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THE CORN-HERO MYTH IN *BEOWULF*, *THE SEAFARER*, AND TOLKIEN'S "KING SHEAVE"

This paper explores the significance of the corn-hero myth in the Scyld Scefing episode of *Beowulf* and the related fragments in prose and alliterative verse composed by J.R.R. Tolkien. An underlying presence of the same myth is discovered in *The Seafarer* as well. The Anglo-Saxon interest in seafarer heroes that brought corn and culture to the land is explained in terms of Georges Dumézil's theory of three functions, and as related to the policy of peace in dealing with vikings. A more lyrical treatment of the myth in *The Seafarer* is postulated and discussed.

KEYWORDS: corn, culture, seafaring, trifunctional theory

The minuscule saga of a strange sea rover Scyld Scefing, preceding the adventures of the eponymous hero of *Beowulf*, is one of the most intriguing parts of the Old English epic. Scyld's bond with the sea, a remote echo of voyaging in Homer and Virgil, is chiefly a Northern affair. The mysterious viking[1] arrives in Denmark as a boy alone in a boat from an unknown land and likewise departs as an old man. This figure and the pattern of two journeys inspired J.R.R. Tolkien to write his fragmentary pieces about Sheaf/King Sheave.[2] A strikingly similar pattern is discernible in *The Seafarer* as well. This paper explores the significance of the mythical hero coming from and going back to the sea and examines an epic and a more lyrical treatment of this motif in each of the texts.

FROM SHIELD TO SHEAF

The lay of the Scyldings, a sort of *vorgeschichte* preceding the numbered sections of *Beowulf* (ll. 1-52), encapsulates early Danish history and provides, in particular, a catalogue of King Hrothgar's progenitors. In this genealogical opening Scyld

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[1] The term *viking*, spelled with a lower-case initial, is semantically close to *seafarer*; the Danes are usually referred to in this sense as *wicinga* (vikings) or *scipmen* in their chronicles (Damon 2000: 74).

[2] Both texts have been published posthumously by Christopher Tolkien in *The History of Middle Earth*, vol. 5, 1987, pp. 85 ff.

Scefing, the founder of the Scylding dynasty, which was a line of historical kings who ruled Denmark down to the Anglo-Saxon period, occupies a prominent place. Scyld's dubious historicity, though, begs an explanation. In Scandinavian tradition he was known as Skjǫldr, the eponymous ancestor of the Skjǫldungar, while by the time of King Alfred he was adopted as an ancestral king of the English as well (Niles 1991: 144). Accordingly, King Cnut was hailed as *Skjǫldungr*, "Scylding", in the skaldic poetry composed at his court in Winchester in honour of his Danish heritage (Carroll 2007: 346).

In his recently published commentary on *Beowulf*, J.R.R. Tolkien explains the name *Scyld*, "Shield", as a 'fiction', "that is a name deduced from the 'heraldic' family name *Scyldingas* after they became famous" (2014: 137). Scyld's second name, Scefing, relates him to Scēaf, another distant leader, though mentioned only in English sources, where the two are sometimes confused,[3] and, semantically, connects him with *scēaf*, 'sheaf'. Scēaf, a mythical ancestor, was not "the same as eponymous or fictitious", Tolkien clarifies, but belonged to "ancient culture-myths of the North" (2014: 138). Only in *Beowulf* are these two divergent traditions about the Danes, the heraldic and the mythical, fused in this way as the poet is "blending the vague and fictitious warlike glory of the eponymous ancestor of the conquering house with the more mysterious, far older and more poetical myth of the mysterious arrival of the babe, the corn-god […], at the beginning of a people's history" (Tolkien 2014: 138).

