



King as Ring-Giver: Gift Giving and its Influence on the Christianization of Germanic and Nordic Peoples

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Abstract: This essay examines the cultural significance of gift-giving in Germanic and Nordic societies, particularly focusing on the figure of the king as a "ring giver." It argues that the kingly ideal of generosity and honor-bestowing in these cultures created a fertile ground for the reception of the Gospel, as the narrative of Jesus Christ resonated with the Northern ideals of what a good king should be. This essay aims to show that from the ideals of the king to the celebration of Yule, the Christianization of these peoples was not a wholesale rejection of their cultural ideals but rather a fulfillment and transformation of them.

Gift Giving Globally and in Northern Europe

Gift-giving is a universal and timeless activity that spans the global and human history. It builds and develops relationships and functions as a tool for social bonding and even religious practice. Ancient examples include the ancient Mesopotamians from whom gift giving was a form of tribute to kings and gods. Ancient Egyptians followed this sacrificial tendency and also exchanged gifts among themselves, especially during times of celebration and festivities. Greeks and Romans saw gift giving as a mark of hospitality and an expectation of what illustrious citizens would do. In China, the tradition of giving and receiving red envelopes stuffed with money during Lunar New Year has ancient roots. Christians had an ethic of generosity and giving gifts, especially at Christmas as a sign of hospitality and Christlike love. These practices often continue in cultures up to the present day. Whether it is an expression of thankfulness, a bestowal of honor, a sign of good will, or a giving of grace, gift giving has been a seemingly universal component of human cultures. Ancient and Medieval Germanic and Nordic cultures were no exception.

The first things about ancient Germanic and Nordic lands that might come to a modern readers mind are bearded brutes.¹ However, a foundational aspects to their cultures was actually generosity and the role of generosity in the assessment of a good king. In Germanic and Nordic traditions, the king was known as the "ring giver" or "gift giver." The ring giver was a central figure that embodied the values of generosity, leadership, and social example. The figure of the ring giver is not only a literal dispenser of wealth, which he was, but also a symbol of the humility that binds a village and a people together. The king's ability to give gifts fostered loyalty increased the support received from their warriors and subjects. Accepting a gift from the ring giver came with the understanding of a commitment to support and serve the giver as king.

In Germanic and Nordic literature, such as in the epic poem "Beowulf," the ring giver is presented as the heroic ideal. The hero's relationship with their king and the hero's ability to themselves become a ring giver is a powerful theme highlighting the pre-Christian Germanic and Nordic values of honor, loyalty, and generosity in the ideal king. The concept of the ring giver survived the Christianization of Germanic and Nordic societies, adapting to Christian liturgy and ethical expectations. It influenced the portrayal of Christian kings and leaders in the north. Post-Christian Germanic and Nordic kings were expected to exemplify the virtue of generosity and leadership and to act as moral and spiritual guides for their people. This continued to influence these cultures and contributed to the Anglo-Saxon and Norman chivalric codes centuries later. In Christianity, the narrative of God's gift of salvation centers on the belief that God, in His infinite love and grace, offers salvation to humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This act is seen as the ultimate gift to humanity, providing redemption from sin and the promise of eternal life to those who believe and accept it.

Jesus is often referred to as the "good King" or "King of Kings" in the Bible and Christian tradition. This depiction highlights the qualities of a just, benevolent, and generous ruler. As the good King, Jesus embodies the virtues of compassion, generosity, and self-sacrifice. He is seen as a shepherd to his people, guiding them, providing for their needs, and ultimately laying down his life for their sake.

The concept of Jesus as the good King resonated deeply with the Germanic and Nordic ideals of a king as a "ring giver," a leader whose legitimacy and honor are tied to their generosity and ability to care for their people. In the Bible, Jesus fulfills and transcends these kingly ideals by giving the gift of salvation, offering

¹ Battle of Teutoburg Forest, raiding Vikings, and the blood eagle.

not just material or temporal rewards, but eternal life and reconciliation with God and incarnationally living with His people and not in isolation and opulence.

The Ring Giver Ideal in Germanic and Nordic Cultures

"Beowulf" is an epic poem composed in Old English, likely between the 8th and early 11th centuries. It centers on the hero, Beowulf, and his heroic deeds in a time of kings and monsters. In Beowulf, the dynamics of kingship and the "ring giver" are a central theme. Final victory over the dragon is not achieved by the strength of Beowulf but by his generosity which empowers the warrior Wiglaf to come to the king's aid against an otherworldly horror.

