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By Weapons Made Worthy: Lords, Retainers and Their Relationship in Beowulf (Amsterdam University Press - Amsterdam Archaeological Studies)

Jos Bazelmans

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In this book Jos Bazelmans offers a new perspective on the relationship between lord and retainer in early medieval society. This perspective goes beyond established politico-economic interpretations and aims for an interpretation of this relationship in ritual-cosmological terms.

Drawing on recent developments within French structuralist anthropology and the anthropology of gift exchange, Bazelmans develops a new model of early medieval socio-political structure (as represented in Old English Beowulf) which explicitly deals with exchange relations between the living and the supernatural, the commensurablity of subject and object in gift exchange, and the whole set of interdependent life-cycle rituals of lords and their warrior-followers. The value of gifts is considered to be determined not only by their function within a competitive game about prestige, status and power, but also by its equivalence with a constituent. The value of the gift is fundamental to the noble person and develops through a man's life-time. It is, ultimately, of a supernatural origin.

The model enables us to understand certain acts at Beowulf's funeral pyre which at first sight appear to be no more than an ethnographic curiosity (Beowulf 3111b-3114a). The warrior's contributions to his pyre form the concluding part of a grand ritual undertaking in which society as a whole is involved and in which the constitution of the noble person, and the disarticulation of that person at his death, is realized. This ritual undertaking goes beyond the politico-economic concerns of the participants which are central to established power-based models of early medieval societal structure. The volume includes an extensive overview of the anthropology of gift exchange.

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