The English poet extols Scyld for his warlike and royal qualities as much as does Saxo Grammaticus,[4] but adds an extraordinary detail, not found in any other sources: "nowhere outside of *Beowulf* do we find Scyld's strange arrival and his wonderful passing narrated" (Klaeber 1941: 120). The *Beowulf* poet's original idea is stressed also by Tolkien: while Scyld's arrival in a boat draws upon ancient traditions about the mythical culture-hero Scēaf, only in *Beowulf* the hero goes back to "some mysterious land whence he had come" (2014: 151). The poet has ingeniously combined the mysterious arrival in a boat with a glorious departure in a ship to an unknown destiny. This reminds Tolkien of another mythical story, "a mysterious Arthurian departure *back to the unknown*" (2014: 139). In *The Passing of Arthur* Tennyson has captured this pattern in a verse rich with Biblical connotation, "from the great deep to the great deep he goes" (line 445); the statement could be a perfect description of Scyld as well.[5]

In Tolkien's view, Scyld Scefing is a genealogical "glorification of a rustic corn-ritual myth" (2014: 147). Interestingly, the reference to corn is present also in the name of Scyld's son, Beow, "Barley". As Christopher Tolkien recalls, his father

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[3] For example, the English chronicler William of Malmesbury in his *Gesta regum anglorum* presents Scēaf as progenitor of the West Saxon kings and refers to him the story of Scyld's wonderful arrival.

[4] His *Gesta Danorum* (*c*. 1200) is one of the most important extant historical materials about Denmark.

[5] Cf. Psalm 42: 7: "Deep calleth unto deep".

was so fascinated with "the traditions of the North Sea concerning the coming of corn and culture heroes, ancestors of kingly lines, in boats (and their departure in funeral ships)" that he wrote two pieces, one in prose and the other in alliterative verse (of 153 lines), on respectively Sheaf and King Sheave (2014: 139). Although J.R.R. Tolkien's protagonist is, in accordance with English legend, a Lombardic ruler, who comes from the deep ocean to the Longobards of the North and becomes their king, his portrayal is largely based on *Beowulf*.[6]

Tolkien, even in his prose piece, deftly imitates the characteristic Old English rhythm, alliteration, and diction, as in the following sentence, "To the shore the ship came and strode upon the sand, grinding upon the broken shingle" (2014: 139). Both of his fragments tell essentially the same story, though only the prose piece, about Sheaf, reaches the hero's departure. Thus, men find in the gold-adorned boat a fair boy clad in gold, lying asleep, with his head resting upon a sheaf of corn gleaming like gold. The sheaf is mentioned side by side with a vessel of gold filled with clear water and a harp of gold and silver, being, implicitly, as precious as these refined objects of culture, and yet the men know not what it is. Their amazement at the sight of the unknown treasure is emphasised in Tolkien's poem:

> his sleeping head was soft pillowed
> on a sheaf of corn shimmering palely
> as the fallow gold doth from far countries
> west of Angol. Wonder filled them.
>
> (Tolkien 2014: 140)

The bright sheaf is set in contrast with the "bleak dwellings" of Angol: "darkwalled and drear in a dim region / between waste and sea" (Tolkien 2014: 140).

Beowulf specifies that Scyld came as a helpless foundling, *ǣrest wearð / fēasceaft funden* (*B* 7). The phrase both stresses his miserable condition and identifies him as a nameless exile for some reason abandoned by family and friends and exposed to the waves. Scyld's destitution is mental and emotional rather than material and physical, though. He arrives in royal splendour and apparently well provided for. Exposure, frequent especially in Irish legend, did not entail material poverty (Klaeber 1941: 122). In romances, where abandoned children often appear, they are as a rule equipped with rich objects that testify to their noble origin without revealing their actual identity. Scyld was probably physically strong and capable of defending himself. Saxo writes about Skiold (I.11) that when he was fifteen years old, he was of unusual bodily size and possessed perfect physical strength and even greater spiritual maturity, and he fought battles at which one of his tender years could scarcely look on.

