cannot become a single entity. This imperfection permits later deconstruction into iconographic forms. The animal may once again become an individualized entity, but, as Hegel notes, it is merely a shell – one that encapsulates a framework of beliefs concerning characteristics of a chimeric animal-god.

The eagle underwent a process of assimilation with the Germanic god Wodan and later deconstruction in the form of battle iconography. Although scholars have suggested that eagle iconography originates with the Greco-Roman polytheistic tradition, the process was not disturbed in the regional Wodannic cults:⁸⁵

We know that the eagle was associated with Wodan, god of the dead, to whom sacrifices were made on the battlefield, and it seems a very fitting symbol. He was the god who traveled far over land and sea; he inherited some of the prestige of the emperor with whom the eagle was associated, in his position as leader of the gods and divine ancestor of kings; while the eagle and the raven were beasts of prey who feasted on the slain. (Davidson 96)

Germanic hunting tribes assimilated the eagle, a perceived sacrificial medium, into the Wodannic cult. Warriors who fell on the battlefield were considered to be sacrifices to the primary god, and those who fed off the corpses were clearly accepted as religious mediums. Eagles were so significant in the war cult that they inevitably merged with the Germanic primary god. They were later consciously fashioned into iconography inheriting both aspects of Wodan and the mystical nature of the medium, so that warriors

⁸⁵ “The eagle has been regarded as the king of the birds by many peoples, and as a natural companion for a sky god it was used as the symbol for the classical Jupiter” (Ross 275).

may benefit from their powers. Eagle iconography aided the warrior in battle by instilling a superior sense of leadership, fearlessness, and abnormal strength while confusing or meddling the psychology of the enemy – all of which are traits of Wodan (Davidson 109). Interestingly, Wodan’s traits are identical to the mythological nature of the berserk. It is not surprising then to find berserks, like King Arthur, wearing eagle iconography.⁸⁶ However, the iconographic object is not necessarily dependent on the warrior.

Eagle iconography in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *The History of the Kings of Britain* serves as both a symbol of prophecy and a beacon. The first instance of the eagle in the war narrative depicts them as prophetic creatures: “The eagles used to flock together each year and foretell any prodigious event which was about to occur in the kingdom: this by a shrill-pitched scream which they emitted in concert” (Geoffrey 219). Congregating eagles foretold the imminence of battle. The scene is reminiscent of Óðinnic lore:

In his byrnie stands	who was born at night,	
king Sigmund’s son,	now the sun is risen!	
His eyes flash fire,	atheling-wise;	
he will feast the wolves:	fain let us be!	(<i>Helgakviða</i> 6) ⁸⁷

Lee Hollander explains, “Ravens, wolves, and eagles rejoice at the birth of a hero who will feed them on the carcasses of his slain foes—a standing conceit in Old Germanic poetry” (*Edda* 213). Wolves here are translated not only as the species but also in

⁸⁶ “When the greater part of the day had passed in this way, Arthur went berserk, for he realized that things were still going well for the enemy and that victory for his own side was not yet in sight” (Geoffrey 217).

⁸⁷ *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I. The Poetic Edda*. Trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin: U of Texas P, 1928. 211-222.

reference to all scavengers common to the battlefield. Later in the *History*, the eagle appears again as a beacon:

[Lucius] commanded that a golden eagle, which he had brought with him as a standard, should be set up firmly in the centre. He gave orders that anyone whom the tide of battle had cut off from the others should do his utmost to force his way back to this eagle. (251)

For warriors, the golden eagle acts as a symbol of leadership in lieu of the general. They will follow where the eagle is mounted, as though a sky god directing the flanks. Of course, the two instances presented are clearly differentiated by the manner they are invoked.

The latter example depicts iconography, a golden eagle, reproduced in animal form – a literal shell, whereas the former is projecting a framework of beliefs regarding the supernatural eagle as a result of its association with a god. The flock of eagles is no longer just a depiction of a natural behavioral pattern among a group of birds. They have become an image disassociated with the natural eagle. The essence of eagle iconography, the framework of beliefs aligning them with the unnatural, is then projected onto the imagery. One may even call this process a form of iconographic reproduction. Notions of eagle iconography spawned the creation of an image imbued with the same mysticism, thus becoming battle iconography. A similar process occurs with the raven in *Beowulf*.

