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**Minnesota State University Mankato**

**The Heliand: The Warrior's Strength and the Transcendence of Faith**

**A Senior Capstone Project submitted to  
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Humanities  
Department of World Languages & Cultures**

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ABSTRACT: The research project centered on the literary text, *Heliand*, a biblical paraphrase of the Gospel originally written in Old Saxon in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout this period, Christianity was steadily spreading to the pagan lands of northern Europe. Because this initially involved a form cultural clash between the Christian and Germanic world-views, Christianity is often thought to have been an overt replacement of the earlier traditional folk-culture of these lands. The *Heliand*, though, expresses differently by drawing parallels between the old Germanic warrior culture and the Christian faith. The project examines how this is accomplished by exploring deeper into the specific foundations that defined Germanic tribal culture of the day and how the *Heliand* appealed to each element in terms of the intimacy of kinship, the heroism of individual conduct and the presence of strong spiritual forces such as Fate. Additionally, the project takes into consideration the effects of certain historical events, such as the Saxon Wars and the conversion stories of some of the major Germanic tribes, and the roles they played in the final incorporation of the Germanic culture into Christendom. In the end, this text has given greater insight on how the person of Jesus Christ, as the center of the Christian faith, could also be the ultimate embodiment of the warrior ideology of the northern peoples.

In the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, Ludwig (or Louis) the Pious, King of the Franks, commissioned a well-esteemed and praised poet of the Saxon peoples of what is now northern Germany to paraphrase the Gospel into the Saxon tongue. The name of this poet is no longer known, but his literary feat has certainly survived down to this day. This is the *Heliand*. Though surprisingly few now know of this work, it is in fact, the oldest complete work of German literature.<sup>1</sup> Ludwig's father, the famous Charlemagne had conducted a series of long and intense campaigns against the Saxons of northern Germany with aims of both extending the borders of his growing Frankish empire and of bringing the Christian faith to the heathen. This was another episode in the transitional period from paganism to Christianity for the Northern people—characterized by its turbulent nature. The work of kings, clergy and missionaries of the day was met sometimes with success and sometimes with disappointment. Quite often was the response a violent one from an indomitable culture, famed through the centuries for their war-like behavior. Often the world of Christendom and that of the tribal Germans seemed to be two opposing poles, with opposite goals and opposite morals. On one side, there was a culture that seemed to

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<sup>1</sup> Herbermann, Charles. "The Heliand." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 4 Oct. 2011 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07205b.htm>>.

flourish off of a love for war and vengeance; and on the other, a deeply contemplative belief-system focused on self-denial and humility. However, this is a rather simplistic analysis. The concept of what it meant to be of a “Germanic” cultural mind-set and what it meant to be “Christian” in that period was much more complex. A closer study of all the elements involved in this issue begins to shed more light on the parallels rather than the contrasts between the two cultures. Hence, a firm understanding of ancient Germanic culture needs to be established in order to glean a good understanding of the *Heliand* itself.

First of all, the society of the Germanic peoples was very tribal in nature, and covered a large portion of Europe by the 9<sup>th</sup> century. (see Appendix. Map A) This tribalism operated on the kinship model. At the same time, it was very much a warrior society, which propagated the hero-cult with its focus on the merits of the individual. All these elements were deeply intertwined with a strong sense of spirituality. Spirituality, in turn, was heavily influenced by a mystical perception of Fate and destiny—a concept highly venerated as a force of sovereign power. It was to these fundamentals that the *Heliand* appealed. Thus, the text need not be limited as a demonstration of a one specific event (i.e. conversion of the Saxon tribes in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries). It is actually a prime example of the transition process of the Germanic culture to Christianity. The purpose of the *Heliand* was not so much to replace the traditional Germanic society with a new, foreign Christian culture. Rather, it sought to re-work and incorporate it in the light of the new religion, portraying the character of Christ as a deeper fulfillment to the already existing culture. How was this accomplished exactly—and why?

### **The Saxon Wars**

The *Heliand*'s composition came about a generation or so after the long series of Saxon Wars, waged by Charlemagne in the traditional Saxon homelands from 772 to 804 AD. (see Appendix. Map B) Tribal fighting between the Franks and Saxons was, by no means, anything new. Both Charlemagne's

father Pepin the Short and grandfather Charles Martel had constantly made war on the Saxons and had essentially passed the custom onto the heir of the Frankish throne. (Barbero 44) Basically, these campaigns consisted of the common method of raid and counter-raid warfare. The Saxons were usually inferior in numbers to the Franks but made full use of the wild terrain of their homelands, waging a sort of guerrilla-style war—sometimes to the point of exhaustion; where they would then offer terms and pay tribute to the Franks. (Barbero 45) Yet, whenever security slackened and peace became too stagnant, they would rise up again to renew the old conflict. However, these wars against Charlemagne were to be the final episode on the generations-long struggle and bordered on what could be labeled as “religious wars.” The spreading of the faith did seem to be a motivating factor for the Frankish king to wage war; and now, more than ever, the struggle became a stressed fight between Christian and Pagan. Here Charlemagne earned his reputation for brutality—both in his war-policies and harsh methods of conversion. He penetrated deep into Saxon territory with his armies, persisting through the winter months to essentially starve the enemy into submission. Charlemagne seemed to have little mercy for vanquished opponents who refused to be baptized. Historical accounts claim that Charlemagne ordered the massacre of 4500 captive revals at Verdun. (Barbero 46) Ever stubborn and indomitable in their nature, the Saxons resisted throughout most of the period with impetuous ferocity, returning raid for raid. But Charlemagne remained undeterred in his campaign to finally eliminate any potential resistance or future threat to his kingdom, and the Saxon tribes were ultimately subdued and included in the domains of the Franks. After the shedding of so much blood, one can only imagine the massive physical and psychological damage done to both sides, but especially to that of the vanquished. Indeed, how could true conversion come from this? Origen, a scholar of the Church in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, had once said: “The process of conversion is not simply purgative, ethical or mystical; it is the continuous result of the coincidence of all three dimensions” (Russell 23). Could this sort of conversion ever come by the sword?

There were indeed elements of contrast between the world-views of tribal German and Christian cultures. Paganism of almost any tribal culture has a “world-accepting” point-of-view—that is, a system of beliefs and values that appeal directly to the physical world. Religious practice and ritual is centered on a series of gods or guardians who governed the forces of Nature. A society sustaining off of hunting, farming and pastoralism relies heavily upon the cycles and provisions of Nature. Therefore, worship was aimed at pleasing the gods in order to directly provide for the people’s temporal needs (i.e. bountiful harvests, successful hunts, protection and victory over foes, etc.). Thus their sense of spirituality was also very closely associated with the freedom of Nature. Natural features, such as forests, islands, bogs and springs that seemed timeless in their existence were used as sites of worship. Tacitus alludes to this mentality in *Germania*:

[I]n keeping with the greatness of divinities, they think it proper neither to confine their gods within walls nor to give them any likeness of human appearance: they consecrate groves and glades and call by the names of gods that intangible quality they see with the eye of reverence alone. (Tacitus 67)

However, Christian religion was, by contrast, not so much concerned with the communal provision of the physical or earthly as the spiritual needs of the individual—that is, the soul’s need for eternal salvation. In fact, the presence of hardships and poverty was often a trait of praise amongst Christians as a tool in this process. This attitude was particularly cultivated in the monastic tradition, where hard work and physical hardships were seen as a means of opening oneself towards spiritual enlightenment—a point-of-view known as “world-rejection.” (Russell 124) In this aspect, these two spiritual outlooks would seem to be opposite perspectives.

