Myths and symbols in pagan Europe

Early Scandinavian and Celtic religions

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University Press

account of his campaigns in Gaul in the mid first century, equating the Germans with the peoples living to the east of the Rhine, while the Celts were to the the west of it. This seems to have been an oversimplification of a complex situation, perhaps due to his ignorance of the languages spoken by many of the tribes, or to a desire to justify his military advances for political reasons. Certainly some of the tribes which he called German are now thought to have been Celtic-speaking peoples. It seems that there was no fundamental difference between the two except that of language, and as Powell pointed out,[5] the many resemblances between them in religious practices, social organisation and vocabulary may have been derived from a common ancestral source. But in spite of this, and the fact that they were in contact with each other for considerable periods, the difference in language must reflect a distinct separation between the two sets of peoples.[6]

It is not clear at what period the original Germanic language from which modern German, Anglo-Saxon and consequently English, Dutch, Frisian and the Scandinavian languages are derived came into general use; it was probably at some time in the course of the first five centuries BC, although some would say earlier. Nor do we know in what region it was first developed. It seems to have originated east of the Elbe and then spread westwards as tribes from that area conquered and settled land beyond the river. By the fifth century AD it was spoken over most of the Elbe basin. Further east Teutonic languages of the Gothic type were spoken, but most of this region was later overrun by Slav peoples. Considerable dialectical differences (High and Low German, Dutch, Old Saxon, etc.) developed by the eighth century AD, while the Scandinavian languages became a separate group. Typical 'Germanic' objects can be traced back into the period before Christ, and 'Germanic' culture seems to extend back into the early Iron Age. The term 'Germanic' came once more into general use in the nineteenth century as a comprehensive term for the whole group of peoples and languages, replacing 'Teutonic', or sometimes used as a sub-division of it.

What is known of the Germanic tribes is that they moved out of the area between the Rhine and the Vistula in various directions in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, just as earlier the Celts had spread out from their original homeland. Finally the Germanic peoples overran and destroyed the Roman Empire. The best known of these tribes are the Franks, who settled in Gaul; the Visigoths, who invaded Italy, captured Rome and later moved into Spain; the Ostrogoths, who settled in Italy; the Alamanni, in south Germany and Switzerland; the Langobards, who took over northern Italy; the Burgundians in eastern Gaul; and the Vandals who finally crossed to north Africa. In the fifth century a

mixture of tribes generally known as Angles and Saxons came to England and settled in the south and east, driving much of the Celtic population westwards into Wales and Cornwall. Our knowledge of tribal groupings however is limited; the precise movements of many known tribes are far from clear, and there are a number who could be either Celts or Germans, since we do not know what language they spoke. There is no other simple way to distinguish them.

In spite of the threats which they posed, the Mediterranean peoples were fascinated by the Celts and tended to idealise them as noble barbarians, led by druids possessing the secrets of ancient wisdom. In the same way the Romans regarded the troublesome Germans with both fear and admiration. An invaluable account of their way of life, 'On the origin and geography of Germania', now generally known as the *Germania*, was written by the historian Tacitus in 98 AD. This was partly based on information from the twenty lost books of the Elder Pliny on the German campaigns, a most regrettable loss, since Pliny had served on the both the Upper and Lower Rhine and knew the Germans well. Although doubts have been cast on the reliability of Tacitus, evidence from archaeology has increasingly confirmed the picture which he gave of Germanic life and culture. Admittedly his work is slanted in order to show up the greed and corruption of Roman society in his time, since he contrasts it deliberately with the simple, healthy existence of the barbarian peoples. Yet it can be claimed with some justice that his book remains 'the best of its kind in antiquity, perhaps in any age'.[7]

Tacitus found much to admire in the courage, loyalty, toughness and simple family life of the Germanic warriors, and yet he was by no means blind to their shortcomings. He admitted their ignorance, their excessive love of drinking, and a fatal tendency to quarrel among themselves, and this picture is very similar to that which an earlier historian left of the Celts about a century before. Posidonius was a Stoic philosopher writing in Greek, and his history is now lost, but several later writers quoted from his material, so that much of it can be reconstructed.[8] He left an account of the Celts, stressing their passion for feasting and for elaborate ornaments, the vanity and boastfulness of their champions, and their extreme touchiness, continually leading to conflict. But he made it clear that these weaknesses were linked with more praiseworthy qualities, those of endurance, courage and considerable fighting skill. The Celts and Germans had clearly much in common in their way of life, and in both their strengths and their weaknesses.