Raven iconography, compared to the eagle, seldom appears in war narratives, despite the category's existential relationship with the battlefield. When the raven does surface as

a symbol, it is more commonly regarded as an omen.⁸⁸ The raven, however, was thought to have some prophetic aspects as well as the ability to instill the warrior with superior intelligence:

The role of the raven in the entire Celtic tradition at all stages, as a bird of omen, possessing outstanding intelligence, and as a creature particularly concerned with the battle-field is such as to cause it to be associated with any deity accredited with exceptional knowledge, skill and martial abilities. (Ross 251)

In the Celtic tradition, the raven was likely merged with the god Lugos. Proto-Christian archeological finds in northern Britain show a close relationship between the raven and Lugos, and the mysticism of the iconography reflects much of the god.⁸⁹ More importantly, the raven foreshadowed battle. The animal fed on the corpses of those who fell in battle, later merged with a regional war god, and then invoked as a creature foretelling mass slaughter. Unlike the eagle, raven iconography inherited a negative character. While the essence of eagle iconography is leadership and victory, the essence of raven iconography is death and loss. Naturally, the raven would be a more suitable object to foreshadow raiding in *Beowulf*:

reced hliuade

geap ond goldfah; gæst inne swæf

⁸⁸ “The bird is found in later Celtic folk tales and local legends, where it figures as a bird of evil omen and as a form taken on by witches and anti-Christian powers” (Ross 243).

⁸⁹ “The god [Lugos] may have been associated with ravens in this area, these birds being fitting symbols for an all-wise, all-purpose deity, for belief in the wisdom and prophetic power of the raven is widespread” (Ross 250).

oþþæt hrefn blaca heofones wynne
 bliðheort bodode. ða com beorht scacan
 scaþan onetton, (*Beowulf and Judith* 1799b-1803)⁹⁰

Following the Scandinavian tradition, Beowulf intends to continue raiding now that he has won prestige at Heorot. The black raven foreshadows imminent warfare, and the battle will not be as honorable as one that is foreshadowed by an eagle. Beowulf should be classified here as a raider rather than a Christianized warrior battling to preserve the Lord's will. This passage further supports the notion by altering the purpose of his departure from Heorot. That is not to suggest Beowulf never intends to return home, but that the editor's efforts to depict Beowulf as a valiant Christian warrior contradicts the fact that he will continue raiding before voyaging to his native kingdom. After all, the ideal warrior in the Scandinavian narrative tradition would never pass up an opportunity to raid regional tribes before returning home if the expedition could expand his wealth and reputation.

Returning to more conventional forms of animal iconography, the boar surfaces in *Beowulf* to continue the traditional image of prosperity. Like the eagle and the raven, the boar inherited the mysticism of its god(s). In the Scandinavian tradition, the boar was associated with the Vanir (Davidson 97). The Vanir were more notably recognized for their powers as fertility gods. Fertility denotes procreation, growth, expansion, abundance,

90 The hall towered,
 gold-shingled and gabled, and the guest slept in it
 until the black raven with raucous glee
 announced heaven's joy, and a hurry of brightness
 overran the shadows. (*Beowulf* 1799b-1803a)

and prosperity. Boar iconography reflected all of these aspects in various forms. A family, for example, hoping to expand during the fall or the spring will carve and sanctify a statue of a boar. At times the boar acts as a companion animal on a piece imaging Frey or Freyja. With either god(dess), the purpose of the iconographic object's creation is to aid in procreation. Warriors, however, will have the boar iconography mounted on their armor in order to be granted greater rewards following raids and battles. Beowulf follows the latter tradition:

	Eoforlic scionon	
ofer hleorberan	gehroden golde,	
fah ond fyrheard;	ferwearde heold	
gufmod grimmon.		(<i>Beowulf and Judith</i> 303b-306a) ⁹¹

Beowulf arrives at Heorot not only to win honor but also to receive a significant amount of wealth, as the gold boar iconography overtly suggests. The war gear may be mounted with any animal to show the warrior's intentions, but Beowulf chose the boar that symbolizes prosperity. Like his raiding voyages up north, Beowulf will battle and win such a sum that he will be able to continue the Danish tradition of distributing exorbitant amounts of wealth. A large band of men will need enough treasure to please even the greediest of warriors – not to mention the large portion Hygelac is bound to confiscate, so

⁹¹ Boar-shapes flashed
above their cheek-guards, the brightly forged
work of goldsmiths, watching over
those stern-faced men. (*Beowulf* 303b-306a)

that Beowulf can maintain his reputation.⁹² Beowulf's war gear effectively compliments the purpose of the voyage.