When he saw his lord Tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet,
He remembered the bountiful gifts he bestowed on him,
How well he lived among the Waegmundings,
The freehold he inherited from his father before him.
He could not hold back."²

The sight of Beowulf under the heat of the dragon's fire brought not thoughts of heroism but memories of generosity and so Wiglaf cast himself into danger. After the dragon is defeated, it is Beowulf's turn to give even more to Wiglaf.

"Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped
The collar of gold from his neck and gave it
To the young thane, telling him to use
It and the war shirt and the gilded helmet well."³

In this scene, Beowulf bestows a list of symbolic and functional gifts to Wiglaf. Wiglaf receives the gifts because the original gifts inspired Wiglaf to behave as Beowulf did—to risk life for another. The gifts represent the transmission of honor and trust, further solidifying the bond between the king and the new heroic generation. Beowulf's "great-heartedness" is the archetype of the ideal "ring giver" who generously honors those who serve their people well.

Robert Schichler provides an interesting comparison between the imagery use in Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxon Psalter. In this comparison of imagery Schichler points out several times the importance of gift-giving and demonstrates

² Heaney, Seamus. 2001. *Beowulf*. Translated by Seamus Heaney. New York: Norton., 2604-09.

³ Heaney, 2809-12.

the way the generosity of Hrothgar, another good king in Beowulf, is seen in Anglo-Saxon translations of the psalms of the Bible and emphasized animal imagery, particularly in Psalms 41 and 111.⁴ It is clear that generosity was important not only to pre-Christian German and Nordic peoples but a central component to the contextualization of Christianity to their cultures. Generosity became a central link between pre and post Christian Northern Europe.

One implication of the gift-giving king in these cultures was the understanding that no one was too good to give. This ideal was represented by the pre-Christian gods as well. In contrast to the selfishness of the Greco-Roman gods who kept secrets and punished Prometheus who “stole” fire from them, the Germanic and Norse gods were known more for their generosity as this example from the *Völsung Saga*. In the saga, Odin, the highest deity in the Nordic pantheon, manifests himself as an aged, one-eyed wanderer and thrusts his sword into the Barnstokkr tree amidst a celebratory gathering at King Völsung's court. Odin says, “he who draws this sword out of the trunk shall receive it from me as a gift, and he himself shall prove that he has never carried a better sword than this one.”⁵ The ring-giving activity of the king was one of participation in divine activity. This influenced the orthodoxy of pre-Christian Germanic and Norse in the doctrine that the gods were generous. But orthopraxy was also influenced since the praxis of the king was to also be generous and the praxis of those under his care was also to be one of generosity and gift giving. In the German and Norse cultures gift-giving was a privilege sought by all—not least of which being the ideal king.

The Gospel Narrative and the Kingly Ideal

Paul summarizes God's intentions in the life, death, and the resurrection/enhronement of Jesus, “in order that in the coming ages he might show *the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus*. The Bible goes on to state explicitly, the gift-giving activity of God in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:8-9 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, *it is the gift of God*— not by works, so that no one can boast. *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*” God is the ultimate generous God, sharing not only wealth but the gift of reconciliation and a new covenant between Himself and mankind through the giving of the gift of Christ Jesus. But

⁴ Schichler, Robert L. 1996. “Glæd Man at Heorot: Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxon Psalter.” *Leeds Studies in English*, no. 27 (January): 49–68.

⁵ Byock, Jesse. 1990. *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. New York: Penguin Books.

similar to the gift-giving of the ring-giver, the gift of Christ Jesus is not supposed to occur in a vacuum, rather it is to establish a relationship that includes good works partnership.

Earlier in the letter to the Ephesians, Paul introduces the concept of the bestowal of honor to humanity as a gift from God when, in Ephesians 1:3-5, he says, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.” In adopting humans into His family, as an expression of His pleasure and will, God honors humans by giving them the gift of not merely the family of a human king but the family of God. So we see, in the summary of the Gospel, the role of God as the archetypal gift-giver. The character God in Jesus Christ as the ideal King is continued in Paul’s words to the church in Philippi. Paul is highlighting the primary role of humility in social cohesion and in imitation of Christ Jesus. In Philippians 2:5-11 Paul says,

