

EVIDENCES OF CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE

IN THE EPIC OF BEOWULF.

by

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## INTRODUCTION.

### Subject and scope of the thesis.

The subject and the subject-matter of this thesis are by no means new. The question as to the genuineness, strength, and extent of the Christian influences in the epic of Beowulf has been argued pro and con for many years; and a set of four articles on these influences has been published, amounting to more than one hundred pages of close print. (1) Yet, though there is little concerning the controversy that has not been worked over many times, something more may be said. New thought may be brought to bear upon the old material; new combinations of evidences may show Beowulf in a stronger Christian light than heretofore, to the extent of furthering the theory that this poem is Christian in spirit. Such is the object of the present thesis.

### Present state of the Beowulf controversy.

The present state of the Beowulf controversy is one of quiescence. To-day the principal exponents of its two sides are William Witherle Lawrence, who holds that the poem is heathen in spirit, and his opponents, the two greatest living Beowulf scholars, Frederic Klaeber and Raymond Wilson Chambers. Lawrence's most recent work on the question, the popularly written "Beowulf and Epic Tradition", appeared in 1928; Klaeber's famous annotated edition of the Anglo-Saxon text, "Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg", came out in 1922; Chambers' monumental work, "Beowulf; an

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(1) "Die Christlichen Elemente im Beowulf." Klaeber. "Anglia" 1911-1912

Introduction," re-appeared in 1932. This second and revised edition, however, does not contain anything concerning the controversy which is not in the 1921 first edition. Since 1932 no one has stirred the embers. A few critical articles on Beowulf have been published, chiefly in "Anglia" and in "English Studies," and a new paraphrastic translation of the poem into modern English, by Ayres, has very recently come out; but concerning the controversy, - nothing. (1)

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## CHAPTER ONE.

### The Pagan Theory concerning Beowulf.

#### The most important critics.

The most important Beowulf critics on this side of the question, listed chronologically, are: F.A. Blackburn; Arnold Smithson; Henry Munro Chadwick; Henry Bradley; and lastly, Professor Lawrence. There are other Beowulf scholars, but they have not entered the controversial lists, and need not be mentioned.

#### Their arguments.

Blackburn's main contention is that the influence of the new religion on the epic of Beowulf extends no farther than the

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(1) When it was requested that I report on the present state of the Beowulf controversy whether this meant temporal or actual state was not specified. The two following chapters may be considered (if so wished) as a presentation of the actual state of the controversy.

definitely Christian passages, and that these passages, besides being interpolations, are "weak, vague, and colorless."(1) He asserts that the only evidences of genuine Christian influence in the poem are found in the mere use of the words God, Lord, and equivalent expressions. When we are told in Beowulf, "God willed it not,"(706) and "Mighty God had exalted him,"(1716) substitute fate (wyrd) for God, the critic says, and it will be seen how little of Christian influence these interpolations really express.(2) In short, remove from the poem its use of definitely Christian terms and you remove its Christianity.

The next critic in point of time, Arnold Smithson, does not confine himself to an examination of the Christian passages in Beowulf. Comparing this poem with the Crist, the Andreas, and other religious works, he finds it deficient in Christianity and sufficient in paganism. "The Christian ideals of faith, love, and sacrifice are absolutely wanting," and "the pagan ideals of strength, loyalty, courage, generosity, wisdom, and acquiescence in the decrees of fate are present."(3) There is nothing of Christianity in its fundamental conception and motivation." "It is a weakly Christianized pagan poem."(4)

Henry Munro Chadwick, a critic of much greater importance than either of the two preceding critics, has thrown all his energies

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(1) Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, 1897, vol.12. "The Christian Coloring in Beowulf." p.216.

(2) Ibid, pp.217-218.

(3) "The Old English Christian Epic," p.315.

(4) Ibid, p. 316.

into elaborating one piece of evidence which has since been proved untenable. This piece of evidence is the cremation of the hero of the poem. His argument is that Beowulf is a pagan poem which has been revised (though not interpolated) by a Christian minstrel, (1) for if the epic was originally composed by an adherent of the new religion "why should he lay Beowulf himself to rest with heathen obsequies, when in his dying speeches the hero has been made to express his faith and gratitude to the Almighty?" (2) But "if the poem was originally a heathen work the inconsistencies become perfectly natural." (2) Chadwick is certain that the account of the cremation of Beowulf is such as "no Christian poet could or would compose." (1) He also notes that "the customs and ceremonies described are almost without exception heathen." (3) but admits that "the reflections and the sentiments are largely Christian." (3) The theology he finds "singularly vague", and conjectures that the final shaper of the epic "had little direct knowledge of the new religion." (4)

Henry Bradley, though one of the outstanding critics of modern times, has, in his article on Beowulf, contributed very little to the controversy. Outside of a remark that "the Christian passages in Beowulf are poetically of no value" he has done no more than merely state the issue: that the Christian passages do not harmonize with the pagan spirit of the poem, and are interpolations. "Though there are some distinctly Christian passages, they

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(1) "Cambridge History of English Literature," p.30.  
 (2) "The Heroic Age", p.53.  
 (3) Cambridge History of English Literature," p.29.  
 (4) "The Heroic Age," p.48.

