

Untydras ealle: Grendel, Cain, and Vǫtra. Indo-European *śruti* and Christian *smṛti* in *Beowulf*¹

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Abstract: This paper examines some of the Christian allusions in *Beowulf*. While some of these may be interpolations, the reference to Cain and Abel seems well-integrated into the poem. On the other hand, the references to a divine flood appear on closer inspection to be grounded in Indo-European rather than Christian myth. I conclude that *Beowulf* is essentially a “Germanic” story representing a pre-Christian world-view and that the integration of the “Cain and Abel” mythologem into the story does not imply a large-scale adoption of Christian ideas.

¹ All quotations from *Beowulf* follow *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Frederick Klaeber (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950), but text is shown without macrons or accents. All quotations from the *Elder Edda* follow *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel, 2nd ed. (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1927). All quotations from the *RgVeda* follow the text of *Rig Veda: A Metrically Restored Text with an Introduction and Notes*, ed. B. A. van Nooten and G. B. Holland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994). Due to limitations of the word-processor, the reader will find the following divergences from normal Indological transcription: (1) long vowels are indicated not with a macron but by doubling (e.g. not *tā*, but *tau*); (2) underdotted letters—both the closed dots of retroflex consonants and the open dots of vocalic consonants—are indicated by “under-hooked” letters (e.g. *ṇ*, *ṣ*, *ṛ* etc.), except for underdotted *m* (*anusvaara*) and *h* (*visarga*) which are indicated by underlining (e.g. m, h); (3) *anunaasika* is indicated by a tilde following the vowel to which it belongs, rather than with the *candrabindu* sign. All quotations from the *Younger Edda* (Snorri’s *Edda*) follow *Snorra-Edda*, ed. Heimir Pálsson (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2003); translations from Snorri’s *Edda* are largely adapted from Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. and ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Dent, 1987). All other translations are mine.

At the end of the first numbered fitt of the Old English epic *Beowulf*, after hearing about Hrothgar's building of the grand mead-hall of *Heorot*, we are introduced to the *grimma gæst Grendel haten*, "grim demon named Grendel" (102), and are given a brief account of his forebears and relatives. The poet tells us about Cain's crime of killing Abel, of his subsequent exile by God, and that from Cain

Ʒanon untydras ealle onwocon,
eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas
swylce gigantas, Ʒa wið gode wunnon
lange Ʒrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald. (111-14)

Thence unspeakable offspring all awoke:
ogres and elves and spirits from the underworld;
also giants, they who strove against god
for an interminable season; He gave them their reward for that.

Thereby the poet seems to establish Grendel's lineage from the primordial Judeo-Christian murderer. While this extraordinary poem never once makes explicit reference to Christian dogma or ritual, or to Christ himself,² it nevertheless provokes such assertions: e.g., that in *Beowulf* there are Christian elements "deeply

² F. A. Blackburn, "The Christian Coloring in the *Beowulf*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* [PMLA] 12 (1897) 205-25, expresses this point with some eloquence, worth quoting at length: "In all the Christian allusions of the poem [...] there is one peculiarity that should not be overlooked. In no one of them do we find any reference to Christ, to the cross, to the virgin or the saints, to any doctrine of the church in regard to the trinity, the atonement, etc. or to the scriptures, to prophecy, or to the miracles. They might all have been written by Moses or David as easily as by an English monk. In fact, if it were not for the use of certain names and titles that have been appropriated by the church and thus given a technical meaning, it would not be difficult to find parallel expressions in Plato or Marcus Aurelius. This astonishing list of omissions seems to be without explanation if we assume that the poem first took its present shape at the hands of a Christian writer" [qtd. from the reprint in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 1963) 1-21, at 12].

ingrained in [its] very fabric,”³ and that the poem’s audience is “steeped in Christian doctrine.”⁴ Within this Germanic epic, we do indeed hear of Cain and Abel (106-14, 1261b-66) and of a great flood caused by God (1689b-93), among other ostensibly Christian allusions.⁵

We could adopt the suggestion of Morton Bloomfield⁶ that *Beowulf* is set in an Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the age of the Old Testament and thus deliberately refers only to pre-Mosaic biblical events and not to Christ or Christian doctrine because it deals with pagans and a pagan setting, and that such references would be unnatural and anachronistic. But one must still wonder why such a restriction would extend to the narrator, considering the fact that the narrator firmly places himself in the present and not the time period of the events he narrates, explicitly opening the story in *geardagum*, “in days of yore” (1b). Marijane Osborn discusses this hypothesized “double vision” of the poem, the narration of a story set in the past by a narrator in the later time of the present: “[the *Beowulf*-poet’s] curiously unmedieval concern with anachronism, with what may be known “now” (in Christian England) but not “then” (in pagan Scandinavia), is necessary if he is to present

³ *Beowulf*, ed. Klaeber, l.

⁴ Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of “Beowulf”* (Oxford, 1951) 21.

⁵ See Blackburn, “The Christian Coloring” in H. M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1912) 47-56; and Frederick Klaeber, *The Christian Elements in Beowulf*, trans. Paul Battles (Kalamazoo, MI: The Medieval Institute/Richard Rawlinson Center for Anglo-Saxon Studies, Western Michigan U [Old English Newsletter Subsidia 29], 2000) for lists and discussion of apparent Christian allusions and phrasing. Battles translates “Die Christlichen Elemente im *Beowulf*.” *Anglia* 35 (1911): 111-36, 249-70, 453-82, and *Anglia* 36 (1912): 169-99.

⁶ M. Bloomfield, “Patristics and Old English Literature: Notes on Some Poems,” *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield. (Eugene, OR: U of Oregon P, 1963) 36-43. The idea is further developed by Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1989); and Thomas D. Hill, “The Christian Language and Theme of *Beowulf*,” *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr. (Amsterdam: Vrije UP, 1994) 63-77.

Christian and secular themes as fused for us [...] while keeping these themes carefully separated, with the Christian element suppressed, for those in the story.”⁷ But again if the references such as *drihten god*, especially in such an evangelical-seeming passage as *ne wiston hie drihten god* (181b), “they did not know Lord God,” are truly meant to indicate the Christian deity, then what prevents the poet from explicitly naming Christ?⁸ For even in the text of the narrator, the poem fails to use show any epithets for God which might suggest Christ, such as *nergend*, *weoroda drihten*, *engla peoden*, *weroda Wuldorcýning* (found in other Old English poems); moreover, the poem avoids even divine names lacking any obvious Christian theology, such as *peoden* or *Aldor*.⁹ If the poet were truly presenting a “double vision” poem, then the avoidance of Christian elements in the narrator’s words, i.e. the text of the poem which is “outside” of the knowledge of those in story, would be unnecessary. Thanking God, praising God, the idea of sin, judgment after death—none of these are uniquely Christian concepts and it does not follow that from these general ideas that the poem should be seen in a “Christian light.”¹⁰

⁷ “The Great Feud,” *PMLA* 93 (1978): 973-81, reprinted in *The Beowulf Reader*, ed. Peter S. Baker (New York: Garland, 1995) 111-25, at 122.

⁸ For *drihten god* (181b) remains ambiguous. For a similar observation, see John Halverson, “*Beowulf* and the Pitfalls of Piety,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 35 (1966): 269-78, at 274.

⁹ As noted by Edward B. Irving, Jr. “The Nature of Christianity in *Beowulf*,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 13 (1984): 7-21, at 16. See also William Whallon, “The Idea of God in *Beowulf*,” *PMLA* 80 (1965): 19-23, at 19-20.

¹⁰ Cf. Klaeber, *The Christian Elements* 69: “A poet displaying such familiarity with the teachings and spirit of Christianity could not have been a transitional Christian. It is not improbable that he was a member of the clergy; only this could explain the aggressively moralizing tone. In any case, he had received a monastic education and was a devoted follower of the Christian religion; indeed, it had become second nature for him to see all things in a Christian light.” This, as well as Klaeber’s statement that “The virtues of benevolence, moderation, self-control, consideration for others, and selflessness stand in sharp relief against the backdrop of the old Scandinavian setting” (56-7), I cannot agree with.