However, through its blend of the Gospel story with Germanic culture, the *Heliand* stands out as a beacon of hope for those who desired to unite clashing cultures. The name of this word-smith who

composed this work remains a mystery. However, the text may shed light on the identity of the author. First of all, due to the fact that the writing of this text was commissioned by the Frankish king, one can assume that the poet was a man of high-standing and well-renown, probably both amongst the Franks and the Saxons. In the introduction to his translation, G. R. Murphy suggests that he may have been a poet-monk and perhaps ex-warrior. (xiii) Winning fame and honor amongst peers was an important element to social life for all tribal Germans; and the most popular methods of attaining this honor was through the bold deeds of a warrior and the poetic and musical skill of the bard (known as the *scop* specifically to the Saxon tradition). Secondly, he was also seemingly very well-disciplined in the Scriptures, or at least well-instructed by those who were (i.e. the clergy). The *Heliand* really is not just a collection of choice snippets of stories from the Gospel. Rather, it is quite comprehensive of the Life of Christ, from beginning to finish. The mastery of its composition, as evidenced in its poetry and harmonious unification of the Gospel with the Germanic culture, also alludes to the passion with which it was written. Thus is the identity of the anonymous poet intriguing, if not important, because it hints at a possible “school of thought” of the day. To me, this suggests that he was not a lone eccentric; rather his sentiments and views were shared by others.

Rather than simply translating the Gospel into the Old Saxon tongue, the writer of the *Heliand* delves deeply into the underlying Christian doctrine of Gospel and seeks to shine light on it from a new angle that would speak to this particular audience—that is, the non-Latinized people of northern Europe. Reworked into the popular Germanic style of rhythm of alliterative verse, the *Heliand* is a poetic rendition of the Gospel, retold in the same manner of that of other old northern epics, such as *Beowulf*. The vocabulary is also formulated to fit Germanic ears. For example, place-names such as Rome are referred to as *Romaburg*, Nazareth as *Nazarethburg*, and so forth—the Germanic word *burg* meaning “fortress” or “castle”. Such word-choice conjures up an image of these places not as being the actual historical Mediterranean cities. Rather, they are depicted more like stockade hill-forts built by

the clan chieftains and petty kings of the north. Similarly is God, the Heavenly Father, referred to as a "chieftain" or the "King of Heaven" (German: *Himmelkönig*), thus using a terminology more familiar to the tribal hierarchical system. Such text formulation and word-choice was quite deliberate on the part of the author. Suddenly, this new, "foreign" religion may not have seemed so alien to the northern Germans, very few of whom would have seen Jerusalem, or other Mediterranean cultures.

Furthermore, Christ is portrayed as a noble-born warrior himself; his disciples, his loyal tight-knit band of warrior-companions. With this portrayal, parallels are drawn between the morals and values of the actual Gospel and those of ancient Germanic culture. In Post-Roman, Post-Migration Age Europe of the 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, where confrontation and conflict between Christian and Heathen could heighten to acts of sheer brutality and hatred, the work of the *Heliand* stands out as a unique blend of two cultures of the day that had often been at odds with one another. The author seemingly had a passion for his Christian faith, whilst retaining an obvious and deep understanding for his Germanic heritage by appealing to the strength of his people's kinship, warrior code, and spirituality.

I believe King Ludwig, as heir to Charlemagne's throne, supported the writing of the *Heliand* to serve as a healing for this people who were downtrodden, but who yet remained ever proud in the strength of their culture. Indeed, the etymology of the title "Heliand" (similar to the modern German "Heiland," meaning "Savior") stems from the ancestor of the German word "heilen", or "to heal" which can also be used interchangeably with the definition of "to redeem". Whether it was sung often in the mead-halls of chieftains alongside their own traditional heroic sagas is unknown. But considering that two copies and fragments of other versions exist,<sup>2</sup> it was probably a relatively well-respected text.

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<sup>2</sup>"Heliand." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 10 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/259944/Heliand>>.



## Christianity and Politics

The story of the conversion of the Germanic peoples was not an easy one. A major cause of suspicion towards the advancing Christian faith by pagan peoples throughout history was the political consequences with which it was often associated—mainly the fear that Christian rulers would use the faith to assert their dominion over the autonomy of the lesser tribes. Christianity first gained its major political support and sanctioning in 313 AD from Constantine, the first Roman emperor to be baptized. From this point onward, the Church no longer needed to stay in hiding and it quickly spread.<sup>3</sup> However, when missionaries started venturing further north beyond the imperial borders, they were initially viewed with great suspicion by the people they encountered. To the Germanic tribes, this was a new religion that came from a political giant whom they had resisted for centuries. Their fear, therefore, was that acceptance of this new faith would ultimately bring about Roman domination. The earliest example of this policy was demonstrated by Athanarich of the Goths, who ruled north of the Danube in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and actively persecuted Christian converts among his people as being dissidents to Rome. (Thompson 99) This similar attitude continued centuries after the end of the Roman Empire, closer to the time period around the *Heliand*. Amongst the largest of the Germanic peoples, the Franks became Europe's next super-power, whilst smaller, neighboring tribes sought to keep them from gaining any foothold on their own independence. The wave of Anglo-Saxon evangelists who worked extensively on the Continent in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries (the most notable of whom were St. Boniface and St. Willibrord) collaborated closely with the Frankish kings in their mission-work both within and without Frankish territory. (Talbot 7) For this reason, Christian mission-work was stubbornly resisted by some of

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<sup>3</sup> During the pagan era of the Empire, the Romans were relatively lenient in allowing conquered peoples to continue worshipping their traditional gods—so long as their loyalty to the emperor was not threatened. Such a policy kept the empire in a state of internal peace. This policy that promoted the emperor as a symbol that unified such a wide spectrum of cultures across much of the known world eventually gave rise to the cult of emperor-worship. Because Christians openly refused to worship the emperor, the symbol of Roman unity, they were viewed as a threat to the State. (Cross and Livingstone 1257)

the pagan kings of smaller neighboring regions, such as King Radbod of the Frisians, who viewed conversion as a Frankish tactic of enforcing their over-lordship.

Political issues were always at the forefront of contact between the several autonomous peoples and tribes of the day. But there also existed strong issues concerning cultural identity in the incorporation of the Germanic peoples to the Faith. This was almost an entirely new experience to Christendom. In earlier centuries, the majority of the Christian community existed primarily in Mediterranean cultures (i.e. Romans, Greeks, Jews, etc.). Stemming from Palestine, the faith spread rapidly within the borders of the Roman Empire. All in all, these cultures were, for the most part, city-centered with strong traditions and reliance on slave-labor. In such crowded settings, where the smaller, more familial atmosphere of the rural traditions had largely been lost, there existed a weakened social sense of kinship and family, leaving a large number of individuals alone and in a state of disparity. These conditions continued to increase toward the decline of Western Roman Empire and the solidarity of Christianity filled these “holes” by giving a spiritual “family” to such individuals. (Russell 20)

