

4-2021

Review: Edward Pettit, *The Waning Sword: Conversion Imagery and Celestial Myth in "Beowulf"*

Craig Davis
Smith College, cradavis@smith.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/eng_facpubs



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davis, Craig, "Review: Edward Pettit, *The Waning Sword: Conversion Imagery and Celestial Myth in "Beowulf"*" (2021). English Language and Literature: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

https://scholarworks.smith.edu/eng_facpubs/23

This Book Review has been accepted for inclusion in English Language and Literature: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu

to rival the great secular capitals, Paris and London, but it claimed great spiritual significance and relics they could never match.

Each of these Italian city-states, and all the other cities, present to students different questions and the sources available for answering them. One of Florence's attractions is that it has everything: laws, communal records, chronicles and histories, diaries, abundant notarial records, to name only a few sources. Other cities are intensely studied, and some utterly neglected, in different Italian and Anglophone traditions and academic lineages. Palmer found in Rome, not surprisingly, that documents of practice from the commune hardly survived and that there was only one contemporary annalist worthy of note, yet of course there were the vast repositories of papal governance. What can one do with these materials? One can always ask questions and make arguments. A large question worth asking might be: was the practice of Christianity different in Rome because the papacy was, apart from one brief sojourn in Avignon, there for so long? Outsiders, as well as Romans, have wondered about its style of faith for centuries. A smaller question might be: what does the evidence collected and published for the canonization of Saint Francesca Romana (1384–1440) reveal about spiritual and social life in Rome? These witnesses appear in the conclusion and not earlier, when they might have buttressed the narrative. The Franciscans and Dominicans were often deeply involved in urban society; how did they affect Rome?

Palmer found in the Roman notarial record a number of testaments and other notarial acts that he used to reconstruct Roman society and piety ranging from the noble elites to those having enough wealth to merit the expense and trouble of making a will. Last wills and testaments, by their survival in many places across Europe, exert an attraction to the scholarly mind because they seem to offer insight into the lives and aspirations of people mostly forgotten in other records. Palmer used the thirty-seven documents (169) about peace-making to contribute to broader debates about the meaning of these events, and whether they really solved anything. Palmer's use of the wills to illuminate charity and family life is less successful because he does not supply details about the number of surviving wills. He claims to have seen them all (74), but what exactly "all" means is not clear. However many or few exist, edited or still in manuscript, they certainly merit study. But to assess the value of these findings against the vast literature on wills across pre-modern Europe, readers would benefit from knowing about the size of the sample. Without recourse to numbers, Palmer deploys the wills as mini biographies, one after another, relying on their cumulative weight of micro-stories to impress the reader, or not. One does not have to be a vacuous number cruncher to value even a little counting and comparing. Looking at a collection of wills sorted in some way enables the scholar to see a context that might make individual wills reveal unforeseen patterns.

Palmer tells the political story of how the papacy eventually asserted its mastery of Rome, and he understands governance and power. Using what sources he can on Roman piety, Palmer's portrait is less certain.

STEVEN A. EPSTEIN, University of Kansas, Emeritus

EDWARD PETTIT, *The Waning Sword: Conversion Imagery and Celestial Myth in "Beowulf"*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2020. Pp. xxi, 537; 7 color and 1 black-and-white figures. £38.95. ISBN: 978-1-7837-4828-0. doi:10.1086/713157

At the heart of the Old English poem *Beowulf*, in the midst of the hero's struggle with Grendel's mother below the bottom of the mere, Beowulf spies a giant sword hanging on the wall by dim firelight. He swipes off her head with it and the lights come on, "as when heaven's candle shines brightly from heaven" (1571–72b). He then finds and beheads her

son, who has already died of his wounds, the hot blood of the two monsters melting the sword-blade into “battle-icicles . . . just like ice when the Father loosens the fetters of frost, unwinds the water-bonds” (1606b–10a), leaving only the gleaming hilt in Beowulf’s hand. The monsters’ spilled blood mingles with the water of the mere as well, leading those waiting above to despair “at the ninth hour” (1600a) of their champion’s life, even as he has already triumphed below. The timing of this event, at the same hour as Christ’s death on the Cross, is the most explicitly Christological moment in the entire poem. It is also one that resonates as deeply, Edward Pettit argues, with an ancient solar myth of the loss and recovery of the sun from the powers of darkness. Indeed, the author finds in this scene a “thought-provoking blend of Christian and heathen themes . . . an implicitly redemptive message about how the icy coldness of heathenism may ‘melt’ into the blazing Cross of Christ” (470).

The author’s method is comparative and cumulative, adducing multiple parallels in the early literatures of northwestern Europe, especially Old English and Old Norse, which he sees as possible reflexes of old solar myths that can be traced archaeologically to the fertility religions of ancient Europe. Many of these analogues are indeed suggestive, though also tentative, fragmentary, and disparate, often surviving as fossilized relics of earlier thought in much later texts, where they are partially recognizable but have been subsumed or encysted in later thematic agendas. Pettit notes especially the recorded myths of *Ing* or *Yngvi-Freyr* (“the Lord Yng”), a Scandinavian fertility god and ethnic progenitor whom Pettit believes is the recollection of an ancient sun-god, reimagined by the poet of *Beowulf* as a human hero. Ing is invoked in the Old English *Rune Poem* as an early founder of the Danish nation, called the *Ingwine* (“Friends or Kinsmen of Ing”) in *Beowulf*, thus recalling how a very old seasonal god brought new life to his people from over the sea in a supernatural sun-wagon or -ship.

