Beowulf, the Hero

An Analysis of the Anglo-Saxon Heroic Ideal

(Scholler 3 Essay by Boglarka Gulyas)

Introduction

According to the dictionary definition, a hero is “a mythological or legendary figure endowed with great strength, courage or ability, favoured by the gods, and often believed to be of divine or partly divine descent”, that is to say, someone who is appreciated and respected by others for his exemplary conduct. But since each culture has a unique system of values, which define what is right and what is wrong, what patterns of behaviour are appropriate and what are not, it is obvious that ideal personality and behaviour can mean different things for different groups of people. Hence the heroic ideal – although it has certain traits in common – can also be slightly different for every culture. I believe that social system and religion are the main factors that influence a community’s system of values, and through this its concept of heroism. Thus these two are going to be the focus of this essay.

To become acquainted with the ideology of a certain culture it is extremely useful to examine its literature. Written materials can tell much about how the people who composed them conceived of the world: what they regarded as good or important and what they rejected for being evil, guilty or inferior. In this essay I attempt to explore the Anglo Saxon system of values through the example of the epic poem Beowulf in order to find out more about the heroic ideal of these people.

The Poem

The poem Beowulf is generally considered to be one of the earliest and most important works of Anglo Saxon literature. It was written in Old English, and is composed of more than 3000 four-stress, alliterative lines. It survives in a single manuscript, the composition of which took place sometime between the 8th and the 11th century by an unknown English poet, although the story that formed the basis of the work had probably been in circulation in the form of oral narrative earlier. The main action takes place in the late 5th–late 6th century Scandinavia, more precisely in Geatland and Danland, in today’s South Sweden and Denmark. Some of the characters and events that appear in the work are based on real historical facts, while other elements are fictional. It is interesting that while the Beowulf story has its roots in Germanic pagan legends it was recorded
by a Christian poet who tried in vain to load it with Christian ideology, thereby creating a religious tension that pervades the whole work. Concerning its style, length and subject matter, Beowulf should most certainly be classified as epic, however if we consider its tone it actually resembles more an elegiac verse. Nevertheless, the fact that its main character is a hero fighting against evil and that its main concerns are values and exemplary conduct in a warrior society support the idea of viewing the work as a heroic epic poem, and as such, a perfect subject for the analysis of the Anglo Saxon heroic ideal.

Although it is true that the poem is not about Anglo Saxon characters, and is not even set in England, I still believe that it can give a genuine picture of the Anglo Saxon hero. The reason for this lies in the fact that, although the story that formed the basis of the work has its roots in Germanic legends, the poet who composed the poem in the form we are familiar with today was indeed an Anglo Saxon and he could make modifications in the original story so that it would meet the moral expectations of the audience. It means that – if there were any – he probably changed or omitted the parts that he found inappropriate and included some of his own ideas that he felt would add a right message to the story. By doing so he created a work that reflects his ideology rather than that of the Scandinavian peoples the story is about.

**Plot Summary**

The poem tells the story of Beowulf, a Geatish warrior who, when he hears of the havoc the monster Grendel is wreaking in the nearby kingdom of Danland, goes to the aid of the Danish king, Hrothgar. He kills Grendel and also its monstrous mother, bringing an end to the Danes’ sufferings. After being rewarded liberally by the Danish king, he returns to his homeland. When the Geatish king and his son die on the battlefield, Beowulf becomes king of the Geats. He rules the kingdom well for fifty years, but then a fearful dragon emerges from its lair to terrorise the people. The aged hero sets off to fight the beast single-handed, and even though he eventually slays the dragon with the help of a young warrior, Wiglaf, Beowulf gets killed in the fierce combat.