In his old age, Scyld foretells his departure, another solitary sea journey: his retainers prepare the funeral of their beloved king "as he bade them while he still

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[6] Old English *Widsith* merely mentions *Sceafa Longbeardum* (line 32).

wielded his words", *swā hē selfa bæd, / þenden wordum wēold* (*B* 29-30; Klaeber 1941: 126). Although his words are not quoted, the text implies Scyld's rhetorical competence, presenting him as an able word-wielder, like any good leader, such as Beowulf, and hinting at a specific, final performance.[7] Naturally, the thanes obey their king: thus, upon his departure they "decked his body no less bountifully / with offerings than those first ones did / who cast him away when he was a child" (*B* 43-46; trans. Heaney).[8] Tolkien in his prose piece likewise has Sheaf summon his friends and counsellors to tell them how he will depart: "and his lords obeying his commands while he yet ruled and had command of speech set him in a ship" (2014: 152).

Scyld's last journey may reflect a real sea-burial (in which the ship is actually set adrift), or the image may be a pure metaphor, related to "the belief that the soul after death had to take a long journey" (Klaeber 1941: 122).[9] The soul's destination was thought to be unknown. Thus, the poet states of Scyld's departure in a ship, "No man can tell, / no wise man in hall or weathered veteran / knows for certain who salvaged that load" (*B* 50-52; trans. Heaney).[10] Scyld's body is placed amidships with his back against the mast, which makes him look as if he were alive, in parallel with his first solitary voyage, while Tolkien's Sheaf is merely asleep: "Sheaf laid him upon his golden bed, and became as one in deep slumber" (2014: 152).

In accordance with the Northern custom, Scyld is surrounded in his funeral boat with treasure, *maðm*. As argued by Elizabeth M. Tyler, this noun, often collocating with *gold*, denotes archaic forms of treasure in the heroic age, particularly weaponry (2006: 233). Indeed, in the account of Scyld's funeral in *Beowulf*, solely weapons are listed between the two occurrences of *mādma* (*B* 36, 41): precious gear, battle-tackle, bladed weapons, and coats of mail.[11] The departing king's taking away of armour from the land may be read as a symbolic gesture. Tolkien, for his part, does not mention weapons at all in the account of Sheaf's departure, but lists goods of refined culture: "Treasures of gold and of gems and fine raiment and costly stuffs were laid beside him" (2014: 152). Though a great linguist and Anglo-Saxonist, Tolkien may have missed the specific implications of *maðm*, only recently observed by Tyler.

The portrayal of Scyld Scefing and Tolkien's Sheaf is therefore framed by the hero's arrival alone as a child from an unknown place and his like departure at the

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[7] Beowulf's deathbed speeches are reported at length (cf. ll. 2419-2537, 2729-51, and 2794-2817).

[8] *Nalæs hī hine lǣssan lācum tēodan, / þēodgestrēonum, þon þā dydon, / þē hine æt frumsceafte forð onsendon / ǣnne ofer ȳðe umborwesende.*

[9] Both Klaeber (1941: 122) and Tolkien (2014: 150) are certain about the historicity of actual ship-burial of Scandinavian chieftains prior to the *Beowulf* poet's day, but Ellis (1968: 39-50) does not find clear enough evidence.

[10] *Men ne cunnon / secgan tō sōðe, selerǣdende, / hæleð under heofenum, hwā þǣm hlæste onfēng.*

[11] *Þǣr wæs mādma fela / of feorwegum frætwa geǣded; / ne hȳrde ic cȳmlīcor cēol gegyrwan / hildewǣpnum ond heaðwǣdum, / billum ond byrnum; him on bearme læg / mādma mænigo* (ll. 36-41).

end of his life. In the Old English epic these boundaries are enhanced by a clear analogy with Beowulf, another outsider, whose life is similarly bracketed by two parallel episodes, the victorious fight with Grendel at the start of the heroic career and the fatal combat with the dragon, followed by Beowulf's demise. In both cases, youth is juxtaposed against old age – this is an archetypal opposition, traced back by Curtius to the Indo-European polarisation of the two gods, Varuna and Mitra, observed by Georges Dumézil (2005: 179). Medieval literature often reduces human life to its like beginning and ending, as for example in Bede's famous image of a sparrow that on a wintry night flies from the snow and cold into a warmly lit mead-hall and after a short while flies back into the dark.

