Images of the Germanic Comitatus in Anglo-Saxon Poetry

The heroic ethic of the Germanic Comitatus was central to the lives of the Anglo-Saxons. Dignity and power was represented by bands of brave young warriors, who paid tribute to their Chieftain with gifts with bravery in battle. A glorious reputation was of primary importance to the Anglo-Saxons and they frequently exhibited their powers as warriors on the battlefield. The strong Germanic Comitatus relationship between the Lord and Retainer was reflected in all areas of Anglo-Saxon life. The failure of the warrior to perform more bravely than his Lord on the battlefield was shameful and it was dishonorable for the Lord to be outdone in valour by his warriors.

The heroic tradition of the Germanic Comitatus was reflected in Old English Literature. It first flourished in oral tradition, but was replaced by Christian didactic poetry. The *Fight at Finnsburgh* is a marvelous illustration of the tradition of the ancient Germanic heroic age. Scholars are not clear about its genre; believing that it might have been part of an epic, but it is generally agreed that is a lay. In its style, it employs a brief technique of narrative, with compressed descriptions and rapid conversation. It expresses perfectly the primitive pagan joy in battle by using language drawn from *Germanic Comitatus* beliefs. It is dramatic tense and vibrant. The poet exploits *Germanic Comitatus* language to convey the movement and sound of battle, so that the cut and thrust of war is brought very close to the reader, while strong, tactile imagery, also drawn from the Germanic Comitatus is conveyed aurally and visually which is designed to bring the reader close to the excitement of the battle.
Narration is through the eyes of a participant in the battle giving the reader an extremely clear point of view and the poet’s technique is to provide a camera-like exposition of the battle. At certain dramatic points in the poem the poet closes in and provides a meticulously detailed view of the action and then contrasts this view by drawing back occasionally to offer a panoramic view of the events. The first half of the poem is devoted to the building up of tension and pre-battle anticipation, which conveys a strong sense of foreboding and is in keeping with Anglo-Saxon tradition. For example, in lines 1-17, the narrator offers a pictorial description providing a close-up focus of the warriors inside the hall:

ne her ðisse healle,
hornas ne byrnað.

Nor are the gables burning on this hall.

Lines 18-23 give a close up view of the numbers of the warriors who are inside and outside the hall while Lines 24-27, reveal the action close up at the doors:

hwa ða duru heolde.

The worthy hero, who there held the doors.

From line 28 onward, the narrative then draws back from the action to provide a broader perspective of the situation:

Ða wæs on healle,
wæslihta gehlyn,
sceolde celloð bord,
cenom on handa.

Then was the sound of slaughter in the hall.
Curved shields in bold men’s hands,
The action gathers momentum and culminates in a fiery hell:

swylce eal Finnsburuh fyrenu wære.

As if all Finnsborough were set on fire

At the beginning of the poem, Hnaef, the young and warlike king opens with an ironic understatement:

Ne δis ne dagað estan:

No eastern dawn is this,

He goes on to sketch a premonition of things to come – a classic example of the Anglo-Saxon way of building up tension and means of elucidating a sense of impending doom:

ne her draca ne fleogeð,
ne her δisse healle
hornas ne byrnað.

No dragon flying,
Nor are the gables burning on this hall.

The conjunction ‘ne’ is brought into play to form a pattern of repetition – another Anglo-Saxon poetic device to increase tension. Visual and aural Germanic comitatus imagery of battle and death further heightens the poetic tension of anticipation:

fugelas singað, gylleð
græghama, guðwudu hlynneð,
scyld scefte oncwyð.

The carrion-birds shall sing,
the grey cloaked wolf shall yell,
the spear resound,
the shield answer shaft.

In the next lines, the poet builds upon this dramatic tension by introducing a ‘wondering moon behind the clouds’. The natural landscape is gloomy and dramatic.
The yell of the wolf; the symbol of death, is an invitation to battle, while ‘deeds of woe’ rise with the moon to create a most effective atmosphere of foreboding.