In view of these considerations, one must consider the possibility that *Beowulf* may be exactly what, at least to some readers, it seems to be: a pre-Christian epic, albeit one complete with puzzling biblical references. If *Beowulf* is not a Christian poem, then apparently Christian material therein could be one of three things: (1) unoriginal interpolations; (2) Christian material assimilated into a non-Christian outlook; (3) material superficially resembling Christian myth, but actually drawn from another source. I shall argue that all three of these types exist in *Beowulf*.

In the nineteenth-century, many eminent German *Beowulf* critics (e.g. Müllenhoff, Ettmüller, ten Brink) attempted to reconstruct an "original" *Beowulf*, with the "monkish" interpolations removed. In the twentieth-century, these attempts have been deeply doubted and abandoned; and the references to Cain indeed do not stand out as intrusions in the story of *Beowulf*, and we shall consider how Cain could be an original part of a non-Christian epic. But first we should consider two cases which may in fact be interpolations in *Beowulf*: for the sake both of contrasting these to the references to Cain and also to better understand the original philosophy of the poem.

Though identifying interpolations in OE verse has gone out of fashion in the 20th century, perhaps due to a rather zealous over-application of German "higher criticism," recent work by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Daniel O'Donnell¹¹ demonstrates that, from the comparison of different versions of Old English poems (in the rare cases that multiple manuscripts preserving the same poem have survived into our time), there often exist significant divergences, including metrical and lexical substitutions, one of the best known and studied cases being that of *Cædmon's Hymn*. As Roy Liuzza summarizes, in *Cædmon's Hymn*,

¹¹ O'Keeffe, "Orality and the Developing Text of Caedmon's Hymn," *Speculum* 62 (1987): 1-20, reprinted in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. Roy M. Liuzza (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002) 79-102; O'Donnell, *Manuscript Variation in Multiple Recension Old English Poetic Texts: The Technical Problem and Poetic Art* (unpubl. PhD Dissertation, Yale U, 1996).

of which numerous versions exist, “in eighteen halflines, there are five significant metrical variants [...] 1a *nu/nu we*, 3a *weorc/weoroda/wera*, 3b *wundra gehwæs/wundra fela*, 5a *sceop/gesceop*, 7a *þa middangeard/ middangeard*.”¹² Other poems existing in more than one manuscript show a similar degree of difference, and Liuzza estimates that the average level of variation in multiple-copy in OE is 21.6%.¹³ One very interesting variant in *Cædmon’s Hymn* occurs at 4b: the verse, in the majority of the recensions, has the form *or/ord onstealde/astealde*, with these two possible variants being rather insignificant, both meaning “[God] established the beginning [of every wonder (*wundra gehwæs*)].” But in the Winchester Cathedral ms. 1¹⁴ version of *Cædmon’s Hymn* (siglum W) the half-line appears instead as *word astealde* “established the Word.” Now, *Cædmon’s* “hymn” narrates the story of the *Christian* creation really only in the context of Bede’s history of *Cædmon*. The actual verses are simply a poem about world-creation (and praising the world-creator) and similarly structured texts can be found in many religions and cultures, a point argued also by Laura Morland.¹⁵ The Winchester Cathedral version has (intentionally?) taken a step in Christianising the hymn, *word astealde* appearing to reflect the New Testament *John* 1.1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” With this example

¹² “On the Dating of *Beowulf*,” *The Beowulf Reader*, ed. Peter S. Baker (New York: Garland, 1995) 281-302, at 291, 300, n. 56. For more on the different versions of *Cædmon’s Hymn*, see O’Donnell, *Manuscript Variation* or my online edition of *Cædmon’s Hymn* at <http://www.heorot.dk/bede-caedmon-i.html>.

¹³ For more details, see Liuzza, “On the Dating” 292-3, and O’Donnell, *Manuscript Variation*.

¹⁴ Number 759 in Helmut Gneuss, *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A List of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001).

¹⁵ “*Cædmon and the Germanic Tradition*,” *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, ed. John Miles Foley (New York: Garland, 1992) 324-58. Cf. Donald K. Fry, “The Memory of *Cædmon*,” *Oral Traditional Literature: a Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord*, ed. John Miles Foley (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1981) 213-33.

in mind, let us turn to evident cases of Christian interference in *Beowulf* itself.

There are at least two passages in *Beowulf* which appear to be expansions of a version of the poem later than the first written archetype¹⁶: 178b-188, 1758-68. The second of these is not as obviously an interpolation for it probably develops a theme already present in the original text: the possibility of those, like Heremod, who are granted wealth and power turning to evil—here “evil” means not *to frofre weorþan eal langtwidig leodum þinum hæledum to helpe* (1707b-9a),¹⁷ and failing to participate in the gift-exchange system in which the lord gives his *gedryht* gold rings to honour them (1719a-20b),¹⁸ but instead slaughtering one’s own followers and companions at table (1713-4), thus violating and destroying the lord-retainer bonds which were a pillar of old Germanic society.¹⁹ As Hrothgar’s speech progresses, in his warning of Beowulf against these evils, he explains how violating this lord-retainer pact leads to the lord being left *dreamleas* (1720b), for, as we have already learned earlier, Heremod was abandoned by his people (901ff.). After this story of Heremod, admonishing

¹⁶ Here we assume that the extant text of *Beowulf* is not the first written archetype. Though on the whole the evidence seems to favor supposing the existence of a written archetype predating the extant *Beowulf* MS, our argument does not depend on it. If Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (2nd ed., Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996), is correct in his argument that the extant text *is* the first written archetype, several possibilities yet remain. The two scribes may have integrated separate stories into a single text, possibly inventing original material in the process. Alternatively, they may have produced a written version of an oral *Beowulf*. In either of these cases, assuming the scribes to be Christian, they may have “sanitized” *Beowulf* in various ways. Some of these alterations would correspond to “interpolations.” In any event, in the following discussion, there is assumed to be a prior “archetype” of *Beowulf*, whether written or not.

¹⁷ “being as a comfort all long-lasting to your people, support for heroes.”

¹⁸ On this treasure granted as a visible sign of honor in old Germanic society, see Ernst Leisi, “Gold und Manneswert im *Beowulf*,” *Anglia* 71 (1953): 259-73.

¹⁹ See further, Stephen S. Evans, *The Lords of Battle: Image and Reality of the Comitatus in Dark-Age Britain* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997).

Beowulf not to follow Heremod's pattern, Hrothgar concludes *ðu þe lær be þon, gumcyste ongit, ic þis gid be þe awræc wintrum frod*, "you learn by this, understand human virtue; I, wise in winters, have recited this tale for you" (1722b-4a). Yet in our text his speech continues and he begins again *wundor is to secganne hu mihtig god*, "it is a wonder to say how mighty god [...]" (1724b-5a), and proceeds to give a "sermon" on the transience of worldly things and how the unwary man may easily be corrupted by the arrows of the "wicked spirit." This part, which we may call the sermon proper, is in some ways reminiscent of Wulfstan's homily on the end of days and the Antichrist,²⁰ but whether or not there is any connexion with that particular homily, this section certainly seems derived from the homiletic genre. A particularly homiletic part of this section has also been noted by Michael Lapidge²¹ as an apparent interpolation, in which Hrothgar sounds very much like a priest in the pulpit:

Bebeorh þe ðone bealonið, Beowulf leofa,
 secg betsta, ond þe þæt selre geceos,
 ece rædas; oferhyda ne gym,
 mære cempa! Nu is þines mæignes blæd
 ane hwile; eft sona bið,
 þæt þec adl oððe ecg eafopes getwæfed,
 oððe fyres feng, oððe flodes wylm,

²⁰ Cf. La, hwylc wunder bið "Lo, is it any wonder"; þe men beoð þurh synna swa swyðe forwyrhte þæt deofol mot openlice þonne heora fandian hu fela he forspanan mæge to ecan forwyrde [...] ac se bið gesælig þe þonne ne awacað, forðam ræde æfter þam witod him bið towerd þurh godes mihte ece frofer. "people will be so thoroughly ruined by sin that the devil may openly tempt them to find out how many he can seduce into eternal damnation [...] but he will be blessed who does not weaken, because truly quickly afterwards eternal comfort will come to him through God's power"; and, reminding us of Heremod's slaying of his companions, ne byrhd þonne broðor oðrum hwilan, ne fæder his bearne, ne bearn his agenum fæder, ne gesibb gesibban þe ma þe fremdan "brother will not protect the other (brother) at that time, nor a father his child, nor a child his own father, nor a kinsman his kinsman any more than a stranger." Wulfstan, *Secundum Marcum*, in *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1957).