The third set of barbarians from northern Europe who raided and robbed the richer and more settled lands to the south were Scandinavians, generally known as Vikings, of the same stock as the northern

Germans. They were called Northmen by contemporaries, but the term Viking (*vikingr* in Old Norse) used by monkish chroniclers came to denote pirates and raiding bands who attacked monasteries and had no respect for churches. The term probably comes from *vik* (bay/ fiord), and 'to go a-viking' meant to sail out from home to seek fame and wealth by fighting, trade or piracy or a mixture of the three. Consequently the period when the Scandinavians were most active outside their homelands, from the mid eighth to the mid eleventh centuries, is generally known as the Viking Age. By the eighth century the men who inhabited Norway, Sweden and Denmark were building seagoing ships of unrivalled excellence, and forging fine, reliable weapons. In their vigour and ruthlessness they were in no way inferior to the Germans and Celts who preceded them. In the Viking Age, Scandinavian pirates, adventurers, traders and warrior bands, fighting either independently or as mercenaries, penetrated from one end of Europe to the other. They attacked and terrorised the very peoples who had behaved in the same way centuries earlier, such as the Anglo-Saxons, the Franks, and the Celtic inhabitants of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The Vikings found a few areas in which to settle permanently, such as Iceland, Orkney, Shetland and the Faroes, as well as parts of northern and eastern England and Normandy, but over most of Europe their dominion proved no lasting one.

These Scandinavians were superb seamen and good fighters, loyal to their chosen leaders and ready to die in their defence. At the same time they are described as touchy and quarrelsome, overfond of drinking, and too independent in spirit to build up large, well-disciplined armies. They operated mainly in small bands, continually forming loose alliances which soon broke up again. They were able to endure appalling conditions of cold and hardship, and were shrewd and knowledgeable traders, ready to go far into inhospitable regions if there seemed a chance of gaining silver and winning valuable booty. There were gifted poets and story-tellers among them, and they had a gift for communicating with those of other languages and cultures. They much enjoyed legal arguments and the complexities of word-games and genealogies. What we know of their character and mode of life is similar to that of the Celts and Germans before them, and indeed they were of the same stock as the Germanic tribes of northern Europe. But while the continental Germans and Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity fairly early, the Vikings continued to hold on to their old religion for some centuries after the Christian church was well established in neighbouring kingdoms.

Like their Celtic predecessors, the Germans and Scandinavians

produced smiths and craftsmen of distinction, and were excellent workers in wood and metal. Much surviving material comes from pre-Christian graves, for at certain periods splendid possessions were left in graves of both men and women of the ruling class. Rich burials from what is known as the Migration Period, from about the third to the sixth century AD when the Germans were on the borders of the Roman Empire and settling in new territories, have been excavated. It was a prosperous period in Sweden, where elaborate cremation ceremonies were held for the kings of Uppsala, and other leaders were buried with fine weapons, shields and helmets. Extensive cemeteries of the continental Germans have been discovered, some holding hundreds of cremation urns and others made up of inhumation graves, and burial mounds of kings and local leaders have yielded up splendid treasures and given indication of impressive funeral ritual. From the seventh century onwards there were rich ship burials in East Anglia, Norway and Sweden, and the possibilities of an undisturbed ship-grave of a rich leader became apparent when one of the mounds at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk was opened in 1939. This is now known to have formed part of a cemetery of considerable size, and more discoveries are expected there. Another outstanding grave was that of King Childeric of the Franks, but the treasures taken from it were unfortunately stolen from a museum in Paris after their discovery in the late seventeenth century.

