

# The Comitatus Relationship

by Damian Nash  
(excerpted & adapted)

In Anglo-Saxon stories, the relationship between the ruler and his thanes is known as *comitatus*. The *comitatus* relationship requires that "the thane swear to defend a lord to their death, while he provides them with the protection and a share of his wealth and weapons."

Along with the thane and lord each providing services for the other, there is also a great deal of comradery between the thanes and their lord: "Some of the native terms used for this group in Beowulf may suggest something of the nature of their relationship to each other and to their king or lord: Friends, kinsmen, table comrades, hearth comrades, hall-sitters, hand companions" (22). Similar in structure to many other protection relationships, the bond between the lord and his thanes was often family oriented.

Grendel is a descendent of Cain, and Cain is the most notorious brother slayer. Anglo-Saxon culture looks very poorly upon a person going against his family. This social tie makes the *comitatus* relationship even stronger.

Beowulf believes in what Hrothgar stands for and is willing to fight for him. Not only does Hrothgar give Beowulf treasures, but he also puts his trust into him: "Now Beowulf, best of men, I will love you in my heart like a son; keep to our new kinship from this day on"(Crossley 32). This is an excellent portrayal of the lord and thane relationship, and shows how much appreciation a lord has for his thanes.

The *comitatus* code not only sets standards for the actions of the lord and thane, but also turns a relationship of services into a bond of love and friendship.

# Comitatus and Interlacing

by John Hendrix

Comitatus is the basic idea that everyone protects the king at all costs even if it means a warrior giving up his own life. If a king is killed, the warriors must avenge the death of the king or they can no longer serve as warriors for the next king. It is an idea that coexists with the interlacing theme. You will see the comitatus theme all through *Beowulf* and all of the Anglo-Saxon poetry. The diction (ring-giver, hearth-companion, etc) indicates the idea as well as the behavior. Notice how there is the motif of eating, sleeping, dying all the way through the text, and all of it is done as a "team" even to the passing of the cup uniting the group of warriors. They stayed in the meadhall while the king slept in an adjoining "apartment" so they could constantly protect him.

You will even see the idea in the avenging of Grendel's death by his mother. Some of the same actions on her part are the same as the actions of the warriors. *Beowulf* is also a good text to demonstrate how comitatus died with the Anglo-Saxon period. Notice how at the end of the text only Wiglaf follows Beowulf into the battle with the dragon. When Beowulf goes into the various battles, there is a progression of the comitatus dying with the behavior of the warriors: the warriors stand on the bank waiting, the next time they are sleeping and the third time only Wiglaf goes with him.

The comitatus idea goes hand in hand with interlacing. Interlacing is best seen in the artwork of the period and then transferred into the text. You have probably seen a picture of the chalice or the necklace or even the helmet most closely associated with *Beowulf*. The interlacing is difficult to see on the helmet, but it is in the ridge across the top. The design is actually that of a flying dragon-like creature. The wings go across the top of the eyes like eyebrows, the head is at the nose piece and the body, twists across the head to the back of the helmet. The reason for the ridges across the helmets was to deflect a blow from a sword. It was a great illustration of the strength found in interlacing used to protect the individual.

The Belt Buckle from the Sutton Hoo treasures shows the interlacing theme quite well with its twists and turns. Interlaced human figures, interlaced dogs, and knot pattern from the [Lindisfarne Gospels](#) and the [Book of Kells](#) are also good examples of interlacing). The torque, necklace, that is most often shown is similar to the one Beowulf receives in the text. It is made of twisted gold rods and they typically weighed between 8-15 pounds.



The idea of interlacing was that nothing in the Anglo-Saxon period was independent. Everything depended on everything else whether agricultural, cultural, personal, or any other way. Women were protected by older men not fighting in battle, king protected by warriors who are well rewarded for their service, etc. Modern Celtic designs are "modern" renditions of this early idea. The intersecting lines in the artwork is what I am referring to.



One of the best ways to illustrate the interlacing idea is through sword making of the time. Swords were made using 4-6 rods of metal. They were first twisted/braided into 2-3 rods and then pounded flat but still allowing for the twisted design to show. Then these 2-3 rods were then twisted/braided into one rod that was pounded flat and then shaped and sharpened. In many of the ancient swords that design is still seen.

The idea was that everything was stronger when "braided" together. In isolation one must only depend on himself, but when linked with everything/everyone that exists within the community, one does not fight just for himself but for the entire kingdom.