

Pagan Gods in Viking Britain

What is the evidence?

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A transformation in historians' attitudes, from the traditional picture of Vikings as savages...





...to Peter Sawyer's great civilisers, in the 1970s.

Now both views seem correct.

- They arrive as looters, settle down as traders, farmers and explorers.
- They come to plunder when they learn of riches of lands to south. Vikings are looters, not just Scandinavians in general.
- Especially attack churches and monasteries, as heathens who simply see them as treasuries, and take occupants as slaves.
- Huge slave traders, Ireland to Iraq. We have lost much literature and art from monasteries, as well as gained much from settlers later.
- Scales found in Hebrides for weighing loot not trade.
- At worst, celebrate psychopathic violence.

RUNES

R N S M Y O F M A S J N M M

mayhem



E.g. Egil
Skallagrimmson



E.g. Bjorn
Cripplehand,
skald to Magnus
Bareleg, 1098

Evidence for Viking Paganism

- The great medieval textual problem: sources are too tainted and too late- 150-300 years after Christianity. Either poetry or sagas (long stories in prose)
- Icelandic writers highly sophisticated – 1560 of 1600 sagas about foreign subjects- Trojan War, Charlemagne, Biblical characters and saints
- Main sources of sagas poetry which the authors may no longer fully have understood. Also influenced by the medieval paganism of the Slavic and Baltic lands against which Scandinavians were now crusading, with large, well-built temples



HAVAMAL
"THE SPEECH OF THE HIGH ONE"

*I know I hung on that windy tree,
Swung there for nine long nights,
Wounded by my own blade,
Bloodied for Odin,
Myself an offering to myself:
Bound to the tree
That no man knows
Whither the roots of it run.*

*None gave me bread,
None gave me drink.
Down to the deepest depths I peered
Until I spied the Runes.
With a roaring cry I seized them up,
Then dizzy and fainting, I fell.*

*Well-being I won
And wisdom too.
I grew and took joy in my growth:
From a word to a word
I was led to a word,
From a deed to another deed.*

From the Old Norse
The Poetic Edda (ca. A.D. 1200)

The basic pattern-
a mixture of old
native ideas,
Christianity and
Graeco-Roman
paganism. But how
do you distinguish
them? Example;
Havamal.

Odin on the Yggdrasil,
or World Tree,
Spies the Runes

Other problems

- Twelve gods on Asgard- but in actual stories too few or too many (answer- Olympians have twelve)
- Skalds loved puns and word-plays, names of deities in poetry could be nicknames for known figures, or separate divinities
- Goddesses few in prose tales, many and mighty in poetry
- E.g. Kormak's Saga- his poetry has six well-known deities, one slightly known one, and two gods and ten goddesses found only in it

Some definite memories of paganism

- Völsunga Saga- cutting of runes on swords confirmed by archaeology, and listing of the Elves, Aesir, Vanir.
- Clear no one picture of otherworld or afterlife
- But major elements of Norse mythology still unfortunately doubtful as aspects of earlier pagan tradition- Valhalla and Ragnarok
- Saga heroes not very religious- Christian or pagan. Finnbogi's Saga- 'I believe in me.' Goes with the stoic, self-reliant ethic of the rootless, adventuring Vikings.