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

In this passage, Paul explains that Jesus came to earth and lived a human life as a servant to His people. Jesus lived among, and as, His people in humility and leading from the front. When Jesus asked something from His disciples He was not asking something He had not already done. The Christian view of Jesus'

obedience to death shares the heroic undertones of a king saving his people. Humans cannot decide whether or not they will die but Jesus' death was not an act of cause and effect—it was an obedience. Like a king who did not have to join the battle but chose to lead his thanes from the front and enter the battle by choice, so Christ did not have to take on humanity and die but chose it. This is another aspect of the ideal Germanic/Nordic king that was fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

This is clearly drawn out, in another Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Dream of The Rood*, a poem about the cross and Christ at the Crucifixion where Jesus is presented as “a "heroic German lord, one who dies to save his troops.”⁶ The sacrifice of Christ was a call to follow Christ and with the Christian emphasis on the historicity of the Cross it was a call to follow the flesh and blood manifestation of the great kingly ideal.

The Christianization of Germanic and Nordic Peoples

The Christianization of Germanic and Nordic peoples was a slow process over a period of multiple centuries. For Germanic peoples, the process of Christianizing their culture started around the 4th century AD and continued for hundreds of years. For most Scandinavian peoples the process did not start until the 9th century AD and again continued for at least a hundred years. It is not possible to perform a univariable analysis of the Christianization of these people groups because each nation and tribe had its own reasons as did different kings and within the centuries long transition there were also different motivations during different centuries. This essay is not about analyzing the many factors that were at play in these transitions so it will suffice to say that it was a complex and long process. This essay is looking into the mythos of these people groups as a whole—the mythos of gift-giving, kingship, and the ideal king. The mythos of gift-giving was specifically associated with the celebrations surrounding winter solstice. During this transition into Christianity people still kept their Yule traditions and many still do today, over a thousand years later.

Yule

Yule was a pre-Christian winter festival celebrated by Germanic and Nordic peoples. The exact origins and practices of Yule are not fully known. What is known is that Yule was an important midwinter event that aligned with the Winter Solstice.

Yule focused on feasting together and burning a Yule log representing light and warmth in the cold and dark northern winters. The timing of the Winter

⁶ Treharne, Elaine M. 2004. *Old and Middle English C.890-c.1400 : An Anthology*. Malden, Ma: Blackwell Pub.

Solstice is important because it also is symbolic of the transition in winter where, from that point forward, the daylight would grow longer and the dark winter was waning—the light was coming into the world. These cultural practices of Yule were easily adapted into Christianity and the celebration of Christmas. Both Yule and Christmas celebrated the light of the world, the idea of birth and rebirth, and the invasion of light and renewal into a world of darkness and death. The feasting honored Christ the ultimate ring-giver, rather than the Germanic/Nordic gods.

The contextualization of Yule into Christmas was one of fulfillment and evolution—the symbols were consistent and the main change was the object of worship. The great ring-giver gave the greatest gift to humankind—the light of the world had come and that was worth celebrating.

Legacy and Transformation of Cultural Ideals

Yule is an example of the ways in which the gift-giving nature of Germanic/Nordic kingship and social expectation presented fertile ground for religious conversion to Christianity. But these transitions into Christianity made their regions Christians unique in their festivities and practice as does almost all contextualization. Looking back to the expectations of kings it is important to note that the idea of gift-giving and incarnational leadership in early Northern European Christianity expanded to include religious leaders as well. It is interesting to see how the role of a Christian priest or bishop did not adapt to the role of a seiar (shaman) but more took upon itself a kingly role. Christian clergy were expected to live and die with their congregants as the Germanic and Nordic kings had done and continued to do. As Ben Merkle points out in *The White Horse King*, “Anglo-Saxon Britain had, of course, a very different set of expectations for their clergy than that of the modern church. Priests and bishops were expected to be leaders of men, and this obligation didn’t vanish during times of war. Thus Anglo-Saxon armies were often commanded by members of the clergy who, like Heahmund, fought and died along with the men of their parishes.”⁷ This historical fact challenges the popular portrayal of the warriors of the north being subdued by pacifist clergy. The clergy of the early Christians in Northern Europe were warriors and found no prohibition to leading their congregants in justified war. After all, if Jesus voluntarily left the privilege of heaven and incarnated among His people, being obedient to death, then how could a leader among Jesus’ church do anything different?

⁷ Merkle, Benjamin R. 2009. *The White Horse King*. Thomas Nelson. “Chapter 3: The Battle of Ashdown.”