²¹ "The Archetype of *Beowulf*," *Anglo-Saxon England* 29 (2001): 5-41.

oððe gripe meces, oððe gares fliht,
oððe atol ylðo; oððe eagen a bearhtm
forsited ond forsworced; semninga bið,
þæt dec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðeð. (1758-68)

Guard yourself against this wicked strife, beloved Beowulf, finest man, and for yourself choose the better, the eternal gains; do not pay heed to pride, renowned champion; now the glory of your strength exists for a while; presently in turn will be that sickness or edge will part you from strength, or grasp of fire, or surge of flood, or bite of blade, or flight of spear, or repulsive old-age; or the brightness of your eyes weakens and dims; very soon will be that, o warrior, death overpowers you.

We may well agree with Lapidge in his view that "[t]his use of polysyndeton to link alliterating pairs of terms is [...] indebted to the language of vernacular preaching."²² Lapidge gives a number of examples of parallel phrasing in OE homilies, the most striking of which is from Wulfstan's *Sermo XX*:

Eac wearð þes þeodscipe, swa hit þyncan mæg, swyðe forsyngod þurh menigfealde synna ond þurh fela misdæde: þurh morðdæda ond þurh mandæda, þurh gitsunga ond þurh gifernessa, þurh stala ond þurh strudunga, þurh mansylene ond þurh hæþene unsida, þurh swicdomas ond þurh searocræftas, þurh lahbricas ond þurh æswicas, þurh siblegeru ond þurh mistlice forligeru. (ed. Bethurum, 258)

There exist also in this community, so it may seem, active great sinners through manifold sins and through many misdeeds: through murder and through evil-doing, through avarice and through greed, through stealing and through robbery, through trafficking in slaves and through heathen vices, through fraud and through artifice, through rule-breaking and through offending the law, through incest and through various fornications.

²² "The Archetype" 38.

One additional clue that this part of Hrothgar's speech may have been interpolated is that the very first line following its closing, telling us of Beowulf's reaction to it, is *geat wæs glædmod*, "the Geat was glad-hearted" (1785a).²³ As it stands in our text, certainly the last half of his speech is an odd thing to be *glædmod* after hearing; whereas, if Hrothgar has stopped speaking at 1724, Beowulf's reported mood would seem rather more natural. We are hesitant to argue this case too strongly, as there is nothing in the passage under consideration which seriously disrupts the coherency of the narrative.

The second interpolation considered, however, is more discordant than Hrothgar's sermon: the often-discussed "idolatry of the Danes" passage.

Monig oft gesæt
rice to rune; ræd eahtedon,
hwæt swiðferhðum selest wære
wið færgryrum to gefremmanne.
Hwylum hie geheton æt hærgrtafum
wigweorþunga, wordum bædon,
þæt him gastbona geoce gefremede
wið þeodþreum. **Swylc wæs þeaw hyra,
hæpenra hyht; helle gemundon
in modsefan, metod hie ne cuþon,
dæda demend, ne wiston hie drihten god,
ne hie huru heofena helm herian ne cuþon,
wuldres waldend. Wa bið þæm ðe sceal
þurh sliðne nið sawle bescufan
in fyres fæþm, frofre ne wenan,
wihte gewendan! Wel bið þæm þe mot
æfter deaðdæge drihten secean
ond to fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian!**

(171b-188, emphasis added)

²³ Though, admittedly, at the very end of his speech, 1782-4, Hrothgar tells Beowulf to enjoy the feast and that he will share out treasures to him in morning, which may brighten Beowulf's heart. But then again, these lines themselves are a bit jarring coming on the heels of Hrothgar's list of his woes.

Many often sat, the mighty at counsel; pondered a plan, what by strong-minded men would be best to do against the sudden horror; sometimes at holy temples they made sacred offering, in words bid that to them the *Gastbona* ("spirit-slayer"?) would offer succor from the plight of the people; **such was their habit: the hope of heathens; on hell they pondered in the depths of their hearts; the Creator they did not know, the Judge of deeds, they were not aware of God the Lord, nor yet were they able to honor the Helm of the Heavens, Glory's Wielder. Woe be to him who must, through dire terror, thrust his soul into fire's embrace; and not hope for relief, or to change at all; well be he who may after death-day seek the Lord and in his Father's arms ask for peace.**

The beginning of the passage is matter-of-fact in its description of the Danes making offerings and praying to "Gastbona" for assistance against the distress the people face, Grendel. The bolded portion is the part which appears to be infelicitous with regard to the overall poem. Unlike the preceding lines, lines 178b-188 are not an objective description of the Danes' actions, but rather a condemnation of their worship of a deity other than *drihten god* (presumably the Christian God). The parallel verses *wa bið þam ðe [...]* *wel bið þam þe [...]* with which it concludes (along with some hellfire rhetoric) constitute a very homiletic-sounding formula.

On the other hand, if we remove the bolded lines, then the narrative, not to mention the spirit, of the poem as a whole is more clear and coherent. Even those critics who argue for *Beowulf* as imbued with "Christian spirit" find this passage difficult for maintaining the "noble pagan" hypothesis, and, seeing it at variance with the spirit of the rest of the poem, are inclined to view it as interpolated.²⁴ The being that the Danes invoke is termed as *gastbona*, a *hapax legomena* in Old English. The most straightforward interpretation of this word is simply "slayer of

²⁴ See, for instance, Whitelock, *Audience* 77f.

ghosts/demons”—though OE *gast* can also mean “spirit, soul” (or *halig gæst* for L. *sanctus spiritus*), it never seems to bear this meaning in *Beowulf*.²⁵ Prior to this passage we have already heard Grendel referred to thrice as a *gast* (86a, 102a, 133a), and following this passage we shall hear the term applied to him on at least five occasions.²⁶ Thus, the most obvious implication of *gastbona* is still that of a slayer of *gastas* like Grendel. Indeed, in spite of the disapproving statements (in the passages I have bolded), the prayers of the Danes to *Gastbona* for help against the people’s plight are answered in the form of Beowulf himself. Though Grendel terrorizes the Danes and in effect rules Heorot hall for twelve years, *twelf wintra tid* (147a),²⁷ it is only after we hear of the Danes’ *gastbona*-prayers that Beowulf himself seems to learn of Grendel. In fact, shortly after the poem’s description of the Danes’ worship, we are told *þæt fram ham gefrægn Higelaces þegn god mid Geatum, Grendles dæda*, “In his home, [Beowulf,] Hygelac’s thane, a good man of the Geats heard about that, the deeds of Grendel” (194-5).²⁸ The poem does not tell us how Beowulf comes to hear of the Danes’ plight; however, the close juxtaposition in the text of the Danes’ prayers and Beowulf’s hearing suggests a causal linkage between the two events. And when Beowulf arrives at the court of Heorot, Hrothgar himself exclaims that *hine halig god for arstafum us onsende, to West-Denum, þæs ic wen hæbbe, wið Grendles gýre*, “the holy god has sent him [Beowulf] to us, to the West-Danes, out of kindness; against Grendel’s terror, of this I have hope” (381b-4a).

²⁵ Cf. Edmund Weber, “Seelenmörder oder Unholdtöter?” *Neuphilol. Monatsschrift* 2 (1931): 293-5.

²⁶ 807b, 1266a (Grendel is one of the *geosceaftgasta*), 1274a, 1349a (*ellorgæstas*, Grendel and his mother), 1995a, 2073b (? - may show *gæst* “guest” rather than *gæst* “ghost, spirit”). Lines 1331a, 1617a refer to Grendel’s mother.

²⁷ “the space of twelve winters.”

²⁸ Beowulf the Geat is here referred to for the first time in the poem—as if he is summoned, as it were, into the text by the prayers of the Danes.