In 1839 Jakob Grimm observed an interesting similarity between Scyld and the Netherlandish "swan knight" (Klaeber 1941: 122), pointing out that both heroes sail away just like they arrived, in a boat going to a strange, distant land, after completing their mission in the land of their arrival. The motif of a child transformed into a swan is deeply rooted in Northern European folklore, as illustrated by the fairy tales, notably Andersen's "The Wild Swans". The swan-knight motif is central also to Richard Wagner's opera, *Lohengrin* (1850), set in the tenth-century kingdom of Brabant and closely following medieval sources.[12] The libretto tells the story of a prince turned into a swan by a wicked sorceress; to save his sister, the princess falsely accused of murdering him, and to resolve a conflict over the royal inheritance, he brings Lohengrin, Parzival's son, from the Grail country; Lohengrin arrives in a boat driven by a swan from a far-off land and has to return there again; the swan-driven boat is already coming to take him back; but before that, the swan is turned into the young prince again. Swans in such stories are noble characters that often serve as intermediaries between the human world and an unknown beautiful realm associated with gods, or the God of all creation.

The sheaf of corn implicit in Shield Scefing's name has an analogous function. The sheaf was a religious symbol among the Northern German tribes (Klaeber 1941: 123), connected with a God-sent mythical being attributed with the introduction of agriculture. As Klaeber puts it, Scyld Scefing is a mysterious being "of supernatural, divine origin", who is "sent by unknown powers on his high mission, and when his life work is done, he withdraws to the strange world whence he had come" (1941: 120-121). Andy Orchard describes him in similar terms, as "the boy-king mysteriously sent by God from elsewhere to help the Danes in their time of greatest need" (2007: 73). In England this mythical ancestor, a divine being of fruitfulness, was deeply associated with the sea and was believed to have been born in Noah's Ark (Niles 1991: 144).[13]

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[12] Including a 13th c. anonymous French poem *Le Chevalier au cygne*, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, and Konrad von Würzburg's novel *Der Schwanritter*. In addition, Wagner studied Jakob Grimm's *Germanic Mythology*.

[13] According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* year 855, versions B and C, Scef was born in Noah's ark.

AN INTERPRETATION IN TERMS OF DUMÉZIL'S THEORY
OF THREE FUNCTIONS

The significance of the founding father of the Danes, Scyld Scefing, whose name symbolically couples sheaf and shield, is fully understandable only in the light of the trifunctional model of culture observed by Georges Dumézil behind the various social and mythological systems stemming from the same Indo-European roots: they all consist of a hierarchy of three fundamental principles of sovereignty, military force, and nourishment, which together form a functionally integrated whole.[14]

From this perspective, the name of Scyld Scefing must not be seen as signifying kingly rule in a simple way, but rather in terms of integrating the heretofore opposing functions, in particular, the higher functions of rule and military defence with the lower function of feeding and reproduction. This lower function is symbolised by the sheaf of grain with which the founder of the Danish society is associated through the second part of his name, while the higher functions are implied by his first name. Scyld's actual biography as summarised in *Beowulf* likewise illustrates all three functions. It would therefore be an oversimplification to reduce Scyld Scefing solely to "a wrecker of mead-benches" (in Heaney's phrase), or a mighty sea-king who "terrorized neighbouring tribes, creating an empire controlled by fear alone" (King 2010: 47). In fact, he is a shrewd ruler capable of exacting tribute from the neighbouring nations to enrich his own people and a generous ring-giver supported by a circle of loyal retainers and thus able to maintain peace. Most importantly, he is a father leaving behind a son and heir. All this suggests a balance of the three functions and the related values. By contrast, this kind of harmony is missing in the poem's main hero, who dies childless, leaving his people doomed to perish.