**The Heroic Society**

To understand the system of values of the Anglo Saxon society, first we need to observe how people lived their lives in the 8th–11th century England. Although it had come through some changes, the social system at that time was in essence very similar to that of the Scandinavian tribes depicted in Beowulf. In the world of the poem small communities live by each other, constantly waging war over land, resources, treasures and honour. Each tribe consisted of peasants, mineworkers, woodsmen, huntsmen, fishermen etc., craftsmen, warriors and a king. Every group was essential for the operation of the community, however, in terms of the heroic ideal, it is the relationship existing between members of the highest social level of this early feudal system, namely the warriors and the king, which is indeed worthy of studying.
In these so-called heroic or warrior societies the most important of human relationships was the one, existing between the king – or basically any lord with a considerable amount of power – and his warriors. Interestingly, this was not so much a superior-subordinate, but rather a kind of mutually beneficial relationship in which military achievements and heroic deeds of the warriors – or thanes, as they are often referred to in the poem – were rewarded by treasures, armour and protection from their lord. It is also important that warriors were not forced to serve a lord, but could enter his service voluntarily. King and hero are presented as different but equal on account of the different obligations they have to fulfil. Hrothgar is not condemned for not being able to destroy Grendel, since it is not a king’s task to do. He could not risk his life and by that the future of his country. The fact that Beowulf as an old king set off to fight the dragon alone proves that he remained a hero even after becoming king – which, unfortunately carried serious consequences for his people, who as a result were left without a leader.

It results from the tradition of gift-giving in return for great exploits, that earthly possessions were regarded as a symbol of valour and strength. The greater the deed a thane performed was, the more treasure he received in turn. In the same way, the power of a king was defined by how much treasure he could distribute among his men, and how magnificent hall he built for his people. Hrothgar is presented as the ideal king in part because of his generous gift-giving and his majestic mead-hall, Heorot that he had constructed for his men to drink, sing, tell and listen to stories, boast about their exploits and generally enjoy themselves. In this case wealth came from the king’s military achievements, that is to say, from the tribute that the defeated tribes paid him. The poem opens with a discussion of Shield Sheafson, the founder of the Danish royal family, in which he is presented as a good king because he had defeated so many tribes, all of which were as a result forced to pay him. Thus, we can generally say that in a heroic society strength seems to bring about the acquisition of gold.

From this follows that precious objects indicate the might and prowess of their owner. When Beowulf and his men arrive at the coast of Danland, a watchman, and later Wulfgar, the king’s advisor, consider him a great warrior and a noble man, only judging by his appearance. He says: “From their arms and appointment, they appear well-born and worthy of respect, especially the one who has led them this far: he is formidable indeed” (lines 368-370).

Of course, appearance does not only consist of clothing and armour, but also physique. In a world where men mostly perform physical work, having a strong frame is a great advantage. Especially on the battlefield, a brawny man is valued highly by his fellows. In the story, Beowulf fought and defeated the terrible Grendel unarmed, and is rumoured to have the strength of thirty men in each hand.

In the world of the poem earthly possessions played an important role even in death: the greatness of a person was shown also by the magnificent funeral he received. Shield Sheafson was buried with many treasures, indicating that he had been a good leader. Similarly, Beowulf is given an opulent burial ceremony, attended by many people – maybe the whole tribe –, which clearly shows that he was both a great warrior and a much liked ruler.
Just as in case of precious objects, good workmanship was highly valued in Anglo Saxon poetry. As the only way to preserve history and legends was oral recitation – given that the majority of the people was illiterate –, the more finely wrought a story was the more chance it had for survival. *Beowulf* gives clear evidence of it: the poem itself is a positive proof, with its strict metre and well-fashioned lines, as well as the poet’s praise for king Hrothgar’s talented court poet. Eloquence in speech and rhetorical skills also seem to be considered important. This is closely related to the fact that in order to win fame and material goods that come with it, it is essential for one to be able to first win over the audience. Of course, it is very unlikely that either the Geatish or the Danish warriors spoke as prudently and eloquently as it is depicted in the poem, it suggests that for the poet and for the Anglo-Saxon audience as a whole, courteousness and refined manners were probably part of ideal heroic behaviour.

Another fundamental feature of these societies is the importance of patriarchal lineage. Men are routinely referred to as the sons of their fathers, and great lords can trace their descent right back to the founder of their family. It is because at that time two main things defined the identity of a person: ancestral heritage and personal achievements. A man wore his father’s name, which could make him famous without him doing anything. But a carried name also brought with itself the expectations of the people for one to live up to the standards of his ancestors. Wulfgar’s conclusion, mentioned earlier, that the arriving Geats seem to be well-born reflects the idea that family heirlooms, often weapons and pieces of jewellery, are normally passed on from father to son. And so the shiny armours of the Geats suggest that their ancestors must have been great warriors to have obtained such treasures, and that the new arrivals can only be just as good as their fathers. However in the text there is also reference that ancestry is not everything: really great deeds might in themselves be enough to make a person renowned. Though Shield Sheafson began his life as a foundling, thanks to his outstanding abilities he still managed to gain fame and power. *Beowulf* similarly was brought up as an orphan, still this did not prevent him from becoming a great warrior and later a powerful king. Albeit the fact that he was the nephew of the Geatish king is not inessential in his ascension either.

