

CHAPTER I

*Retying the Bonds***Overturning the Old Gods**

The coming of Christianity to Northern Europe around the turn of the first millennium changed medieval northern culture profoundly. New answers were given to fundamental questions regarding the nature of the superhuman forces at work in the world, how one interacts with these forces, and the place of humans in this life and beyond, to name a few. New ideas invalidated older, less stable (and perhaps less firmly conceptualized) notions. Without overemphasizing the differences between the so-called local and world religions, it seems safe to assume with Schjødt 'that Christianity is religion in quite another way than the pagan "religion" was religion' and that, to a higher degree than in Christianity, worldviews before the conversion were relatively organic and changeable.¹ Recent scholarship on Old Norse pre-Christian worldviews has done much to emphasize the variable nature of the pre-Christian cultic practices, in particular over larger geographical areas.² This variance is to a large part explained by the lack of centralized authorities delimiting orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The Christian Church, on the other hand, had an overarching administrative structure, a well-developed and well-conceptualized theology, and strove, if not always successfully, for uniformity.

The dynamic nature of pre-Christian rites, the outlook associated with them, and the reluctance (perhaps the inability) of Christian writers to go into detail about actual cultic practices frustrate attempts to establish in any detail the worldview that dominated the North before the advent of Christianity.³ Adam of Bremen, e.g., one of the key textual sources to tenth- and eleventh-century Scandinavian history, does not deem it worth his while to describe the history of the Scandinavians before their conversion: 'In my opinion, it seems just as useless to explore the deeds of those who did not believe as it is irreverent to disregard the salvation [i.e. conversion] of those who for the first time believed and those through whom they

believed.⁴ Adam, in consequence, has very little to say about the religion, or as he terms it ‘superstition’, of pre-Christian Scandinavians.⁵ The main exception is found in his famous description of the sacrifices performed at the pagan temple in Uppsala at the eve of conversion. Although he does, at this point, go beyond the topoi that had recurred in Christian writings on pagans and their sanctuaries since Late Antiquity, the reliability of the information he provides has long been debated. It is also clear that he censors parts of his description, thinking it better not to commit to writing the chants accompanying the rites at Uppsala: ‘Furthermore, the incantations customarily chanted in the course of these libations are numerous and appalling, and therefore it is better to leave them unsaid.’⁶ Adam’s account therefore provides tantalizing information that songs or chants could accompany sacrificial rites, but we do not, with the possible exception of the poem that accompanies *Vǫlsa þáttr* (see below), have examples of such songs.⁷

Despite such determined reticence on behalf of some of the textual sources, scholars generally agree that the prevailing notions of fundamental categories such as time, fate, and divinity changed radically in the course of Christianization. One example that illustrates the difficulties involved in determining the exact nature of the pre-Christian notions, and at the same time highlights their alterity, is the central concept of divinity. The traditional Scandinavian gods, it seems, were divinities of a very different kind than the God of the Abrahamic religions with which most Westerners today will have some familiarity, and their characteristics differ notably from those of the Abrahamic God. One remarkable difference is that the Norse gods were mortal rather than eternal. They existed in time rather than outside of time, had been born, and were expected to die as well. This is one of the major talking points in Daniel of Winchester’s letter of advice to Boniface (723/4) on how to convert the pagans. While we have few stories about the procreation and childhood of Norse gods – Óðinn’s son Váli is the major example – the mythological sources generally present the gods as linked in various ways by relations of blood, Þórr being the son of Óðinn, Freyja the daughter of Njǫrðr, etc. Indeed, the mythological ties of kinship are often the major key to understanding Scandinavian mythology as we know it, as in Lindow’s *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods*. A corollary to the mortality of the gods is that they are at the mercy of fate and preordained to die at a certain time. Far from being omnipotent, the gods are subject to powers stronger than themselves. Another example of the gulf that separates the pre-Christian gods from the Christian one is that the criteria for divinity appear to be uncertain and variable in the

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former case. Some gods were called upon by humans and considered to have special spheres of influence (such as fertility, war, and poetry), while other gods seem to have had a much more loosely defined sphere of power. They are simply around, waiting for the time to come in which they can fulfill their mythological role. The blind Hqðr and the silent Viðarr come to mind as examples of such deities, to whom no worship was offered as far as we know but who nevertheless have each their purpose in the grand mythological scheme. To take a final example, there is also the question of divine goodness and justice. The Norse gods as we know them are not consistently perceived as good or just. Rather they are presented as being occasionally opportunistic, selfish, irrational, unjust, and so on; exactly like their human worshippers. In short, judged by Abrahamic standards, the Norse gods are not at all godly. With the coming of Christianity, the very notion of divinity was refashioned in such a way that the old gods were divested of this crucial attribute.