In Dumézil's theory, such mythical fullness of social and cultural order is necessary at the foundation of any tribe or dynasty to mark the beginning of its proper history, even if that history is still mythological at this initial stage. However, the state of completeness does not come ready-made from some supernatural forces ruling the world, but is achieved through a dangerous conflict, insoluble by sheer force, which can be resolved only through an integration of the two groups representing for a time distinct and incomplete subsystems of values. In Northern mythology the conflict takes the form of the Æsir-Vanir war and what it stands for. A convergence of partial values is the condition of forming the community's new, destined, and final order, while introduction of heretofore unknown values of the third function is especially important.

The founder of the Danish kingdom in *Beowulf*, "Shield with the sheaf'", symbolically represents the desired synthesis, while the meaning of his son's Beow's name, "Barley", further marks the crucial historical moment. In the opening line of the poem the Danes are identified as *Gardena*, "Spear-Danes", which underscores the

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[14] For further discussion see Littleton.

initially dominant military function. Already the first part of Scyld's name, referring to a weapon of defence rather than attack, may indicate a mitigation of the military tendencies, while the patronymic suggests a vital embracing of the values of the third function. That moment initiates the people's history, which culminates in the building of Heorot, a potent spatial symbol of culture, during the reign of Scyld's further descendant, Hrothgar. Significantly, in the mythical story weaponry is carried away from the Danish kingdom in the founding father's departing ship, just as he himself was first brought in. The praise of Scyld as good king, *þæt wæs god cyning!* (*B* 11), sums up his accomplishments in terms that imply all three functions.

Dumézil's theory allows one to make sense of the apparently paradoxical account of Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf*, whereby, as noted by Tolkien, he "came out of the Unknown beyond the Great Sea, and returned into It: a miraculous intrusion into history, which nonetheless left real historical effects: a new Denmark" (2014: 151). Although there is no evidence of Tolkien's knowledge of Dumézil, his comments and renderings of the story reveal an understanding of the myth that comes very close to the trifunctional paradigm. Tolkien certainly grasped the deeper significance of Scyld's story and reinforced it by supplying an actual sheaf of grain in his own versions, to connect the beginning of history and culture explicitly with corn and the associated values of the third function.

Indeed, Tolkien's Sheaf/King Sheave, seen in the context of his whole work, nearly exhausts a catalogue of such values. This mysterious newcomer from the West taught the people of Angol not only tillage and husbandry and the making of many things, but also new words, song, verse-craft, and rune-craft; he introduced kingship into the land; in his time the dark forests receded and there was plenty; there was peace in the isles; ships went unarmed from land to land bearing rich merchandise. Although there was gold and treasure, people did not covet it; the greatest good was the golden grain coming from the mill, around which the whole culture flourished. Sheaf is described as a great patriarch whose numerous and fair children become ancestors of the kings of the North Danes, the West Danes, the South Angles, and the East Gothfolk. Correspondingly, Dumézil's third function encompasses agriculture, food, fertility, health, provision, prosperity, love and family life, peace, security, and the resulting development of arts and leisure activities. In the light of Dumézil's theory, the historical significance of the mythical ancestor becomes fully apparent.

