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2016

Head of State: An Exploration of Developing Concepts of Kingship as Portrayed in the Severed Heads of Medieval Literature

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Head of State:

An Exploration of Developing Concepts of Kingship as Portrayed in the Severed Heads

of Medieval Literature

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Dr. Swedo, Advisor

History Thesis

Spring 2016

Introduction

Literature, when used as a source of historical study, yields valuable and sometimes unexpected results. Though not always the conventional source of historical information, literature, rather than giving facts or dates, can reveal details of a broader nature regarding the culture in which it was created, such as trends, values, and ideals. These trends, values, and ideals can then be used to create a richer, deeper understanding of a society in order to provide context for further historical analysis. The process of gathering such information from historical literary samples involves a fair amount of literary analysis. For example, identification of a motif, a repeated theme or concept, appearing in various works produced during an identified period of time could be indicative of an ideal held by the members of the society at that time.

Writing in Britain prior to the Christianization of the island was uncommon. Although certainly not unheard of prior to the spread of Christianity, scholasticism and composition grew significantly with the increase of monasteries that would become the repositories of knowledge and wealth for centuries to come. Monks and members of the clergy became not only the scribes responsible for recording earlier oral tradition but also the authors of many of the pieces of writing that have survived from the second half of the Anglo-Saxon period in Britain (c. 660-1066 CE). Through the analysis of various kinds of writing produced by these early medieval clerics, scholars can learn much about the world in which they lived and wrote.

A motif that stands out in several genres of literature from this period is the motif of the decapitation episode. Unusual and striking, this motif appears in both the folklore associated with the Celtic mythological tradition that was present prior to the advent of Christianity and the writings about the lives, deaths, and miracles of Catholic saints, also known as hagiography. Within these genres of literature--hagiography being composed by clerics and folklore being

scribed by clerics based on an earlier oral form--decapitations and severed heads appear with surprising frequency and share many distinguishing details, such as supernatural qualities, divine symbolism, and protective purposes.

Various scholars of both Anglo-Saxon hagiography and Celtic mythology have posited that these two genres are connected through their similar preponderance towards episodes of decapitation and the similarities identified in these episodes. Each genre has been extensively studied by scholars in the past. When the studies of these two genres are combined, the claim most often made by past scholars is that the supernatural elements of hagiography associated with these heads are derived in some way from Celtic mythology. The influence of Celtic mythology has been contested among scholars almost since it was first proposed, and recent scholarly work has attempted to provide guidelines to regulate this endeavor of connecting the two genres. Combining the sources from both literary genres and the scholarship on these sources is a monumental task, and discovering if any relevant connections do exist is complicated work.

The body of writing concerning Celtic mythology is large and can be divided into several sub-groups based on region. The Celts were a people group who migrated to the British Isles from Central Europe c. 6th century BCE. The Gauls of continental Europe and the Bretons of what is now modern-day northern France were closely related to these Celts; thus, *insular Celtic mythology* is the term used to specify the traditions and stories belonging to the Celts of the British Isles. This category of insular mythology can be further divided into the Gaelic (Irish) and British branches, each branch with its own distinct lore and pantheon. However, there are many similarities between these two branches of mythology, not the least of which the frequent appearance of the severed head.

The stories of the various heads appearing in Celtic mythology survive in several manuscripts, dating roughly from the end of the Early Middle Ages (c. 800) to the beginning of the Late Middle Ages (c. 1300). Although the existing copies of these manuscripts all date to the Middle Ages, there is a general consensus among scholars that the stories themselves are part of an oral tradition and were circulated for many years before being written down.[1] Some of the most significant sources of the British branch of Celtic mythology are Welsh manuscripts, the most noteworthy being the "Four Ancient Books of Wales" and the "Red Book of Hergest."[2] These texts contain poetry attributed to the 6th century bards Myrddin, Aneurin, and Taliessin, as well as several sets of commemorative praise poetry known as *Triads*. These manuscripts also contain *The Mabinogion*, a set of eleven Welsh stories. Although fragments of *The Mabinogion* appear in several medieval manuscripts, the "Red Book of Hergest," the earliest extant manuscript of which dates from c. 1400, is the earliest surviving text to contain all eleven stories in their complete forms. The stories were likely subject to extensive alteration before they were written down; however, the language and style of the stories suggests that they had evolved to their present format at some point between 1000 and 1250 CE.[3] One of the oldest sources of the Gaelic branch is the "Book of the Dun Cow," a manuscript composed in the late 11th century; another manuscript, dating about half a century later but containing more material, is the "Book of Leinster."[4]

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[1] Jeffrey Gantz, "Introduction," in *The Mabinogion* (England: Penguin Books, 1976), 13; William F. Skene, *The Four Ancient Books of Wales* (Forgotten Books, 2007), 12-20; Charles Squire, *Celtic Myths and Legends* (New Jersey: Gramercy Books, 1994), 12.

[2] Skene, *The Four Ancient Books*; Mary Jones, ed., "The Welsh Triads (Red Book of Hergest)," in John Rhys and J. G. Evan, *The Text of the Mabinogion and Other Welsh Tales* (1887), Celtic Literature Collective, last modified 13 Sept., 2015, http://www.maryjones.us/ctexts/triads1.html.

[3] Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, 21.

[4] Squire, *Celtic Myths*, 10.

Examples of hagiography from the Middle Ages are more numerous. A significant work that contains much information on many of the early saints of Britain is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.[5] Although it was technically historical writing, the *Ecclesiastical History* also contained details on various British saints from the time of the Roman occupation through the early eighth century. Besides being a pioneer in Western history, Bede, a monk from northern England, was an exceptional religious scholar and author whose work influenced both religious and secular histories for centuries after his death. Another work that was equally influential in religious writing was *The Golden Legend*.[6] Compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, an Italian Dominican friar who lived in the mid-thirteenth century, this work was a collection of short hagiographic writings about various saints. It brings together saints from diverse locations and establishes narratives for their lives and deaths, providing an excellent example of themes and purposes of the genre.

