

Religion in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe

Arts and Humanities Through the Eras, 2005

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EARLY VIKINGS.

The term "Viking" has been used to refer to inhabitants of Scandinavia and the northern regions (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden). The native religion of these people was polytheistic (that is, involving worship of more than one deity) and revolved around a pantheon (a system of gods and goddesses) that was anthropomorphic—that is, featuring gods with human characteristics. Viking societies were also reputed to be polygamist, allowing multiple spouses within a family. Some scholars have gone so far as to attribute the invasions to the south and east, which began after 800, to a crisis of overpopulation linked to the polygamist practices of certain Scandinavian groups. Little is known about the actual religious practices of the Vikings before the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Most of the information on this era comes from Icelandic sagas that had long been removed from their earlier Scandinavian cultures and were perhaps even further affected by Christian ideas, since they were recorded in Icelandic societies that had long been educated and immersed in Christian tradition. The Saxon chronicler Widukind of Corvey, who wrote in the mid-tenth century, commented that although the Danes converted to Christianity they "continued to venerate idols according to their heathen customs." From this time period in Denmark and Sweden, casting molds were discovered which simultaneously produced crosses for Christians and hammers for devotees of the thunder god Thor.

GODS AND DOMAINS.

The Vikings' religious practice helped orient them to the world around them, assisting them in understanding both the present and the past. They perceived the universe to be comprised of a number of worlds (heavens, hells, earth) numbering anywhere from three to nine, depending upon the cultures and particular historical time frame. The gods resided in a variety of these worlds and affected the daily lives of humans. These divinities had certain domains for which each was responsible. For example, Odin (or Woden) was the god of war, the all-father, a middle-aged kingly figure who in later periods was seen as the god of the sky. He resided in Asgard, the heavenly home of the warrior gods. Odin rode an eight-legged horse named Sleipnir and was accompanied by two ravens (Hugin and Munin) who informed him on a daily basis of the deeds of the other gods, giants, dwarves, and, of course, humans. He was also attended by the Valkyries, female warriors who were said to be responsible for taking those who died bravely in battle to Valhalla, a great palace in the city of heaven close to where Odin resided. In Valhalla the dead war heroes spent eternity fighting by day and feasting at night. Among the more popular Viking gods was Thor. He was said to be tall, strong, determined, and good-hearted, but he was known to have a temper and was lacking in intelligence. The thunder god wielded a throwing hammer forged by dwarves that could, after its release, magically return to his hand at his

bidding. Freyr, a nature deity associated with the sun, rain, and agriculture, was also the god of peace and goodness. His twin sister was Freya, the goddess of love and beauty. It was believed that she could turn herself into a bird by donning the skin of a falcon. Some members of the Viking pantheon, of course, reflected the "darker side." Loki was the challenger of order and structure—the god of fire and a sort of "trickster" deity, the one deemed necessary to bring about change. His daughter was Hel, the goddess of death and the afterlife.

rites and Ceremonies.

The Vikings believed it was necessary to establish close relationships with the gods as they looked after their families and their honor, as well as their tribes, villages, and kingdom. The gods helped the kings keep peace and looked favorably upon the harvests. The deities were both patrons and companions, to whom the people owed tribute and from whom they received many blessings. Priests functioned as intermediaries and would perform rites to the cults of various gods. However, they were not a professional caste. Chiefs and tribal leaders often functioned as priests, or a father would fulfill that function during family gatherings; however, the priest could often be killed or banished from society for improper or unfavorable mediation. The Scandinavian polytheists most often worshipped in open-air spaces where they could more appropriately connect with nature. There were communal ceremonies in open fields, meadows, and clearings, at gravesites and near massive stones. The dead were often buried with their possessions. At especially solemn feasts there could be blood sacrifice (blot). The eleventh-century chronicler Adam of Bremen described

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a particular Viking religious ceremony that was supposedly celebrated only every ninth year, explaining that "nine heads were offered from every type of living male creature and the custom was to appease the gods with their blood." Decapitated bodies were hung in a grove, which was considered sacred, as were the trees upon which the victims hung. In fact, the trees were by virtue of their role in the ceremony considered sacred in and of themselves. The details of the event were startling:

Dogs were hung with horses and men and a Christian told me that he had seen as many as 72 corpses hanging in rows. The blood was collected in a sacred vessel and sprinkled by the priests. The ritual was followed by a feast with offerings to the gods.

THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY.

