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HEATHEN GODS IN
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RICHARD NORTH
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Preface

'And you really think that the wooden figure . . . ?' Clarissa tailed away in query.

'Oh, a fertility god, dear', said Rose. 'No doubt of it at all. Of course, the carving's very crude. Much cruder than the few finds they've made on the Baltic coast. Due to native workmanship, no doubt with the Continental tradition almost lost. That accounts for the large size of the member, you know.' Clarissa felt that she need not have feared to finish her sentence. 'But it's an Anglo-Saxon deity all right. A true *wig*. One of the *idola* Bede was so shocked about. Or pretended to be, shall we say?'

Angus Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*

When I started working on this book some ten years ago, I had no idea what the conclusion would be or how the project would end. That it now ends with Bede and a fertility god has surprised me and may be the last straw to some of Bede's modern readers, but is a conclusion to which some entirely unforeseen implications of the evidence led me. The thrust of my arguments became clear to me only gradually and in the last three years. Nor at any time in the last decade could I have developed any of these arguments without trying them out on older and wiser scholars, whose reservations about the study of Anglo-Saxon paganism consequently gave shape to this project no less than my enthusiasm did. Their doubts were to do with the dearth of relevant material, with the Christianization of the evidence, with the problem of dating the Norse poetry on which most analogies with Old English literature depend, and with the relative unsuitability of Norse prose, which is too often held to be the equal of Norse poetry in pagan authenticity. These doubts are legitimate and well known, but the climate which they create is not

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always helpful in the wider Anglo-Saxon field. Because the study of Anglo-Saxon paganism is never free of these uncertainties, many scholars find it easier to be 'sceptical' than observant about heathen gods in Old English literature. For most scholars it is easiest not to bother with this subject at all. Ours is a long and distinguished Christian tradition, in which most heathen gods were excised, transformed, filtered out or forgotten in the seventh century, some generations before the composition of the first literary evidence. There is more to say about the gods in Old Norse–Icelandic Eddic and Scaldic poetry of the tenth century, and in the mythography and saga-prose of the thirteenth century, but the picture here, though so much fuller, must usually be made clearer before it can inform Anglo-Saxon texts of the eighth to the eleventh centuries. But then not every scholar of Old English knows Old Norse, and recently it seems that even some with an interest in Anglo-Saxon paganism would rather declare Old Norse irrelevant than see the justice of any textual comparison with Old English. Heaven forbid that this vogue should become an orthodoxy. The motives for this unfashionable kind of philology have also been viewed with suspicion. What has Woden to do with Bede, Scandinavian paganism with *Beowulf*, *Hinieldus cum Christo*? Not much, it might be insisted. The romanticism of these 'pagan' enquiries, whatever their results, has proved alien to many scholars in both Anglo-Saxon and Norse fields, and there is no denying that romantic philology (no less than statistical analysis or ultraviolet photography) is a product of the modern age and would have been strange to the Christian men and women who preserved or created Old English literature, as well as to their heathen ancestors who shaped the language in which this was written. These, in short, are the reservations of most scholars concerning 'heathen gods in Old English literature'.

The simplest apology for an interest in this subject, however, is that it remains relevant to Anglo-Saxon history. Heathen religion was a political issue in seventh-century England and was still practised in some kingdoms during the lifetimes of Aldhelm and Bede. Some of its beliefs were of common ancestry with Scandinavian paganism and may have been revived when the Vikings settled in England. Norse paganism itself, first in Scandinavia and then in the countryside around the Danelaw boroughs and in Yorkshire, Cheshire, Lancashire, Cumbria and Northumberland, lived next door to the Anglo-Saxons almost from beginning to end of their history. Cognate Icelandic literature may thus be used to throw

Preface

light on the changing ideologies of the early Anglo-Saxons, particularly through the late literary traces of their gods. The arguments which do this here are written in the subjunctive mood, but also with a self-evident methodology and with the use of a probability by which it may be assumed that if the *contra* of any case had outweighed the *pro*, the argument would not have been included in the first place. As long as all the doubts are admitted and the argumentation is made clear in all places along the route of this enquiry, my conclusion at the end of the book, however unorthodox it first seems, is supported by evidence.