Episodes of decapitation from both hagiography and Celtic folklore recorded during the second half of the Anglo-Saxon period in Britain share many similar details--including the retention of speech and animation following the event of decapitation and a lack of decay--and these details are strongly connected to concepts of Anglo-Saxon kingship. In the latter half of the Anglo-Saxon period, the roles and responsibilities of Anglo-Saxon kings were undergoing change as the island experienced both internal and external warfare; these changes in conceptualizations of kings were reflected in the literature that was produced both during and after this time period. In both genres, the symbolic nature of the continued speech and lack of decay is indicative of a similar concept: the divine power that resides in the severed heads of the

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[5] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (England: Penguin Books, 1990).
[6] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Ryan Granger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

kings. Furthermore, the common protective role that is attributed to the head in both genres of writing is highly reflective of the notions of kingship that were developing at this time in Anglo-Saxon Britain. This sort of contextual knowledge that is gained by a careful consideration of these two genres side-by-side is evidence of the benefits that come from the joint-analysis of multiple genres of medieval writing.

Historiography

In light of the research that has combined the analysis of hagiography and mythology in the past, it is necessary to acknowledge some of the difficulties and problematic areas of the field before examining the decapitation episodes in each. When these two genres are combined in research, the goal of scholars is often to identify elements of pre-Christian pagan religion that have survived and manifested themselves in the literature of medieval Christianity. In general, survivalist arguments are poorly received, in part because of a lack of standardization regarding the method of identifying elements of pre-Christian pagan mythology within the context of Christian writings. In her article, Catherine Cubitt notes that "discussion of lay and popular religious practices has been mistrusted because of its tendency to seek their origin in the ancient Germanic and pagan past and to reconstruct beliefs of a pre-literate period using widely diffused evidence from much later centuries."[7] Cubitt alludes to the fact that the primary sources for the beliefs of pre-Christian Britain are relatively small in number, and arguments for the endurance of these beliefs as evidenced by their presence in Christian literature are often based on shaky reconstructions. Often, pre-Christian roots are identified in hagiography on the assumption that Celtic survival is an established fact, but this is not the case. Moreover, after the publishing of Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Lore* (1995), it became common practice to simply use

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[7] Catherine Cubitt, "Sites and Sanctity: Revisiting the Cult of Murdered and Martyred Anglo-Saxon Royal Saints," *Early Medieval Europe* 9, no. 1 (2000), 56.

this work to identify elements of folklore in hagiography.[8] However, using these basic and

inconsistent methods to demonstrate the presence of folklore in hagiography, as well as other

genres of medieval writing, has resulted in much criticism of the combination of the two genres.

C. Grant Loomis is one of the more prominent scholars who has examined the question of

the presence of folkloric elements in hagiographic writings. His book, *White Magic: An*

Introduction to the Folklore of Christian Legend, published in 1948, was first inspired by

research on the Anglo-Saxon writer Aelfric's sources and attempts to shed more light on the

story of the martyrdom of Saint Edmund.[9] Loomis divides the book into chapters according to

the type of miraculous--or folkloric--element. He then essentially lists the various pieces of

hagiography that include the element with a brief description of the element in the context of the

piece. While Loomis' book seems thorough simply due to the sheer number of hagiographic

writings mentioned, he provides little information or background on any of the stories and no

interpretation of the elements in the stories that he has claimed are folklore and, therefore, no

evidence to support that these elements are indeed borrowed from folklore.

A scholar who takes a different approach to identifying elements of folklore in

hagiography is Patrick Geary. Looking at the complex interpretations that can be derived from a

piece of hagiographic writing, Geary examines the many factors contributing to the complexity

of the actual hagiographic work in his book *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*.[10]

Discussing the *Visio Karoli Magni*, a piece of hagiographic writing that describes a saintly vision

of Charlemagne, Geary claims that "to understand the *visio*, we must consider its constituent

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[8] Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Lore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955).
[9] C. Grant Loomis, *White Magic: An Introduction to the Folklore of Christian Legend* (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1948).
[10] Patrick J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

elements as they appear in classical Christian and Germanic dream theory and tradition."[11]

Through this hagiographic source, Geary argues that a historian can discover information relating to each of these strands of influence in this complex piece of hagiographic writing. Geary traces several influencing traditions in the *visio*, reaching complex conclusions:

> First, it contains elements of the tradition of familial visions through which obligations uniting present, past, and future generations of the royal stirps are articulated. Second, it belongs to an ancient tradition of legitimization visions in which a magical barbarian weapon, the sword, is transmitted to a powerful leader from a predecessor in the otherworld as a sign of his right of succession. Finally, the tradition does not end with the ninth century: in the next century this central object of the royal regalia, like the vision tradition itself, was increasingly appropriated by the Church.[12]

By identifying various contributing elements in the *visio's* composition, Geary is able to illuminate several areas of historical interest that allow the vision to be more fully understood. This new, richer understanding allows historians to use the *visio* in more ways in future study in order to better illuminate general themes of the society and culture in which the *visio* was written.

Specifically concerning the connection of hagiography and the Germanic folklore tradition, Geary weaves a convincing argument. He claims that a deep understanding of both Christian dream episodes and Germanic dream episodes is essential to the process of determining the amount of influence of the folklore on the hagiography. Geary begins by noting that the dream in the *visio* takes place at an unusual point in the narrative; Christian tradition does not usually locate dreams at the beginning of the character's sleep cycle. However, Geary points out that "in Germanic tradition, and particularly in saga literature, it is exactly this moment when one is most likely to experience true visions."[13] He concludes that "the *Visio Karoli Magni* clearly

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[11] Geary, *Living with the Dead*, 57.
[12] Geary, *Living with the Dead*, 73.
[13] Geary, *Living with the Dead*, 58.

includes not only four Germanic words but also elements of a cultural tradition alien to that of Christian visionary literature--a tradition that...the author himself either did not understand or attempted to disguise."[14] Geary successfully identifies key elements in the narrative that either belong to or were influenced by Germanic folklore, and his overall conclusions result in a complex interpretation of this piece of hagiographic writing, allowing for further analysis of the society in which the *visio* was written.