THE *CORNA CALDAST* OF *THE SEAFARER*

Let us return once again to Old English poetry and in particular to a poem which, in its striking similarity to the Scyld episode of *Beowulf*, may be read as a resurfacing of the same corn-hero myth in a more lyrical form. The Seafarer's monologue in the Old English elegy seems to be a deathbed speech filled with

recollections of youth spent alone in a sailing ship. The speaker frames his life with two solitary sea-journeys, while his whole career (like Scyld's) has been punctuated with seafaring. This characteristic pattern, echoing the delineation of Scyld, may signal yet another literary realization of the corn-hero myth. Tellingly, the Seafarer describes himself as *feasceaftig ferð*, "the desolate spirit" (*S* 26), that is, with the very same word (the adjective *fēasceaft*/*feasceaftig*) that in *Beowulf* identifies the boy Scyld as a foundling.[15]

The elegy starts with a seaman's parting speech followed by a more general reflection, with growing Christian overtones.[16] The speaker recalls a time in the past when he travelled completely alone in a ship. He is not merely as self-absorbed and deranged as to fail to mention his companions (Neville 2007: 146-147), but his struggle to escape the waves and omit the cliffs (cf. *S* 5-8) is truly solitary. This is a very strange situation for even Beowulf was accompanied by twelve sturdy retainers on his way to Hrothgar's country. Dorothy Whitelock has suggested that the Seafarer represents the *peregrinus per amore Dei*, a voluntary exile for the love of God, but even such wandering ascetics lived and travelled in small groups.[17] Whitelock's influential interpretation has recently been questioned by Sebastian Sobecki, who suggests that the Seafarer is a fisherman. But fishermen do not typically appear in medieval heroic poetry. The only individuals voyaging alone in this epic tradition are noble-born political exiles, including banished children in popular romances. The Seafarer may remind us, in particular, of Horn, the king's son driven into exile while still a boy, though Horn was accompanied by two friends.

The Seafarer dwells on a past solitary voyage while he is about to embark on another such journey now. The parallelism between these hard experiences is suggested by the verbal repetitions which emphasise solitary exploration – the pronoun *sylf* (*S* 1, 35), in which the meanings "myself" and "alone" merge into one (Klinck 1992: 133), and the verb forms of 'explore', *gecunnad* and *cunnige* (*S* 5, 35). The speaker's life is thus framed by solitary voyaging, which is also the object of his rhetorical performance concerning both his past and future expedition: *Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan, / siþas secgan*, "I can narrate a true story about myself, / speak of the journey" (*S* 1-2). The monologue sounds like a veteran's speech facing once again the liminal experience he knows so well.

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[15] Although I realize that in the context of the oral-formulaic theory of Old English verse an argument based on tracing lexical parallels between any two poems may appear problematic, I still find the reiteration of certain words and images to be significant in this particular case beyond a mere sharing of a common poetic repertory. A mutual influence of one text upon the other is not to be excluded, but establishing a possible textual affinity is beyond the scope of this paper, which postulates merely an underlying significance of the same myth, a generator of stories.

[16] The Old English elegies employ pre-Christian materials to Christian ends (Conner 2008: 257-58; see also Bullough).

[17] The 891 entry in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* mentions the arrival in England of "three Scots" who "came to King Alfred in a boat without any oars, from Ireland, from where they had stolen away because they wanted for the love of God to be abroad – they did not care where" (Swanton 1987: 82).

The word-play of *cnossað* (*S* 8, "strike, beat upon") and *cnyssað* (*S* 33, "press, throb") creates a meaningful link between, respectively, the waves beating against the cliffs and the inner rhythm of the speaker's heartbeats – the sea calls him to make a voluntary journey home, which brings to mind the concept of ship-burial in *Beowulf*. In both texts the journey is long, *feor* ("long"; cf. *B* 42; *S* 37), the farthest kind of travel, *feor gewitan* (cf. *B* 42; *S* 52), while the destination is unknown, though the way thereto leads through the domain of dolphins and whales – *hronrāde* (*B* 7) and *hwæles eþel*, "the whale's haunt", or *wælweg*, "the whale's path" (*S* 60, 63).

