

THE BOAR IN *BEOWULF* AND *ELENE*: A GERMANIC SYMBOL OF PROTECTION

The boar appears in eight Anglo-Saxon poems belonging to seven different manuscripts. It is sometimes named with its accurate noun, *eofor*, and sometimes with *swyn*, noun which really designates the farm pig. In spite of this frequency, the boar is not the main theme of any poem belonging to the classical or Christian tradition, such as a riddle or a physiologus-poem; so that, proper physical and symbolic descriptions of this animal can not be found; however, due to the information documented in the poems and in the archaeological remains of the period, we can have the impression of how the Anglo-Saxons viewed the boar.

In most of the poems, the allusions to the boar are completely based upon the observation of its behaviour; in this way, two qualities of this creature are continuously emphasized: its wildness and its courage. The boar is a wild beast which inhabits the forest: «*eofor sceal on holte*» (*Maxims II*, 19), grunts: «*Sume wæron eaforas, / grymetedon*» (*The Meters of Boethius* 26, 81) and «*ponne amæsted swin, // bearg bellende*» (*Riddle 40* 105-106); destroys the fields: «*Hine utan of wuda / eoferas wrotal*» (*The Paris Psalter* 79.13, 1); its name is used as an example of bravery: «*ond efore eom / æghwær cenra, // ponne he begolden / bidsteal giefel*» (*Riddle 40*, 18-19); it is such a dangerous creature, that when hunting, the hunter must be accompanied by a very reliable person:¹

Earm bip se pe sceal ana lifgan,

¹ In *Exodus* the noun *oferholt*, a weapon used by the armies is documented. Critics have tried to identify such weapon, but they do not agree with which one is that weapon; nevertheless, Sedgefield indicates that *oferholt* «probably means the forest of spears rising above the Egyptian army; but perhaps the original word was *eofersholt*, 'boar-spear'» (Krapp, 1936: III, 205, note 157). If this suggestion is right, we can assume that Anglo-Saxons considered the boar so dangerous that special weapons had to be made for its hunting.

wineleas wunian hafap him wyrd geteod;
betre him wære pæt he broþor ahte, begen hi anes monnes,
eorles eaforan wæran, gif hi sceoldan eofor onginnan
(*Maxims I* 172-175)

However, in two poems which belong to two different manuscripts, the boar is documented in the descriptions of the decoration of several weapons and war equipment. These poems are *Beowulf* and *Elene*:

Eoforlic scionon
ofer hleorberan gehroden golde,
fah ond fyrheard (*Beowulf* 303b-305a).

sweord swate fah swin ofer helme
ecgum dyhttig andweard scire Í (*Beowulf* 1286-1287).

swa hine fyrndagum
worhte wæpna smi Í, wundrum teode,
besette swinlicum (*Beowulf* 1451b-1453a).

According to Marquardt (1938: 222) and Scholtz (1928: 79), in both poems, there are kenningar which use the nouns *eofor* / *swyn* to name the helmet; such as *eoforcumble* or *eoforcumbol* (*Elene* 76, 259), *swyn* (*Beowulf* 1111), *eofer* (*Beowulf* 1112), *eoferas* (*Beowulf* 1328), and *eaforheafodsegn* (*Beowulf* 2152).

In the *Skaldskaparmal* (*The Language of Poetry*), the second chapter of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, all the different kenningar which can be useful for the poets are shown, and two of them are related to the Anglo-Saxon ones: *slaughter-shiner*, which names the boar and *battle boar*, which names the helmet (*Skaldskaparmal* 75), and this second kenning is once again documented in the *Hattatal* (*List of Verse-Forms*), the last part of *Edda*:

The outstanding one covers the hill of the dwelling of the brain
[his cranium] with a battle-boar [helmet] and the distributor of gold
brandishes the battle-fish [sword] in the hawk's perch [hand].
(*Hattatal* 2).

When Tacitus in his *Germania* describes the Aestii's army, Germanic tribe which lived by the Suebian Sea, he emphasizes the use of figures of boars in different war weapons as a protective amulet:

Matre deum veneratur. insigne superstitionis formas aprorum gestant: id pro armis hominumque tutela securum deae cultorem etiam inter hostes praestat. (*Germania*. XLV).

These literary descriptions are verified by archaeological finds, and the boar, as an ornamental motif, is found in several war equipment such as helmets, shoulder-clasps and swords (Speake, 1980: 78-79):

A [...] boar exists [...] on the crest of the Benty Grange helmet. The two shoulder-clasps from the Sutton Hoo ship-burial boast four pairs of cloisonné boars. [...] Three tiny figures of boars stamped on the blade of a sword from the River Lark, Cambs. [...] Again at Sutton Hoo, on the Swedish-made helmet, each of the bronze eyebrows ends above the cheek-guard in a small, stylized, gilt-bronze head of a boar.