The writing of this book has also led me to question a number of axioms which continue to define the field of comparative Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse–Icelandic studies today. For example, it is sometimes stated by historians that pagans saw Christianity as something new; that Anglo-Saxon paganism was failing when the Roman mission reached England; that Bede would have been horrified if he had known what that paganism was; that comparative Icelandic evidence can be lightly dismissed as tenuous, without further discussion, because it is preserved in later medieval manuscripts; that most of what passes for heathen poetry there anyway is the product of learned Christian invention in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland; that ‘sacral kingship’, in particular, is a figment of the same or a later era; that nothing can be concluded from a Norse text on pagan themes, even if it is accepted that this text predates the conversion; and that even if a motif in Norse poetry is accepted as pre-Christian, it surely had no existence prior to the late pagan poets who created it *ex nihilo*. By other scholars it is often stated that Norse gods and their roles can be fitted into a tripartite caste-system alleged to work for Indo-European mythologies as a whole; that the cult of Woden or Óðinn – a love-affair continuing to this day – was of Nordic origin and dominated the pantheons of all Germanic religions; and that Nerthus, the Old Anglian deity whose name is cited in the *Germania* of Tacitus, underwent a sex-change from female to male at a time between the first century and the ninth. The scholarship is often impressive in which these views are upheld, but in view of the rareness with which some of them are challenged, it might be said that there are other sacred cows in this field than the heifers pulling Nerthus through *Germania*.

All these views I have been obliged to revise in some way, but in doing so I have made three new arguments crucial to the conclusion of my book. I suggest that Nerthus was male, like Njörðr; that Baldr was derived

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Preface

from the same figure as Freyr; and that Njǫrðr's wife Skaði was a Norse reflex of Terra Mater. If these innovations are accepted as a new joint premise for heathen gods in Old English literature, then our picture of Bede's knowledge may change – not to the extent that Rose Lorimer would have changed it, of course, but enough to show that Bede knew the *gens* as well as the *ecclesia Anglorum*. Lest I share the fate of Dr Lorimer, however, let me finish by urging sceptics and enthusiasts alike to read this book carefully from beginning to end.

I am grateful to my wife Inma Ridaio, my father and mother Professor John and Mrs Marion North, my sisters Rachel and Julian, Mr David Ashurst, Dr Peter Heather, Dr Susan Irvine, Professor Elaine Jahner, Mr Roger Llewellyn and Ms Cath Ranzetta, Mr Timothy McFarland, Professor Janet Nelson, Dr Peter Orton, Dr Clive Tolley, Dr Elizabeth Tyler, Dr Martin Welch and Dr Bryan Wyly, among other friends and colleagues, for reading through and making comments on various passages in this book. My thanks also go to Professor Michael Lapidge, Dr Simon Keynes and Dr Andy Orchard for reading, and in Michael's case for patiently rereading and correcting, drafts of this book for the press. Thanks go to the late Jenny Potts for her meticulous copy-editing of this book. Thanks also go to my colleagues in the English Department, University College London, who supported me with a grant with which to assist the completion of this book. I acknowledge Curtis Brown on behalf of Angus Wilson for my quotation from *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (copyright as printed in original volumes). My debt extends further back to Sally Frank, in whose confidence I raised many questions on the subject of my doctoral thesis and to whose memory I dedicated it on her untimely death in 1985, to Professor Ray Page, my then supervisor, without whose good-humoured objections I would never have learnt to evaluate the material which I have used, and to Mrs Ursula Dronke, whose undergraduate tuition and later imaginative guidance helped generate many of the ideas contained in this book.

Abbreviations

All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<i>ABäG</i>	<i>Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik</i>
AF	Anglistische Forschungen
<i>AIEW</i>	Johannesson, <i>Altisländisches etymologisches Wörterbuch</i>
<i>Akv</i>	<i>Atlakviða</i>
AM	Arnamagnaean
<i>Am</i>	<i>Atlamál</i>
<i>And</i>	<i>Andreas</i>
<i>ANEW</i>	de Vries, <i>Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch</i> , 2nd ed.
<i>ANF</i>	<i>Arkiv för nordisk filologi</i>
AR	de Vries, <i>Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte</i> , 2nd ed.
ASC	<i>The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , ed. Plummer and Earle, cited by volume and page number
<i>ASE</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
<i>ASPR</i>	<i>The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records</i> , ed. Krapp and Dobbie
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
<i>Bdr</i>	<i>Baldrs Draumar</i>
<i>Beo</i>	<i>Beowulf</i>
<i>BGdSL</i>	<i>Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur</i> [Paul und Braunes Beiträge]
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CR	Codex Regius
CSASE	Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
<i>Dan</i>	<i>Daniel</i>
Dan	Danish
Du	Dutch