In response to the various approaches of scholars who have attempted to draw connections between hagiography and folklore traditions, Hilary Powell sets out some guidelines in the recent article, "'Once Upon a Time There Was a Saint…': Re-evaluating Folklore in Anglo-Latin Hagiography."[15] In this article, Powell states that the purpose is to "set out a methodology by which folkloric elements in hagiographic texts can be more securely identified."[16] Powell is particularly critical of how "conclusions are founded on the identification of parallels between hagiographical elements and folk motifs as listed in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*" and points out the weakness of this method, stating that "although attractive, this argument is profoundly ahistorical and sheds no light as to how hagiographers came by these motifs nor what meanings they held."[17] Powell does not necessarily oppose the connection of these two genres of historical writing but calls for a more regulated approach to this topic of research.

Powell's article is an example of the results of the haphazard, inconsistent methods that have been employed in the joint consideration of both medieval folklore and hagiography. It

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[14] Geary, *Living with the Dead*, 57.
[15] Hilary Powell, "'Once Upon a Time There Was a Saint…': Re-evaluating Folklore in Anglo-Latin Hagiography," *Folklore* 121, no. 2 (2010): 171-189.
[16] Powell, "Once Upon a Time," 173.
[17] Powell, "Once Upon a Time," 174; 175.

seems that scholars who use a more complex lens of analysis, such as Geary, are producing research that yields more compelling results. The call for standardization is a positive development in a hotly-contested field, and suggests that there is room for more research to be done. However, past research trends and responses suggest that research conducted in a manner that accounts for cultural influences and genre consideration will be the most relevant and well-received by the field as it currently stands.

Origins and Development of Anglo-Saxon Conceptualization of the Head and Body

In order to understand the decapitation episode and severed head motifs in medieval literature, the concept of the body in Anglo-Saxon Britain must first be established. It is clear that, in literature produced at this time for the popular masses throughout Europe, death--particularly death by decapitation--did not signify the end of human interaction. In his book, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*, Patrick Geary discusses this idea, claiming that "death marked a transition, a change in status, but not an end."[18] He goes on to explain that "all the dead interacted with the living, continuing to aid them, to warn or admonish them, even to chastise them."[19] In medieval literature, sometimes this interaction of the dead with the living was as obvious as a conversation with a head that continued to speak after being severed from the body; at other times, the dead's continued influence in the world was more veiled. Regardless of the nature of the continued interaction, examples from many genres of medieval literature indicate that the existence of an individual was not dependent on the physical state of the body.

In the case of Britain, an examination of the conceptualization of the body is rooted in the Celtic mythological tradition that preceded the establishment of Christianity on the island.

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[18] Geary, *Living with the Dead*, 2.
[19] Geary, *Living with the Dead*, 2.

Along these lines of inquiry, Celtic mythology has developed a somewhat infamous reputation for the importance placed on the head. However, a discussion of the head in Celtic mythology must be preceded by the acknowledgement that, while the head is significant in Celtic mythology, it is not unique to it in pre-Christian European rituals and beliefs. The head appears in various pre-Christian belief systems, and the cult of the head itself is a topic which has merited much research. According to E. O. James, "it seems that from the beginning of the Pleistocene Period a cult of the dead was practiced...which found expression in the preservation of the head and the extraction of the brains."[20] While James notes a general tendency towards head veneration, other scholars researching pagan cults revolving around the head have focused specifically on the Celtic mythological system. Looking specifically at the island of Britain, A. W. Smith claims that "the cult of the head came to England with the Northern people," justifying this claim with the argument that "animal sacrifice, followed by the dedication of the head, is, of course, well-known as an ancient Scandinavian and Germanic practice."[21] Smith goes on to point out that "head dedication is quite uncharacteristic of Greek, Roman, and Semitic rites," indicating that it is unlikely that the importance ascribed to the head in Celtic pagan tradition would come from different origins.[22]   The integral significance of heads is a belief that has been established in Celtic mythological tradition for a large portion of Britain's history.

The cult of the head itself was initially studied in-depth and promoted by Anne Ross, a prominent scholar of Celtic mythology. Written in 1967, her book, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, is recognized by modern scholars as "the first major work to pay detailed attention to the

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[20] E. O. James, *Prehistoric Religion* (Thames & Hudson), 28, in A. W. Smith, "The Luck in the Head: A Problem in English Folklore," *Folklore* 73, no. 1 (1962),19.
[21] Smith, "The Luck in the Head," 24. The head is a prominent part of Scandinavian legend; one of the most famous Scandinavian heads is the head of Mimir: after Mimir was beheaded, Odin "smeared it with herbs to preserve it, so that it would never decay," and he "sang charms over it and gave back to Mimir's head the power of speech," in Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 8.
[22] Smith, "The Luck in the Head," 14.

distribution and function of heads...and crucially set these in a context which included a range of mythological traditions and documentary evidence."[23] Ross' evidence for the existence of a head cult in insular Celtic religious practice was primarily the many decorative stone heads that archaeologists have found throughout the island of Britain. Ross cross-referenced these British stone heads with similar stone heads found in continental Europe and established dates that were pre-Christian.[24] The idea of the Celtic head cult--made popular largely due to Ross' work--lost a tremendous amount of support when new research showed that the majority of Ross' stone heads were dated inaccurately. Subsequent archaeology, led by Ronald Hutton, concluded that "the frequent appearance of the head...suggested nothing more than it was a favourite decorative motif."[25] As it now stands, the two sides of the debate seem to be in a deadlock and further research has resulted in no indications that the head cult existed. However, the presence of the head is an important element of pre-Christian Celtic tradition, despite the lack of definitive information regarding its exact significance.