Whoever the *gastbona* is, apparently he grants the prayers of the Danes, and delivers them from the *ellorgæstas* (1349a) via (his champion?) Beowulf. We might suppose that Thor (or Þunor) is the *gastbona*, as he is the preeminent giant-slayer²⁹ of the gods, and perhaps the poem is implying that in some way he has sent Beowulf to the Danes. It has long been noticed that Beowulf's slaying of the dragon, and his death in this act of defense of his people, has an analogue in Thor's fight with the world-serpent,³⁰ and in giant-slaying too Beowulf resembles Thor. Not only does Beowulf of course slay Grendel, who is described as an *eoten* "giant, troll" at 761a, against whom Beowulf keeps *eotonweard* "look-out for giants" (668b), but in introducing himself to Hrothgar, he recounts some of his prior exploits, including his report that *ic fífe geband, yðde eotena cyn*, "I bound five, destroyed a tribe of giants" (420b-1a). Thus, we can imagine Beowulf as a sort of agent, or champion of Thor (if not quite his *avatar*), in the quelling of giants and, at last, in the slaying of a serpent.

²⁹ Among other examples of Thor's role as giant-slayer, see: [...] hamarinn Mjöllnir er hrímpursar og berggrisar kenna þá er hann kemur, og er það eigi undarlegt. Hann hefur lamið margan haus á feðrum eða frændum þeirra (Gylfaginning, *Snorra-Edda*, ed. Pálsson, 36) Thor possesses the "hammer Mjöllnir, well-known to frost-giants and mountain-giants when it is raised aloft, and that is not to be wondered at. It has smashed many a skull for their fathers and kinsmen"; En er æsirnir sáu það til viss að þar var bergrissi kominn, þá varð eigi þyrmt eidunum, og kölluðu þeir á Þór og jafnshjótt kom hann. Og því næst fór á loft hamarinn Mjöllnir [...] (56). "When the Æsir saw for certain that it was a mountain-giant that they had there, then the oaths were disregarded and they called upon Thor and he came quickly. And the next thing was that the hammer Mjöllnir was raised aloft [...]."

³⁰ Cf. esp. Karl Müllenhoff, "Der Mythos von Beowulf," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 7 (1849) 419-441; Axel Olrik, *Danmarks helteedigtning: en oldtidsstudie* (Copenhagen: Gad, 1903-10); Friedrich Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagen Geschichte*—vol 1: *Beowulf* (Munich: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagbuchhandlung, 1910); Ursula Dronke, "Beowulf and Ragnarök," *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 17 (1968), 302-25. Cf. *Beowulf*, ed. Klaeber, xxi ff.; Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2000), esp. 37-8, 44-5.

Before proceeding to Cain, in order to discuss the interaction of these Germanic and non-Germanic elements (both mythology and phraseology), I borrow two Sanskrit terms used to describe two different types of Hindu scripture: *śruti*, lit. “what is heard,” and *smṛti*, lit. “what is remembered,” less etymologically, Revelation and Tradition.³¹ *Śruti* is the higher form of scripture and is deferred to in the case of conflict between *śruti* and *smṛti*. *Śruti* are the texts which were divinely revealed by the gods, constituting the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads*, which are considered to be eternal or atemporal. *Smṛti* includes a variety of secondary scriptures including most relevantly what one might call historical texts, in contrast to the atemporal character of *śruti*. However, these historical texts are not secular or non-religious—both the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* are *smṛti*-texts. *Smṛti* texts are not necessarily fixed, and new texts may be added, in contrast to *śruti* which is carefully preserved unaltered.³²

I do not intend to suggest that pre-Christian (or Christian) Anglo-Saxon theology possessed such formally-defined notions as *śruti* and *smṛti*. These terms are simply a useful way of thinking about a world-view which can adopt new theological truths which do not run contrary to its spirit. That is, *śruti* and *smṛti* seem to be valid concepts in so far as the Saxons did not feel a great conflict between their existing faith and at least some of the new teachings

³¹ As Ananda Coomaraswamy says at the start of his essay on the Indic dragon-fight myth (to which struggle we shall have occasion to return): “[l]ike the Revelation (*śruti*) itself, we must begin with the Myth (*itihāsa*), the penultimate truth, of which all experience is the temporal reflection” in “The Hindu Tradition: The Myth” in *Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), reprinted in *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004) 267-73, at 267.

³² On the terms *śruti* and *smṛti* and their place in Hinduism, see Stephanie W. Jamison and Michael Witzel, “Vedic Hinduism,” *The Study of Hinduism*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2003) 65-113. See <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~witzel/vedica.pdf> for the longer version.

of Christianity—a scenario which is suggested by some of the accounts of conversion in early Anglo-Saxon England.³³

In particular, the representation of Cain as the progenitor of *eotenas*, *ylfe*, *orcneas*, and *gigantas* is a plausible example of an instance of Christian scripture interpreted by pre-Christian Saxons as a sort of *smrti*—as new knowledge, but not knowledge requiring a major change in world-view. The adoption of a story of a primal act of kin-slaying is not surprising considering the recurrence of this theme throughout old Germanic literature. The apparent biblical explanation of Cain's monstrous offspring is in the interpretation of *Genesis* vi, where it is said that

2. The sons of God seeing the daughters of men, that they were fair, took to themselves wives of all which they chose. [...] 4. Now giants were upon the earth in those days. For after the sons of God went in to the daughters of men, and they brought forth children, these are the mighty men of old, men of renown.

As well, apocryphal material—preserved in written form in the Ethiopic *Book of Enoch* and also in some of the recently-discovered “Dead Sea Scrolls” from the Qumran caves, but also apparently fairly widely spread in oral form during the medieval period—elaborates on giants and their progenitors, the *Nephilim*, or fallen angels.³⁴

³³ A conclusion also reached by R. North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1997) 305: “[T]he Angles, in particular, offered no resistance to Christianity and indeed failed to perceive the difference between this new religion and their own. In other words, the scholarly axiom that Christianity involved a clash of cultures or ideologies in seventh-century England may have been conceived on the basis of the history of the Scandinavian conversion in the tenth and eleventh centuries.” But see n. 58 and n. 64 below.

³⁴ Of particular relevance are: *I Enoch* VII.2-6: “And they [the daughters of men] became pregnant, and they bear great giants, whose height was three thousand ells: Who consumed all the acquisitions of men. And when men could no longer sustain them, the giants turned against them and devoured mankind. And they began to sin against birds, and beasts, and reptiles, and fish, and to devour one another's flesh, and drink the blood”; and *I Enoch* CVI.14-15: “And

Whatever the precise origins—biblical, apocryphal or other—of the traditions of Cain's offspring as giants, the question we now face is: How do we determine the originality of the Cain episodes in the text of *Beowulf*? The idea of a race of monsters that a god or gods struggle against is not foreign to the Indo-European mythos itself—as we shall see below—because of this, the Cain mythologem could be easily assimilated, but this does not in itself show us whether the Cain passages are original to the poem or not. However, the episode of Cain and Abel is mentioned twice: once at 99-114 and again at 1261b-1266. Both passages fit smoothly into their surrounding narrative, and are consistent with the theme and style of the poem as a whole; both focus on the themes of kinslaying and exile, favourite Old English poetic scenarios, and both focus on Cain in his role as Grendel's ancestor. Even more telling is the form *camp* found in the second Cain-passage: *sipðan cain wearð to ecgbanan angan breper*, "after Cain became a sword-slayer to an only brother" (1261b-2), which in the

behold they [angels] commit sin and transgress the law, and have united themselves with women and commit sin with them, and have married some of them, and have begot children by them. And they shall produce on the earth giants not according to the spirit, but according to the flesh, and there shall be a great punishment on the earth, and the earth shall be cleansed from all impurity." Both passages are cited from *The Book of Enoch*, trans. R. H. Charles (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1917).

For extensive discussion see esp. Ruth Mellinkoff, "Cain's Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*: Part I, Noachic Tradition," *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979): 143-62; *eadem*, "Cain's Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*: Part II, Post-diluvian Survival," *Anglo-Saxon England* 9 (1981): 183-97; Oliver F. Emerson, "Legends of Cain, especially in Old and Middle English," *PMLA* (1906): 831-929; Robert E. Kaske, "*Beowulf* and the Book of Enoch," *Speculum* 46 (1971): 421-431. Also, Leo Jung, *Fallen Angels in Jewish, Christian and Mohammedan Literature* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College for Hebrew & Cognate Learning, 1926).