### **The Identity of the Tribesman**

These niches in Roman society where the Christian following was able to grow in strength did not exist to the same degree amongst the Northern peoples who hailed from outside the old borders of the Roman Empire. The social organization of Germanic peoples, originally stemming from earlier prehistoric groups of wandering Indo-Europeans, was rural-based and remained tribal in structure – grounded on the idea of kinship and clan (German: *Sippe*). A larger conglomeration of clans formed into the larger entity that would be considered a tribe. (Green 49) In the earliest stages, no central authority or judicial system governed the land. In such conditions, folk banded together in relatively small and very tight-knit groups based on blood-relation. Kinship, particularly in a Germanic culture, was the source of security and of solidarity of the people as a whole. In a landscape where no strong, centralized

kinship existed to keep order, one turned to his kin to find support. (Green 63) The important mentality of the clan-based model was its focus on the collective rather than the individual. A man without relatives was a no-body—an outcast unable to exert himself socially and whose lineage would quickly die from existence and memory. The individual could rely upon the solid support of his kin. From this mindset rose the system of the blood-feud. If an individual was embroiled in a quarrel, his kin were expected to fully support him in the issue, even if it came to fighting—no matter how private the dispute may seem. (Green 64) One must also remember that “kin” had a much broader definition than simply the nuclear family. Kinship meant any blood-relation that hailed from a common ancestor from an extended succession of generations ago. This network of relatives kept a vibrant form of oral traditions to keep alive the memory of their ancestors that fused the unity of the later generations. However, kinship could also be extended by means of inter-marriage with other clans. (Green 53) Furthermore, it could also include any retainers, servants and slaves (all the “dependents”) of the household. In fact, the word *Sippe* in Old High German could have meant both “kindred” and “peace”—hinting that peace, from the Germanic viewpoint, was produced from within the protective circle of one’s kin. (Green 51)

An individual could entrust his very life with his kinsmen. Tacitus describes the Germanic custom of forming up for battle in family units. (Tacitus 67) Every man stood shoulder to shoulder with his father, brothers, cousins and uncles. Even their women and children hung close by as a moral support and for the caring of the wounded. (Tacitus 67) Understanding the gravity of this familial bond could lead one to see how it even could surpass any connection that folk may have with location—i.e. ancestral homelands. This was probably best demonstrated during the Migration Age (*die Völkerwanderung*), when the whole of Europe underwent massive demographic changes due to the large and numerous Germanic populations relocating and chiseling out new kingdoms out of the lands

of the former Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup> Tribes who originally stemmed from the far north around the shores of the Baltic (such as the Goths, Vandals, and Burgundians) ended up as far as Spain and northern Africa. (see Appendix. Map C) Throughout this period of constant roaming through diverse lands and environments, they were able to maintain their entity and remained as a tight-knit, conquering force. Their sense of nationality was not tied to a grounded territory or city that could end up being hundreds of leagues away. Wherever they went, they brought their “nation” with them. For this reason, their strongest sense of “homeland” could be accredited to their kinsmen.

As always, tribal culture can be compared against Roman civilization. Romans of the previous century had their sense of identity inseparably welded to the actual city of Rome itself. To the citizens of the empire, the center of unity, wealth, civilization, of the very world itself, was Rome. Indeed, the popular phrase “All roads lead to Rome” clearly and simply illustrates this understanding. Thus is the mentality of societies formulated around the idea of a city-state as was best illustrated by the Mediterranean civilizations. City-states developed around regions where fertile, arable land was highly concentrated and enabled a well-established sedentary life-style to arise which, in turn leads to highly-intensified agriculture, population-growth and urbanization. (Scarre 194) Historically speaking, this process happened relatively early on amongst the regions clustered around the fair-weathered Mediterranean Sea. However, a tribe is fluid and is able to move here and there, whereas a city cannot. This outlined one of the plainest of contrasts between the Germanic and Latin cultures of ancient times. The Germanic clan-based model was also capable of creating extensive and viable institutions. Common

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<sup>4</sup> The Age of Migrations (*die Völkerwanderung*), which took place roughly from the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries was a period in which the Western Roman Empire, the major power-house of Europe was rapidly crumbling and the security which it had formerly supplied was rapidly declining. Various tribes from beyond borders used this as an opportunity to invade and exploit the prosperity of empire. When the Huns from the East invaded Europe in 375 AD, an avalanche of displaced tribes breached Roman territories, from which the legions had been steadily withdrawing. Infrastructure of the Empire decayed rapidly that eventually led to the sacking of the City of Rome itself twice—in 410 AD by the Visigoths under Alarich and in 455 AD by Geiserich and his Vandals. Ultimately the Empire officially came to its end in 476 AD, when the German general Odoaker deposed the last official Western Roman emperor. (Strayer 96)

ancestry was the building block to the tribe, which was simply a larger network of *Sippe*. (Green 49) The *Heliand* acknowledges this sacredness of the kinship bond by seeking to tie it into the *Sermon on the Mountain* where Christ is stressing to have love for all men of the earth, for: “they are all brothers after all, the blessed people of God, they belong to the clan, they are *family relatives!*” (Murphy 50)

### **The *Comitatus* and the Warrior Code**

Though kinship was viewed in a most sacred light, a second element existed in Germanic tribalism that could surpass even this bond—the war-band. In periods of almost constant warfare, certain chieftains with prosperous households and general success in battle attracted many young warriors from near and far, seeking to serve under his banner. Together, they would form a war-band (also known as *comitatus*) of battle-companions bound together with oaths of fealty to their leader.<sup>5</sup> In such circles, the importance of a man’s honor and loyalty took on an almost mystic aura. A warrior could not abandon his chief in battle. Idealistically, he would live and die at his side. If the chief was slain, the warrior-companion would either die there with him, or else escape with his life, but branded with eternal shame. (Tacitus 70) The duty expected of the chieftain from his warriors was also very high. Apart from promises of booty and adventure, Tacitus describes that “[I]t is shameful for the chieftain to be excelled in valor, shameful for the entourage not to match the valor of the chieftain.” (Tacitus 70) Such perceptions of personal dedication and commitment gave rise to a strong code of manhood and a growing value in the strength of individual conduct.

Warriors sought to join the bands of certain warlords on grounds of fame and success rather than family-lineage. (Green 108) Furthermore, as the Age of Migrations hit Europe, the series of wars

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<sup>5</sup> The chieftain’s household retainer was known by several names throughout the different regions of the Germanic world. Amongst the Norse they were *huskarls*, to Anglo-Saxons of England they were *pegns*, or *thanes*, and to the Saxons of the Continent (in whose language the *Heliand* had been written), they were *gesiđi*. Yet, their nature was essentially the same and became the forbearers to the future mounted knights of the Middle Ages.

and invasions between wandering tribes allowed warfare to become more full-time of a profession and probably led to an intensification of the *comitatus* model, which eventually evolved into a more aristocratic society. (MacDowall 36) Therefore, I believe the unique effect of this warrior-cult was that its importance transcended even the bonds of kin-relation where a man left his clan of birth to join a new family of adopted brothers.

### Legends in the Making

It was from the feats of these very war-bands that legends and epics surfaced. Prime examples would include Beowulf and his band of 14 Geats on the quest for action and adventure,<sup>6</sup> and Dietrich von Bern with his Arthurian-like retinue of champions. Thus is also the portrayal in the *Heliand* when Christ calls his twelve disciples. The author sought to make a direct connection between the disciples and the *comitatus* by referring to them sometimes as *jungaron* (which also interestingly survives in the modern German word for the disciples, *die Jünger*), literally translating as “young men.” (Murphy 201) The image painted in the *Heliand* is close to that of a chieftain gathering together young and energetic retainers on the eve of a war-campaign:

Then He moved mightily up onto a high mountain—the most powerful Person ever born—and sat apart. He chose for Himself twelve good, loyal men to be the followers whom He, the Chieftain, wanted to have around Him every day from this day forward in His personal warrior-company...Then the twelve walked together, fighting men headed for secret council, to the place where the wise Ruler sat, the Protector of many people, who wanted to help all of mankind against the oppressive force of Hel, the infernal power—to help anyone who wanted to

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<sup>6</sup> Beowulf and his warriors were greeted by a Danish retainer with these words: “I have never seen so bold or brave a band of foreigners, so it is less likely that you are landless strays than valiant adventurers visiting my king.” (*Beowulf* in Ringler 672-678)

follow the lovely teachings which He intended to explain to the people there with His great knowledge and understanding. (Murphy 43-44)

This excerpt intones the classic spirit of excitement in the Germanic *Heldensagen* (Hero-tales)—that of young and bold fighting men actively seeking out adventure, whose deeds and feats of strength were spread by word of mouth through the work of poets.