Although the idea of the cult of the head has been contested, it remains that, in pagan Celtic tradition, the head was believed to be a source of power. In her study of Old English poetry, Mary Flavia Godfrey traces the origins of this concept, claiming that "comparative studies of myth...indicate that belief in various parts of the body as loci for power or creativity may be traced to Indo-European origins."[26] The power of the head, often demonstrated by the presence of supernatural abilities, is highlighted in Celtic folklore, particularly in the context of episodes of decapitation. Thus, "such sights as severed heads were familiar...and when talking,

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[23] David Clarke, "The Head Cult: Tradition and Folklore Surrounding the Symbol of the Severed Human Head in the British Isles," (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 1998), 18.
[24] Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).
[25] Clarke, "The Head Cult," 21.
[26] Mary Flavia Godfrey, "Beowulf and Judith: Thematizing Decapitation in Old English Poetry," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 35, no. 1 (1993), 5.

singing, or oracular, were commonly met with in the regions of miracle as well as of magic."[27]

In many examples of Celtic folklore, heads that retained animation following decapitation

episodes were portrayed in a positive light and not seen as objects that inspired horror or fear.

Instead, they were associated with protective power and indicative of otherworldly origins,

exemplified by continued powers of speech and unnatural post-mortem preservation.

Besides the folklore of pre-Christian Celtic tradition, another genre which provides

insight on the development of the Anglo-Saxon concepts of the body is the hagiography that was

produced after the Christianization of the island of Britain. The study of hagiography has long

been characterized by the hope that events described in hagiographic writings are a relatively

accurate portrayal of historical occurrences and, as such, useful for verifying historical

information. Thus, in modern scholarship there has always existed "the positivist concern to

separate 'fact' from 'fiction' in hagiography."[28] Towards the end of the 20th century, a

significant shift in the study of hagiographic writing occurred when scholars focused on

hagiography as a source of broader thematic knowledge of the society in which it was created.

Rather than examining hagiography with the intention of determining its historical accuracy in

order to add to knowledge of a specific event, scholars have taken a more interpretive approach

to hagiographic writing in recent years, allowing for further interpretive possibilities.[29] As

Patrick Geary notes, "as historians turn increasingly from the history of events to that of

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[27] Beatrice White, "A Persistent Paradox," *Folklore* 82, no. 2 (1972), 123.

[28] Geary, *Living with the Dead*, 9. Scholars associated with this sub-field of research are known as the Bollandists, who, according to George R. Coffman, "combined a pious and scientific purpose in their attempt to sift the authentic from the bizarre and the meretricious," in "A Note on Saints' Legends," *Studies in Philology* 28, no. 4 (1931), 48. Named after the scholar Hippolyte Delehaye, who published his influential work *Les Légendes Hagiographiques* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1905), translated as *The Legends of the Saints* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962). An example of research conducted in this manner is Dorothy Whitelock's article "Fact and Fiction in the Legend of St. Edmund," *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology* 31 (1969): 217-233.

[29] Notable works in this movement include Thomas Head's *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints: The Diocese of Orleans, 800-1200* (Cambridge, 1990); Elissa Henken's *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives* (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 1991); and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen's "'De Historiis Sanctorum': A Generic Study of Hagiography," *Genre* 13 (1980): 407-429.

perceptions and values...it seems to offer images of societies' idea types, such as the values held by medieval Christians and the behavior they tried to emulate."[30] As a result of this shift in the study of hagiography, scholars have gained the ability to draw connections between common themes and other similarities between hagiographic works and other aspects of society, often other genres of historical writing. This thematic research that has recently become more popular in the field has resulted in a variety of explorations of the theme of saintly bodies and their portrayal in hagiography.[31]

Hagiography produced in the latter half of the Anglo-Saxon period in Britain portrays the body in a different manner than Celtic mythology, emphasizing the body as a spiritual conduit of God's power. The remains of deceased saints were perceived as extremely powerful and valuable objects through which the divine power of God was channeled. By the power of God, saints were able to perform miracles from the grave, such as physical healings and even punishments. The remains of saints, known as relics, established a strong tradition of a spiritual existence that continued after the demise of the physical body.[32] Even though the saint had died, they were still alive in heaven--perhaps more powerful than they had been while on earth--and they were still able to interact with the living by channeling the power of God through their physical remains that were still present on earth. As the Middle Ages progressed, the bodies of saints "sanctified the very ground and space of the city, demonstrated to the world the superiority

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[30] Geary, *Living with the Dead*, 11.

[31] For example, for studies concerning the theme of bodily portrayal applied female saints, see Shari Horner's "The Violence of Exegesis: Reading the Bodies of Ælfric's Female Saints," in *Violence Against Women in Medieval Texts* (1998): 22-43; Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and Phillip Pulsiano's "Blessed Bodies: The Vitae of Anglo-Saxon Female Saints." *Parergon* 16, no. 2 (1999): 1-42.

[32] For an intriguing discussion of relics and relic theft, see Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

of the commune, and endowed its history with religious authority."[33] Even after death, the

physical body of the saint continued to be viewed as holy, powerful, and capable of influencing

the community, either through reputation or actual miracles. The bodies of saints were

instrumental in contributing to the formation of the spiritual nature of the body as a conduit for

divine power after death.