Compare also with *Genesis A* (1265b-9): "hwonne frea wolde / on wærlogan wite settan / and on deað slea dædum scyldige / giantmæcgas, gode unleofc, / micle mansceaðan, metode laðe" [in *The Junius Manuscript*, ed. P. Krapp (New York: Columbia UP, 1931)].

manuscript is *sipðan camp wearð* [...], “since strife became...” (?).³⁵ The *Beowulf* scribes are, on the whole, fairly careful³⁶ and—since they were presumably Christian scribes, as they were copying other obviously Christian texts like *Judith* or *St. Christopher*—it would seem odd for the first scribe of the Cotton Vitellius A.xv manuscript to have miscopied *cain* (or *cam*)³⁷ as *camp*. This suggests that the first scribe’s exemplar read *camp* and he has faithfully reproduced this form. And, if his exemplar read *camp*, then this is presumably the error (assuming it is an error) of a scribe of an earlier copy, which suggests that this Cain episode was present not only in the Cotton Vitellius A.xv’s scribe’s exemplar, but in his exemplar’s exemplar as well—another indicator of the antiquity and originality of this passage in the *Beowulf* epic.

Incidentally, this form *camp* also suggests that this recension passed through the hands of a scribe who was unfamiliar with the name *Cain* (or *Cham/Cam*) and who “corrected” the form to the most orthographically similar word which fit the context of *ecgbanan*, i.e. *camp* “strife, battle.” This raises the possibility that the scribe who mistakenly corrected the (for him) nonsense word *cain* into *camp* was not a Christian, and, in fact, not very knowledgeable about Christian mythology in general! This accords well with our

³⁵ See Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* 183 for an argument to retain the MS reading.

³⁶ On the accuracy of the scribes, see the extensive discussion of the careful proofreading of the scribes in Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* 191-218.

³⁷ For there was a mediaeval confusion and mixture of the characters of Cain and Cham (=Ham), as Mellinkoff, “Cain’s Monstrous Progeny, Part II,” puts it: “not only because of the similarity of the names [...] but also because Ham, though not of Cain’s seed, was traditionally regarded as Cain’s successor in the figurative sense. Ham and his son Canaan and all the members of their line were thought to have continued the evil of Cain; thus Cain and Ham represented the same wicked principles” (194). Even at *Beo.* 107a, Cain’s name seems to be spelled as *cam(es)*, cf. Emerson, “Legends of Cain” 925.

general thesis that the archetype of *Beowulf* originated outside of a Christian community.³⁸

We have examined two cases of interpolation of Christian material and one instance (the Cain-story) of Christian material which appears original to the poem. The last case to be examined, the "divine flood," we shall argue is an occurrence of material which is actually native Indo-European. Of the sword-hilt *Beowulf* brings back from Grendel's mere, the blade having melted in Grendel's blood, the poem tells us,

Hroðgar maþelode-- hylt sceawode,
ealde lafe, on ðæm wæs or writen
fyrngewinnes, syðþan flod ofsloh,
gifen geotende giganta cyn,
frecne geferdon; þæt wæs fremde þeod
ecean dryhtne; him þæs endelea
þurh wæteres wylm waldend sealde.
Swa wæs on ðæm scennum sciran goldes
þurh runstafas rihte gemearcod,
geseted ond gesæd, hwaþ þæt sweord geworht,
irena cyst ærest wære,
wreoþenhilt ond wyrmfah. (1687-98a)

Hrothgar spoke; he looked at the hilt, the old heirloom, on which was engraved the origin of the ancient struggle, when the flood destroyed the race of giants; they fared terribly. That was a people foreign to the eternal lord. The ruler (god) gave them final-reward through the surging of water. So/also it was marked on the sword-hilt in bright gold rune-staves, it was set down and said, for whom the sword had first been wrought, choicest of irons, twisted-hilted and serpent-patterned.

³⁸ Of course, if *camp* for *cain* is in fact an error, it could still be attributable to rote copying by an earlier scribe who may have been Christian but simply poorly educated, who mistook *cain* for *camp*.

Many studies have assumed this *flood* to be the Flood of the biblical *Genesis*. The proximity in *Genesis* of the reference to giants and God's view of the "wickedness of man" (*Gen.* vi.5) and his subsequent decision to "destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them" (*Gen.* vi.7) may have suggested this scenario in mediaeval exegesis. Yet the text of *Genesis* cites "the wickedness of man" as the source of God's anger and cause of the Flood, not "the wickedness of giants." The development of a biblical story of a flood directed against giants is unclear. The closest scriptural analogy occurs in the apocryphal Book of Enoch (mentioned earlier), as pointed out by Ruth Mellinkoff,³⁹ and describes a Deluge in which the giants, misbegotten offspring of women and angels, are destroyed: "And they [the fallen angels] having united with women shall produce on the earth giants [...] and there shall be a great punishment on the earth [...] and there shall be a deluge and a great destruction [...]" (I Enoch CVI.14-16).⁴⁰

However, these particular giants are not recorded as struggling against God. In Indo-European mythologies, on the other hand, gods often fight against giants; and, in fact, we find a recurrent myth of battle between divinities and giants, linked with a great flood, in the native Indo-European tradition. Within Germanic legend, the Old Norse *Edda* refers to the drowning of giants in a divine flood, which occurs when Odin and the other gods shape the world from the body of a giant:

Synir Bors drápu Ymi jötun, en er hann féll, þá hljóp svo mikið blóð úr sárum hans að með því drekktu þeir allri ætt hrímpursa, nema einn komst undan með sínu hýski. Þann kalla jötnar Bergelmi. Hann fór upp á lúður sinn og kona hans og hélst þar, og eru af þeim komnar

³⁹ "Cain's Monstrous Progeny, Part I," 156.

⁴⁰ *Enoch*, trans. Charles.

hrímpursa ættir [...]. (Snorri, Gylfaginning, *Snorra-Edda*, ed. Pálsson, 18).⁴¹

Bor's sons [=Óðinn, Vili and Vé] killed the giant Ymir. And he fell, so much blood flowed from his wounds that with it they drowned all the race of frost-giants, except that one escaped with his household. Giants call him Bergelmir. He went up on to his ark with his wife and was preserved there, and from them are descended the families of frost-giants [...]

One may reasonably object, based on this Eddic analogue, to seeing in *Beowulf* "a picture of the giants drowning in the blood of the sacrificed Ymir"⁴² on the grounds that the extent of commonality between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian pre-Christian religion is uncertain, and further that the Icelandic texts are relatively late and may themselves exhibit the influence of Christianity, or even have been composed by Christian authors.

However, in the ancient (1200 B.C. or earlier) Hindu *R̥gVeda*, a text belonging to the Indic branch of Indo-European, we find a strikingly similar story involving a great flood and the slaying of a demon. Briefly the story is thus:

⁴¹ The survival of "Bergelmir" in Snorri may be an adaptation of the biblical "Og," e.g.: "For only Og king of Bashan remained of the remnant of giants; behold, his bedstead was a bedstead of iron; is it not in Rabbath of the children of Ammon? Nine cubits was the length thereof, and four cubits the breadth of it, after the cubit of a man" (*Deut.* III.11). See Mellinkoff, "Cain's Monstrous Progeny, Part II," for more discussion of the legends surrounding Og, and the survival of post-diluvian giants.

⁴² Karl Schneider, *Sophia Lectures on Beowulf* (Toyko: Japan Science Society, 1986) 170, who briefly discusses this passage. The connection between *Beo.* 1687-97 and the Eddic stories of Ymir and his destruction is also discussed at length in Paul Beekman Taylor, "Swords and Words: Grendel and the *Dursar*," *Sharing Story: Medieval Norse-English Literary Relationships* (New York: AMS, 1998) 123-37, at 129-34; the Norse stories of struggles between gods and giants in general, as they relate to this passage, are also briefly mentioned in John A. Nist, *The Structure and Texture of Beowulf*, *Lingua e literatura inglêse*, no. 1 (São Paulo: U de São Paulo, 1959) 26-7.