Wood seldom survives in the earth except in unusual soil conditions, as in the Alamannic cemetery of Oberflacht in West Germany, and the ship-grave at Oseberg in south Norway. In both these cases the rich variety, skilled craftmanship and elaborate symbolism of the carving on the wooden objects found indicate how much may have been lost in other rich burials. Elaborate ritual objects were sometimes abandoned along with vessels, ornaments and weapons in the northern peat bogs or lakes, as happened in the case of the Gundestrup cauldron in the Iron Age, and the pair of gold drinking horns from Gallehus in Denmark. The decoration on such objects may tell us something of the mythology of the people who used them. So too may amulets once worn for luck and protection, such as the golden bracteates popular in the Migration Period, while carved stones raised in memory of the dead may give some indication of beliefs. A fine series of picture stones on the island of Gotland set up in the Viking Age and earlier are covered with scenes and symbols. Some figures apparently representing the gods have survived in Northern Europe, roughly carved in wood or in the form of small metal amulets. In spite of a delight in abstract art and complex patterns, the Scandinavians occasionally produced vigorous narrative scenes carved in wood or stone. There is reason to think that this form of art

found wide expression not only in wood-carving but also in weaving and tapestry; a roll of embroidered wall-hangings found in the Oseberg ship revealed after years of patient restoration supernatural figures and processions of what appear to be gods and heroes.

The influence of other art styles and religious symbolism from Christian art can be seen in the work of the Celtic and Germanic peoples. Celtic sculptors in Gaul and Britain produced native figures of their local deities in imitation of the Roman manner, often with titles and inscriptions in Latin which are a source of information about the types of god they worshipped. At the close of the Viking Age, myths and symbols from the pre-Christian past were employed to decorate monuments raised over the Christian dead, so that Thor and Odin and the ancient World-Serpent are found in association with the cross of Christ. New evidence of this kind is still being discovered in northern England, where Scandinavians settled in the tenth century and were soon absorbed into the Christian church, in the form of carved stones set up to commemorate the newly converted.

Neither Celts, Germans nor Scandinavians appear to have built elaborate temples and sanctuaries, except in Celtic areas where classical fashions were adopted, such as in the south of France, or in Romanised towns like Colchester and Bath. Such religious art as we possess is mainly restricted to graves and monuments, figures representing supernatural beings, religious or lucky symbols on ornaments, weapons and objects of daily use. There are runic inscriptions from Germanic or Scandinavian territory which belong to the pre-Christian period, but these are not easy to interpret. In discussing the religion of these early peoples of north-western Europe, it has been customary to turn to legends of gods and heroes in the early literature of Ireland and Iceland to fill the gaps in our knowledge. These were written down in Christian times, although a few surviving poems in Old Icelandic on mythological subjects were composed before the conversion to Christianity. Most of the written sources, however, were put together or edited by Christian monks and scholars at various times, in some cases long after the old faith had been abandoned by the people. In Iceland, from which most Old Norse literature is derived, our earliest sources are poems, some attributed to the 'skaldic' poets attached to the courts of Norwegian kings in the period before the establishment of Christianity. The mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda* come from a thirteenth-century manuscript book, the *Codex Regius*, although some may be considerably earlier than this. Prose records of early Iceland, such as Ari the Learned's 'Book of the Icelanders' (Islendingabók) and the elaborate 'Book of the Settlements' (Landnámabók), giving information about the

first families settled in Iceland, do not go back beyond the twelfth century, although they may record older traditions. As for the rich body of prose sagas, most of these belong to the thirteenth or fourteenth century. There is little early material from the other Scandinavian countries, apart from a few Latin works and the late twelfth-century history of Denmark in Latin by Saxo Grammaticus. The invaluable account of Norse mythology derived from early poetry and oral tradition by the gifted Icelander Snorri Sturluson is roughly contemporary with the work of Saxo. In Ireland the Christian church was established much earlier, by the fifth century, although from about the seventh century onwards Irish monks were absorbing and recording pre-Christian traditions in the tales making up the great manuscript collections of various dates, and the poems included in the tales. However, this wonderful material has been mixed with later speculation, Christian learning and antiquarianism, and many supernatural beings transformed into human heroes and heroines.

This is why the art of the pre-Christian period, shaped and handled by those who accepted the old beliefs, is in some ways a more direct link with the religious past than the recorded literature. But indeed we have to seek out whatever clues are available, and not limit ourselves to any one type of source material. It is no easy task to build up a convincing picture of beliefs and practices from scattered hints, echoes and chance survivals. Only by critical evaluation of evidence from a wide field and by bringing different types of material together is it possible to find a perceptible pattern in the religion of these early peoples.

