

Beowulf: Supplemental Info

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The Role of the Chieftan

- "The chieftain of the *comitatus*, or small war band, is surrounded by noble warriors, his *comites* 'companions,' who have sworn to defend him with their lives. He, in turn, is unstintingly liberal in giving them gifts and weapons. . . . Their virtues were those of reckless and absolute personal courage, loyalty to one's chief; and on the chief's part, generosity and protection. The aim was glory--the fame of 'a good name' after death.
- "In Old English heroic poetry, the chief was often called 'the gold-giver' . . . [It] indicated the Germanic custom of taking the symbolic measure of a man's worth by the amount of gold he could win through valor. Thus, the chief, by his large-handed generosity, was asserting his confidence in his man's daring and courage in combats to come; and his follower, by accepting the chief's gift, was vowing an equally perfect fidelity. Tacitus* quite rightly emphasized the bloody-minded ferocity behind the *comitatus* oath, but it was still a noble bond between men and not very far from what we now call brotherly love."

Lof Explained

- A man's good name on others' lips--in Old English *lof* 'fame, praise,' or *dom*, loosely 'the good judgment of others,' related to the verb 'deem'--was the final goal of the heroic life. It is no accident that the last word of the poem should be *lof-geornost* 'most eager for fame.'"
- "To achieve a place in such a world, a nobleman had to rely on his own personal strength, which is always an ambiguous force for others' good. . . . The Anglo-Saxons believed that life was a struggle against insuperable odds and that a man's *wyrd* or 'lot' would be what it would be. . . . Even in early pagan days, they do not seem to have believed in a supernatural conception of Destiny. *Wyrd* originally meant simply 'what happens' Perhaps it was precisely because. . . life was potentially meaningless, that they looked to the heroic notion of personal fame to find the strength to resist *wyrd*. The Anglo-Saxons had an incomparable sense of the transience and pointlessness of mortal life. Only a man's name lived on, and then only in the mouths of others, usually the poets."