CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE RELIGION OF THE VIKINGS

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What will be outlined here are the religious beliefs and rituals of the Scandinavians in the eighth to the eleventh centuries including those who went for trade, plunder or settlement abroad, that is, the 'vikings' properly speaking. Some among them were already Christians but the vast majority of the population still clung to their traditional religion. From a modern point of view their religion can be classified as a 'non-doctrinal community religion' in contrast with the 'doctrinal transnational religions' as represented by Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. Religion was strongly integrated with social life, warfare and subsistence activities, and this means that religious elements can be expected to occur within the total range of Viking Age culture and society.

Cultural and political contacts with Continental Europe and the British Isles slowly paved the way for Christianity, and towards the end of the Viking period many among the ruling elites of Scandinavia and Iceland had adopted the new religion. They also succeeded in imposing it on the rest of the population, and by the early thirteenth century Christianity was firmly established. In the transition period there was still room for the development of syncretistic phenomena, but with the full power of the Christian Church implemented, Scandinavian religion could survive only fragmentarily in popular beliefs and practices which were soon to disappear or to be mixed with medieval European folklore.

The attempt to grasp the main features of Scandinavian religion in the Viking period is beset with many difficulties. The written sources date roughly from the end of the tenth to the thirteenth century when a process of decisive religious and cultural change was already going on. Our knowledge of ancient Scandinavian religion is thus primarily based on sources that have passed through the intermediary of medieval Christian culture. In addition these written sources stem almost exclusively from Iceland and Norway. There is also an imbalance in the transmission of relevant texts. Only very scarce information on ritual is available whereas several myths and legends have survived the shift to Christianity. Archaeological evidence presents us with details of ritual and worship that do not appear in the written sources. On the other hand we are faced with greater problems when interpreting archaeological remains than with texts. The toponymic record is important in giving information about the deity or deities worshipped

at a particular place and about the character of the cult place (grove, hill, hall, etc.). Iconographic evidence from runestones and various archaeological objects also provides knowledge on aspects of the religion.

THEOLOGY, MYTHOLOGY AND WORLD-VIEW

As in other religions of pre-Christian Europe the belief in divine and other supernatural beings permeated most aspects of human life. The Greeks used the term *theologia* to denote ideas and reflections on divine beings, and this use is retained here as a scholarly category. The main Scandinavian gods and goddesses were inherited from a distant past but their character may have changed over time. The deities were often referred to as a group: *goð* 'the gods', the original meaning of which is unknown, *regin* literally 'those who rule' (gen. pl. *ragna* cf. *Ragnarǫk* 'the destiny of the gods'), *bǫnd* (gen. pl. *banda*) and *hǫpt* (gen. pl. *hapta*), literally 'those who bind'. The connotations that the two last terms carried in the Viking period cannot be precisely recovered but the meaning is probably that the gods 'bind', that is, decide the destinies of the world and people whom they also tie to themselves in friendship and awe. Different classes of supernatural beings were distinguished. The *æsir* and the *vanir* represent mythologically the two main families of gods but in practice the term *æsir* could include all the prominent deities. Female deities were the *dísir* who seem to have played an important part in private worship especially in western Scandinavia. The *álfar* 'supernatural beings' were divine beings of lower rank who were related to the *vanir*. The *jǫtnar* 'giants' and the *dvergar* 'dwarfs' represent other classes. The mythology often reveals a complicated relationship between giants and gods. The former are not always regarded as hostile and male gods can have giant women as mothers and wives.

The deities were spoken of as 'most holy' (*ginnheilǫg goð* in Vǫluspá 6 etc.; Lokasenna 11), 'helpful' (*nýt regin* in Vafþrúðnismál 25) and 'gentle' (*in sváso goð* in Vafþrúðnismál 17–18). We do not know how the idea of a divine world with many and different supernatural beings worked in reality. It can be assumed that people believed in the existence of the deities that were worshipped by the community as a whole but that in practice only one god or a couple of gods were important for the individual. Different attitudes ranging from fear and awe to trust and friendship could be taken towards the gods depending on the prevailing situation and on the persons involved. The relationship between man and deity which the modern terms 'piety' or 'personal religion' intend to denote can be expressed in many ways, but only few traces of such individual relationships have survived the shift to Christianity. In addition what has been preserved is often discarded as due to Christian influence and as being alien to Scandinavian 'paganism'. Combining the scraps of evidence from the written sources with the archaeological record (mostly amulets and divine symbols of various kinds) we are, however, able to get glimpses of genuine personal devotion to a particular deity. Literary sources sometimes characterise this individual devotion by saying that the deity was considered a person's *fulltrúi* 'confidant' or *ástvinr* 'close friend'. Even if these terms were first applied to pre-Christian conditions by authors of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – an assumption which is still open to discussion, however – it is likely that memories of personal devotion to the old deities were passed on by oral tradition into later centuries.