Hagiography also began to use the bodies of saints as physical representations of

theological concepts.   Authors of pieces of hagiography could embed deeper theological

meaning into the more visually-oriented descriptions of the saints and their bodies. For example,

in his discussion revolving around the decapitated Anglo-Saxon king-saint, Edmund, Ciaran

Arthur writes that "this realignment symbolizes both the reunification of the king (as head) with

the people (as body) and it imitates Christ's relationship with His body, the Church."[34] The

restoration and reunification of Edmund's head and body was reminiscent of God's

reconciliation of his people to Himself. In another work of historical research concerning St.

Edmund, Mark Faulkner examines how the state of Edmund's body after his death and the

miracles associated with it are physical manifestations of his purity and saintliness.[35] As the

genre of hagiography grew with the growth of monasteries and scholasticism during the Early

Middle Ages, the bodies of saints in particular became objects of great symbolic power in

writing and were used by authors as a means of embedding complex ideas in their written works.

Anglo-Saxon concepts of the body can be further defined and clarified when viewed

specifically in regards to the bodies of royalty. Throughout the Middle Ages, the concept of

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[33] Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 176.
[34] Ciaran Arthur, "Giving the Head's Up in Aelfric's Passio Sancti Eadmundi: Postural Representations of the Old English Saint," *Philological Quarterly* 92, no. 3 (2013), 326.
[35] Mark Faulkner, "'Like a Virgin': The Reheading of St. Edmund and Monastic Reform in Late-Tenth-Century England," in *Heads Will Roll: Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination*, ed. Larissa Tracy and Jeff Massey (Boston: Brill, 2012): 39-52.

kingship in the British Isles itself evolved, moving from an "elected" kinship requiring approval of the Anglo-Saxon *witan* to annointed Christian kingship in the central Middle Ages to divine right by the early modern period. However, while a king was not viewed as being God-appointed during Anglo-Saxon times, he was still considered to be a significant spiritual figure in other respects. This spiritual role is reflected in the perception of the king's physical body. If the king was ill, his illness would be reflected in the state of his kingdom; thus, it was the king's responsibility to ensure that his physical body was healthy. Catherine Cubitt expands on this idea, writing that "in Christian thought kingship encompassed responsibility for the fertility and well-being of the kingdom and became imbued with priestly attributes."[36] The king took on a spiritual role and, as a priest-like figure, was responsible for the religious well-being of his people. Similar to the concepts that were established by the hagiography produced after the conversion to Christianity, the king's body was perceived to have a significantly spiritual nature, and these concepts of spirituality began to be reflected in the shifting role of the king at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period.

These changing conceptualizations of royal bodies in the late Anglo-Saxon time period became incorporated into the ways in which the king was viewed in both a political and theological sense. Ernst H. Kantorowicz discusses this symbolism attributed to the physical bodies of kings in his seminal book, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*.[37] In this book, Kantorowicz references a tract written by an anonymous cleric ca. 1100 CE, roughly one generation after the Norman Conquest of England. The cleric writes that "we thus have to recognize [in the king] a *twin person*, one descending from nature, the other

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[36] Cubitt, "Sites and Sanctity," 81.
[37] Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957).

from grace."[38] The cleric describes how kings became imitators of Christ--who possessed a dual

nature of God and man--and discusses how, upon ascending the throne, a king received the

spiritual nature of his body by the grace of God.[39] Kantorowicz interprets this cleric's writing to

mean that the king had become "deified" upon his assumption of the role of king.[40] The king

was seen as a representative of God on earth, but also as being like God in the very nature of his

body--both a physical and spiritual entity. Thus, death, which had not defeated Christ, did not

defeat the king; his physical body might have been defeated, but his spiritual body would remain.

This concept aligns with the ideas concerning saints and, in general, suggests that life after death

in the Middle Ages was not an unusual concept, especially when pertaining to kings.

However, it cannot be said that this perception of the dual nature of the body of the king

would have been widely spread through the general populous. This highly theoretical idea was

likely only known among the literate in society: the clergy and the very elite members of the lay

population. Regarding the writings of this anonymous cleric, Kantorowicz concludes that "his

tractates, therefore, have to be used, not as a reflection of ideals valid in his time or

foreshadowing the future, but as a king of mirror that magnifies, and thereby slightly distorts, the

ideals current in the preceding era."[41] Thus, according to Kantorowicz, the concept of the dual

nature of a king's body would have found its roots prior to 1100 during the late Anglo-Saxon

period. As a concept that would have been understood by educated members of the clergy, it

could easily have been incorporated into the literature produced at this time.

Various sources of medieval literature in Britain prior to the end of the Anglo-Saxon

period incorporate ideas of a spiritual or otherworldly nature into their portrayals of the body.

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[38] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 46.
[39] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 47.
[40] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 47.
[41] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 60-61.

By this time in British history, the body and head--especially the bodies and heads of kings--had taken on a great amount of symbolic meaning as a result of pre-Christian pagan remnants of tradition and recent but strong spiritual affiliations. Thus, the decapitation of a king would be comparable to the act of decapitation itself: just as the head is forcefully separated from the rest of the body, so the head of the kingdom--the king--is forcefully separated from the rest of the kingdom--his subjects. However, because of the deeply-embedded concepts regarding the endurance of the dead individual through their spiritual nature and the great significance of the head itself, decapitation did not necessarily mean that a king's interactions and influence on society had come to an end. The literature produced during this time period demonstrates this concept, often incorporating episodes of decapitation into narratives from various genres in a way that also reflects the changing role of kings in Britain.

Divergence and Overlap Regarding the Severed Heads in Mythology and Hagiography

Symbols of the developing concepts of kingship can be found embedded in many instances of severed heads and decapitation episodes in both Celtic folklore and hagiography. However, in a cross-generic evaluation of decapitation episodes in literature from the second half of the Anglo-Saxon period in Britain, there are first several striking differences to consider, particularly those that occur in Celtic folklore as markers of Celtic tradition and culture. In Celtic folklore, severed heads appear in contexts that are distinctly Celtic and were not incorporated into other genres of medieval writing, such as hagiography, as noticeably as other Celtic aspects were.