Another perhaps even more drastic refashioning of the Northern worldview was the replacement of polytheism with monotheism or, from the perspective of the preserved Old Norse texts of the Christian Middle Ages, the substitution of *ótrú* ‘disbelief’ and *skurðgoðavilla* ‘the error of idols, idolatry’, with *trú* ‘belief’.⁸ This substitution resulted in a degradation of the gods that had traditionally been venerated by the Scandinavians. As the gods were deprived of their divine status through the redefinition of the very notion of divinity, the former recipients of worship were reduced to demons usurping the misdirected reverence of the heathen. From this perspective, there was no such thing as a non-Christian god.⁹ The figure of Óðinn illustrates this process of degradation most clearly. The importance of his position in pre-Christian Scandinavian mythology is beyond doubt.¹⁰ In the oldest skaldic poetry, that of Bragi Boddason, traditionally dated to the early ninth century, Óðinn is referred to as the ‘father of humankind’ (*aldaqðr*), or alternatively as the ‘father of all’ (*alfqðr*).¹¹ Adam of Bremen mentions that a spear-carrying effigy of Wotan (Óðinn) is venerated by the Swedes, along with Thor and Fricco – conventionally identified with Freyr – in the temple at Uppsala. Adam’s description makes clear that Wotan is considered a god of war(fare), since he is believed to grant his worshippers bravery against their enemies.¹² Eyvindr Finnsson’s *Háleygjatal* hints that Óðinn was a god of the aristocracy and traces the family line of Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson of Hlaðir back to Óðinn. Actual and incontestable traces of an active cult of Óðinn are more difficult to point out in the literary material, but rich onomastic evidence indicates that sanctuaries, fields, groves, islets, hills, etc. were dedicated to Óðinn

all over mainland Scandinavia, although with a concentration near centers of power.¹³ One of the most famous of such theophoric place names connected with Óðinn, and one that clearly points to an active cult of Óðinn at some point in the past, is Odense on the Danish island of Funen (Fyn).¹⁴ With the exception of Adam's testimony concerning the Uppsala cult, which is difficult to assess,¹⁵ all this early evidence may in general be considered sufficiently trustworthy when it comes to determining the importance and centrality of Óðinn in the later part of the pre-Christian period.¹⁶ Later materials point in the same direction, but the reliability of such materials is in many cases disputable. A case in point is the *Prose Edda's* statement that 'Óðinn is highest and oldest of the Æsir. He rules all things.'¹⁷ It is tempting to regard this statement as a later accretion to Óðinn's dossier, designed to turn him into the head of a pantheon in the Roman or Greek style.¹⁸ Alternatively, it can be argued that the process of textualization in itself encouraged a systematic organization of the power relations of the gods, and that Óðinn, who was already considered 'father of all/humankind' by Bragi Boddason, came out as the supreme divine being.¹⁹ But even if the *Prose Edda's* testimony to the importance of Óðinn is discounted, the material briefly summarized here – and additional material could have been produced – still confirms his central position among the gods of the pre-Christian Scandinavians of the late pagan period.

The conversion to Christianity brought an end to Óðinn's pre-eminence. Scripture teaches that 'all the gods of the pagans are demons', and in the course of the process of Christianization Óðinn's role was adjusted accordingly.²⁰ Translated lives of saints amply illustrate how the old gods were demonized in Norway and Iceland. Already the oldest preserved manuscripts of hagiographic sagas provide clear instances of this. In the saga of St. Clemens, the protagonist is said to have characterized Óðinn as 'a fiend and an unclean spirit',²¹ and in the saga of St. Martin of Tours, the saint is tempted by demons coming in a variety of guises but most often in the shapes of the pagan gods Þórr, Óðinn, and Freyja.²² These lives of saints have all been translated from Latin into Old Norse, and the translators (or later revisers of the translations) made sure to acclimatize these texts by replacing the Roman gods mentioned in the Latin originals, such as Mercury, Mars, and Jupiter, with their counterparts among Old Norse gods.²³ The same demonization is at work in the Latin historiographical tradition. Adam of Bremen, to take one example, includes a short miracle tale about how 'one of the priests who used to serve the demons at Uppsala' suddenly lost his sight. In this case, the names of the gods Thor, Wodan, and Fricco, about whom Adam wrote in the previous chapter of

his account, have been left out, and these gods are simply labeled ‘demons’. The sacrificial priest, by the way, was cured by the Virgin Mary when he realized the error of his ways.²⁴ Theodoricus Monachus, to take another example, identifies the old gods with demons when he mentions that Jarl Hákon ‘became the most eager slave of demons once he had a tight grip on the kingdom’.²⁵