In non-doctrinal community religions *myths* are the foremost verbal expression of religion because they convey the world-view, ideas, emotions and values of a specific

culture. Myths have several contexts, they may accompany rituals or be re-enacted in a dramatic form, but they may also be told in a variety of other situations. Myths have different functions, they explain the origins of the universe and humankind, they serve as models for ritual and social behaviour and they legitimise fundamental institutions of the society. After the shift to Christianity Scandinavian mythology was still handed down by many Icelandic and Norwegian families thanks to their interest in the traditions of the past. The anonymous collection of Eddic poems in the famous manuscript Codex Regius (latter half of the thirteenth century) is the best example. Skaldic poetry from the tenth century includes many allusions to living myth. Medieval written compilations such as the various versions of the Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson from the early thirteenth century and the *Gesta Danorum* composed in Latin some decades earlier by the Dane Saxo helped to preserve parts of the mythological heritage for the future albeit in reworked or historicised forms.

The world-view of the ancient Scandinavians is incompletely known. Eddic poems such as the *Vǫluspá*, the *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál* give selected but reliable information whereas Snorri's descriptions should be read more critically. The Scandinavians undoubtedly believed in a sort of universal history beginning with the creation of the world including that of humankind and ending with the destruction of the world in the Ragnarǫk. The end would, however, be followed by the emergence of a new world in which some of the ancient gods reappeared and human life became regenerated through a primordial couple (called Líf and Lífþrasir) who survived the catastrophe.

The cosmogony is described by Snorri as a process and has its origin in the polarity between a cold place, Niflheimr, and a hot place, Muspell, separated by an empty space called Ginnungagap, which eventually became filled with ice in the north and light and warmth in the south. When the soft sparks from the south met the frost from the north it thawed and dripped and from that two figures emerged, the giant Ymir and the cow Auðhumla. She licked the ice-blocks and a human figure called Buri appeared. He had a son Borr who married a woman, named Bestla. From them three sons were born, Óðinn and his two brothers. They killed Ymir and fashioned the world from the parts of his body. Finally, walking along the seashore the gods found two trees (or wooden pieces) which they endowed with human qualities. They named the man Askr and the woman Embla and gave them clothes. Snorri's narrative has clearly been compiled from different sources, mainly Eddic poems, and it is doubtful whether such a systematic account ever existed as a living myth. On the other hand some details unknown in the Eddic poems (e.g. the cow Auðhumla) seem to be rooted in genuine pre-Christian tradition. Judging from the evidence of the Eddic poems different creation myths were circulating. One represented by the *Vǫluspá* (stanzas 3–6) told how in distant times nothing existed:

> there was no sand nor sea, nor chill waves, there was no earth nor heaven above (*upphiminn*), a great void only (*gap var ginnunga*) and grass nowhere.
>
> (*Vǫluspá* 3)

Then the gods lifted the earth up from the sea and created the glorious Miðgarðr. The sun appeared and shone on the barren soil, which was grown with green plants. The ordering of the cosmos by the gods is then allusively told but the wording is partly obscure. Another myth – the one preferred by Snorri – imagined the world being created from the body of Ymir (*Vafþrúðnismál* 21; *Grímnismál* 40–1). The earth was

fashioned from his flesh, the sky from his skull, the sea from his blood. Other parts of the body were used to shape further elements of the world, which are differently described in the two poems, however. Both types of myth have parallels in other religions and the Scandinavian versions are certainly expressions of an inherited archaic tradition. An allusion to a third creation myth has probably been preserved in a skaldic poem from the tenth century, which mentions a struggle between Heimdallr and Loki appearing in the shape of two seals over a piece of earth (*rein*) that presumably came up from the sea (*Husdrápa* 2; *Skaldskaparmál* 8).