It is very important to understand that there was a great pressure on young men resulting from the expectations of his surroundings. On the one hand, the son of a famous man felt compelled to show that he was at least as good as his father. On the other, one whose ancestors were not highly esteemed wanted at all costs to prove that he was nevertheless worthy of respect. In both cases, the solution was to win renown through deeds of valour. But for this, it was not enough to perform a great deed, people had to learn of it. At that time it did not count as an improper, conceited act to give an account of one’s accomplishments, in fact, boasting was a completely accepted way to convince the audience of one’s might and prowess. Moreover, a formal boast about the accomplishment of a future deed could increase the level of expectations toward a warrior, and in case of his successful feat would increase his reputation. It is also an excellent way to defend one’s honour if someone reflects upon it, like the vain and jealous Unferth did to *Beowulf*.

And the best place for telling stories was the mead-hall. This early community centre played a significant role in people’s life, being the main – if not the only – place of entertainment. In the evenings the inhabitants of the village gathered in the hall to put aside their work and problems to enjoy music and drink. Stories that proved worthy of preserving were recited by so-called scops or bards, who
thereby kept alive the memories of great heroes and their remarkable exploits. To become sang of as the accomplisher of heroic deeds was the greatest privilege for a man – and the right track to make an eternal name for himself. When Beowulf defeated Grendel, he was given not only treasures, but the honour of becoming part of the oral tradition.

The next thing that defines warrior societies is kinship. Since people lived in small communities, virtually constantly under threat from other tribes, in a world so dangerous it was essential for one to be able to trust at least his own kinsmen. People had a very strong sense of belonging to their family, their homeland, the tribe and the king. As a part of this, loyalty and the keeping of one’s word were of great importance, and oath-breaking and treason were the most serious crimes imaginable. Warriors vowed loyalty to their lord, the breaking of which was not only shameful, but almost unimaginable. When Beowulf finds himself outmatched by the dragon, only one of his men feels enough courage and loyalty to help his lord. Wiglaf sharply rebukes the coward warriors who let down their king. In lines 2890-2891, the poet perfectly sums up the right attitude through Wiglaf’s words: “A warrior will sooner die than live a life of shame.” For the Anglo Saxon people honour was one of the most laudable, and maybe the most vital virtue.

In part resulting from the strong sense of belonging is the tradition of vengeance. If someone was killed, it was his kinsmen’s duty to take revenge on the offender. In this case murder was not at all seen as a crime, but necessary and even appropriate. This concept animates Beowulf’s words in his speech to the desperate Hrothgar: “It is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning” (lines 1384-1385). Moreover, this attitude towards revenge did not only apply to human beings, but was of universal validity. When Grendel’s mother attacked Heorot and took one man, her behaviour was completely justified and not at all surprising: Beowulf had slain her son, so she had to take revenge: “He [Grendel] died in battle, paid with his life; and now this powerful other one arrives … to avenge her kinsman’s death” (lines 1337-1340).

Another solution for soothing over murder was the paying of wergild, or ‘man-price’, which was an amount of money given as a compensation for the family of the deceased. It was crucial to keep this custom, since the neglect of it could easily lead to bloody feuds between peoples. We learn from Hrothgar that Beowulf’s coming to Heorot was not solely in order to avenge the deaths of so many people, but also to discharge an old debt, namely that his father had killed a member of another tribe, and as he had been too proud the pay the wergild, Hrothgar did it in his stead in order to settle the feud. So Beowulf went to the Danes’ aid in part because, being a dutiful man, he felt himself obliged to do so.

**The Hero’s Role**

In a warrior society, a hero plays a significant role in many respects. On the one hand, the mere existence of a great warrior gives some sort of protection for his people, since he might discourage other tribes from attacking. And naturally, in case it comes to fighting he can increase the chances of victory of his tribe. Moreover, the positive effect of his exemplary conduct on the morale of his fellow warriors is also something to be taken into consideration. On the whole, he gives his kin a sense of security, which was highly appreciated in those days.
On the other hand, he can act as an apt successor to the throne should the king die without a legitimate heir. This was the case with Beowulf when the Geatish king, Hygelac, and soon after him his son died. And of course if it does not happen, an acknowledged hero can always act as a right hand and advisor of the leader. From the point of view of the king a hero is a trusted and respected, steady companion, a loyal retainer to whom he would entrust even his country. Interestingly, this relationship can also be observed between Beowulf and Hrothgar. Despite the fact that they were members of different tribes, Hrothgar “adopted Beowulf in his heart as a son” (lines 945-946). It seems that mutual assistance and generosity is above national status.