Severed heads appear in many scenarios in Celtic mythology, but they are most commonly found in the context of the motif known as the Beheading Game. Examples of the Beheading Game can be found in both the British and Gaelic branches of Celtic mythology. The

well-known British poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, begins with the Beheading Game.[42]

In the motif of the Beheading Game, an unknown visitor arrives, usually preceding or during a

feast, and issues a challenge of decapitation to those present. In the case of *Sir Gawain and the*

Green Knight, the Green Knight's terms are that Gawain can strike a blow with the Green

Knight's axe if he agrees to allow the Green Knight to strike a blow in return in one year's time.

The severed head in this story continues to speak following Gawain's decapitating blow, and the

Green Knight's body remains animated, picking up his newly-severed head and leaving the feast.

Although the only surviving manuscript of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was not composed

until the end of the fourteenth century, it is believed to be an example of many aspects of earlier

pagan Celtic tradition, and there are several parallels between the poem and other severed heads

in Celtic mythology.

Often, the motif of the Beheading Game is set in the context of a feast, a common event

in Celtic folklore. Like the Beheading Game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the

Beheading Game in the Irish tale of *Fled Bricriend*, or *Bricriu's Feast*, also occurs at a banquet.

Another severed head appearing in Celtic mythology in the context of a feast is the head of Bran

the Blessed. After his decapitation in Ireland, Bran's companions are tasked with returning

Bran's head to London. Along the way, they are delayed at a feast where they "remembered

nothing of all the grief they had seen and suffered, staying in this magical place of feasting and

happiness for 80 years without aging or noticing the passage of time."[43] Discussing the presence

of Bran's head at the feast, Anne Ross suggests that "the story of [Bran's] decapitation is likely

to have been a rationalization of an original cult legend about a wonderful superhuman head

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[42] Brian Stone, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (England: Penguin Books, 1959).

[43] Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, 81.

which traditionally presided over a divine feast."[44] Feasts were significant events in Celtic

society, and feasts in Celtic folklore often precipitated the beginning of a journey or an important

revelation. The feasting tradition, although not transferred and used in the genre of hagiography,

was continued in other, more subtle ways; days in the Celtic calendar that had been established

as celebratory feast days were co-opted and altered to be Christian feast days.

Despite some distinct differences, particularly in regards to the contexts in which the

severed heads appear in Celtic folklore, there are several important points of overlap between the

severed heads of both Celtic folklore and hagiography produced in the second half of Anglo-

Saxon Britain, especially concerning the qualities that are associated with the severed heads.

These shared qualities carry more analytical weight than the contextual differences because they

are indicative of the deeper symbolism of the head in each genre--a symbolism that is nearly

identical in each genre. The severed heads in both mythology and hagiography exhibit qualities-

-such as continued speech and animation, a lack of decay, and a protective role--that symbolize

the presence of divine power in the head, a concept that aligns with the ideals of kingship that

were developing at this time.

One of the most fascinating qualities associated with severed heads in these two genres of

medieval writing is the continuation of speech following decapitation. This tradition in Celtic

folklore is best exemplified in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In this story, the continued

speech of the severed head inspires fear in those who are still living.[45] However, this story was

recorded at a later date than most of the pieces of Celtic folklore from which it is supposed to

have descended, and it incorporates themes of horror that are not present in its predecessors.

Another head, although less well-known than the Green Knight, that continues to interact with

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[44] Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, 119-120.
[45] Stone, *Sir Gawain*, 37.

the living after decapitation is the head of Bran the Blessed. Although it is unclear whether the head of Bran the Blessed actually continues to speak during the long journey back to London, the head is nevertheless clearly cast in the role of companion. The narrator states that, during the journey, Bran's friends did not perceive "having the head there [as being] more disagreeable than when Bran had been alive and with them."[46] The presence of Bran's head does not appear to be diminished by the absence of the rest of his body; even if the interaction did not take the form of speech, Bran's head is still perceived as the evidence of his continued presence in the world of the living even after the event of his decapitation.

Severed heads that continued to speak following episodes of decapitation are also found in the genre of hagiography. Within the tradition of hagiographic writing, the earliest martyr to speak after decapitation was Paul the Apostle. According to the version of Paul's death which appears in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, "as soon as [Paul's] head bounded from his body, it intoned, in Hebrew and in a clear voice, 'Jesus Christ.'"[47] In this case, the martyr's words directly glorify God by speaking the name of Christ, making it clear that the miracle of continued speech has occurred as a direct result of God's power.

In the category of hagiography specifically from Anglo-Saxon Britain, St. Edmund's head also speaks after being severed from the saint's body, although to a slightly different effect. After being decapitated by pagan Danish invaders, Edmund, a king of the early medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia, calls to his friends until his head is located. Hidden behind some shrubbery in the forest by the Danes, Edmund's head cries "here, here, here" in response to his

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[46] Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, 81.
[47] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 354.

companions' question of "where are you now, friend?"[48] The words spoken by Edmund's

severed head are not as obviously religious as Paul's words following his decapitation. Instead,

Edmund's words seem to serve a different purpose. As a result of Edmund's continued speech,

his head is eventually found and buried with the rest of his body, thwarting the Danes' malicious

intentions. The continued ability of speech turns what could have been a victory for the pagan

Danes into a triumph for Christendom, asserting the dominance of Christianity over pagan

beliefs and representing the power of God. Despite the Vikings' best efforts, God's power

enabling Edmund's severed head to speak ensures that the saint receives a proper burial.