### **Fame and Glory and Oral Tradition**

“Cattle die, Kinsmen die, I myself shall die. But there is one thing I know that will never die: the fame of our deeds that we leave behind at our death.” (O’Donoghue 71) This old adage from the Old Norse *Hávamál* gives voice to another important element of any tribal society and yet another cultural contrast to the literate-based Romanized Christians—its oral tradition. How else can the iron bond of kinship be forged but through the faithful and vibrant memory of a common ancestor and his famous deeds, as well as those of his descendants; and thus fusing the over-all solidarity of the tribal unit? Indeed, I can imagine that in the past, when daylight had faded and no more work could be done outside, the evenings were most likely spent listening to the story-tellers. A form of writing called runes did exist amongst the ancient Germanic cultures. But unlike the alphabets of city-state cultures, runes were not used so much for the purpose of record-keeping. Rather, they were considered to be imbued with magical powers, and used for incantations and religious rites. Therefore the ancient Germans can still be considered to have been a culture mainly with an oral tradition. Because the means of passing their history from generation to generation was by word of mouth, the importance of the performing poet came into play. His trade was just as much a discipline as it was an art. He became, in a sense, the official historian of the tribe, the memory of their past. I believe that his original function naturally added to the over-all communal solidarity of the tribe, giving them a common pride. Furthermore, he

fostered also this growing importance of the deeds of the individual, adding to the repertoire of tales for the future generations.

### **The Merits and Morals of the Individual**

As the war-band model developed and formalized, so did also a stronger cognizance of the individual begin to rise. As a member of a war-band rather than a clan, a man sought to win for himself a reputation that would give him high respect from his chief and amongst his brothers:

[T]he entourage itself has ranks, in accordance with the judgment of him whom they are following; and thus there is great rivalry among a man's followers, who has the leading position with their chief, and among the chieftains who has the largest number of followers and the fiercest. (Tacitus 70)

This growth in "meritocracy" amongst members of a war-band was, in one sense, a shift of values from the kinship model. A clansman could stir up a quarrel; regardless if his act was foolish or not, and his kin were expected to give him their full support. However, a war-band was built up of men of varied backgrounds. In order to earn the trust of lord and comrades, the quality of a man was judged more heavily upon his personal actions. I suspect that this shift in mentality laid the first steps of putting Germanic culture on par with some of the Christian values concerning the individual—that is, a more heavy focus on the soul and actions of the individual rather than of the communal unit. This merging of warrior merits and Christian morals materializes in the *Heliand*. An interesting example of this is the transcription of the Beatitudes in Christ's *Sermon on the Mountain*. This part of the Gospel is considered the hallmark in defining the proper morals and behavior for the Christian life.<sup>7</sup> The modern translation

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<sup>7</sup> And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, "blessed [are] the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed [are] they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed [are] the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed [are] they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed [are] the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed [are] the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed [are] the



of the Gospel has often been interpreted in rather passive nature, and would seemingly be irreconcilable to the war-like nature of tribal cultures (i.e. “Blessed are the meek...Blessed are the peacemakers... etc.”). However, the *Heliand* delves deeper into the meaning of these teachings. A new light has been shone on these verses, whilst great care has been taken not to change the actual Scriptural reference. The fourth Beatitude, for example, (“Blessed are they which hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled”) may seem to have very inactive overtone when using words such as “hunger” and “thirst” which seem to imply the suffering individual is *waiting* to receive justice and respite. But in the *Heliand*, the verse is paraphrased as: “Those too are fortunate who desired to do good things here, those fighting men who wanted to judge fairly.” Here, the individual is seen not as one waiting to receive justice, rather more as the one *delivering* justice and righteousness. The eighth Beatitude (“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake...”) probably drives this point home in the most powerful and beautiful poetry:

He said that fortunate too are the fighting men who wanted justice, ‘and, because of that, suffer more powerful men’s hatred and verbal abuse. To them is granted afterwards God’s meadow and spiritual life for eternal days—thus the end will never come of their beatific happiness!’ (Murphy 47).

The *Heliand* wishes to convey more clearly that persecution is the result of one *acting* on truth, and is thus hard-pressed by others who are alarmed and threatened by his actions.

The issue of persecution and martyrdom has always played a very powerful and central role in the history of Christendom, especially in that of the early Church when it was still a minority in the Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. During this period, Christians suffered the brunt of

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peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed [are] they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5: 2-10 KJV)

persecution; first at the hands of the Jews then under the harsh policies of several of the emperors. Such conditions had obviously failed to stamp out the Christians. On the contrary, they continued to grow at a fast rate. As soon as folk are martyred for a cause, that cause grows in strength and charisma. Tertullian, a scholar of the Early Church said, "The blood of Christians is the seed." (Campenhausen 13) Such people who were so resolute to die for a cause quickly became heroes and a rallying point for their followers.

But the *Heliand* hones in deeper in the nature of the persecuted in the eighth Beatitude. The Christian individual here is portrayed not as one vulnerable like a sheep, exposed to the depredations of a more powerful force; rather as one who actively sought to live righteously, and extrovertly administer justice; and has consequently been persecuted for their heroic cause. The Christian warrior is beginning to receive exhortations to use his strength for the sake of justice. Could it be that some proto-chivalrous ideals are beginning to surface here?

Not only the tangible strength of skill and arm, but also the slightly more abstract strength of spirit and resolve was lauded by the warrior culture. This included his oath of fealty—that is, a warrior's oath to remain faithful to his lord; which was praised and accentuated into an empowering and mystical virtue with which the warrior became obsessed. The *Heliand* is riddled with this theme, expressed in a language of an emotional nature. The oath meant more than simple lip-service to a chieftain who would provide the physical benefits of feasting and booty. At its purest, it was a heart-felt attitude.<sup>8</sup> The sincerity of unwavering commitment is stated with boldness:

Simon Peter then spoke words of confidence, the thane said graciously to his Commander and Lord, "even if this entire group of warrior-heroes," he said, "Your warrior-companions, should desert You, I am always willing to suffer any hardships together with You! I am always ready, if

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<sup>8</sup> This attitude is expressed by the emotional language and word-choice in which the author wrote the *Heliand*. (see footnote 228. Murphy 150)

God lets me, to help You, to stand at your side without wavering. Even if these people lock You up deep in the dungeon, I have little doubt that I will stay with You in chains, lying with You whom I love so much. If they then want to take away Your Life with the blade's hatred, my good Lord, I will give my life-spirit for You in the play of weapons; and I will not give any ground as long as my mind lasts and my arm has its strength!" (Murphy 154)

This rendition of Peter's speech echoes of similar speeches made by thanes in poems like *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*. (Murphy 154) Such a speech was not considered foolish or inappropriately boastful; rather it was a cultural expectation within the war-band. The solidarity of the war-band pivoted on the personal commitment of the individual. The personal power of the individual thane himself pivoted on his oath. His loyalty was the source of God's blessing. Thus in the *Heliand*, when Judas broke his oath to his lord and his companions, he committed one of the most serious crimes in Germanic eyes, and this naturally resulted in God ultimately abandoning him. (Mierke 154) The word-smith of the *Heliand* takes great care to distinguish the actions of Judas the Traitor and of the rest of the disciples, who do eventually abandon Christ when he is arrested by the Jews in Gethsemane. Judas' crime was fully intentional and was carefully planned on his own initiative.