Some clearly distinctive and recurrent deities: Odin



Thor



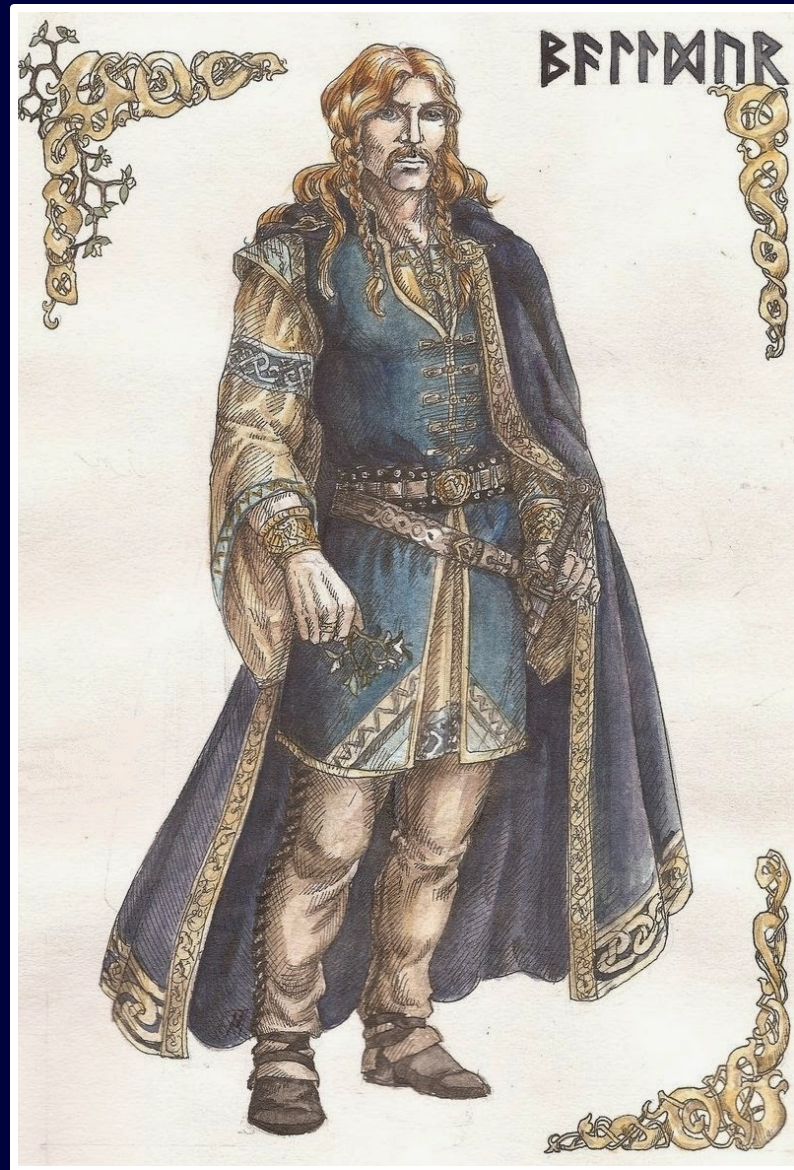
Frey



Freya



Baldur



Tyr and Fenris



Loki



Also heroes: above all Sigurd



So how does all this relate to the British Isles?

- A short period- Vikings arrive in region from the 790s and are converted all over it by 990s, and the Viking homeland by 1030. So just 200 years at most.
- Actually in most areas still shorter. In England settlement only really starts in the 860s, and the last pagan Viking ruler is removed in 954. So less than 100 years in southern Britain, less than 200 in northern.
- Vikings were settling among a more numerous and sophisticated Christian population
- In all, the paganism which made the slightest impression on Britain

So What Is The Evidence? Literary sources.

- Place names. Only Orkney properly studied- lots of Odin, none of Thor. The opposite to Iceland.
- Christian chronicles and Icelandic sagas. There is very little relevant to Britain. They do agree on raven banners.
- Laws codes of King Canute and Archbishop Wulfstan in early 11th century, to Christianise recently pagan Viking settlers- prohibit veneration of trees, pools, and stones; pagan songs, use of charms, worship of sun and moon.
- Looks like a family-based religion with use of natural landmarks- no temples or priests

The Blood Eagle: A Literary Myth



The Blood Eagle Myth

- Appears in four stories from 12th to 14th centuries. Two are legends, and two bits of alleged 9th-century history.
- In 1984 Roberta Frank pointed out that all actually derive from one original, in 12th-century Orkneyinga Saga, and account of Earl Torf-Einar.
- No earlier account of this. Instead the saga version depends on a skaldic poem in which Torf-Einar boasts of his enemy being 'torn by the eagle's talon' before burial. May just mean eaten by carrion birds.

Archaeology now the great source, if compared with overseas material and literary texts

- No temples or shrines anywhere. One apparent foundation deposit found under a jetty or bridge end at Skene on the river Humber.
- 34 swords found in English rivers, probably offerings as no other item.
- Carvings on crosses, in churches or churchyards. Many in Isle of Man and over 600 in northern England. By definition, Christian, but sometimes have apparent pagan images.
- Easy as images overlap- dragon symbol of evil in both cultures. Loki equated with Satan, Ragnarok with Apocalypse.
- Heroes more common than deities, especially Sigurd, who could match Archangel Michael.



Some mythology on crosses

- Tyr and Fenris on slab in church at Sockburn, Co. Durham.
- Occasional gods- on scores of Manx crosses, Odin twice, Thor once.
- Vikings had no tradition of stone monuments before conversion period, so these scenes made for crosses.
- Could be assimilation of pagan tradition to Christian, or the two co-existing.

Burial the greatest source of evidence (as in Anglo-Saxon and Iron Age cases)

- Across Britain, most of warrior leaders- high-status males with weapons
- Cross slabs show men lying in graves with weapons- sometimes found in northern English churchyards
- Viking graves common in Norse-settled areas of Scotland- far north plus isles. Men with weapons, women with jewellery, horses and dogs. Some in boats. A 'family vault' at Sanday, Orkney, 1992.
- The most awe-inspiring deposits at and near Repton, on river Trent in Derbyshire, base of an invading Viking army in early 870s, led by the sons of Ragnar.