The representation of the boar in the Anglo-Saxon art is mainly reduced to a head with a prominent tusk from its lower jaw (Speake, 1980: 78):

The motif [of the boar] is not so rare in Anglo-Saxon ornament as has previously been thought. Its chief identifying characteristic is the presence of a tusk protruding from the creature's lower jaw, which is essential for identification when only the head is depicted, as is most commonly the case.

It is quite significant that the only part of the body of the boar / pig pointed out in the Anglo-Saxon poetry are its tusks: «eofor [...] tolmægenes trum» (*Maxims II* 19-20).

However, sometimes the whole body is represented, such as the unique free-standing boar which crowns the Benty Grange helmet; the two inter-linked boars with crested backs of the shoulder-clasps from Sutton Hoo; the three figures of boars stamped on a sword from the River Lark; and so on. The boar is also used for the ornamentation of several objects of daily life, such as bowls, brooches, buckles, plates, bracelets and pendants (Speake, 1980: 78-79):

The boar-like mounts from the Hildersham hanging-bowl [...]. Mere heads [...] occur in each of the four roundels from the damaged cloisonné composite brooch from Faversham, Kent [...] on four triangular buckles, all from Faversham [...]; on a silver plate riveted to the border of one of the five harness mounts from Faversham [...]; two pairs on a silver-gilt bracelet from Faversham [...]; three pairs on a bronze-gilt bracelet from Kingston Gr. 299 [...]; and there is the single cloisonné boar head beneath the suspension-loop on a pendant from Womersley, Yorks. It is possible that the stylized twin heads at the foot of the open-work buckle from Kingston Gr. 300 [...] are also boars [...] Pendent boar heads also occur on square-headed brooches, projecting from the shoulders of several Leed's Type A3 brooches.

Besides these weapons and objects, boar's tusks have been found in some Anglo-Saxon graves, as if they were amulets for the protection of the dead (Speake, 1980: 79):

Also to be considered is the occurrence in Anglo-Saxon graves of boar's tusks mounted for suspension, as in Wheatley, Oxon., graves 12 and 27, and no doubt serving similar symbolic functions as the boar-motif decorating a brooch, buckle, or bracelet.

Speake gives a few selected archeological examples of war equipment and different objects from other Germanic tribes, similar to the Anglo-Saxon ones (Speake, 1980: 79):

In the selected comparative material illustrated, the boar motif occurs on the cloisonné sword pommels from Hög Edsten, Bohuslän (one face only) and Vallstenarum, Gotland [...]; Skärholmen, Södermanland [...]; Gammertingen, Germany [...]; Åker, Norway [...]; Fétigny, Switzerland [...]; the brooch from Lingotto, Italy [...]; the gold foil cross from Milan, Italy [...]; and the fragmentary gold foil cross from Wittislingen.

Tacitus points out that this protective symbolism of the boar is due to its relation with a deity to whom he names «matrem deum». The worship of that unidentified goddess might be related to the cult of Freyr and Freyja in Scandinavia. Both of them are the deities of fertility and have an association

with the boar¹. The relation between Freyja and the boar is documented in an Old Norse poem entitled *Hyndluljóf*, included in the *Flateyjarbok*, or *Book of the Flat Island* (Bellows, 1991: 165-170):

- Freyja spake: [...]
5. «From the stall now one of thy wolves lead forth,
And along with my boar shalt thou let him run;
For slow my boar goes on the road of the gods,
And I would not weary my worthy steed.» [...]
7. «Wild dreams, methinks, are thine when thou sayest
My lover is with me on the way of the slain;
There shines the boar with bristles of gold,
Hildisvini, he who was made
By Dain aad Nabbi, the cunning Dwarfs.» [...]
46. «To my boar now bring the memory-beer,
So that all thy words, that well thou hast spoken,
The third morn hence he may hold in mind,
When their races Ottar and Angantyr tell.»

The relation between Freyr and the boar is documented in another Old Norse work, Sturluson's *Edda*:

This burning was attended by beings of many different kinds: firstly to tell Odin, that with him went Frigg and valkyries and his ravens, while Freyr drove in a chariot with a boar called Gullinbursti or Slidrugtanni (*Gylfaginning*, 49).

How shall Freyr be referred to? By calling him son of Niord, brother of Freyia and him also a Vanir god and descendant of Vanir and a Van, and harvest god and wealth-giver. [...] He is possessor of Skidbladnir and of the boar known as Gullibursti [...] Ulf Uggason said this: Battle-skilled Freyr rides in front to Odin's son's [Baldr's] pyre on golden-bristled boar and governor hosts. (*Skaldskaparmal*, 7).