However, this is not so with the other followers. Peter's oath-speech to remain loyal and steadfast is sincere. As the chiefest of the disciples, Peter is described with great affection by the *Heliand*, with several references to his great strength. The ultimate reason to his failing, however, is attributed to forces that are beyond his human strength—namely the will of God. The episode of Gethsemane, where Christ is arrested by the Jews, is also retold in an interesting manner by the *Heliand*. Here, when the band of Jews advance to capture Jesus, his loyal companions initially perform their expected duty: "Christ's followers, wise men deeply distressed by this hostile action, held their position

in front.” (Murphy 160) One visualizes the disciples forming a defensive shield-wall<sup>9</sup> around their master. Again, Peter stands out from his comrades in his actions:

Then Simon Peter, the mighty, the noble swordsman flew into a rage; his mind was in such turmoil that he could not speak a single word. His heart became intensely bitter because they wanted to tie up his Lord there. So he strode over angrily, that very daring thane, to stand in front of his Commander, right in front of his Lord. No doubting in his mind, no fearful hesitation in his chest, he drew his blade and struck straight ahead at the first man of the enemy with all the strength in his hands [...] (Murphy 160)

His violence in the Gospel has often been interpreted by preachers and theologians as a rash and hot-headed reaction. True, the *Heliand* does also depict him in a state of berserk rage. However, his actions are described with a more noble nature. Peter here is a professional fighting man who is simply doing what any warrior ought to do when his lord is under attack—move to the front and address the threat.

### **Single-Combat and the Hero-Ideal**

The desire to prove the worth of oneself in battle had established a more solid image of the individual in the Germanic ethos. From this spawned also a fascination in the idea of single-combat. The custom of challenging an opponent, usually on the eve of a battle, arose from the professional warrior class of Germanic society, where champions would fight out a dispute alone and unaided by their comrades. Such a practice had many practical advantages. In ancient warfare, pitched battles could indeed be risky affairs, being very costly in lives and resources. Allowing a dispute to be settled at the hands of a designated champion provided a favorable option that spared much risk, as well as boosted the morale of the on-looking comrades. Additionally, such a custom offered the opportunity of

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<sup>9</sup> The shield-wall was a defensive formation classic to the Germanic peoples, where warriors would form up around their leader, standing shoulder to shoulder, with each man overlapping his shield with the man next to him. This created a fish-scale effect, resulting in every man being steadied by the interlocking shields of his companions.

winning recognition amongst peers in a highly-competitive war-band society. (McDowall 59) Single combat was so engrained in society that it was also eventually incorporated as a means of settling private disputes between two parties; which in turn, evolved into the elaborate art of dueling. The sagas from Scandinavia are riddled with accounts of duels fought to solve grievances. By 501 AD, King Gundebald of the Burgundians formalized the duel into the judicial system of his subjects; which subsequently spread throughout all of Europe. (Baldick 12) Essentially, if a man was willing to risk his soul by swearing his innocence in a court-case, then he should be willing to risk his body as well, by defending his word with his sword.

### **Christianity and the Feats of Strength**

Ancient Germans seem to have had the ultimate respect for the display of personal strength and resolve. In a culture where the perception of physical and spiritual worlds often blended, feats of strength could also take on both a physical and spiritual form. I believe this was a major factor of influence in the conversion of the Germanic tribes. Of course, the methods at which early evangelists reached out to the tribes were varied, and were met with different results. However, the bold and rather confrontational attitude, particularly of Anglo-Saxon evangelists, was probably the most common trait that has clearly left an impression on modern scholars and historians: “[T]he Anglo-Saxon approach to missionary preaching [...] concentrated on stressing the power of the Christian divinity and the positive virtues of Christianity.” (Russell 195) This method of spreading the faith was especially daring and direct—always blatantly emphasizing the *strength* of the Christian God. St. Willibrord in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century openly desecrated an island considered sacred by the locals by drawing water from a certain spring whilst he was travelling through Frisia. Afterwards, with seemingly little tact, he went before the local king and bluntly told him to give up his pagan worship and turn to Christ. (Talbot 10p.)

Perhaps the most well-known story of confrontational evangelism, though, is that of St. Boniface (also known as Winfrid), the Apostle to the Germans.<sup>10</sup> This daring Benedictine from England made a serious break-through in his career when he felled the Donar's Oak near what is now Geismar in Hesse, Germany. This tree had been consecrated to the god Donar (i.e. Thor) by the local tribe, the Chatti (forbearers to the Hessians). Upon reaching the locality, Boniface seized an axe, and began chopping at the oak. Presently, a great wind blew up and sent the tree crashing down. The horrified tribesmen looked on, expecting Donar to strike the mad missionary down at any moment. However, the divine retribution never came and Boniface remained unscathed and ever so resolute. Apparently, this event had such a profound effect on the Chatti that they converted there on the spot. With the very wood of the fallen oak, Boniface built a church. The evangelist did indeed meet his death later on in Frisia at the hands of locals who were enraged at his doings. However, the significant success of this man's works is undeniable—that is, the firm establishment of Christianity in the German homelands beyond the old Roman border. How could have this open desecration been an appeal to the Germanic point-of-view? It could possibly be that this was translated as yet another form of single combat. When Boniface let his axe bite the wood of the sacred oak, he was, in a sense, the “champion” of Christ issuing forth a challenge to the god Donar to fight. When Donar seemingly failed to answer, it was plain to the on-looking Chatti tribesmen, that the victor of this “trial by combat” was unquestionably the God of Boniface.

A passage in the *Heliand* also alludes tantalizingly to the Boniface story. In his *Sermon on the Mountain*, Christ claims to his hearers that he did not come to destroy the ancient laws of the Old

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<sup>10</sup> The fully-detailed stories of the lives of Willibrord and Boniface can be recounted in C. H. Talbot's *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries In Germany: Being the Lives of SS. Willibrord, Boniface, Sturm, Leoba, And Lebuin, Together With the Hodoeporicon of St. Willibald And a Selection From the Correspondence of St. Boniface*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1954.

Testament rather to *fulfill* them (Matt. 5:17). In the rendition of the *Heliand*, Christ's words read as follows:

Do not think for a moment that I have come to this world to destroy the old law, to chop it down among the people...I did not come to this world to fell the word of the prophets, but to fulfill them; to increase them and to make them new again for the children of men, for the good of this people. (Murphy 49p)

Though Christ is referring to the law established by Moses in the Old Testament that had outlined the formation of the Jewish religion and culture, I suspect that the author of the *Heliand* believed this could also apply to the Germanic culture. When he translates the Gospel passage to use words such as “chop it down” and “fell the word of prophets”, the author may have been hinting at the heathen shrines placed in groves and forests—not unlike Donar's Oak. If this were indeed the case, then one would be initially tempted to think that perhaps the author was disapproving of Boniface's harsh acts of desecration. But one must remember that the story does not end there. Boniface goes on to build a church *from the wood of the oak*. This does not mean an abandonment of an entire culture. Yes, of course the divinities who were worshipped changed; and the culture underwent changes. But instead of being replaced, it underwent transformation, renewal and hope.