The demonization of the pagan gods was not restricted to the hagiographic saints’ lives or ecclesiastical writings in Latin, where a condemnatory attitude to pre-Christian gods after all is expected. Later texts frequently exhibit a similar outlook.²⁶ Thus the stranger who visits Óláfr Tryggvason in the Qgvaldsnes episode of *Flateyjarbók* and calls himself Gestr ‘Guest’ is eventually identified as ‘the enemy of all humankind, the devil himself’ in the guise of Óðinn.²⁷ The late medieval *fornaldarsaga* of Egill the One-Handed retains Óðinn’s role as a central aristocratic figure. However, it locates his reign in the netherworld rather than in the world of the gods and by referring to him as ‘the lord of Darkness’,²⁸ thereby demoting him from the divine summit to the depths of hell. A similar attitude is evidenced by a late fourteenth-century rune-stick from Bryggen, Bergen, which calls Óðinn ‘the greatest of fiends’²⁹ and in many other sources.

The fortunes of Óðinn in these texts illustrate how a set of religious notions was deliberately transformed into its absolute opposite in translated religious literature and Latin historiography and how this in turn influenced more popular conceptions of Óðinn, as reflected in some sagas of kings, a *fornaldarsaga*, and a runic inscription. Parallels to this development are widely attested across cultures, but a particularly striking example is offered by the recasting of traditional inherited deities as demons in Zoroastrian materials from ancient Persia. The Proto-Indo-European word for god appears to have been **deiwós*.³⁰ However, as a consequence of a unique doctrinal development, traditionally associated with the religious reform of Zarathustra, the Avestan reflex of the very same Proto-Indo-European word (*daēva-*) came to mean ‘demon’ rather than ‘god’.³¹ The Avestan development of the Proto-Indo-European god-word thus offers a manifest parallel to the evolution of the perception of Óðinn in Scandinavia, from pre-eminent god to (pre-eminent) demon.

Sweeping religious reform then leads to degradation of former divinities to demons, demonization in its most literal sense. Since such demeaned and disgraced godheads are likely to have held central positions in the worldview of the pre-reform culture, their sudden dethronement must have been accompanied by attempts to resituate dominant cultural practices connected with the old gods within the framework of

the newly adopted worldview, as will be mentioned later in the discussion of the transference of the notion of *ár* and *fríðr* from the pagan ideological sphere to a Christian one through the anchoring figure of the royal saint. Demonization is, however, not without drawbacks. Since it entails an utter devaluation of the old ways, it is likely to have been a troublesome process in traditional societies, such as the ancient Scandinavians', where a high value was placed in continuity. Old Scandinavian literature, that of Iceland in particular, exhibits a number of responses to this demonization. Due to the intellectual climate and the circumstances of literary transmission in Iceland, it took almost two centuries before these responses materialized in the written record, but once they did, they provided new narratives and alternative models for explaining the former existence of polytheism in the North, models that did not resort exclusively to demonization.

Responses to Demonization

The present study examines a number of responses elicited by the metamorphosis of gods into demons as expressed in Scandinavian texts from c. 1200 to the early eighteenth century. Although complete coverage is not possible, an effort has been made to select less well-known texts in addition to the high canonical text of the *Prose Edda*. Geographical as well as chronological coverage has also been taken into consideration, and texts originating in what is today Norway and Denmark have therefore been included in addition to texts of Icelandic origin. This approach will highlight both the variety and similarity of the approaches taken to the questions of the nature and origin of the pagan gods across time and space. Chapters 2 and 3 will focus on an extended section of polemic against pagan gods in *Barlaams saga* and the *Hauksbók* text *Um þat hvaðan ótrú hófsk* 'On the Origin of Disbelief'. Both texts are translations into Old Norse, both belong to the Norwegian part of the Old Norse corpus, and neither has been much studied. The two texts share a number of ideas and features, most notably both present a euhemeristic decadentist model, but they differ radically in their explanations of the origin of the worship of false gods. While *Um þat hvaðan ótrú hófsk* presents a demonological explanation, the text from *Barlaams saga* eschews demonology and places all blame on human injudiciousness. Whereas the texts discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 discuss how disbelief arose, the texts studied in Chapters 4 and 5 explain how it reached the ancient Scandinavians.