The mature Seafarer's mind, like a bird, a solitary flier, explores faraway places over the sea and then returns to him and incites him to travel.[18] The second half of the poem is filled with the sense of mutability and with metaphorical and explicit allusions to death and ageing (cf. *S* 39-47, 63-65, 68-71, 72-86, 89-95), while the shift from *dryhten* (*S* 41), an earthly lord, to *Dryhten* (*S* 43), the Lord God, introduces an eschatological perspective.[19] Paradoxically, the imagery of natural rebirth – the blossoming groves, beautiful meadows, and the song of the cuckoo (cf. *S* 48-57), which marks the beginning of a new cycle in the circular time of pagan societies memorably described by Mircea Eliade, enhances sorrow, being a reminder that even the greatest heroes cannot eternally renew themselves like nature.[20] In the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* King Arthur's death is likewise coupled with spring imagery, suggesting that while nature is self-renewing, the death of a great leader is absolute.

The Seafarer's recollections of his past voyaging focus on an intense perception of the sounds of the sea, which he interprets in terms of mutual vocal interactions as in social intercourse: the cry of the gannet, the curlew's sound instead of the laughter of men, the seagull singing in the place of mead-drinking, or the icy-feathered tern calling out in response to storms (cf. *S* 18-25). The speaker's fascinated absorption with these sounds not only underscores his complete solitude, the "hunger within" (*Hungor innan*, *S* 11), but may also imply a youngster's acute need of language acquisition. Interestingly, central among the avian companions is the swan, whose song is the Seafarer's only entertainment: *Hwilum ylfete song / dyde Ic me to gomene* (*S* 19-20). The word *gomene* suggests the kind of games, and toys, needed

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[18] "The defenceless soul prepares for the road of death, across the waters of the sea", and the poem's structure is "analogous to that of *Beowulf*: A + B; Life + Death", while its unifying theme is "mankind's desire for survival, first physical, then spiritual" (Wallace 1996: 180).

[19] This part of the poem has been interpreted in Christian terms, as referring to a passage from this world to another and following one's heavenly Lord in voluntary exile (Swanton: 1987: 116-117).

[20] The eschatological implications of the spring season were commonplace in Anglo-Saxon Doomsday literature, especially sermons, while the cuckoo was a bird of lament anticipating death and judgment (Swanton 1987: 119, 139). Likewise, in Irish monastic poetry, the May Day is a liminal time, incorporating both the bad fortune of the winter days and the good fortune of the coming summer months, while the song of the cuckoo is both pleasant and plaintive (for more information see Chadwick).

and appreciated particularly by children, while the entire verb phrase, *dyde Ic me to gomene*, may imply active doing, playing, rather than mere passive enjoyment. The image evokes a person, young rather than aged, imitating the swan's song and thus satisfying a vital need of communication.

This communion with the swan is strongly reminiscent of the swan-knight motif that has been associated with the mythical corn hero. In his account of the bird the poet follows not so much nature as some old fables and ancient beliefs, those of Plato and Aristotle (though not Pliny), where the swan's song was mentioned even though swans apparently do not sing. The association of swans with poets was frequent, as was the motif of a swan singing before its death, betokening a person's last speech or work (Brewer 1894: 1193). In *The Seafarer*, the swan's song, while referring to the speaker's former experience of playing with the swan may therefore signify, as well, his last performance before going back to the sea, unifying thereby his initial and his final voyage. A phonetic similarity between the adjective *elþeodig* ("foreign", *S* 38) and the noun *ylfete* "swan" (*S* 19) associates the bird with the strange land of the Seafarer's longing, while a possible connotation with *ylfe*, "elves", imbues that unknown realm with a magical aura (note the *yl/el* head-rhyme in these three words). The poem's Christian colouring, in turn, associates the sea-longing with metaphysical desire, a thirst for *Dryhtnes dreamas*, "the joys of the Lord".

But perhaps the clearest and most explicit trace of the corn-hero myth in *The Seafarer* is the peculiar reference to corn in the description of hail as *corna caldast*, "the coldest of grains" (*S* 33). This metaphor expresses, in an extremely condensed manner characteristic of poetry, the ancient Germanic belief that corn and culture came from the sea. Let us repeat, in England the divine being of fruitfulness, the mythical ancestor, was deeply associated with the sea.