Such harsh and seemingly reckless methods carried out by the Anglo-Saxon monks may be rather difficult to comprehend to people of the tolerance-focused 21<sup>st</sup> century and one would could not help but wonder whether such tactics would be truly effective in administering an actual genuine conversion.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the case, conversion was by no means a process of exclusive “Latinization” of

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<sup>11</sup> Many would attribute the missionaries' success to the fact that they gave and received support from the current super-power of the European continent at that time—the Franks. Conceivably, there was a sort of intimidation factor involved for the smaller neighbouring tribes to accept the same religion of the Frankish kingdom. Perhaps this may have been an initial influence. However, this was most likely not the core factor. As discussed earlier, the tribes were fully capable of challenging Frankish rule whenever security slackened. Also, an important fact to note

the heathens. In fact, considerable cultural adaptation took place in the Christian world to accommodate the Germanic peoples. (Russell 38) The Franks and Anglo-Saxons notably converted to Christianity whilst retaining significant “Germanic” elements in their culture. For example, the Anglo-Saxons, when converted by St. Augustine of Canterbury in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, did not destroy their heathen temples. Rather, they re-consecrated them into churches for the celebration of the Mass. Likewise some of the former pagan feasts and rituals were not to be discarded. The bulls used for sacrifice to the old gods were to be slaughtered to feast the people as a thanksgiving to their Creator. (Russell 190)

However, an even more significant Germanic element was a heavy spirituality that accompanied the waging of war. This went beyond the more tangible/physical reasons to take up arms. A common practice amongst the Germanic peoples in earlier days had been to appeal to their war-gods on the eve of battle, including taking sacred images or talismans from their groves of worship to inspire bravery, and ultimately victory. (Tacitus 67) Such actions demonstrate how tightly intertwined their religious spirituality was with their warrior culture. These beliefs were again embodied in the story of Chlodwig (Clovis ) the First—the first major king to unite the Frankish tribes. In a pivotal battle against the Alemannic tribe, he was the first to openly appeal to Jesus Christ rather than his traditional folk-gods. According to Gregory of Tours, Chlodwig had been frustrated by the lack of success from invoking his own gods and became convinced that they had no power.<sup>12</sup> Having made this leap of faith to put his trust in a new god, he won a resounding victory, which proved to be the beginning of the consolidation of the Frankish Kingdom. In the feats of strength, manifested in the form of the physical battle, Chlodwig and his Franks proved to be the strongest. Yet there existed another aspect that went beyond

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is that no major cultural movement amongst the Germanic peoples materialized to restore the old-time religion. Of course, there were small, local incidents, but nothing on the scale of that of the Roman emperor Julian (known as the Apostate) who had earlier made a desperate push to completely reverse the religion of the empire and return to the old pantheon. Rather, the conversion of the Germans took a sure and steady, progressive pace. (Russell 38)

<sup>12</sup> Taken from the *History of the Franks*, written by Gregory of Tours in the 6<sup>th</sup> century



the battle of flesh and blood armies. A struggle of a strong symbolic or spiritual dimension also was present, pitting the strength of the old gods against that of the Christian god. In the end, Christ proved to be the strongest; and had essentially taken the role of Wotan, Donar or Tiw as the god of victory. When viewed in this light, Christ had risen to be the ultimate champion or fulfillment to their culture.

### **The Epic Struggle of Good vs. Evil**

Born from the ideal of the champion of single-combat was also the ideal of the lone hero battling the insurmountable odds. Of course, prime examples (and probably the most well-known) from Germanic literature would be Siegfried of the *Nibelungenlied* and his fight with Fafnir the dragon; and also Beowulf, who slew the gargantuan, man-eating monster Grendel. The stories of these heroes are transformed into the stuff of legend; for these protagonists are on a *righteous* quest, battling a seemingly undefeatable force of evil. This is the classic ideology of the Good vs. Evil, the Light vs. the Darkness—an ideology with which Man has always been fascinated, down to the present day. The *Heliand* was written to be an equivalent story—namely Christ, the Son of the King of Heaven and his war and triumph over Satan and the forces of evil. The episode of the Temptation of Christ (Matt. 4.1-11) has been precisely transformed into this light. Christ wanders through the wilderness for forty days and nights to seek out the Devil to do battle with him. He takes no companions with him; no form of aid—this is his test of mettle as a champion:

He did not have any people with Him, no men as companions; this was as He chose it to be. He wanted to let powerful creatures test Him, even Satan, who is always spurring men on to sin and malicious deeds” (Murphy 36).

Christ’s subsequent “single-combat” with the Devil echoes of Siegfried seeking out the dragon’s lair in the dark forest and Beowulf penetrating deep into the thick Danish marshes to chase down Grendel’s mother. Additionally, Murphy notes on how the *Heliand* puts a new meaning of the reason for the long

forty days of fasting as a demonstration of Christ's sheer strength and power that the evil one was too frightened to approach him. (37) Even the setting is painted to relate to the Germanic audience. Rather than the usual barren wasteland of Judea, the *Heliand's* portrayal of the "wilderness" in which Christ is wandering is made out in a different manner: "The happy Child of God remained for a long time in the deep forest [...]." (Murphy 39) The word-choice of the author here clearly made the setting to be more similar to the untamed woodlands of the north! To the author, the Temptation was the first battle in Christ's war against the Devil to win Mankind back to redemption. Such epic, martial imagery accompanies this episode, as the two adversaries near each other: "Then the Ruler's Child hardened His heart and stiffened His mind against the blasphemer—He wanted to win the heaven-kingdom for people." (Murphy 37) At the end of the episode, Satan's offensive (i.e. attempts at tempting Christ to sin) is confounded: "Now the holy Christ did not want to listen any longer to this loathsome word, and so He drove him away from his favor, He brushed Satan away.....Then the malicious destroyer, in a very worried mood, went away from there...returned to the valleys of Hel." (Murphy 39)

### **The Workings of Fate and Spiritual Warfare**

The portrayal of the individual in the heroic light, I believe, is taken further into the spiritual dimension towards the climax of the Gospel. Christ does indeed finally meet his death. In the Passion story of the Gospel, he is eventually abandoned by his comrades, arrested, tried by an angry mob and crucified. Obviously, a warrior audience would initially object to this seemingly passiveness of Jesus. How could this so-called Savior be a great hero? He does not even die fighting against insurmountable odds with his faithful thanes at his side! This sentiment is carefully explained as the result of yet another powerful force in the Germanic belief system—the workings of Fate. In Germanic mythology, Fate takes the form of a well called Urth. From the waters of this well is Life itself sustained. Urth is tended by three demi-goddesses, who represent the Past, Present and Future. These weave together

the destinies of men (Bauschatz 5). Urth and the Norns do not seem to be governed by the gods. Rather, the gods hold the Norns in a deep reverence. Indeed, the head-god Wotan (i.e. Odin) obtains his wisdom in exchange for one of his eyes from the well of Fate. Fate, in the Germanic mythology, has also predestined the apocalyptic battle of Ragnarök (in German, “die Götterdämmerung” or “Twilight of the Gods”) that will signify the doom of the gods. The gods are unable to evade it, powerless to alter the will of Fate. This is their destiny. Therefore, they can only prepare for it. (Page 63) The important point to glean from this is that the abstract concepts of Fate and prophecy were extremely revered by the northern peoples—so much that it surpassed the strength and capabilities of even their nature gods in being a deciding factor. Yet, through all the blood and turmoil of Doomsday, the seed of hope seems to remain. Life survives the apocalyptic struggle and is reborn.

Many specific instances in the *Heliand* have made the purposeful mention of Fate. Its most frequent role is during the Passion of Christ (His betrayal, trial and crucifixion) in which it is equated with the will of God. Again, oath-bound warriors would be outraged at the actions of Peter, when his initial courage failed him and he ended up denying his lord and chieftain. Yet the author of the *Heliand* carefully explains this as what God had willed to happen—or, the workings of Fate. Christ is arrested and brought before the Jewish council. Peter follows from a distance and is coincidentally recognized by someone as a being one of Jesus’ men.

