Below are two explanations of the code *Comitatus*...

Comitatus is the basic idea that everyone protects the king at all costs even if it means a warrior giving up his own life. If a king is killed, the warriors must avenge the death of the king or they can no longer serve as warriors for the next king. It is an idea that coexists with the interlacing theme. You will see the comitatus theme all through *Beowulf* and all of the Anglo-Saxon poetry. The diction (ring-giver, hearth-companion, etc) indicates the idea as well as the behavior. Notice how there is the motif of eating, sleeping, dying all the way through the text, and all of it is done as a "team" even to the passing of the cup uniting the group of warriors. They stayed in the meadhall while the king slept in an adjoining "apartment" so they could constantly protect him. You will even see the idea in the avenging of Grendel's death by his mother. Some of the same actions on her part are the same as the actions of the warriors. *Beowulf* is also a good text to demonstrate how comitatus died with the Anglo-Saxon period. Notice how at the end of the text only Wiglaf follows Beowulf into the battle with the dragon. When Beowulf goes into the various battles, there is a progression of the comitatus dying with the behavior of the warriors: the warriors stand on the bank waiting, the next time they are sleeping and the third time only Wiglaf goes with him.

The first century Roman historian Tacitus coined the term *comitatus* in his observations of Germanic tribal culture in Germania. The comitatus was a gathering of warriors under one governing lord, representing a strategic interweaving of family threads so as simultaneously to enlarge and secure tribal identity and allegiance. The comitatus and intermarriages among tribes were physical representations of intertribal treaties -- or rather the pre-literate versions of treaties, called *friths*, in which physical objects of value that represented the tribe were exchanged.

In much the same way, blood-money (*wergild*, or literally 'man-money') is offered by one tribe as payment for those of another tribe whom they kill. And tributes of swords and rings, necklaces and battle gear are offered as seals of good faith -- physical objects in place of (non-existant) written contracts. They are markers of agreements which, without writing, have no other physical representation.

In a small group, answer the following questions. Be prepared to offer input in discussion when called upon.

- Is there a down side to the idea of Comitatus?
- Does the idea of Comitatus exist in our society? How? If not, what has replaced it?
- What are some other examples of Comitatus not listed in the above selections?
- Why would Comitatus have been important in Anglo-Saxon society? Why was there, as the first passage suggests, a shift away from it?