In addition, the relatively numerous verbal links between *The Seafarer* and the genealogical opening of *Beowulf* make one ponder on the mutual relationship of these two texts. Apart from the crucial (for the present argument) similarities already discussed, the following verbal concurrences may be mentioned:

– *æþelinga*, "princes" (*hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon!* – *B* 3, cf. also 33-34; *S* 93); another typical element of heroic diction in *The Seafarer* is *duguð*, "noble company, *comitatus*" (*S* 86)
– *blæd*, "glory" (*B* 18, *S* 88)
– *meahte*, "power" (*B* 25, *S* 108)
– *Ealdor*, "Chief" – Scyld (*B* 56) and God (*S* 123)
– *egsode eorlas*, "the terror of the hall-troops" – Scyld (*B* 6) vs. *Godes egsan*, "the terror of God" (*S* 101, 103).

Through this kind of diction, the heroic age of the past is recalled against the present age of human toil in *The Seafarer*, while a pantheon of former heroes, such as Scyld of *Beowulf*, looms behind God and His angels; even the Christian moral ideal of self-control and humility is stated in terms of heroic seafaring, of steering one's spirit: *Stieran mon sceal strongum mode* (*S* 109).

Likewise, a funeral evoked in the elegy (*S* 97-102) refers to the Northern heathen custom of filling the grave with gold and treasure rather than to more recent burial practices. Although this funeral is neither a sea-burial nor a burial by fire, like those of, respectively, Scyld and Beowulf, the mention of *gold* (*S* 97, 101) and *maðm* ("treasure", *S* 99), which denote archaic forms of treasure in the heroic age, no longer prominent in the economy of Anglo-Saxon England (cf. Tyler 2006: 228-235), harks back to the burial ceremonies described in the Old English epic.[21] In the elegy the gold and treasure are clearly disparaged as useless from the Christian eschatological perspective, nevertheless, especially when one remembers that *maðm* referred particularly to weapons, the funeral removal of it may be read as conveying a vital need of balance, as conceptualised through the corn-hero myth.

In sum, the dramatic monologue of a weather-beaten veteran facing his final journey and recollecting a parallel liminal experience of his early days can be a lyrical expression of the same myth that we find behind the epical story of Scyld Scefing. Both texts illuminate the nourishing role of the sea in Northern imaginaries, notwithstanding its destructive potential manifest especially in *The Seafarer*. The latter's emphasis upon misery and hardship may be related to the Christian colouring of the seafaring hero, whose suffering resembles Christ's Passion, yet does not annul the principal significance of the corn-hero myth, which simply enters a new cultural context.

The evident vitality of the corn-hero myth as a generator of poems and stories in Anglo-Saxon England and beyond testifies to an awareness of the importance of the ideas conceptualised in the myth, which may have been especially acute in the social and political context of the late tenth century, when most of the surviving Old English poems were written down, and more broadly from the beginning of viking wars. Seen against that background, the early literary expressions of the myth may be read as supporting, at a deep level of cultural consciousness, a complex policy of peace-making with vikings, which had been embraced already by King Alfred and which involved their conversion into Christianity (cf. Damon 2000: 69-70). The policy has thus been described by Richard Abels: "Alfred learned that to make a secure peace with Vikings they had to cease to be Vikings. To bind them, one had to recreate their leaders in the image of Christian Anglo-Saxon (or Carolingian) territorial rulers. Once defeated, their sea-kings had to be provided with a political ideology that emphasized stability and legitimacy" (1988: 29). From that perspective, the corn-hero myth was particularly potent: in its impartial presentation of the desirable values as associated with the common Northern tradition of the sea and its simultaneous openness to Christian ideas, it could spawn useful and captivating narratives that would appeal to the peace-hungry society.

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[21] The parallel with *Beowulf* is observed also by Swanton (1987: 121).

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