During the latter half of the Anglo-Saxon period in Britain, the concept of continued

interaction of the dead with the living was manifested quite clearly in the motif of the talking

severed head, which appeared in both hagiography and folklore produced at the time. The event

of the talking severed head in these pieces of writing not only illustrates this concept but also can

be seen as an example of how kings continued to affect the state of their kingdoms--even after

their physical body was no longer on the throne. Bran the Blessed's responsibility to his

kingdom did not end with the destruction of his physical body; he was still perceived as an entity

with whom his subjects interacted on their long journey back to London. The example of St.

Edmund demonstrates a similar concept in hagiography: the abilities of speech that the saint's

head retains following the event of decapitation allow the king to continue to interact with his

subjects. Furthermore, while the event is obviously miraculous, Edmund's subjects do not seem

surprised by his continued speech after his decapitation. These examples demonstrate how the

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[48] Abbo of Fleury, "The Martyrdom of St. Edmund, King of East Anglia, 870," translated by Kenneth Cutler, *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, Fordham University, last modified 1998, http://www.forham.edu/Halsall/source/870abbo-edmund.asp.

idea of a king's interaction with his subjects--even from beyond the grave--is embedded in each genre.

Another common quality of severed heads which demonstrates the concepts which grew around ideals of kingship at this time is the lack of decay that is often found in the heads long after the episode of decapitation. A lack of decay is a shared trait in these two genres that was symbolic of the king's divine origins (in folklore) or saintliness (in hagiography), which was then proven by the presence of the divine power of God in the saint. This lack of decay signifying divine power suggests that kings at this time in British history were perceived as spiritual figures.

An early and slightly altered form of the severed head that did not decay can be seen in the head of Bran the Blessed. Although not overtly attributed to the head of Bran the Blessed, it would seem as if unnatural preservation occurred. In total, it took The Assembly of the Wondrous Head 87 Years to transport Bran's head to London; after arriving in London, no decay was mentioned and the protective powers that were later attributed to the head did not seem to diminish during the long journey. Throughout the story of Bran's exceptional severed head, no explanation is given for the unusual qualities displayed by the head. In the later case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the supernatural qualities displayed by the Green Knight's head are, in a way, expected because, as evidenced by his astonishing color, the Green Knight is clearly a denizen of the supernatural world. Thus, an audience would expect the head to display abnormal abilities following an episode of decapitation. Bran, however, is a human king of Britain, and--although he is portrayed as a heroic individual--there is little to explain these abilities. However, in both *The Mabinogion* and the *Welsh Triads*, Bran is quickly and unobtrusively introduced as the son of Llyr, the god of the sea who was associated with the

British branch of Celtic mythology.[49] It therefore follows that the unusual attributes of Bran's

severed head could be indicative of his roots in the Celtic pantheon and evidence of Bran's

divine ancestry. Just as the Green Knight's abilities of speech--a sign of life that continues after

death--are attributed to his supernatural origins, so Bran's lack of decay and continued

interaction with his companions can be seen as a result of the supernatural identity of his father.

A lack of decay is also a common feature of the bodies of decapitated martyrs whose

vitae were written during this period in Anglo-Saxon Britain, and this lack of decay was often

used to illustrate the presence of the divine power of God that remained active in the saint

following death. According to Abbo of Fleury's "Martyrdom of St. Edmund," many years after

his burial, it was discovered that Edmund "was as sound as when he was alive, with a clean

body."[50] The narrative goes on to say that "Edmund lies thus uncorrupted down to the present

day, awaiting resurrection and the eternal glory."[51] St. Oswald, a king of Northumbria, was

another Anglo-Saxon king whose remains did not decay. Killed in a battle against the king of

another Anglo-Saxon kingdom, Oswald was dismembered; the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* notes that

his hands, specifically, remained undecayed.[52] In the cases of both Edmund and Oswald, the

lack of decay reaffirms the sanctity of each saint. Abbo of Fleury confirms this in Edmund's

vita, stating that the lack of decay "tells us that [Edmund] lived without fornication in this world,

and with a clean life journeyed to Christ."[53] The reader is directly informed that it is because of

Edmund's saintly actions during his life that his physical remains do not experience decay after

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[49] Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, 67; Jones, "The Welsh Triads."
[50] Abbo of Fleury, "The Martyrdom of St. Edmund."
[51] Abbo of Fleury, "The Martyrdom of St. Edmund."
[52] Michael Swanton, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 27.
[53] Abbo of Fleury, "The Martyrdom of St. Edmund."

his death. Not only indicative of the saintliness of the individual, the lack of decay is a visual

demonstration of God's power that remains present in the saint.

An extension of the theme of lack of decay is seen in the miraculous event of post-

mortem healing of wounds, a miracle which again demonstrates the active power of God through

the physical remains of the saint. According to Abbo of Fleury's narrative, "[Edmund's] neck,

which previously was severed was healed" and "the wounds which the cruel heathens made with

frequent spear-shots to his body were healed."[54] The only evidence that Edmund's head had ever

been otherwise existed in the form of a scar similar in appearance to "a red silken thread around

his neck."[55] In his writing, Abbo makes it very clear that the healing of the saint's wounds and

the reuniting of Edmund's severed head with his body is due to a miracle of "the heavenly

God."[56] The red scar on Edmund's neck serves as an indicator of the saint's martyrdom, but also

as a reminder of the power of God manifested in the miraculous healing of Edmund's wounds.

The lack of decay that was manifested in many of the severed heads in both the genres of

mythology and hagiography serves a similar symbolic purpose in each genre. While in Celtic

mythology, a severed head which does not decay at a normal rate is often a result of the divine or

supernatural origins of the individual, this same trait in hagiography is a physical manifestation

of the continued presence of God's divine power in the remains of the saint. This association of

divine power--whether from a mythological or religious source--with decapitated royal

individuals is, perhaps, one of the earliest predecessors of the early modern concept of the divine

right of kings. In hagiography, it certainly demonstrated the approval of God regarding these

saintly kings who did not decay. It also was evidence of God's continued use of the deceased

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[54] Abbo of Fleury, "The Martyrdom of St. Edmund."
[55] Abbo of Fleury, "The Martyrdom of St. Edmund."
[56] Abbo of Fleury, "The Martyrdom of St. Edmund."

king as a means of channeling His divine power on earth and, thus, a continuation of the saintly kings' involvement in their previous earthly kingdoms after their deaths.