He [Peter] did not want to admit it in the slightest, and so he stood there contesting it, and swore a strong oath that he was not a member of that warrior-company. He had no control over his words. *It was supposed to happen that way. It had been thus determined by the One who is the Protector of mankind in this world.* (Murphy 164)

The significance of this passage is the fact that it appeals to the warrior’s consciousness of outside forces that overrules the will of the mind and body. If Fate, a force greater than the strength

and will of man, which spells out even the destiny of the old pantheon of gods, was thus identified as the Will of God, then the Christian God has been given the prevalence over any other force—both divine and earthly. This also explains Christ's lack of physical resistance to his enemies throughout the Passion story. The warrior spirit has been taken to the spiritual level. Christ lets his enemies mock and slay him because the *real* foe is not a human foe—rather, it is Satan, the prince of Darkness: “but the Chieftain of Peoples bore it all with strength because of His love for human beings.” (Murphy 181)

### The New Face of Fate

Again the Good versus Evil theme surfaces as the *Heliand* author brings Satan again into the story. Satan realizes that his defeat is spelled out if Jesus is allowed to be crucified. Up to this point, Mankind has been in a state of separation from God by their rebellion and sin. But by the spilling of his own divine blood instead of that of Mankind, Christ will release Man from the condemnation of sin, and thus from the dominion of the Devil. Therefore, Satan actually does everything in his power to keep Jesus from being killed, so that he may maintain his clutches on Mankind. (Murphy 179) But nothing can alter what had already been predestined; and Christ dies nailed on the cross: “All of this was just the way He wanted it and had predetermined beforehand for the benefit of mankind, the sons of men. Now it had all come to pass.” (Murphy 188) In his commentary, G.R. Murphy notes the significance of how these last sentences state that Christ had fulfilled destiny—in other words, *he is the embodiment of Fate/God's will*. This would settle any dispute to his divinity.<sup>13</sup> I believe this identification of Christ with Fate fulfilled another element of Germanic culture. Firstly, it re-affirmed the previous perception that Fate was supreme and sovereign in deciding the destinies of men. But finally, it gave Fate more of a personal identity. Fate has often been perceived as a very abstract, neutral and distant force, even cold, being closely associated with death. But in the *Heliand*, Fate is embodied in the form of a Savior who is

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<sup>13</sup> “In Germanic cosmology there may be no more ultimate way of stating Christ's divine status.” (footnote 302. Murphy 188)

both God and Man. Suddenly, Fate sheds its distant and mysterious aura; and takes on meaning of purpose and hope.

### **The Ultimate Hero**

Of course, this story is full of conflict and death. But it does not end at the Crucifixion. As in Ragnarök, the element of life and hope is preserved to rise out of the ashes of turmoil. In the *Heliand*, Hell is interpreted as Hel, which was the Land of the Dead in northern mythology. Christ rises again from the tomb, proving that not even Death can keep hold of him:

It was not long then until: there was the spirit coming, by God's power, the holy breath, going under the hard stone to the corpse! Light was at that moment opened up, for the good of the sons of men; the many bolts on the doors of Hel were unlocked; the road from this world up to heaven was built! Brilliantly radiating, God's Peace-Child rose up! (Murphy 191)

Siegfried and Beowulf eventually meet their deaths in each of their tales. Wotan and the other gods are slain in their apocalyptic battle with the forces of evil. Christ alone rises again, thus conquering the ultimate enemy, Death itself. This was the core purpose to the writing of the *Heliand*—to sing of Jesus Christ and prove that he is the greatest hero-champion by his ultimate quest to save Mankind from the forces of darkness. Indeed, one needs only read the opening lines of the book: "There were many whose hearts told them that they should begin to tell the secret runes, the word of God, the famous feats that the powerful Christ accomplished in words and in deeds among human beings." (Murphy 3)

In writing the *Heliand*, the author aimed to demonstrate how Christ did not dislodge the Germanic culture, but has embodied the epitome of strength on the different levels of ancient Germanic society. In the first stages, his teachings appealed to the solidarity of kinship. But furthermore, he rose beyond the simple ties of blood-relation, appealing to the close camaraderie and brotherhood of the

war-band. The strength of the character of Christ surpassed that of any other hero, for his was the hand of Fate itself, able to wage warfare on the spiritual level. Therefore, where Christendom may have been previously tailored to the urbanized Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds, works such as the *Heliand* stand out as proof that certain ideals of the Christian faith could incorporate the warrior society of the north as well. Christ seemed to satisfy elements of culture; but at the same time he also transcended culture—not discarding it, but giving it deeper meaning.

### **The Past and the Present**

Of course, the question that remains is how this closer analysis of the *Heliand* ties into the broader spectrum of history. Does it at all relate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Indeed, the perception of the world has gone through much change since the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The present age claims to be very much reliant upon the power of scientific observation and empirical analysis. Nevertheless, spiritual faith and religion, which cannot be so easily measured or weighed empirically, continue to remain influential factors in the functions of human society. Religion and culture have always gone hand-in-hand with one another. Hence rages the debate on whether spiritual perceptions and beliefs are influenced by a culture, or if cultural changes are the results of underlying spiritual beliefs. Perhaps elements of truth lie in both perspectives. But the *Heliand* sheds light on how this faith in Christ that had originally stemmed from the distant lands of the Jews expanded with effective rapidity over a wide spectrum of cultures—even the fierce warrior cultures of northern Europe.

Scholars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have the advantage of being able to study the progression of historical events and observe how one led to another. With the coming of Christianity to northern Europe, the presence of the warrior culture, by no-means died out. Rather, the Age of Migrations gave way to the Age of Faith, and the old Germanic warrior class evolved and flourished into the knightly class of the High Middle Ages. Chieftains and thanes eventually became lords and knights and the ideology