The Repton Burials



The Repton camp and St Wystan's church



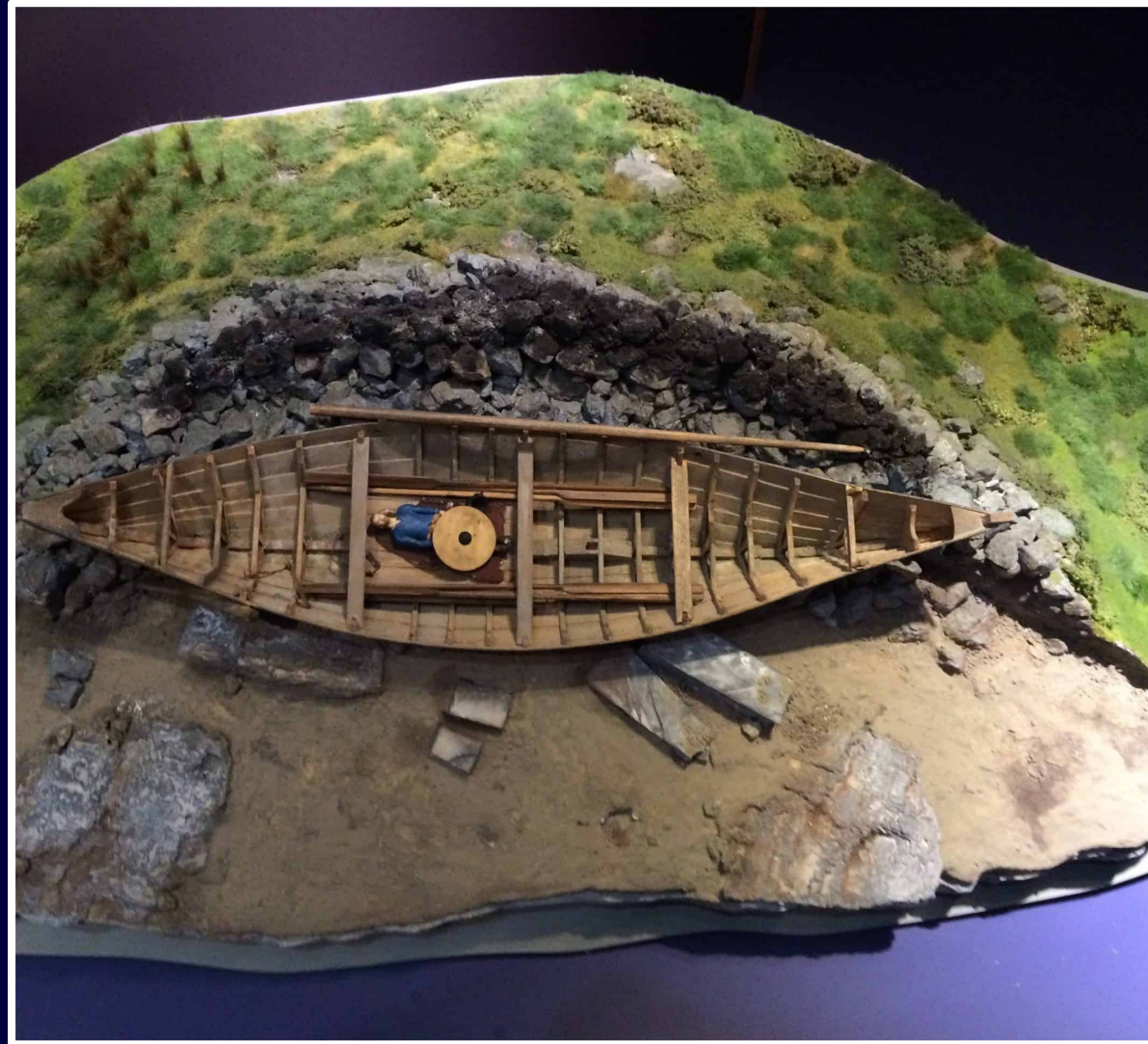
The Henley Wood Burials



The Isle of Man, British Capital of Viking Archaeology

- Greatest collection of Scandinavian carved stones outside Scandinavia
- 40 burials with goods. Jurby parish- six of eight farms had great burial mound

Balladoole Ship Burial



Other Interesting Burials

- Knoc-y-Doonee- grave of a smith and fisherman?
- Cronk Mooar- a badly decayed corpse. Lay in state or brought home dead?

The ghoulish one: Ballateare



The Ballateare Woman's Skull: parallel with Ibn Fadlan?