Christian missionaries began to be sent to the Danes and Swedes in the early 800s, though it is unlikely that any of the kings in Scandinavia from that period underwent conversion. What is clear is that Vikings and Christians lived side by side and freely traded goods at stations such as York, Lincoln, Dublin, Fécamp, Rouen, Birka, Kaupang, Novgorod, and Hedeby. Those Vikings who settled in predominantly Christian areas on the European mainland eventually assimilated Christian customs, lifestyle, and faith, and by the mid-1000s Christianity began to become more firmly established in Denmark and Norway, with Sweden following in the middle of the twelfth

century. As these conversions took place, some of the pagan sacred sites in Scandinavia were taken over by Christians, and churches were built on or near these places. In Sweden at Gamle Uppsala there are remains of an early Christian church that stands beside a large Viking burial mound. Harold Bluetooth, the king of Denmark from 940 to 986, was quite successful in influencing his people to convert to Christianity. Christian images appear on Danish coinage from his reign and there are records of the establishment of bishoprics in major Danish cities. Christianity became even more pervasive in Denmark once Canute (1018–1035) became ruler of both England and the Danes in 1018. Influenced by the great English bishop Wulfstan of York (d. 1023), Canute became a patron of Christian institutions and a model king, rivaling his royal and noble contemporaries. After Canute's famous pilgrimage to Rome in 1027, other nobles such as Robert of Normandy, Macbeth, Sihtric Silkbeard, Earl Thornfinn, and Earl Tostig all followed his example in undertaking journeys to holy sites. He attached a number of Danish bishops to his court and sent them out to establish churches throughout Scandinavia.

LOOTING OF MONASTERIES.

From around the year 800 on, the Vikings engaged in a period of tremendous expansion, using their naval expertise first to engage in raiding and looting along the coastlines of Europe and later to undertake conquest and settlements in England, Ireland, northern France, and Russia, as well as places as far away as Iceland, Greenland, and Finland. During the age of Viking invasions, it was not uncommon for Christian monasteries in coastal regions of England, France, and Germany to endure a certain amount of looting—not, apparently, as a deliberate attempt by the invaders to destroy the system of Christian organization and faith, but for purely material reasons. Not only were the monasteries repositories of church treasure (including gold and silver vessels, jeweled reliquaries, lavishly decorated manuscripts—such as a French book of hours containing an ornate miniature of the Annunciation to the Virgin—and priestly vestments), but some of them acted as banks and safe depositories for the aristocracy. Monasteries located on rivers were also susceptible; for example in Normandy, along the Seine, there are records of displacements at Saint-Audoen and Saint-Filbert at Jumièges. It was also common to find certain breaks in episcopal succession in areas that were prone to Viking invasion. For example at Avranches in Normandy there was no bishop from 862 to 990. In the British see of Galloway, records of episcopal activity vanish in the ninth century and do not reappear until the office was revived in 1128. Those Christian monasteries and bishoprics that were fairly poor did not seem to be disturbed as much by the Viking invasions.

CONVERSIONS.

The period of competing religions in western Europe reached its end by around the beginning of the twelfth century. The story of the conversion of Norse settlers in Iceland, for example, is told in the *Landnamabok* (Book of Settlements). Bishops from the Isle of Iona (off the coast of Scotland), such as Patrick in the late ninth century (not to be confused with St. Patrick of Ireland) and Fothad (c. 960), sent native Scandinavian missionaries that they had trained to Iceland to build Christian churches. Intermarriages between Christian Scottish aristocrats and Scandinavian ruling families were common, and by the mid-1000s many of the Vikings who had settled in the northern British Isles had converted. (Conversions of the native British and Irish were much

earlier, mostly during the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries.) In Ireland more permanent coastal commercial centers of Viking traders were established during the ninth century, and certainly by the tenth and eleventh centuries there are records of conversions of leaders such as King Olaf Cuaran of Dublin and his son Sihtric, who made a pilgrimage to Rome in 1028, issued coins with Christian symbols, and founded Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin. Likewise, the conversion of tribes of the Rus' in eastern Europe (the area near modern Kiev, Russia) was a lengthy process. In the 860s Rus' ambassadors to the court at Constantinople had embraced Christian monotheism, and in the 870s a bishop was sent to live among them, but it is more likely the primary concern was ministry to those Christian merchants who routinely made journeys into the Russian territories, not ministry to the Rus' themselves. Indeed, in the early 900s the Muslim traveler Ibn Fadlan still relates tales of offerings made by the polytheistic Rus' to their gods for success in commercial endeavors. The Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus (913–959) wrote in his diplomatic manuals about the practice of sacrificial offerings made by Rus' merchants for safely navigating the rapids of the Dnieper river during their trade with the west. By 945 there was a Christian church in the city of Kiev, and Olga, the wife of Prince Igor, was baptized in 957 while on a visit to the city of Constantinople. Upon her return she built a church in Kiev dedicated to the Hagia Sophia (holy wisdom) in commemoration of her admiration for the famous cathedral of the same name in Constantinople. Olga's grandson Vladimir was baptized at Kiev in 988 and was married to Anna, the sister of the Byzantine emperor Basil II. Shortly after this, there were mass baptisms in Russia, followed by the establishment of more churches, bishoprics at Belgorod and Novgorod, and a school to educate clergy. In the eleventh century native Rus' such as Luke of Novgorod were elevated to episcopacies, the monasteries of St. George and St. Irene were built in Kiev, and Jaroslav the Wise (d. 1045) rebuilt Kiev's Hagia Sophia on an extraordinary scale. Additional monastic establishments followed.

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Source Citation:

"Religion in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe." *Arts and Humanities Through the Eras*. Ed. Edward I. Bleiberg, et al. Vol. 3: Medieval Europe 814-1450. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 309-311. *Gale World History In Context*. Web. 6 Jan. 2011.

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