There is a demonic serpent or dragon named Vritra, who has coiled around and obstructed (or perhaps has swallowed) the world's waters.⁴³ Indra, the Thunder-God, fights and defeats Vritra,⁴⁴ and in slaying him, releases a deluge onto the earth.⁴⁵ The resulting flood waters "carry off the nameless body of Vritra, tossed in the midst of the never-stopping, never-resting currents."⁴⁶

⁴³ daasápatniür áhigopaa atisṭhan níruddhaa áápah pañíneva gáávah /
apáá bílam ápihitam yád áásiid vṛtrám jaghanvāá~ ápa tát vavaara //
RgVeda I.32.11

"The waters were as wives of the Dasa (=Vritra), guarded by the dragon, shut up like cows by the Pani. The orifice of the waters, which had been closed up, he (=Indra) opened after having slain the dragon."

⁴⁴ áhan vṛtrám vṛtratáram vāmsam índro vājreṇa mahatāá vadhéna /
RgVeda I.32.5ab

"Indra, with his great weapon *vajra* ["thunder" cudgel] slew the shoulderless Vritra, worst of Vritras."

⁴⁵ áhann áhim ánu apás tatarda prá vakṣāṇaa abhinat párvataanaam //
áhann áhim párvate śisriyaanām tvāṣṭaasmai vājram svaríyam tatakṣa /
vaaśráá iva dhenávaḥ syándamaanaa āñjaḥ samudrám áva jagmur áápah //
RgVeda I.32.1cd-2

"[Indra] slew the dragon, bored through to the waters; he split through the bellies of the mountains. He slew the dragon who lay on the mountain; Tvashtar (the smith of the gods) fashioned for him the roaring Vajra (thunder-club). [With a sound] like lowing milch cows, the flowing waters ran quickly down to the ocean"

Cf. RgVeda X.111.9:

stjāḥ síndhuu~r áhinaa jagrasaanāá~ áád id etaáh prá vivijre javéna /
múmukṣamaṇaa utá yáá mumucré ádhéd etaá ná ramante níitktaah //
"You have set free the rivers which had been swallowed by the dragon; just then—darting they rushed forth with speed. (The waters) which longed to be released were released; right then—excited, darting, they did not stop."

Thanks to David Baum and Boris Oguibénine for help on *adhéd* (=adha id "just then"). On *prá vivijre*, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "*Samvega*: 'Aesthetic Shock,'" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7 (1943), reprinted in *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* 193-9, at 193, says "the root *vij*, with or without the intensive prefix *sam*, or other prefixes such as *pra*, 'forth,' implies a swift recoil from or trembling at something feared."

⁴⁶ átiṣṭantiinaam aniveśanáanaam káāṣṭaanaam mádhye níhitam śáriiram /

The disposal of the dragon's corpse in *Beowulf* reflects similar imagery:

dracan ec scufun,
wyrm ofer weallclif, leton weg niman,
flod fæðmian frætwa hyrde. (3131b-3133)

The dragon too they shoved, the wyrm over the cliff-wall,
they let the waves take, the flood enfold, that keeper of
baubles.

In the *RgVeda*: "The dragon lies beneath the feet of torrents which (formerly) by his might he had hoarded."⁴⁷

Interestingly, both the Indic and Norse flood legends are also Creation-myths (or rather demiurgic, because in both cases the world already exists before the gods were born).⁴⁸ Snorri's

vṛtrāsya niṇyám ví caranti áapo diirghám táma áásayad índraśatruḥ //
RgVeda I.32.10

⁴⁷ nadám ná bhinnám amuyáá śáyaanam máno rúhaaṇaa áti yanti áápah //
yáás cid vṛtró mahináá paryátiṣṭhat táásaam áhiḥ patsutaḥśūr babhuuva //
RgVeda I.32.8

"He (=the dragon) lay there like a split reed, the rising waters of Manu flowed over (him); the dragon lay at the feet of those (waters) whom he had encompassed with his might."

Thanks to Ray Tripp for bringing this parallel (*Beo.* 3131b-33 and *RgVeda* I.32.8) to my attention. The Indic dragon hoards water rather than the gold of the Germanic dragon, but note in both cases that the substance hoarded is a precious one, deprivation of which is dangerous to the community.

⁴⁸ For more on Vṛtra, see Ajoy Kumar Lahiri, *Vedic Vṛtra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984). An interesting summary of one aspect of the myth occurs on p. 72: "In the [*RgVeda*], Vṛtra is evil; Vṛtra imprisons the waters and Indra, after killing Vṛtra, lets loose the waters and creates the world. In the later Vedas though, Vṛtra continues to be an evil. Still everything valuable, like Agni and Soma [deified 'fire' and 'divine nectar,' respectively-BMS], comes out of Vṛtra when he is killed by Indra." On the Indra-Vṛtra battle as a story of Creation, see particularly W. Norman Brown, "The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62 (1942), 85-98 and *idem*, "Theories of Creation in the Rig Veda," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 85 (1965), 23-34;

narrative of the giant-race drowning in the flood of blood is based on verses of the *Elder Edda* which recount the creation of the world from the corpse of the giant that Óðinn and his brothers slew:

Ór Ymis holdi vas jörð um sköpoð,
en ór beinom biörg, himinn ór hausi
ins hrímkalda iötuns, en ór sveita síor.
(*Vafþrúðnismál* 21) [Elder Edda]

Of Ymir's flesh the earth was shaped,
the mountains from his bones; the heaven from the skull
of that frost-cold giant, and from his blood the sea.⁴⁹

Likewise, Indra is praised in the *Rigveda* as creator of the world in connection with his dragon-fight. One version of the *RgVeda* narrative worships Indra with the words:

When, you, O Indra, slew the first-born of dragons and
thereupon dispelled the sorcery of the sorcerers, then

and Lahiri, ch. III. For more on Vritra in a wider Indo-European context, *vide* Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), esp. 297-323.

⁴⁹ See also *Völuspá* 3-4 [Elder Edda]:

Ar var alda þat er Ymir byggði,
vara sandr né sær, né svalar unnir;
iörð fannz æva né upphiminn;
gap var ginnunga, en gras hvergi.
Aðr Burs synir biöðom um ypðo,
þeir er miðgarð mæran skópo:
sól skein sunnan á salar steina;
þá var grund gróin grænum lauki.

"In earliest times did Ymir live: there was not sea nor land nor cool waves, earth was nowhere nor the upper heaven; the gap yawned, and grass was nowhere. First Bur's sons [=Óthin, Vili and Vé] raised up the earth, who made the mighty Middle-Earth; the sun shone from the south on the hall of stones, on the ground then grew the green leeks."

producing the Sun, the Day, the Dawn, you found no enemy indeed at that time.⁵⁰

Norman Brown suggests that the cosmogonical significance of the Indra-Vritra combat myth is “symbolic representation of Potentiality striving with Inertia and overcoming Inertia through the aid of Power or Energy existing in the universe, especially in the atmosphere.”⁵¹ Through the primordial struggle of the Storm-God (Indra) with the dragon (whose name *vṛtra* literally means “resistance, obstruction, enclosure”), the universe is created, or, rather, arranged and given life. The treasure hoarded by the dragon Vritra comprises the vital elements of life: water, sun, cattle etc., and Indra, in slaying him, releases these necessities to be utilised by mankind.⁵² So too, Germanic dragons in general and

⁵⁰ yád indrááhan prathamajāám áhiinaam áán maayínaam áminaah prótá maayááh / áát súúrýam janáyan dyáám uśáásam taadútnaa sátrum ná kílaa vvitse // *RgVeda* I.32.4

⁵¹ Brown, “Theories of Creation” 24.