The creation of humankind is only mentioned in *Vǫluspá* stanzas 17–18, which are retold by Snorri with some additional details. The wording and context of these stanzas are far from clear and many diverging interpretations have been proposed. One point concerns the question of which shape Askr and Embla had when they were found by the gods. Carved human figures, wooden trunks drifted ashore or slender trees growing up from the soil have all been suggested. Comparative Indo-European evidence may speak in favour of the last alternative.

The world is mythically imagined as a cosmic tree, the Yggdrasill, which represents both time and space. The prophetess of *Vǫluspá* remembers it in the beginning growing beneath the earth (stanza 2), then it appears as a mighty tree (stanza 19) and when the end of the world draws near, the old tree quivers (stanza 47) and is finally consumed by the flames of the great fire in the Ragnarǫk (stanza 57). The closest correspondence to the idea of Yggdrasill is found in ancient Iranian religion where we find myths depicting the world as a tree and the branches as world ages. The trunk of the cosmic tree is also thought to contain nine mountains from which all waters of the earth flow forth. These similarities together with evidence from Greek, Phrygian and Indic traditions indicate that the Scandinavian idea of the world-tree is part of an Indo-European mythic heritage, which has analogies also among Finno-Ugric peoples of northern Eurasia.

RITUALS AND WORSHIP

Information on Scandinavian public ritual is scanty since this sort of religious expression was among the first things to be abolished when Christianity was introduced. Some aspects of the wide variety of ritual life in the Viking period can be gleaned from the sources, however. We may distinguish between several types of religious practices among the Scandinavians. Sacrificial feasts (*blótveizlur, blótdrykkjur*) seem to have occupied a prominent place and were also part of the great seasonal festivals which attracted a large number of people. Family rituals were usually performed in or around the farmhouses, for example the *álfablót* in western Sweden mentioned by Sigvatr Þorðarson in an early eleventh-century poem. An important group of religious practices are the rites of the life cycle ('rites de passage'), that is, birth, initiation, wedding and funerary rites. With the exception of the burials only a few hints at ritual detail performed at these occasions have survived. Funerary rituals can partly be reconstructed by the archaeological record, which indicates the diversity of ritual expressions. At rare occasions burials could include ritual killing as in the funerary ceremony of an eastern Scandinavian chieftain in Russia that was witnessed by Ibn Fadlan in the tenth century. His account survives only in later excerpts and reworkings, however.

Public rituals had certain basic forms in common but varied otherwise over time and geographical space. Animal sacrifices together with libations are clearly attested by

skaldic verse and prohibitions in provincial laws, and by a few medieval literary sources. These types of sacrificial offerings seem to have been prominent in public and family rituals, whereas human sacrifices – if they were practised at all in the Viking Age – appear to have been occasional, perhaps performed only as crisis rituals. The references to human sacrifices in the medieval sources are rather to be interpreted as literary motifs. Descriptions of sacrificial feasts are found in secondary sources only and have varying claim on reliability. Snorri attempts to depict the usual procedure of a pre-Christian religious feast in *Hákonar saga ins góða* (ch. 14), but his account may not be true in all details. The report given by Adam of Bremen around 1075 of the temple and sacrificial rites in Old Upþsala (*Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* 4: 26–30) preserves several elements which bear the mark of authenticity, but is otherwise characterised by polemical stereotypes that cast doubt on his information. What cannot be questioned, however, is the importance of the Uppsala festival as a religious and political manifestation, the existence of a sacred grove and a building for ritual community meals, probably a hall (*triclinium*). Some further details reported by Adam seem likewise to derive from genuine tradition. It was customary to perform various songs during the ritual offerings and some of them were most probably addressed to the god Freyr who, according to Adam, was invoked for weddings and fertility. Snorri has an independent notice of the seasonal festival at Uppsala in the *Saga ins helga Ólofs konungs* (ch. 77) which confirms the main points of Adam's account and brings some additional details. The festival was held in the month called *góa* (late winter/early spring) and was connected with a law assembly (*þing*) and a market. The short remark of Thietmar of Merseburg (beginning of the eleventh century) on the religious festivals celebrated by the Danes at Lejre on Sjælland is not trustworthy in detail and explains the meaning of the ritual by using Christian polemic commonplaces.