In startling contrast to the previous gloomy lines we now see warriors roused by a typical Anglo-Saxon formulaic speech:

Ac onwacnigeað nu, wigend mine,
habbað eowre linda,
hicgeaþ on ellen, winnað on orde,
wesað on mode!

But wake yourselves my warriors now,
and take your shields,
and set your minds on gallant deeds,
fight at the front, and be of noble heart.

This phrase is consistent with the heroic code when warriors would vie on the battlefield for glory. They respond to the cry to battle immediately:

Ða aras mænig goldhladen ðegn,
gyred hine his swurde.

Then many a treasure-laden thane arose
And put his sword on;

The ‘goldhleden ðegn’ is a variation on brave warriors. They are ‘treasure laden’ because they have been rewarded richly, because they have performed well in previous battles. They might also have been rewarded well because they have a generous and powerful Lord, so this variation reflects well upon him too. The comitatus relationship of Lord and retainer is again illustrated in this variation.

The warriors then disperse, placing themselves in strategic positions around the doors ready for battle. Lines 18-23 is advice to ‘temper courage with caution’ but Garulef dies exemplifying courage and extreme heroism:

Ða gyt Garulef Guðere styrde,
Lines 24-27 illustrate an Anglo-Saxon stock image of war, and the translation Homer has used mentions fate, which is pagan but there is no mention of fate in these lines. He asks the enemy to surrender to him or he will kill them, having first established his experience in the field:

‘Sigferþ is min nama (cweþ he), ic eom Secgena leod, wreccea wide cuð; fæla ic weana gebad, heordra Hilda; ðe is gyt her witod, swæþer ðu sylf to me secean wylle.’

‘Sigferth is my name, a Secgan prince,’
He answered, ‘An adventurer well-known.
I have seen many fierce and grievous battles.
And fate already has laid down for you

Having built up dramatic tension in the first 28 lines, the poet then conveys all noise of battle. The motion and sound is conveyed through aural and visual imagery of war gear in use: There is the ‘sound of slaughter’ in the hall; ‘helmets hard burst’; ‘the hall floor resounded’:

sceolde callod bord
cenum on handa, banhelm berstan,

Curved shields in bold men’s hands, and helmets hard Burst,
The hall floor that would normally resound with celebration now hosts a battle so fierce that protective war gear gives way. The bone protector, a kenning for ‘helmet hard’ bursts, and as war-gear is tested in conflict. In line 32 the kenning on human mortality ‘eordbuendra’ ‘earth-dweller’, or ‘human’ further underlines the mortality of humankind. Many noble heroes fall and the raven, the Anglo-Saxon symbol of death, circles. In line 35 ‘swurdleome’ ‘sword of light’ flashes constantly amid the fiery battle which takes place as though all Finnsburgh was alight.

Lines 34-42 present as a poetic explication of the Germanic Comitatus spirit at its most moving. Here, the narrator intrudes to tell us how he has never heard of ‘sixty warriors behaving better in a mortal fight.’ The young warriors give mead to Hneaf - an inversion of the Germanic Comitatus. The poet tells of the length of the battle - the fight went on for five days:

Hig fuhton fif dagas,
swa hyra nan ne ðeol, drihtgesiða,
ac hig ða duru heoldon.

The comrades fought for five full days, and none
Of them was slain, but they held fast the doors.

The battered war gear reflects the extreme ferocity of the battle and the poet shows us the pitiful sight of the wounded hero, tragically battered with war gear burst under:

Ða gewat him wund hæled on wæg gangan,
sæde þæt his byrne abrocen wære,
heresceorp unhror, and eac wæs his helm ðyrel.

A wounded hero then went on his way,
His armour useless and his helmet pierced.
The post-battle carnage is well illustrated in the poetic diction present in these lines which draw attention to the stoicism connected with the Germanic Comitatus and the bravery of the young retainers in the face of danger and battle which rages even as the poem ends.