List of abbreviations

EETS	Early English Text Society
<i>El</i>	<i>Elene</i>
<i>ES</i>	<i>English Studies</i>
<i>EStn</i>	<i>Englische Studien</i>
eWS	Early West Saxon
<i>Ex</i>	<i>Exodus</i>
<i>Fáf</i>	<i>Fáfnismál</i>
<i>Fates</i>	<i>The Fates of the Apostles</i>
<i>Finn</i>	<i>Finnsburh Fragment</i>
<i>FJSnE</i>	<i>Edda Snorra Sturlusonar</i> , ed. Finnur Jónsson; cited by page number
<i>Flat</i>	<i>Flateyjarbók</i> , ed. Unger; cited by volume and page number
<i>Fort</i>	<i>Fortunes of Men</i>
Fris	Frisian
<i>GD</i>	Saxo Grammaticus, <i>Gesta Danorum</i> , ed. Olrik and Ræder
<i>Gen</i>	<i>Genesis</i>
Ger	German
<i>Germania</i>	<i>The Germania of Tacitus</i> , ed. Robinson
Gmc	Germanic
Got	Gothic
<i>Grím</i>	<i>Grímnismál</i>
<i>Gríp</i>	<i>Grípissþá</i>
<i>GRM</i>	<i>Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift</i>
<i>Guð</i>	<i>Guðrúnarkviða</i> (I, II, III)
<i>Guth</i>	<i>Guthlac</i>
<i>Gylf</i>	<i>Gylfaginning</i> , ed. Faulkes
<i>Hamð</i>	<i>Hamðismál</i>
<i>HAR</i>	Helm, <i>Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte</i>
<i>Hárb</i>	<i>Hárbarðsljóð</i>
<i>Háv</i>	<i>Hávamál</i>
<i>HE</i>	Bede, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i> , ed. Colgrave and Mynors
<i>HHj</i>	<i>Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar</i>
<i>HHund</i>	<i>Helgakviða Hundingsbana</i> (I, II)
<i>Hym</i>	<i>Hymiskviða</i>
<i>Hynd</i>	<i>Hyndluljóð</i>
ÍF	Íslensk Fornrit
<i>JDay</i>	<i>Judgement Day</i> (I, II)
<i>JMH</i>	<i>Journal of Medieval History</i>

List of abbreviations

<i>Jud</i>	<i>Judith</i>
<i>Jul</i>	<i>Juliana</i>
<i>Lok</i>	<i>Lokasenna</i>
<i>LSE</i>	<i>Leeds Studies in English</i>
<i>IWS</i>	late West Saxon
<i>Max</i>	<i>Maxims</i> (I, II)
<i>MÆ</i>	<i>Medium Ævum</i>
<i>MCharm</i>	<i>The Metrical Charms</i>
<i>ME</i>	Middle English
<i>Met</i>	<i>The Meters of Boethius</i>
<i>MGH</i>	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
Auct. Antiq.	Auctores Antiquissimi
FIG	Fontes Iuris Germanici in usum scholarum separatim editi
SRG	Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum
SRM	Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>ModIce</i>	Modern Icelandic
<i>ModSw</i>	Modern Swedish
<i>MoM</i>	<i>Mål og Minne</i>
<i>MScan</i>	<i>Medieval Scandinavia</i>
<i>MSol</i>	<i>Solomon and Saturn</i>
<i>Neophil</i>	<i>Neophilologus</i>
<i>NM</i>	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
<i>NoB</i>	<i>Namn och bygd</i>
<i>Norw</i>	Norwegian
<i>Oddr</i>	<i>Oddrúnargrátr</i>
<i>OE</i>	Old English
<i>OHG</i>	Old High German
<i>OIce</i>	Old Icelandic
<i>OrW</i>	<i>The Order of the World</i>
<i>OS</i>	Old Saxon
<i>PBA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
<i>Peritia</i>	<i>Peritia: Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland</i>
<i>PGmc</i>	Proto-Germanic
<i>Phoen</i>	<i>The Phoenix</i>
<i>PL</i>	Patrologia Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844–64)
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>

List of abbreviations

PPs	The Paris Psalter
<i>Prec</i>	<i>Precepts</i>
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>Ríg</i>	<i>Rígsþula</i>
<i>Saga-Book</i>	<i>Saga-Book of the Viking Society</i> (formerly <i>Club</i>)
<i>Settimane</i>	<i>Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo</i>
<i>Sigsøk</i>	<i>Sigurðarkviða in skamma</i>
<i>Skí</i>	<i>Skírnismál</i>
<i>Skj</i>	<i>Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning</i> , ed. Finnur Jónsson
<i>SnE</i>	<i>Edda Snorra Sturlusonar</i> , vol. I, ed. Jón Sigurðsson (1848); cited by page number (text slightly normalized)
SNF	<i>Studier i nordisk filologi</i>
<i>Soul</i>	<i>Soul and Body</i> (I, II)
<i>Þrym</i>	<i>Þrymskviða</i>
<i>Vaf</i>	<i>Vafþrúðnismál</i>
<i>Vsp</i>	<i>Völuspá</i>
<i>Völ</i>	<i>Völundarkviða</i>
<i>Wald</i>	<i>Waldere</i> (I, II)
<i>Wan</i>	<i>The Wanderer</i>
<i>Wid</i>	<i>Widsith</i>
<i>ZfdA</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum</i>
<i>ZfdPh</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie</i>