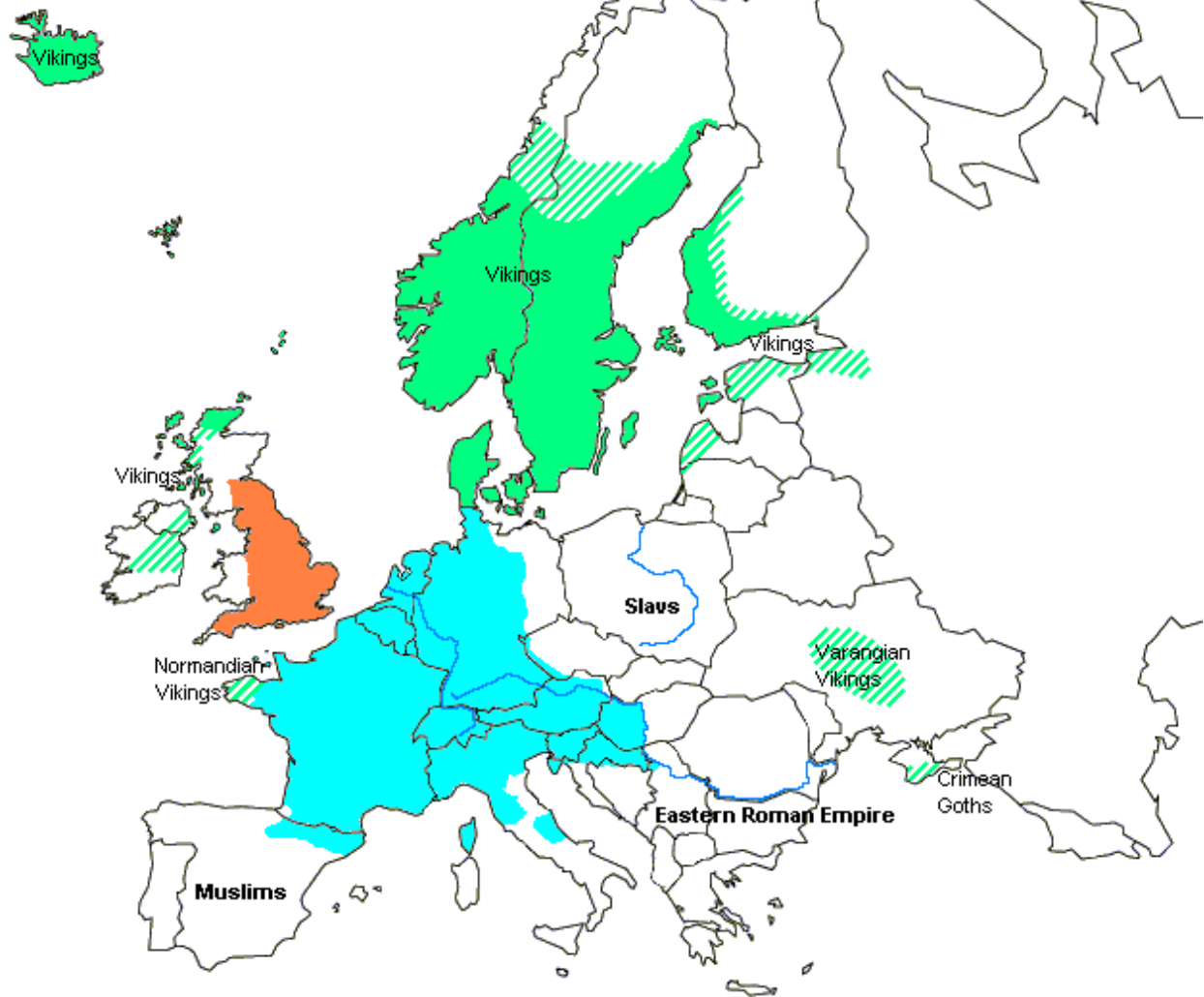
and romance of chivalry blossomed. This new development in the warrior code became even more fused with the religious passion and piety of the day and the ideal of the righteous hero, or savior of types, battling evil and wrong-doing reached its pinnacle of popularity. However significant social organization, government, technology and even religious worship may seem to have changed over the millennia, this idea has clearly remained a strong fascination throughout. Therein lies proof that the people of today continue to retain traits of the past, as well as an underlying sense of familiarity with their ancestors.

Appendix

Map A:

Germanic tribes in Europe 9th century AD

- Green = Germanic tribes
- Cyan = Franconian empire
- Orange = Anglo-Saxon kingdoms





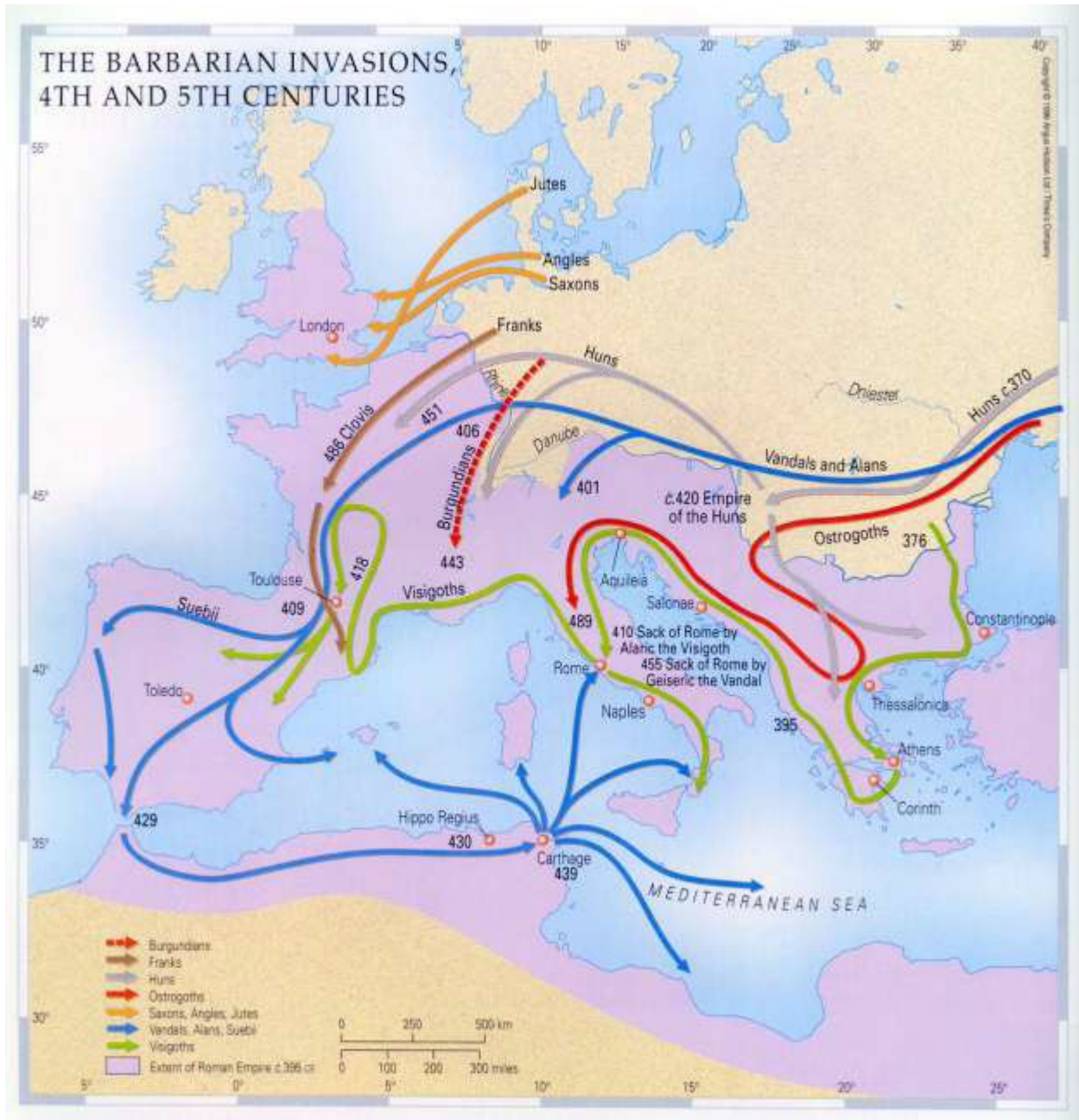
**Map B:**

**Early Saxons and their neighbors (9<sup>th</sup> century AD)**



Map C:

Age of Migrations



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### Professional Bibliography of Nathanael Rhody

My name is Nathanael Rhody. Currently, I am working towards a Double Major in German and in Scandinavian Studies at Minnesota State University Mankato. I completed *The Heliand: The Warrior's Strength and the Transcendence of Faith* during my junior year as a Capstone project for my German Bachelor of Arts degree. I grew up in South America and have been overseas several times—either as a volunteer farm-hand or a student. This included a year in Erlangen, Germany from 2010-2011 when I went on the Study Abroad program to study and immerse myself in German language and culture.

Future plans after finishing my Undergraduate degree remain hitherto loose and uncertain. However, I hope to get involved in a career that will enable me to live overseas in non-English speaking countries again.

### Faculty Mentor Biography

Nadja Krämer received her Ph.D. from Indiana University, focusing on the German colonial imagination and national identity through the construction of colonial space. Her research centers on issues of race and identity as well as minority and popular culture. She is interested in film studies, urban studies and the practice of place. During the Academic Year 2012/13, she is on sabbatical leave to work on her book project regarding fascism and "völkisch" concepts of urban planning of the early 20th century. She is Associate Professor of German at Minnesota State University, Mankato.