More reliable glimpses of individual worship and smaller community rituals are given by a Gotlandic source, the Guta Law and its appendix the *Guta saga*, codified at the beginning of the thirteenth century, a date still rather close in time for people to be able to remember something of the ancient tradition. The evidence points to the fact that it was not until the end of the twelfth century that Christianity became implemented as the sole official form of religion on Gotland. The Guta Law states in the chapter entitled *af blōtan* 'on pagan ritual' that when somebody is guilty of worship (*haizl*) with offerings of food or drink that does not conform to Christian tradition he shall pay a fine to the Church. The *Guta saga* reports that local communities used to have worship with animal sacrifices, food and beer which was known as the ritual of the 'cooking friends since they all cooked together' (*suðnautar þī æt þair suðu allir saman*).

Little has survived pertaining to prayers and ritual formulas. Two fragments of skaldic verse invoke Þórr as protector of the world of men against the giants, addressing him directly in the second person. An Eddic poem has preserved a praise and prayer formula, which addresses the divine beings in the second person plural:

> *Heilir æsir, heilar ásynior, heil siá in fjǫlnýta fold!*
> *Mál ok manvit gefið okr mærom tveim ok læknishendr meðan lifom!*
>
> Hail you, gods and goddesses, hail you, bounteous earth, give the two of us, glorious ones, word and wisdom and healing hands as long as we live.
>
> (*Sigrdrífumál* 4)

The concept of *ár* 'good harvest, good crops' occurs in various ritual formulas, the most well known being *ár ok friðr* 'good crops and peace'. The origin of this formula has been much discussed and some scholars claim a Christian background. The formula is not attested in the Poetic Edda nor in pre-Christian skaldic verses, but this may be explained by the fact that these sources are not ritual texts. Since a Christian model is lacking and since Indo-European parallels are found, the evidence suggests that the formulas with *ár* represent an ancient ritual legacy.

CULT PLACES

These were manifold and included natural sites such as mountains and hills (*fjall, berg*), groves (*lundr*), meadows and arable fields (*vangr, akr*), islands (*ey*), lakes (*sjór, sær*), rivers (*á*) and springs, but also funeral barrows (*haugr*) and grave-fields. The designations for such sites also form part of sacral place names. At these places different constructions could be added to enhance the religious character of the site: stone-settings in the form of ships (*skæið*) or circles, raised stones sometimes inscribed with runes (*kumbl, mærki*), hearths and other constructions for ritual purposes. Acts of worship were also performed indoors in farmhouses and chieftains' halls, the religious function of these buildings being one of many others. In several places specific cult houses were built; they were fairly small and served probably as a sort of shrine. The existence and importance of these houses have been brought out more clearly in recent decades through archaeological excavations (Tissø in Denmark; Uppåkra, Järrestad, Borg and Lunda in Sweden; Mære in Norway). The only undisputed Scandinavian word denoting a cult site is ON *vé* (ODa *væ* and OSw *vi*). A runic inscription at Oklunda in Östergötland shows that a cult site could also offer the right of asylum. It is said that Gunnar who carved the runes 'fled under penalty (*sakr*), he sought this holy place (*vī*)'.

RELIGIOUS PERSONNEL

There seem not to have been any professional priests similar to the druids among the Celts and the hereditary priestly classes of the Indo-Iranians. Religious ritual functions of different kinds were performed by various persons besides their ordinary occupations and roles in society. Kings and chieftains are known to have played an important part in public sacrificial feasts, as is witnessed by the kings' sagas for Norway and by Adam of Bremen for Sweden. In medieval Iceland we find the institution of the *goði*, a chieftain who in his person combined political, judicial and religious functions. It is probable that the *goði* institution also reflects the conditions prevailing in pre-Christian Iceland; the term *goði* is also known from three Danish runestones (DR 190, 192, 209) and possibly on a Swedish runestone from Småland (Sm 144). Another person who seems to have had some sort of religious function was the *þulr*, perhaps being the one who preserved and taught ritual and mythic traditions. The Snoldelev runestone in Sjælland mentions a man named Roald who was *þulr ā salhaugum*. In communicating with the world of supernatural beings both men and women played important roles, but women had a particular fame for foretelling the future. The *vǫlva* was not just a mythic figure as in the *Vǫluspá* ('the prophecy of the sibyl') but the help of the *vǫlva* seems to have been much asked for in real life when difficult and uncertain situations came up as is told in several

Old Norse texts. The *vǫlva* appears to have a long continuity in Scandinavia since Germanic prophetesses like Veleda were renowned already in the Roman Empire.

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