Both are original Scandinavian compositions and belong firmly to the medieval Scandinavian canon. Chapter 4 analyzes Saxo Grammaticus' images of the Scandinavian gods in his monumental *Gesta danorum* and shows how he creates a two-storied model in which the pre-Christian gods are simultaneously rejected and taken for granted. Chapter 5 turns to the *Prose Edda*. The chapter begins with a discussion of scholarship on three interpretative frameworks that have been applied to the *Prose Edda* (euhemerism, demonology, and analogy) and then turns to an analysis of the *Edda* prologue as it is found in *Codex Wormianus*. The discussion will show how this version presents Óðinn as a northern counterpart to Zoroaster and Saturn.

This study's central claim is that the cultural significance of the traditional gods was too great for the carriers and producers of the preserved tradition to allow them to see this tradition degraded to mere demonology or simply forgotten. In the process of conversion, efforts were made to sever the bonds between the Scandinavians and their traditional gods, but the conceptual boundaries set by demonization were too narrow to accommodate the potency inherent in the traditional worldview, and parts of this cultural property therefore had to be salvaged. For this reason, skalds and later writers sought to – and to a large extent were able to – retie their severed bonds to the gods. As a result, the gods were resituated within a Christian worldview and assigned positions that were not exclusively negative. Thus the pre-Christian gods became something more than manifestations of pure evil.

One of the lasting results of this relocation effort is the extraordinary preservation in Scandinavian writings of a pre-Christian mythology in a mythological form. Scandinavian literature, particularly that of medieval Iceland, combined the various models that Christianity had to offer in order to understand the origin of their mythology and the cult of the pagan gods in such a way that they retained or regained as much of their former eminence as practically and doctrinally possible without challenging the priority of the Christian worldview. These reconfigurations of pre-Christian mythology were most powerfully at work in the early thirteenth-century Golden Age of Old Icelandic literature. They were counter-balanced by more theologically oriented writers who pulled in other directions and sought – via explicit comparison and juxtaposition with classical, especially Greek, mythology – to understand the matter at hand more narrowly through the theological pre-conceptions and cognitive tools Christianity offered.

Theologia tripartita: The Three Parts of Theology

At this point, some words are in order concerning the general nature of our knowledge of pre-Christian religion and of the mythological material that has been handed down to us. It has often been observed that the Old Norse textual sources contain a wealth of information about Scandinavian mythology, while they have comparatively little to tell us about the practice of pre-Christian religion and cult. In a discussion of the reasons for the relative paucity of information about pre-Christian cult and ritual in Old Norse literature, Clunies Ross argues that ritual knowledge has to be maintained through action, and hence that ritual knowledge is forgotten when rituals are no longer performed.³² Lack of knowledge then goes a long way in explaining the distinctive mythic bias of the textual sources. One may continue this line of thought and ask how the preserved mythical material relates to the now forgotten pre-Christian rituals. This leads to the contentious issue of the relationship between myth and ritual.³³ The following pages will argue that when it comes to the Norse materials, myth and ritual are not necessarily two sides of the same coin. Rather, they should be considered two separate domains that may well overlap in some cases,³⁴ but one should not expect a consistent and predictable connection between the two domains *a priori*. Indeed, the two domains may very well be completely inconsistent with one another in many cases. After Christianization a third, equally separate sphere developed in addition to the mythic, while the ritual sphere faded into oblivion or morphed into a form that would be inoffensive to the new Christian regime. This third domain is the learned one. This sphere may well be closely tied to the other spheres, but assumptions of fixed, mutual connections between these domains should not be taken as a starting point for further reasoning. The complementary nature of these three domains and their differences can be illustrated through the theory of the 'tripartite theology' known to us first and foremost through the work of the prolific Roman scholar and antiquarian M. Terentius Varro (d. 27 BCE).

The greater part of Varro's literary output has been lost, and most of his works are only known through quotations in the works of other authors.³⁵ One of these lost works is the *Divine Antiquities* (*Antiquitates rerum divinarum*), probably composed shortly before 45 BCE. According to Augustine, to whom we owe most of our knowledge of the *Divine Antiquities*, Varro 'worshipped those same gods [i.e. the pagan gods about whom he wrote]. Indeed he esteemed their worship so highly that, in that same work, he says that he was afraid lest they should perish ... by the neglect of the citizens.'

