Comitatus Essay, Research Paper

Only through outstanding achievements and demonstrations of allegiance, eminence, and gallantry, could a Germanic tribe exist. With these three characteristics flowing through the blood of all men throughout the tribe could they all establish an immense trust, a vow of sacred friendship, comitatus. Comitatus, was a practiced religion for these tribal warriors, it was their morals and part of their ethics. In order to be a part of any honorable Germanic tribe one had to understand the unspoken rule of comitatus. Without the knowledge and respect of comitatus between warriors and their kings a Germanic tribe like the one of Beowulf s would eventually be doomed. Bravery, loyalty, and glory are needed to be found within oneself, before one can establish and find themselves well within the clan of other warriors. These three adjectives define the true meaning of what each Germanic tribe values the most, and what they mainly stood for. The leader, the authority, the ruler of every Germanic tribe was known to be the Bretwalda. Since he was the Bretwalda, he was also known to be the warrior king. The Bretwalda was always a man of great stature and a truly heroic past, not to mention that he too was a nobleman. The Bretwalda was usually of noble history, and had the reputation of being a brave, loyal, and glorious man who had succeeded in numerous accomplishments in which he had risked his life for the better of his own people. He was a man of great social stature in which all the people he ruled entrusted him with their lives as well as their families. He was a man that everyone looked up to and believed in, especially his warriors.

These truly brave soldiers were known as retainers or within the Germanic tribe as thanes. The Bretwalda s thanes were his right hand men. These thanes were experienced men of battle who knew what it took to risk their lives for the benefit of their King, and their people. The thanes of the tribe were extremely brave and heroic men of battle, who were strictly trained with the skills of fighting. Any thane or warrior under the name of the Bretwalda would have made an allegiance to a Beot. A Beot is the tremendous vow of oath that any warrior, or thane takes when he comes under the name of the king. This Beot between the thane and the warrior king is one of true loyalty, bravery, and glory. Under the vow of Beot, a thane would be signing a contract for his life, since he now has devoted his entire life to his warrior king, his Bretwalda. This vow of Beot was an unwritten contract, which stated that the thane would fight anyone or anything in order to protect he warrior king, and his people. This too meant even if it included sacrificing his own life. This immense vow of Beot demonstrated the courageousness and loyalty between the warrior king and the thane, which is comitatus. Through the vow of Beot and the unwritten laws of comitatus, the thanes and warriors would receive a place within the Germanic tribe. They would be provided with a lavish place to reside and rest as well as many luxuries such as golden treasures, and rare and beautiful jewels worth plenty, not to mention the protection they too received under the king. Although each of these wonderful luxuries did not come without a demonstration of their comitatus, such as a won battle, they were always honored.

In this epic poem the vow of comitatus affects the relationship between Beowulf and his King Hygelac, Hrothgar and Beowulf, and finally Beowulf and Wiglaf. For example, the great vow of comitatus is proven to be quite immense as soon as the beast of Grendel threatens the people under the clan of King Hygelac. As soon as Beowulf herd that the King was in need of help he responded. No one stopped him, no one tried to convince him otherwise, and instead they helped prepare him for what was to come. Finally, after the voyage Beowulf and the Geats arrive at Heorot to greet King Hygelac and report for their duty. We are retainers from Hygelac s band. Beowulf is my name. If your lord and master, the most renowned son of Halfdane, will hear me out and graciously allow me to greet him in person, I am willing to report my errand (Heaney 25). This quote demonstrates the tight bond of comitatus that a thane has for his King, showing that to Beowulf putting his life on the line is just an ordinary errand. Not only is there a strong sense of comitatus from thane to King, but also the other way around. For when Beowulf inherits the kingship, he settles the feuding himself. For the dragon that is threatening his people shall die. I would rather not use a weapon if I knew another way to grapple with the dragon and make good my boast as I did with Grendel in days gone by (Heaney 171). Once again the bond of comitatus goes both ways, for both the thanes and warriors must be loyal to their king, but the kings too must guard and protect his people.

As the epic poem of Beowulf began King Hrothgar was on the throne of the people of Heorot. As King of Heorot, Hrothgar is threatened by a powerful demon. This monstrous scary demon that threatens King Hrothgar and his people of Heorot is Grendel. The vicious beast of Grendel is a monster from Cain s Clan. So one night Grendel the powerful demon attacks the town of Heorot and butchers thirty men at once. So King Hrothgar sends out a call of distress and Beowulf as a loyal and brave thane comes to the rescue since it is his duty to protect his King and people. Now I mean to be a match for Grendel, settle the outcome in single combat (Heaney 29). So in return for the comitatus that Beowulf has demonstrated to his King Hrothgar, he shall be compensated for. This is my hope; and for his heroism I will recompense him with a rich treasure (Heaney 27). After having boasted that he will not use weapons against Grendel instead use his fists, everyone awaits to for Grendel in order to watch the battle. Finally, Beowulf and his thanes defeat Grendel with only the death of one warrior. After the astonishing defeat King Hrothgar who gives him a treasure recompenses Beowulf for the great display of comitatus that he showed him.

The final demonstration of comitatus is between Beowulf and Wiglaf. Like the last two relationships of comitatus, Beowulf and Wiglaf too share a strong bond of King and thane. After Beowulf inherits the kingship he and his people as well are threatened yet again by another dragon. This dragon is upset at the people of Geats for the theft of his property. The provocation of the dragon leads to a threatened and frightened people whom Beowulf as King must protect. So with the sword that Hygelac presented him with, Beowulf sets out to defend his people from this vicious dragon. Unlike the last time when he fought Grendel, this time Beowulf is fifty years older and somewhat weaker. I risked my life often when I was young. Now I am old, but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight for the glory of winning, if the evil one will only abandon his earth-fort and face me in the open (Heaney 171). For the last time in this epic poem comitatus is demonstrated between King and warrior, or Bretwalda and thane.

All in all, the relationship of comitatus between a Bretwalda or King and his warriors or thanes does not just go one way, but both. Not only is the warrior of thane committed to an unwritten rule of pure loyalty, true braveness, and glory to his King, but so to is the King vowed to a service of comitatus to his people. A lifetime of service vowed to truth, allegiance, eminence, and gallantry, and the possibility of death was proven to be more valuable than not having to risk your life in time of need and living in disgrace. Comitatus is the root and source of a succeeding tribe within these Germanic peoples. Glory, Bravery, and loyalty was the only way the Germanic tribe of the Geats succeeded. Comitatus was the key of their success.