

## “Literary Terms and Definitions”

Dr. L. Kip Wheeler (Year)

### Literary Terms and Definitions

**COMITATUS:** (Latin: "companionship" or "band"): The term describes the tribal structure of the Anglo-Saxons and other Germanic tribes in which groups of men would swear fealty to a hlaford (lord) in exchange for food, mead, and heriot, the loan of fine armor and weaponry. The men who swore such an oath were called thegns (roughly akin to modern Scottish "thane"), and they vowed to fight for their lord in battle. It was considered a shameful disaster to outlive one's own lord. The *comitatus* was the functional military and government unit of early Anglo-Saxon society. The term was first coined by the classical historian Tacitus when he described the Germanic tribes north of Rome.

**THEGN:** A warrior who has sworn his loyalty to a lord in Anglo-Saxon society. In return for a gift of weaponry and provisions of food and drink at the mead-hall, the *thegn* vows to fight for his lord and die in his service. He also takes up the task of avenging his lord's death if that lord (*hlaford*) should die. Compare with Modern English *thane*. See Anglo-Saxon, *hlaford*, and *heriot*.

**HLAFORD** (Anglo-Saxon *hlaþ+ord*, "loaf-leader" or "loaf-giver," or possibly from *hlaþ-weard*, "loaf-guardian," becomes Mod. English *lord*): An Anglo-Saxon warrior chieftain who was served by a number of loyal warriors called *thegns*. His wife, called the *hlaþdig* ("loaf-kneader," becomes, Modern English *lady*) or the *cwen* (becomes modern English *queen*), may have been responsible for overseeing communal provisions. In the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, Hrothgar is the *hlaford* of Heorot, and Weoltheow is the *hlaþdig*. See *hlaþig*, Anglo-Saxon, thegn, and heriot.