⁵² Cf. the famous *puruṣa*-hymn of the *RigVeda* 10.90, which also recounts the creation of the world, through the sacrifice and dismemberment of the *primaeval* male (*puruṣa*), esp. verses 6ab, 11-14:

yát puruṣeṇa haviṣaa deváa yajñám átanvata/
[...]

yát puruṣam ví ádadhuḥ katidháa ví akalpayan /
múkham kím asya kaú baahúú káa uurúú páádaa ucyete //
braahmaṇò 'sya múkham aasiid baahúú raajan'yaḥ kṛtáḥ /
uurúú tád asya yád vaiśyah padbhyáám súudró ajaayata //
candrámaa mánaso jaatás cákṣoh súúryo ajaayata /
múkhaad indrás ca agnis ca praanáad vaayúr ajaayata //
náabhyaa aasiid antárikṣam sírṣṇó dyaúḥ sám avartata /
padbhyáám bhúúmir díśaḥ srotáat táthaa lokáa~ akalpayan //

“When the gods prepared the sacrifice with Purusa [the *primaeval* man] as their offering [...]. When they divided Purusa how many portions did they make? What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet? The Brahman [first, priestly caste] was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya [second, warrior caste] made. His thighs became the Vaisya [third, cultivator caste], from his feet the Sudra [fourth, labourer caste] was produced. The Moon was born from his mind, and from his eye the Sun had birth; Indra

Beowulf's dragon in particular, hoard and obstruct the flow of another vital element of the world: treasure. As Calvert Watkins explains: "In Indo-Iranian it is the theme of the pent-up waters, the 'resistance' ([IE] **wr-tram*) which is the blockage of life-giving forces, which are released by the victorious act of the hero [...]. In the Germanic world we find yet another modality of symbolic Chaos. It is the dragon's 'job' [...] to guard treasure. That is, the dragon keeps wealth from circulating: the ultimate evil in a society in which gift-exchange and the lavish bestowal of riches institutionalized precisely that circulation."⁵³ In both Indic and Norse narratives the god must defeat an ancient demonic being—ettin or serpent—in order to shape the world, by means of freeing the vital *blast* held static by the demon. In Coomaraswamy's words: "[...] the Dragon-slayer [is] born to [...] take possession of the kingdom, distributing its treasure to his followers. For if there is to be a world, the prison must be shattered and its potentialities liberated."⁵⁴

Turning back to waters, we may find additional flood-imagery in *Beowulf* in the passage which describes the melting in Grendel's blood of the blade of the giant-sword Beowulf discovers in the mere, and with which he kills Grendel's mother and decapitates Grendel's body:

and Agni were born from his mouth, and Vayu [wind] from his breath. Forth from his navel came mid-air, the sky was fashioned from his head. Earth from his feet, and from his ear the regions. Thus they formed the worlds."

⁵³ Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon* 300. Though, following Leisi, "Gold und Manneswert" 259-273, and Michael D. Cherniss, *Ingeld and Christ: Heroic Concepts and Values in Old English Christian Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), esp. ch. 4, treasure would also appear to function as the material representation (or manifestation) of honor, worth, etc.

⁵⁴ "The Hindu Tradition" 267.

þæt wæs wundra sum,
þæt hit eal gemealt ise gelicost,
ðonne forstes bend Fæder onlæted,
onwinded wælrāpas, se gewæld hafað
sæla ond mæla; þæt is soð metod. (1607b-11)

That was a great wonder, that it all melted, most like ice
when the bonds of frost the Father loosens, unwinds
water-ropes, He who has control of times and seasons;
that is the true Creator.

This also seems to echo the image of a divine flood directed against giants (1687ff.), and may reflect the connection, discussed above, between a giant-killing flood and the creation of the world. Indeed, Viswanathan⁵⁵ points out that this passage in *Beowulf*, which compares the melting of the blade of the giant-sword to God untying the bonds of frost and letting flow the frozen sea, also suggests God's release of a flood to destroy his enemies (thus linking the destruction of the Grendelcynn by the sword with the destruction of the giants by God's flood). Although the epithet of *fæder* may well have been chosen primarily for metrical reasons, its use in *Beowulf* is nonetheless uncommon in reference to God and does seem to point to the progenitor aspect of God, *sæla ond mæla* also suggesting Creation.

Though it is possible that along with the story of Cain, the *Beowulf* poet learned some biblical story of the flood, the poem's references to a flood appear to have a greater debt to Northern legends for it makes no reference to Noah, or an ark, or the effect of the flood on anyone except giants. Thus the Cain episodes of *Beowulf*, though drawn from Judeo-Christian mythology, are well-integrated into a Germanic *Weltanschauung*; and the references to the "Flood" appear to be strongly grounded in old pan-Indo-European myth. Or, rather, this is to say that we are observing

⁵⁵ S. Viswanathan, "On the Melting of the Sword: *wælrāpas* and the engraving on the sword-hilt in *Beowulf*," *Philological Quarterly* 58 (1979): 360-3.

basic Indo-European “*śruti*-myths” elaborated by “Christian *smṛti*.”⁵⁶

That we would find Christian elements, such as the story of Cain and Abel, within a poem which is otherwise, in both tone and content, Germanic, is not surprising considering what we know of the nature of the early missions in England. Pope Gregory’s letter to Mellitus directs him to instruct Augustine not to tear down heathen shrines, but rather to build temples on top of them.⁵⁷ A programme of accommodation by the Church could

⁵⁶ Cf. “[T]he passages in *Beowulf* concerning the giants and their war with God, together with the two mentions of Cain (as the ancestor of the giants in general and Grendel in particular) [...] are directly connected with Scripture, yet they cannot be dissociated from the creatures of northern myth, the ever-watchful foes of the gods (and men). The undoubtedly scriptural Cain is connected with *eotenas* and *yŷfe*, which are the *jötnar* and *álfar* of Norse. But this is not due to mere confusion—it is rather an indication of the precise point at which an imagination, pondering old and new, is kindled. At this point new Scripture and old tradition touched and ignited”—J. R. R. Tolkien, “*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936), 245-98, reprinted in *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*, ed. R. D. Fulk (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1991) 14-44, at 30.

⁵⁷ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, trans. L. Cecil Jane (London: Dent, 1927) I.30: “I have, upon mature deliberation on the affair of the English, determined upon, viz., that the temples of the idols in that nation ought not to be destroyed; but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be made and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected, and relics placed. For if those temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God; that the nation, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may remove error from their hearts, and knowing and adoring the true God, may the more familiarly resort to the places to which they have been accustomed. And because they have been used to slaughter many oxen in the sacrifices to devils, some solemnity must be exchanged for them on this account, as that on the day of the dedication, or the natiivities of the holy martyrs, whose relics are there deposited, they may build themselves huts of the boughs of trees, about those churches which have been turned to that use from temples, and celebrate the solemnity with religious feasting, and no more offer beasts to the Devil, but kill cattle to the praise of God in their eating, and return thanks to the Giver of all things for their sustenance; to the end that, whilst some gratifications are outwardly permitted

easily lead to an Anglo-Saxon understanding of Christian instruction as a sort of *smṛti*, a sort of supplemental knowledge of the world, rather than new conception of existence.⁵⁸

Concerning expressions which are unlikely to have a non-biblical source,⁵⁹ e.g. *ylða bearn* “sons of men” (70a, 150a, 605a), one can imagine that they were introduced into the poetic repertoire in the same way as Christian legends such as Cain and Abel. To be more precise, it would be odd if none of the missionary work in England was carried out by *scopas* who sang versified biblical stories in the traditional heroic manner. Indeed, it is easy to imagine poems such as *Judith* or *Exodus* being sung in just this way as a part of a programme of conversion. Bede’s story of Cædmon (IV.24) and the anecdote of Bishop Aldhelm on the bridge acting the role of a minstrel, weaving Christian doctrine

them, they may the more easily consent to the inward consolations of the grace of God [...].”

⁵⁸ James C. Russell, summarizing Walter Baetke, *Die Aufnahme des Christentums durch die Germanen: ein Beitrag zur Frage der Germanisierung des Christentums* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962), says “[...] while kings and nobles may have been attracted to Christianity for political or cultural reasons, for many of their subjects the reception of baptism was not the result of a conscious decision to reject their Germanic religiosity, but rather the result of a misunderstanding of the extent to which Christianity represented a radical break with their traditional thinking, feelings, and ethical behavior. Since Christianity was not initially presented to the Germanic peoples as requiring a radical break with their traditional ethos and world-view, it is not surprising that, for them, baptism did not imply such a transformation”—*The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 202.

⁵⁹ The use of the word *hæden* “heathen” seems likely also to have been learned from Christian missionaries. However as its use in *Beowulf* is consistent with a meaning of “proscribed magic,” *hæden* may have supplemented (and eventually replaced) words such as *siden*—*ðis is se halga drænca wið ælfsidene* “this is the holy drink against elf-*siden*”—which in the *Lacnunga*, entry 29, in Stephen Pollington, *Leechcraft: Early English Charms, Plantlore, and Healing* (Hockwold-cum-Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2000) 192-3, seems to be cognate with Old Norse *seiðr* (see North, *Heathen Gods* 48-56).

into popular ballads,⁶⁰ also suggest that “missionary-gleemen” likely formed part of the project of conversion. *Ylða bearn* (“sons of men”), despite its biblical origin,⁶¹ has no overt Christian sound, but surely would be recognised by a *scop* as a good verse half-line!