The eagle, raven, and boar became significant icons to the tribes of northwestern Europe following their secession from their respective gods. In the process, they also inherited aspects of the gods. They never become the god nor do they act as a direct representative of the god. Followers of the Scandinavian, Germanic, or Celtic cults recognized the iconographic forms as representative of the physical animal. Only the essence of the iconography altered, becoming a chimeric animal-god with characteristics from both origins. Weapon iconography, however, lacks a secondary identity in the (re)production of the historicized object. Narrators constructed a fantastical object out of the image of a common tool in order to facilitate some form representative of the primary god – the stand-alone complex. Once the essence of the iconography becomes a corporeal object, the form is stabilized in regional theology. Thor's hammer and eagle iconography remained the same, if not for a few narrative additions to compliment cross-cultural divergences. A distinct corporeal and / or narrative form contributed to their stabilization. The mediums became historical references regardless of whether original iconographic forms existed, defining both the form and the essence of the reproductions.

⁹² Hrothgar, being a generous man, advises Beowulf to continue the tradition to maintain his reputation:

Beowulf, my friend,
 your fame has gone far and wide,
 you are known everywhere. In all things you are even-tempered,
 prudent and resolute. So I stand firm by the promise of friendship
 we exchange before. Forever you will be
 your people's mainstay and your own warriors'
 helping hand. (*Beowulf* 1703b-1709a)

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

Revising the long-standing tradition of reading for Christianity while examining medieval narratives will not be an immediate or simple process. Prior to distancing academia from Christian absolutism, canonical works from the late antiquity to the Middle Ages must first be methodically deconstructed in order to expose the true origins of various elements in the texts presently mislabeled Christian. This thesis focused only on a small category, war narratives, in the medieval literary canon to demonstrate the method of distinguishing and segregating the Christian mask or rather aspects that modified pre-Christian elements in literature, such as war rituals and battle iconography, to coincide with Christian theology during the Christianization of northwestern Europe in the fifth through the ninth centuries.

War narratives are merely stepping-stones leading to the broader genre of medieval literature. Their unique depiction of organized cultural practices regarding a natural phenomenon, war, provides a rich foundation of pre- and proto-Christian beliefs. In northwestern Europe, these beliefs were Scandinavian and / or Celtic in origin. They derive from polytheistic tribes spanning from Iceland to Finland, Norway to Germany. As this thesis examined, war rituals and battle iconography, pre-dating literature, survived both time and Christianization by adapting to theological changes in the region. After revisiting these products of Christianization for centuries, academia must delve deeper in

the texts, utilize unconventional sources and exercise unorthodox research methods in order to better develop the study of theology in medieval literature. Only then may pedagogical practices for medieval literary courses begin to step away from the conciliatory practice of reading for Christian hegemony.

Organizing a new medieval literary course is not necessary to resolve the fallacy of reading narratives from the late antiquity to the Middle Ages in a manner that sanctions Christianity. Once medieval literary scholarship progresses beyond reifying Christian absolutism by limiting textual interpretations to the tone the Christian author has developed for assimilated non-Christian customs and objects, professors can gradually integrate critical questions concerning the presence of pre-Christian elements in the works into their lectures. Lesson plans may include additional or extended segments on close readings while focusing on the significance of the customs and the objects that appear in medieval narratives. Critical discussions may include identifying the origins of any particular custom or object, its purpose in the narrative, and possible reasons for its inclusion. Apathy is not an excuse for glossing over what could possibly be essential aspects of a medieval work that can question the author's biographical background or better identify the intended audience.

Lecturers should not hesitate to introduce, as I have done, historical and archeological sources in order to provide additional evidence and to broaden the scope of the study in the classroom. With an increasing number of hybridized courses in American colleges, drawing on sources from a wide range of professional studies should not be considered unusual. Literary scholarship, after all, has always been a comprehensive subject in

academia. Incorporating corroborating evidence or theories from varying fields of study, such as philosophy, to support findings in the literature should be encouraged.

Universities today have the technology to provide the electronic materials needed to aid students in their search across disciplines. The primary concern for professors will naturally be no different than in the past, and that is having students stray too far from the topic of the literary study. However, with proper guidance this problem can be avoided. In the end, the plethora of unexplored sources for literary scholarship will enrich medieval courses by contributing to new theories and broader studies.

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