The hero’s status as a possible successor to the king was also relevant in the eyes of the folk. It assured them that whatever happens, they will not be left unprotected, without a leader. It was a real threat to remain without a leader, as it meant that the people became defenceless against conquering tribes. In the middle of total confusion that followed the king’s death, it was impossible to settle affairs, not to mention raising an army. And the hostile nations were well aware of this, and would not miss such a great opportunity for invasion. When Beowulf died in the battle with the dragon, his men immediately realised the serious consequences: they did not only lament over the loss of their king, but also over the war-torn future they saw for themselves.

**Religion in Beowulf**

As I have mentioned earlier on, religion is the other main factor that influences a community’s system of values. The characters of *Beowulf* are clearly pagans. This is both mentioned by the poet and is established historically – the main action is dated to the late 5th–late 6th century, and the Christianization of Scandinavia only took place between the 8th and the 12th centuries. The Anglo-Saxon peoples started their migration from Scandinavia to the British Isles in the late 5th century, taking with them their legends and myths to the new land. However the poet that recorded *Beowulf* was unquestionably a Christian. It seems that though the change of religion in England took place in the 7th century, it did not mean the complete eradication of the heathen past of the Anglo-Saxons. This explains the unique occurrence that a pagan legend is interpreted from the point of view of a Christian narrator. When studying the effect of religion on the heroic ideal in *Beowulf* we have to take note of three things.

First, that we can find elements of a unanimously heathen world view. Though gods are mentioned in the text, the almighty power guiding people’s lives is fate, the will of which should not – and cannot – be defied. There is no reference to any kind of heaven or otherworld. The emphasis is on earthly existence and fulfilling one’s role here below. The only way to achieve immortality is by winning everlasting reputation. Even though Beowulf possesses almost superhuman strength and abilities, he is just as mortal as anyone else. The difference is that he could overcome the fear of death for the sake of a greater good.
Second, that there are numerous biblical allusions – interestingly all to the Old Testament – and Christian ideas in the text. A bard sings of the creation of the world, monsters are depicted as the descendants of Cain, kings and heroes are said to be sent by God, who is moreover cited as the source of every fortunate occurrence.

And third, that collating the two above, the poet appears to be dubious about religious issues. He seems to be praising and condemning the faith of his characters at the same time. He admits that theirs is not a path to be followed, but also tries to defend them citing their ignorance as a reason. Where possible, he construes the actions of the protagonist as driven by God, and events as being according to God’s will. He puts Christian words into the mouths of them, and includes Biblical elements in places where they can fit into the story.

The explanation for this can be that not enough time had elapsed from the Christianization of England to the composition of the poem, which means that perhaps the new religion did not completely take the place of the old one. So it could be a kind of transition period, when people started to believe in something new but still did not get rid of the religious heritage of their past.

**Conclusion – the Anglo-Saxon Hero**

Taking into account all the social and religious issues that arose with reference to the Anglo-Saxon heroic ideal depicted in *Beowulf*, we get the following picture.

The Anglo-Saxon hero is a loyal, trustworthy thane of the king, born with almost superhuman strength and abilities. He is high-born, but owes his reputation more to his own exploits than to his ancestors’. He is wealthy, bears splendid armour and weapons, but is a formidable fighter without them as well. Ingenuity, persistence, courage, self-sacrifice, and faith in victory are all necessary elements of his personality. He would do anything for the sake of his people, but also feels called upon to act for the good of anyone in need. He is courteous and well-mannered, but not afraid to put his foot down if his honour is at stake. He always keeps his promises and never leaves death unavenged. He does not rise against the will of the almighty, let it be God or fate, and accepts whatever it brings for him. His departure is mourned by many people and his majestic funeral bears evidence of his greatness. For his incredible deeds his story becomes part of the oral tradition of his people, who will keep him in their memories for a very long time. Such hero was Beowulf, amusing and inspiring all who heard of him – even if he existed only in the imagination of the audience.