Material culture of the period also bears out the suggestion that Christianity may have been received as *smṛti* in some parts of England for some time: archaeological finds such as the Benty Grange helmet, adorned with boar-crest and silver cross, or the magnificent ship-burial at Sutton Hoo which reveals objects bearing Christian symbols⁶² within an otherwise “pagan” burial, or the Franks Casket which juxtaposes scenes of the gifts of the Magi to Christ next to bloody revenge of the Germanic *wundorsmith*

⁶⁰ William of Malmesbury, *The Deeds of the Bishops of England (Gesta Pontificum Anglorum)*, trans. David Preest (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002) 227-8 (V, ch. 190): “[Aldhelm] could write poems in English, compose music for them and sing or recite them as the occasion demanded. Indeed Alfred tells us that Aldhelm was the composer of a light-hearted song, which people still sing nowadays, though Alfred adds the reason for it, thus enabling him to prove that it made sense for the great man to turn his mind to apparent frivolities. The English people at that time, says Alfred, were semi-barbarians and not too attentive to teachings in church. Indeed the very moment mass had been sung, they would rush off home. So the saint himself [=Aldhelm] placed himself in their way on the bridge joining country and town, pretending to be a minstrel. He did this more than once, with the result that the people got to like it and came in crowds. The consequence was that *Aldhelm gradually inserted the words of Scripture into his ballads* and so brought the people back to their senses” (my italics).

⁶¹ Likewise, the alternation between *ylða bearnum* “sons of men” and *eorðan beornum* “sons of the Earth” in the different versions of Cædmon’s Hymn suggest that the metrically equivalent but more acceptable *ylða bearnum* may have substituted for an original, but less doctrinally-sound *eorðan bearnum*. For more on the possible pre-Christian origins of Cædmon’s Hymn, see Morland, “Cædmon and the Germanic Tradition.”

⁶² Such as the baptismal spoons engraved “Saulos” and “Paulos.” Though whether these objects have “Christian” significance in the burial, or are simply “treasure,” is hard to say. For presumably the statue of Buddha found in the Viking hoard at Helgo, near Stockholm, is “booty,” and *not* evidence of Viking conversion to Buddhism.

Weland.⁶³ Textual evidence points to the same conclusion, as in Bede's complaint against King Rædwald of East Anglia, who set up altars both to the Northern Gods and to Christ.⁶⁴

As in cosmic battles Indra slays the dragon Vritra who hoards the life-giving waters, so too Thor fights the World-Serpent;⁶⁵ the

⁶³ W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1904) 48-9, says of the casket: "Weland the smith (whom Alfred introduced into his *Boethius*) is here put side by side with the Adoration of the Magi; on another side are Romulus and Remus; on another, Titus at Jerusalem; on the lid of the casket is the defence of a house by one who is shooting arrows at his assailants; his name is written over him and his name is *Ægli*—Egil the master-bowman as Weland is the master-smith of the Northern mythology. Round the two companion pictures, Weland on the left and the Three Kings on the right, side by side, there go wandering runes, with some old English verses about the 'whale,' or walrus, from which the ivory for these engravings was obtained. The artist plainly had no more suspicion than the author of *Lycidas* that there was anything incorrect or unnatural in his combinations."

⁶⁴ "[Augustine or an assistant baptized Rædwald] in vain; for when he came back home he was led astray by his wife and certain perverted teachers, and thus depraved from the earnestness of his faith, he was in a plight worse than before; for as in the custom of the ancient Samaritans, he was seen to serve both Christ and the gods whom he had once served, and in the same temple had both an altar for the holy sacrifice of Christ and a little altar for the sacrifice of victims to demons" [...] *sed frustra; nam rediens domum ab uxore sua et quibusdam peruersis doctoribus seductus est, atque a sinceritate fidei deprauatus habuit posteriora peiora prioribus, ita ut Samaritanorum et Christo seruire uideretur et diis, quibus antea seruiebat, atque in eodem fano et altare haberet ad sacrificium Christi et arulam ad uictimas daemonium* (Bede, II.15). Russell, *Germanization*, remarks that it is likely that "the initial response [...] among the Germanic peoples [was to view] Christ as a powerful new god to be incorporated into their pantheon" (179).

⁶⁵ Þá kœmr inn mæri mögr Hlóðyniar,
gengr Óðins sonr við [orm] vega,
drepr hann af móði miðgarz véor
-- muno halir allir heimstöð ryðia --,
gengr fet nío Fiörgyniar burr
neppr frá naðri níðs ökvíð[inn].
Edda, Völuspá 56

"Then advances the glorious son of the Earth [=Thor], Odin's son, to fight against the serpent, he strikes in his anger, the guardian of the earth—all men

myth of the Storm-God battling the Dragon appears to be an enduring Indo-European idea.⁶⁶ Snorri, summing up the events of Ragnarök, tells us that *Þór ber banaorð af Miðgarðsormi og stígur þaðan braut níu fet. Þá fellur hann dauður til jarðar fyrir eitri því er ormurinn blæs á han* (Gylfaginning, *Snorra-Edda*, ed. Pálsson, 78), “Thor will be victorious over the Midgard serpent and will step away from it nine steps. Then he will fall to the earth dead from the poison which the serpent will spit at him.” Just so, the old Geatish king Beowulf, having slain the ravaging dragon, sits down, poisoned, and dies (2711b-15a). The myth of Thor, the perennial giant-killer, and his struggle with the Midgardsorm (or the Anglo-Saxon equivalent to this myth), rather than any biblical (or Judeo-Christian apocryphal) story, appears to be the ultimate conceptual base in *Beowulf*. The myth of Cain and Abel serves as a fascinating backstory for Grendel (and for *untýdras ealle* in fact), but ultimately seems to play no real role in the philosophy of the poem; the references to a divine-flood, as we have seen, stem mainly (if not solely) from the ancient Indo-European mythologem of the Storm-God and his monster-slaying.

Thus, I suggest that we should not understand *Beowulf* as a Christian poem constructed from Germanic “heathen” materials.⁶⁷

must leave their homesteads—nine steps Earth-Mother’s child [=Thor] takes with difficulty from the snake who is without fear of ill fame.”

⁶⁶ Again, see Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, and also Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: a Study of Delphic Myth and Its origins* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1959) for general discussions of the God-Dragon cosmic combats.

⁶⁷ Ursula Dronke’s view of the origin of the Norse *Voluspá* might provide a good parallel case: “*Voluspá* arises from Christian impact on Norse pagan beliefs: without Christianity as an intellectual pace-setter, there would have been no *Voluspá* such as we have it. But the poem, though it was designed under Christian intellectual influence, was designed for pagan, not for Christian ends. *Voluspá* would originate—I suggest—in the recognition that much of Christian doctrine had its counterpart in Norse: the poet [...] might be sustained by the conviction that there was no need for a Norseman to adopt Christianity in order to have a religion just as good”—“Pagan Beliefs and Christian Impact: the Contribution of Eddic Studies,” *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary*

Nor should we see the biblical references to Cain as impositions on the theme or feeling of *Beowulf* as a heroic epic. Rather, I believe, it is more informative to read the poem as composed within a Germanic heroic society, preserving the values and philosophy of that society, and freely borrowing—in a limited fashion—such outside elements and stories from the Christian tradition which do not contradict native wisdom and serve further to illuminate existing lore.

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Symposium, ed. A. Faulkes & R. Perkins (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1993) 121-7, at 122.

IN GEARDAGUM XXVII

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IN GEARDAGUM XXVII

We dedicate these essays to the memory of

Raymond P. Tripp, Jr.

(1932-2005)

The light of his works continues to shine.

*ac þær lifgað a leohhte werede,
swa se fugel fenix, in freoþu dryhtnes,
writige in wuldre. Weorc anra gehwæs
beorhte bliceð in þam bliþan ham
fore onsyne ecan dryhtnes,
symle in sibbe, sunnan gelice.*

Lines 596-601 of *The Phoenix*.