The forces that resist this bright deity and seek to steal his sun are elemental creatures of winter, cold, darkness and death, called “shadow-walkers” in *Beowulf*, ancient enemies of daylight whom Pettit identifies with nocturnal “moon-monsters,” creatures rationalized by the Christian poet as the outcast descendants of Cain. They occupy the moors and fens, barren wastelands beyond the boundaries of human agriculture and husbandry. When Beowulf overcomes them, he emerges from the black waters of the mere with the recovered hilt of a golden sun-sword that Pettit believes had not been forged by the giants in ancient times, as the poet suggests, but rather stolen from them in an earlier version of the myth. Pettit seems to have a point: the hero returns to Heorot bearing both hilt and monster’s head, striding through a landscape which only that morning had been a rough, wintry wilderness. Now he traverses burgeoning “mead-fields,” sprouting for brewing and celebration in the great mead hall. The hero’s victory over the powers of winter darkness has fast-forwarded to spring and harvest.

This book’s strength is its wealth of such comparanda—interesting, worthy, often compelling analogues to the central monster-fight of *Beowulf*. They reveal the likelihood of an archaic mythic substrate embedded in the narrative tradition the poet inherited. This reviewer is friendly to such efforts at “narrative archaeology,” but wary of their results, especially since the poet’s own awareness of the mythic genealogy of his material is unlikely. Typological antecedents may indeed be buried piecemeal in the alliterative oral tales the poet learned from his predecessors, but he probably knew even less than we do about the character of Old European fertility religion. Indeed, if we are looking for a clear pre-Christian precursor for the figure of Beowulf, it can be found in the younger Indo-European sky-god Thor, who goes out to fight the great world-serpent on the last day, kills it just like Beowulf did the dragon, then himself succumbs to its venom, Pyrrhic victor of a final defeat. The narrative trajectory of the poem replicates not a myth of renewal or redemption, but one of unmitigated disaster. At the end of his life the old hero will again confront a creature of darkness, a chthonic *wyrm*, coiled upon the rusting remains of a long-defunct people. This monster is supercultural and therefore insuperable, even by the bravest of gods or heroes. The “celestial myth” Pettit sees

at the heart of *Beowulf* was overtaken by a more potent mythic prototype at its end—the doom of the gods at Ragnarök. *Beowulf* marks not the happy mingling of pagan myth and Christian promise, but rather its demise, the last gasp of that old world as it struggled for life in the new regime of Roman Christianity. Pettit's study is well worth the effort he has put into it, gathering in one place a compendium of the solar imagery that once appealed so strongly to the *Beowulf* poet, even as he rejected it in the end.

CRAIG R. DAVIS, Smith College

ALEKSANDER PLUSKOWSKI, ed., *Ecologies of Crusading, Colonization, and Religious Conversion in the Medieval Baltic: Terra Sacra II*. (Environmental Histories of the North Atlantic World 3.) Turnhout: Brepols, 2019. Paper. Pp. xviii, 243; 9 color and many black-and-white figures, many maps, and 22 tables. €100. ISBN: 978-2-5035-5133-3.

Table of contents available online at http://www.brepols.net/Pages/ShowProduct.aspx?prod_id=IS-9782503551333-1.

doi:10.1086/713413

This volume is the second of two publications emerging from the multinational research project entitled The Ecology of Crusading, which investigated the environmental dimensions of the long process of conquest and Christianization of the eastern Baltic countries from the end of the twelfth up to the fifteenth century. (For the first volume, see Aleksander Pluskowski, ed., *Environment, Colonization, and the Baltic Crusader States: Terra Sacra I* [2019].) The volume comprises an introduction by the principal investigator, Aleksander Pluskowski, and seventeen papers (many of them co-authored) by thirty-seven project members based at institutions in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Twelve papers are archaeological case studies, while the remainder offer more interdisciplinary approaches.

Seven papers (the largest group) deal with plant and animal remains and the detail they provide about the diet, health, and animal exploitation of the predominantly immigrant communities in Prussia and Livonia (with one study of Novgorod and its hinterland). While it is not possible to comment on every contribution in a review of this length, one can highlight some important findings in this section, for example the increasing consumption of imported marine fish (notably herring, cod, and salmon) throughout the region, the import of exotic fruits, nuts, and spices to the main centers in Prussia, and the surprising use of frogs, worms, and insects as medical remedies. The discussions on food are complemented by Juhan Kreem's investigation of written evidence about the victualing of the castles of Karksi and Viljandi in southern Estonia (77–82).

A second group of papers relates to architecture and the wider landscape. Māris Zunde's survey of tree types and the use of timber from the Iron Age to the end of the medieval period provides essential background to the history of a highly forested region, where some tree species enjoyed cultic status in pagan belief (25–34). Joanna Fonferek describes excavations leading to the discovery of the earliest castle at Elbląg, built from oak in the 1230s but soon reinforced by brick constructions as the town became the principal administrative center of the Teutonic Order in the region; this work undoubtedly will pave the way for further important discoveries (16–23). K. M. J. Hayward gives a wide-ranging survey of the composition, dating, and provenance of brick, stone, and mortar used for castle construction in both Livonia and Prussia (35–58). The palaeoecological study of the Livonian landscape by Normunds Stivriņš et al. (147–51) suggests an intensification of agrarian activity after 1200, but as these findings seem to be at variance with the evidence of excavations along the River Daugava by Laimdota Kalniņa et al. (129–45), one might assume that a more wide-ranging investigation (with common parameters) is desirable, and that this needs to be done in conjunction with the study of landholding patterns in Livonia.

Speculum 96/2 (April 2021)