Varro's aim was thus to rescue the gods from oblivion by 'preserving them in the memory of good men'.³⁶ *Divine Antiquities* took the form of an overview of Roman religious traditions in sixteen books. It was the second part of a longer work that also treated human antiquities.³⁷ Augustine quotes significant parts of *Divine Antiquities*, but since one of his goals is to refute it, circumspection is called for when reading the preserved fragments.³⁸

Augustine's treatment of *Divine Antiquities* shows that Varro operated with three ways of conceiving of the divine, or with a tripartite theology (*theologia tripartita*).³⁹ Theology in this context should not be understood in the Christian sense as referring to the study of the nature of God, but more broadly as discourse about the gods, or as Augustine says: 'accounts given of the gods'.⁴⁰ Varro labeled these three branches of theology the mythical, the physical (i.e. philosophical), and the civic, which encompassed rituals.⁴¹ Applying this threefold division *mutatis mutandis* to the Old Norse context, one may say that the mythical branch lives on in the Eddas and elsewhere. The civic branch was subdued and rendered harmless or suppressed and eventually eradicated in the course of Christianization. The physical branch, lastly, does not appear to have been well developed in the North before Christianization, but one may see the attempts at understanding paganism that are examined in the following chapters as ways of creating, as it were, a physical branch of theology. These points will be examined in more detail on the following pages. Although Augustine's *City of God* was known in some circles in medieval Scandinavia,⁴² the application of this threefold division to the Norse material does not intend to show that the Old Norse knew Varro's work or its Augustinian distillation. The aim is rather to re-examine some well-known (and less well-known) materials using a more appropriate set of conceptual tools than is usually applied to this material. Varro's tripartite theology has been declared 'the most cogent theory of polytheism'.⁴³ It is a particularly convenient tool with which to handle polytheism because Varro himself lived in a pre-Christian world where polytheism was the order of the day. His notions of divinity and religion are therefore not colored by the exclusively monotheist conceptions of divinity and religion that often cloud our own approach to polytheistic materials.⁴⁴

The civic branch of theology (*theologia civilis*), as Varro describes it, is the one that free men in the cities, and priests in particular, should be familiar with.⁴⁵ It includes knowledge about those gods that should be venerated publicly and about the rites and sacrifices for which the individual is responsible.⁴⁶ This is in other words a normative, rather than narrative or theoretical, dimension of theology that deals with practical

knowledge of cult and ritual practices, such as worship, sacrifices, divination, etc. Being connected with cult, it is also a reciprocal sphere in which humans and deities interact in various ways or in which such interaction is sought. In the less centralized Old Norse world, the sacrifices presided over, however unwillingly, by Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri (see the Epilogue) would fall into this realm of civic theology, as would the cultic celebrations at Uppsala that Adam of Bremen described, the *disablót*,⁴⁷ and all other kinds of large- and small-scale public and private rituals. Because this practical and performed aspect of the tripartite theology was the most manifest and easily discerned dimension, it was particularly targeted by missionaries and later Christianizers who did what they could to eradicate pre-Christian cultic practices. *Heimskringla*'s saga about the missionary king Óláfr Haraldsson, admittedly written long after the conversion, expresses this in clear terms: 'Óláfr considered it of utmost importance to bring an end to paganism and the old customs that he considered incompatible with Christianity.'⁴⁸ A similar preoccupation with the practical side of pre-Christian religion is evident in legal materials, where the oldest written laws explicitly forbid pagan practices.⁴⁹ The same can be observed at a more individual level in the fifth of the so-called conversion verses of Hallfreðr vandrœðaskáld 'the troublesome poet', who states that he is forced to turn from the traditional cult of the Norse gods to that of Christ because 'that is the policy of Óláfr Tryggvason [< of the king of the people of Sogn], that sacrifices are forbidden'.⁵⁰ Different in some measure is Ari Þorgilsson's narrative in *Íslendingabók* (c. 1122–33) about the decision of the Icelandic general assembly to adopt Christianity in 999/1000. In this account, the learned Ari famously mentions a somewhat unusual transitional arrangement whereby Icelanders were allowed to conduct pagan sacrifices even after the conversion as long as these rituals were not carried out in public.⁵¹ However, this phase did not last for long, and soon even pagan practices carried out in secrecy were forbidden.⁵²

This ban on the most easily identifiable non-Christian cultic practices led in time to a loss of the knowledge of how the rituals were carried out.⁵³ This loss goes a long way toward explaining why the Old Norse written sources provide such sparse reliable information on pagan cult and why the foremost textual sources describing pre-Christian cultic practices of the Northerners are written by non-native outsiders (e.g. Adam of Bremen, Tacitus, and ibn Faḍlān). As contemporaries of the rituals and ceremonies they describe, these foreigners would have been much better positioned to report about them than later writers, even if they were not necessarily eyewitnesses to the ceremonies they describe. However, a consequence