The warrior king leadership of the Christian clergy suggests a possible answer to the question to why Germanic/Nordic peoples lived less violent lives but were not pacifists. Even nearly a thousand years after the introduction of Christianity, the empires involved in the 30 Years War recognized the prowess of Swedish and Norman warriors. Yet there was a cultural change when Christianity was introduced and made normative. What was it? The answer suggested here is that the change was in the source of honor. Given that Christ gave the ring-giver's gift of ultimate honor, being adopted into the family of the one true God, the need for honor based killing and retribution decreased. The concept of defensive violence did not end—even the priests and bishops fought to defend their lands and families. But the need to kill in order to save face was no longer seen as necessary. Forgiveness, not pacifism, was the innovation. Freedom from shame, not bondage to dovishness renewed the Germanic and Nordic cultures.

This is reinforced by the self-expressed motivations of the German people prior to World War II. Many Germans who supported the maniacal violence of Hitler did so because of a sense of honor. The idea of honor coming from Christ had become out of vogue in the decades leading up to World War I and its aftermath. Culture shifted yet again and this time away from Christ as the source of honor. Germans sought honor in the abstract article of “the fatherland”, and not in the gift of the ring-giver. Simone de Beauvoir recounts the following in an interaction between herself and Sartre in the time between the World Wars:

A German approached us: around forty years old, with a black cap on his head, a gloomy face; after a few banalities, he told us that he had served in the 14-18 war as a sergeant; his tone rose little by little: “If there is a new war,” he said, “we will not be the vanquished: we will regain honor. >> Sartre replied that there was no need for war: we should all want peace. “Honor comes first,” said the sergeant. First, we want to regain honor. » His fanatical voice worried me. A veteran is necessarily militaristic, I thought to reassure myself; all the same, how many were there to live with their gaze fixed on the moment of the great revenge? I had never seen hatred burst forth on a face in such a triumphant way. Throughout this trip, I tried to forget him without success.⁸

⁸ Beauvoir, Simone de, 1908-1986. 1960. *La Force De L'age*. [Paris]: Gallimard. Page 221, translated into English.

Original French: Un Allemand nous aborda : une quarantaine d'années, sur la tête une casquette noire, un visage morose ; après quelques banalités, il nous dit qu'il avait fait la guerre 14-18 comme sergent ; son ton se monta peu à peu : « S'il y a une nouvelle guerre, ditil, nous ne serons pas les vaincus : nous retrouverons l'honneur, » Sartre répondit qu'il ne fallait pas de guerre : nous devons tous souhaiter la paix. « L'honneur passe d'abord, dit le sergent. D'abord, nous voulons retrouver l'honneur. » Sa voix fanatique m'inquiéta. Un ancien combattant, c'est forcément militariste, pensais-je pour me rassurer; tout de même, combien étaient-ils à vivre

The German's fixed gaze upon revenge was due to a 19th century reliance on the fatherland as the source of honor. The results of coveting honor apart from the great ring-giver was one of the greatest acts of collective violence known in these cultures to date.

Conclusion

The Christian narrative in the New Testament resonates deeply with Germanic/Nordic traditions, making the integration and acceptance of Christianity within these societies as consistent with their prior culture. These include parallels between the Germanic/Nordic ring-giver (king) and God's ring-giving nature ultimately through the gift of Jesus to the world. The life of Jesus, while offensive culturally in some aspects, ultimately finds itself as the fulfillment of the Germanic/Nordic kingly archetype. Yule is an example of how fulfillment focused contextualization took place and is still celebrated today. What we saw as well was a religious, kingly leadership class in Christianity that did not mirror the pre-Christian religious cast but focused more on a holistic leadership approach that reimagined the priest and bishop as a leader of men. This leadership and incarnational approach to priests and bishops made sense in a culture where ring-giving and incarnational living was not expected only of an elite religious class but of all capable members. Since the priests and bishops were members of the kingdom they too were to live as Christ lived, that is to say, live as the king lived.

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le regard fixé sur le moment de la grande revanche ? Jamais je n'avais vu la haine éclater sur un visage d'une manière si triomphante. Pendant tout ce voyage, j'essayai de l'oublier sans y parvenir.

Merkle, Benjamin R. 2009. *The White Horse King*. Thomas Nelson. "Chapter 3: The Battle of Ashdown."

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