The roles of the heads of kings in both genres of medieval writing are deeply reflective of the developing concepts of kingship during this period, revolving around the theme of continued protection. Kings--both saints and heroic figures--continued to fill a specific protective role after being decapitated and buried. The continued protection of their subjects demonstrated the ways in which the kings were seen as both physical and spiritual protectors.

The head of Bran the Blessed, although not overtly attributed with any supernatural qualities, was still considered to be an object of great power, primarily of a protective nature. According to the *Welsh Triads*, Bran's head "was concealed in the White Hill in London, with its face towards France. And as long as it was in the position in which it was put there, no Saxon oppression would ever come to [Britain]."[57] The 7th-century Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain is then explain: "Arthur disclosed the Head of Bran the Blessed from the White Hill, because it did not seem right to him that this Island should be defended by the strength of anyone, but by his own."[58] Bran's head is given a slightly different purpose in *The Mabinogion*, which states that "while the head was concealed no plague came across the sea to this island."[59] Most likely written after the Anglo-Saxon settlement of England and during a time of Anglo-Saxon dominance, it is not unusual that *The Mabinogion* would supply a different enemy for the head to protect against. Despite the change in aggressor from the Saxons to the plague, Bran's head still serves the same protective purpose, continuing to protect his people from invasions from the grave.

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[57] Jones, "The Welsh Triads."
[58] Jones, "The Welsh Triads."
[59] Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, 81.

Saint Edmund also displays a similar protective purpose after his death. Rather than just his head providing protection, as in the case of Bran, Edmund's head is not specified as the source of the protective power. Very few miracles are recorded after Edmund's death; the one recorded in the most detail is of a protective nature. According to Abbo of Fleury's "Martyrdom of St. Edmund," eight thieves come to "steal the treasures which men brought thither [to Edmund's shrine]."[60] Edmund, seeing the thieves who were about to desecrate his shrine, "bound them stiffly, each as he stood with his tools, so that none of them might succeed in the crime nor stir from there."[61] The thieves were then caught in the act of their crime in the morning when the inhabitants of the town woke up. Edmund's miracle not only protected the wealth that had accumulated at his shrine but also the wealth and reputation of the town in which his shrine was located. Though his miracle was primarily protecting himself, it also had a protective effect on the community that surrounded his shrine and the people who were responsible for maintaining and caring for it. The power of God that remained active in Edmund after his decapitation continued to protect Edmund's former subjects long after the saint's death.

This protective power that remains in Edmund's body after his death is similar to the protective power that remains in the head of Bran the Blessed after it is buried in London. The protective nature of the power is suggestive of the qualities that were associated with the developing concept of kingship during this time period. Kantorowicz's cleric describes the dual nature of the king's body, and the aspects attributed to the kingly severed heads in literature produced at this time are suggestive of this dual nature. Both the continuation of speech and animation and the lack of decay indicates that the life of these beheaded kings did not end with their decapitation. The spiritual nature of the king's body is embedded in the divine associations

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[60] Abbo of Fleury, "The Martyrdom of St. Edmund."
[61] Abbo of Fleury, "The Martyrdom of St. Edmund."

that are attached to these royal severed heads. Reflective of the lack of stability near the end of

the Anglo-Saxon period in Britain, the protective powers of the heads of kings demonstrate the

desperation for protection and stability that was felt by the population. The Vikings who were

responsible for the decapitation of St. Edmund were only one of the many groups of invaders

crossing the North Sea to invade Britain during this time period. Many of the kings of the

Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were killed in battles either against these invaders or in wars against

other Anglo-Saxons. In a turbulent time when kings were military figures, attempting to increase

their power by extending--or at least maintaining--their borders, their subjects would long for

their protection from the increasing Viking attacks.

Conclusion

The protective power of kings was a theme that was being incorporated into the concepts

of kingship that were developing during the second half of the Anglo-Saxon period in Britain.

This theme is deeply embedded in two significant genres of literature being produced at the time-

-Celtic folklore and hagiography--in the form of the motif of the severed head. Unusual qualities

that were attributed to these severed heads, such as talking, moving, and prolonged preservation,

were indicative of the divine power that continued to reside in the heads after decapitation and

were also reflective of the spiritual regard in which the king's body was increasingly viewed.

Furthermore, the protective powers that these royal severed heads overtly exhibited over their

former subjects are a direct reflection of the changing role of the king towards his subjects.

When considering the genres of Celtic mythology and hagiography together, one runs the

risk of assuming similarities. A relationship between the two is implied simply by virtue of

deciding to examine the two in the same research. A scholar must be careful when examining

the writings to avoid preconceptions of similarities between the two genres. If one is looking for

parallels, parallels can almost always be found. Thus, in research such as this, it is important to examine all possible influences on a piece of writing. Just as no culture develops in a vacuum, no writing is without its influences. The interpretive danger comes when these influences are assumed and not substantiated with evidence.

Despite these precautions, it is useful--even beneficial--to compare these two genres of writing and consider them together. Written fairly close together in history and by authors of the same backgrounds, the texts can serve as a window into the society in which they were produced. The similarity of the motif of the severed head--not just in the appearance of the motif in both genres but also in the shared supernatural qualities--suggests a knowledge on the part of the writers of audience preference and expectations. The incorporation of a motif that had likely been a common element in oral tradition and folklore for centuries into the developing written culture indicates a trend in popular entertainment, and it also gives insight into developing concepts of kingship which were foundational to the shifting Anglo-Saxon society.

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