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Germanic Heroic Ideals in Anglo-Saxon Christian Poetry: The Language of a New Comitatus

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Germanic Heroic Ideals in Anglo-Saxon Christian Poetry: The Language of a New *Comitatus*

Abstract

The Roman historian Tacitus once identified a code of ethics peculiar to Germanic warriors as the *comitatus*. *Comitatus* was defined as the lord-retainer relationship, which elevated loyalty above all other virtues. This loyalty was demonstrated with courageous acts in battle, vengeance in return for the death or injury of a beloved lord, and receipt of gifts from that lord. Violating loyalty to one's lord was considered the most abhorrent of transgressions to a Saxon warrior. This code of ethics, strongly associated with a pagan Germanic culture, remained in the consciousness of the Anglo-Saxon people well into the eleventh century, long after Christianity had been established as the prevailing religion of England. *Comitatus* is appropriated, often paradoxically, for the Anglo-Saxon Christian faith, as is demonstrated in many of the writings. In this paper I will examine the ideals of *comitatus*, as it relates to Christianity, and the possible objectives and implications of its presence in four Anglo-Saxon Christian poems: *Genesis B*, *Exodus*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and "The Dream of the Rood." I propose that the Anglo-Saxons found fertile ground in the new Christian faith for a deeper expression of the old heroic ideals, which gradually and subsequently gave rise to a *new comitatus*.