Brokk brought out his precious things. [...] To Freyr he gave the boar and said that it could run across sky and sea by night and day faster than any horse, and it never got so dark from night or in words

¹ Damico (1984: 169) indicates that «although as a rule the boar was Frey's animal, it was also one of the three major emblems linked to his sister [Freyja]».

of darkness that it was not bright enough wherever it went, there was so much light shed from its bristles (*Skaldskaparmal*, 35).

Freyja was the goddess of fertility, and her brother Freyr was the god of fertility, of plenty and of kings. In spite of the *baptism* that the Anglo-Saxon literature suffered, we can establish that the cult of Freyr was continued in England, since his name was the origin of *frea*, a title similar to (Ritzke-Rutherford, 1979: 29) 'prince' or 'lord' (Chaney, 1970: 50):

Connotations of this deity may well have been present in the use of *frea* as a common kenning for an earthly lord and for the Anglo-Saxon king.

This identification of Freyr with a lord also becomes an identification with 'the Lord', and for this reason, the Christian God is named 'freaan mancynnes' in *The Dream of the Rood* (l. 33); 'folcfreaan' in *Genesis* (l. 1852); 'frea leoda' in *Genesis* (l. 2098); 'frea ælmihtig' in *Genesis* (ll. 5, 79, 116, 150, 173, 852, 904, 1359, 1427, 2353, 2760), in *Judith* (l. 300), in *The Paris Psalter* 68.14 (l. 2), 69.6 (l. 2), 79.9 (l. 1), and 85.17 (l. 2), in *Psalms* 50 (l. 97) and in *Cædmond's Hymn* (l. 9); 'frea mihtig' in *Daniel* (l. 377), in *Andreas* (ll. 662, 786), in *Elene* (ll. 680, 1067) in *Christ* (ll. 457, 1378), in *The Judgment Day II* (l. 19), and in *Psalms* 50 (l. 135); 'heofona frea' in *Genesis* (l. 1404), 'rices frea' in *Creed* (l. 34), 'frea engla' in *Genesis* (ll. 157, 1711, 2837); and 'lifes frea' in *Creed* (l. 5) and in *The Seasons for Fasting* (l. 3).

This association of Freyr and the king, makes the boar then become a royal symbol (Chaney, 1970: 121):

The animals of sacral kingship may indeed be seen behind the Anglo-Saxon prophecy that 'to see any four-footed beasts betokens a king's friendship'. However, certain animals are peculiarly associated with the king, and of these one of the most important was the boar.

Saxo Grammaticus (1894: xlix) attributes the boar's head to Woden: «to Woden is ascribed the device of the boar's head, hamalt fylking (the swine-head array of Manu's Indian kings)». In this way, the boar, as an emblem of

Woden, the divine ancestor of every Anglo-Saxon royal house,¹ becomes the protector of the warriors and also an emblem of kings² as war-lords.

To conclude, because of the Christian monks who composed all the manuscripts, and therefore, swept all the pagan beliefs away almost completely, there is insufficient information for us to establish whether by wearing the figures and / or amulets of boars in the battlefields and by placing those figures / amulets in their graves warriors commended themselves to Freyr, to Woden or to the king (or perhaps to them all); but we can assume that the boar had a protective symbolic character for the Anglo-Saxons, as it had for all the Germanic tribes. And this symbolic character survived through the Christianization. This is illustrated with the seventh-century Benty Grange helmet which keeps the boar crest in conjunction with the Christian cross on the nose-piece.³

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¹ The worship of Wodin in Britain was spread out, as some topographical names prove (Niles, 1991: 129): «place-names like Wednesbury and Wenslow indicate sites where Woden was once important»; and Branston (1957: 86-87) points out that «Woden was the most widely honoured of the heathen gods in England, for we find him commemorated as the parton of settlements among the Angles of Northumbria, the East and the West Saxons of Essex and Wessex, and the Jutes of Kent. There is no doubt that the aristocracy of the Old English looked upon Woden as chief god: the genealogies of the kings bear witness to the former dignity of Woden's name, for even in Christian times the royal houses of Kent, Essex, Wessex, Deira, Bernicia and East Anglia all traced back to Woden.»

² Chaney (1970: 7) stresses the importance of the kingship and its association with Woden: «Kingship is the Anglo-Saxon political institution *par excellence* and gives cohesion to the realms established by the invading tribes. In each kingdom the royal race -the *stirps regia*- which sprang from its founder provided the source from which the individual rulers were chosen, and beyond the earthly founder was the god who was the divine ancestor of almost every Anglo-Saxon royal house, Woden».

³ Chaney (1970: 51) maintains that the new Christian faith did not wipe out the pagan beliefs, but both creeds amalgamated with the supremacy of Christianity: «Christ and the Scandinavian Frey, god of plenty and of the king, may perhaps have blended in the new religion, even though the goddess Freyja and her maidens nowhere appear to have been 'converted' into the Virgin Mary and the three (or nine) Mary's, as they were in the Scandinavian North.»

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