are so incongruous with the rest of the poem that they must be regarded as interpolations." (1) Ten Brink, Andrew Lang, John Clark, and other critics said as much before Bradley. Lawrence, indeed, writes of the English scholar's article, "it reflects to a considerable extent earlier opinions; it is not in line with the most advanced research." (2)

There is little that is new in the arguments of the American scholar, Lawrence. But his positions are the most recent expression of this side of the controversy, and will bear summarizing. Briefly, he maintains that although the author of Beowulf was nominally a Christian, at heart he was a pagan; (3) that "the Christianity of the poem is all on the surface" (4) and that this "veneer seems the least admirable part of the poem" (5) that "the Christianity of the characters seems imposed upon them rather than natural to them;" (4) that "the definitely Christian passages are among the poorest and weakest parts of the poem"; (4) and lastly, - unkindest cut of all, - that the poet was perhaps "not even sincere in his religious convictions, but fell into line, as he had of necessity to do." (6)

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(1) "Encyclopaedia Britannica," 11th edition, vol. 3, p. 730.

(2) "Beowulf and Epic Tradition," p. 298. Bradley has been included here principally because Chambers lists him as an opponent worthy of attention. See Chambers' "Beowulf; an Introduction," p. 121ff.

(3) "Beowulf and Epic Tradition," pp. 281-282.

(4) Ibid, p. 9. Yet he speaks of "the courtly, refined, and Christian spirit of Beowulf," p. 258. See also p. 284.

(5) Ibid, p. 15.

(6) Ibid, p. 282.

The Christian passages in Beowulf not interpolations.

Before summarizing the various views of the aforementioned critics into one consistent argument worthy of being controverted at the present day, it will be necessary to eliminate the interpolation theory. In late years this supposition has been not only out-moded, but shattered. Chambers has argued most effectively against it, (1) and Lawrence himself, concurring with the critical conclusions of modern scholars, rejects the view that Beowulf has been Christianized by a pious interpolator. "Careful research has shown that the Christian elements are in all probability not interpolated, but an integral part of the epic." (2) "The older idea, that the Christian elements in Beowulf are interpolations in an originally heathen poem is now generally abandoned. Careful study has shown no difference in style, metre, or dialect, such as would be likely to arise in the inserted sections." (3) In short, the Christian passages "are not mere interpolations, but an integral part of the work of the final poet." (4)

The pagan theory brought up to date.

In the past the pagan theory concerning Beowulf was that the poem was composed by a pagan: now it consists of the assumption that the poem is pagan in spirit. Summarizing the

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(1) "Beowulf; an Introduction," pp. 121ff, 322ff, 390.

(2) "Beowulf and Epic Tradition," p. 258.

(3) Ibid, p. 282.

(4) Article on Beowulf in Encyclopaedia Americana, 1928, vol. 3 p. 534.



theory in its present day form we obtain the following abstract: that the Beowulf poet, though nominally a Christian, was at heart a pagan; that the influence of the new religion in the epic is superficial; that this influence extends little farther than the definitely religious passages; that the Christian ideals of faith, love, and sacrifice are wanting, and that the pagan ideals are present; briefly: that the poet, although of the new religion, has not toned down the pagan elements in his epic sufficiently to justify the ~~work's~~ being labelled Christian.

*works*

## CHAPTER TWO.

The Christian Theory concerning Beowulf.

### The most important critics.

On this side of the question there are four critics of weight who have not stepped into the controversial lists. These are,- Knut Stjerna, W.J. Sedgefield, G. Sarrazin, and A.S. Cook; there are two who have entered deeply into the question: Alois Brandl and Raymond Wilson Chambers; and there is one who has almost exhausted the subject: Frederic Klaeber. Chambers and Klaeber are ~~both~~ the most recent and most important exponents of the Christian theory.

### Their arguments.

Stjerna, though not troubling himself about the

controversy, has supplied some useful material which no doubt has troubled the holders of the pagan theory. Studying the account of the cremation of Beowulf, Stjerna has proven that it is not pagan at all, but an inaccurate, almost bungling description of what the poet imagined a heathen funeral ceremony would be like.(1) As will be shown, Chambers has turned this evidence to good account.

Sedgefield's point of view is gathered from one remark: "As a pious Christian our poet reveres God, but his loathing of the devil and the devil's minions has all the bitterness of a recent convert."(2)

That Sarrazin and Cook belong on this side of the controversy we learn from their conjectures as to the author of Beowulf. The former thinks it probable that the epic is a translation from the Danish by the Christian poet Cynewulf.(3) The latter believes that the poem was composed in the learned and pious court of Aldfrith.(4)

Brandl's work on Anglo-Saxon literature has not yet been translated into English, though it fully deserves to be. This erudite critic's main contention is that the epic of Beowulf is "pervaded throughout" by a strongly Christian influence, and that this influence is especially noticeable in the character of Beowulf, the hero of the poem: "Wer die unheidnischen Elemente

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(1) Essay on funeral obsequies, in "Essays on Questions connected with the Old English Poem of Beowulf." pp.197-239.

(2) "Beowulf." Introduction to the text, p.9.

(3) "Beowulf-Studien" pp.68-108.

(4) "The Possible Begetter of the O.E. Beowulf and Widsith."