Much of their religion was concerned with battle ritual, which is hardly surprising, since Celts, Germans and Vikings were all warrior peoples in a period of expansion. It was also closely associated with the natural world, of which they were very much aware. They did not regard this as something inanimate or wholly separate from themselves; as Henri Frankfort pointed out: 'For modern scientific man the phenomenal world is primarily an It; for ancient – and also for primitive – man it is a Thou'.[9] They revered their dead ancestors beneath the earth, and particularly their kings and founders of families. They practised various means of divination, observing movements of birds and animals, fire and water. They relied on supernatural powers ruling sky, earth and sea to bring them strength and luck and to protect them from hostile forces, which they pictured as giants, monsters or destructive goddesses. Certain symbols had particular meaning, remaining potent through the centuries. The heads of warriors possessed special power, as did the remains of the noble dead within their mounds. The sacred drink of the gods giving immortality and inspiration was a favourite motif, and

the axe-hammer of the sky-god, warding off cold and chaos, another effective symbol . Vigorous male animals such as horse, stag, bull and bear, together with ruthless birds of prey like the eagle and raven were seen as special manifestations of supernatural power. The centre of their universe was pictured as a great tree or pillar, and they laid emphasis on the creation of the worlds surrounding this and foresaw their ultimate destruction.

Such symbols and motifs were absorbed into religious ritual. Feasts in honour of the gods marked out the course of the year and were held to promote success in war and good harvests. Men and animals were offered as sacrifices, and objects thrown into water or hung on trees as gifts for supernatural powers. Such practices established a mysterious yet familiar background of contact with the Other World. All this inspired their art and left an imprint on their legends. Long after the Christian church had been firmly established, story-tellers and artists turned back to the old ways of thought for inspiration and imagery.

We shall be concerned with the exploration of this rich world of tradition and belief, tracing the main outline of man's relationship with the natural world and with supernatural powers. It extends back into a time long before the northern myths were recorded in writing in the Middle Ages. An underlying pattern can be made out in spite of local variations and changes due to altering modes of life and the fragmentary nature of the evidence. The basic religious traditions of our ancestors in north-western Europe were accepted over a long period of time, and we should surely approach their world picture with respect as well as curiosity and make some attempt to understand it. It may be that by following the working of men's minds in the past we may learn more of our complex reactions to our own world, while gaining insight into the realms of imagination, imagery and spiritual perception once open to the barbarian peoples who inhabited north-western Europe.

I Holy places

Jacob woke from his sleep and said 'Truly the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it . . . How fearsome is this place! This is no other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven.'

Genesis 28, 16–17 (*NEB*)

Every religion must have its holy places, affording a means of communication between man and the Other World. Sometimes as in ancient Egypt and Jerusalem this was essentially the great temple, where kings and priests could conduct ceremonies, make offerings, learn the will of the god, or enquire into hidden things, with or without a congregation. Among the Celts and Germans there seem originally to have been few permanent and elaborate temples used as meeting places for worship and sacrifice. In spite of the rigours of the climate, the place where men sought contact with the supernatural powers was for the most part in the open air. The resorting to holy places was something which could be witnessed by outside observers, often arousing interest and curiosity. Thus in the works of Greek and Latin writers we hear repeatedly of sacred woods and groves, sanctuaries in forest clearings and on hilltops, beside springs and lakes and on islands, and of places set apart for the burial of the noble dead.

1 Sacred landmarks

When the Scandinavians came to settle in Iceland in the late ninth century, certain natural sites were chosen by them as areas of sacred space. It may be noted that these were not marked by permanent buildings, or even enclosed by walls or obvious boundaries. An impressive example of the simplest type of holy place is Helgafell, on the peninsula of Snæfellness in western Iceland (Plate 1a). This is described in one of the Icelandic sagas as a place of great sanctity, venerated by one of the early settlers from Norway, Thorolf of Mostur. It remains today as a landmark, visible from many miles away, as at the time of the Settlement. Helgafell is a small natural outcrop of rock, resembling in