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H. M. Chadwick

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INTRODUCTION.

FEW of the ancient Germanic cults exercised a more important influence on the character and fortunes of the race than that of Woden. Yet in spite of this fact, not only the origin but even the character of the cult is shrouded in much obscurity. This is due partly to the scantiness of the evidence in England and on the Continent, partly to the fact that in the North, where the materials are much more plentiful, it is by no means unlikely that cults of essentially different character became confused even before the end of heathen times. In one respect a fairly satisfactory conclusion seems to have been reached in recent years; Petersen's work "*Om Nordboernes gudekyrkelse og gudetro i hedenold*" (1876) has rendered it probable that the cult of Woden (Othin) was not native in the North. Another conclusion which has found general acceptance, namely, that the cult was never practised by the tribes of Upper Germany, seems to me less certain, as it is based entirely on negative evidence.

The myths connected with Othin have been frequently discussed, but sufficient attention has hardly been paid to the cult itself and the rites with which it was associated. In the following pages an attempt will be made to examine this subject with a view to obtaining answers to the following questions: 1. What were the characteristics

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of the cult in the North? 2. Is this cult approximately identical with that of the ancient (continental) Germans, or has it undergone substantial modifications in the North? 3. When was the cult introduced into the North?

In regard to the origin of the cult, it seems to me that we are not yet in a position to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion. I am not convinced that "Woden is the deified Wode" and that the cult is an outgrowth of the belief known as "das wütende Heer." On the contrary I suspect that its origin is rather to be sought outside the Germanic area, probably either among the Gauls or among the races inhabiting the basin of the Danube. Another difficult question closely bound up with the preceding is the relationship between Woden-Othin and the Germanic "Mars" (O.H.G. *Zio*, O.E. *Tī*, *Tīw-*, O.N. *Týr*), a deity who, to judge from his name (originally **Tīwaz*, "god"), must once have occupied a peculiar position in the Germanic theology. It is possible that the Northern Othin, perhaps even the *Wōdenaz-Mercurius* of the first century, may have had some of the attributes of this (probably older) deity transferred to him. Of the god *Tīwaz* however but little is known, though he has been the subject of much unprofitable speculation. For the present I prefer to avoid discussing this question.

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CHAPTER I.

THE CULT OF OTHIN IN THE NORTH.

ALLUSIONS to sacrifices offered to Othin on the battle-field are frequent. These sacrifices however must be discussed together with other rites connected with the cult of Othin in time of war. Sacrifices under other circumstances are not unfrequently mentioned, but the god to whom the sacrifice was offered is not usually specified. In cases where it is distinctly stated that the sacrifice was offered to Othin, the victims are, so far as I am aware, always human. This however may be an accident as the number of examples is small. The most striking case is the sacrifice of king Vikar, which is recorded in *Gautreks s. konungs* c. 7 (F. A. S. III. p. 31 ff.) and *Saxo* VI. p. 276 f. According to the account given in *Gautreks Saga*, Vikar's fleet was delayed by contrary winds. Having had recourse to divination, they find that Othin requires a man out of their company. The victim is to be chosen by lot and hanged. Selection by lot is therefore made throughout the host, and the lot falls on the king. After this the *Saga* goes on to relate *Starkaðr's* vision in the forest (cf. p. 68 f.). At the conclusion of the discussion *Hrosshársgrani* (Othin) asks *Starkaðr* to reward him for the services which he has rendered him, and to this *Starkaðr* consents. *Hrosshársgrani* then says that he

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requires Vikar to be sent to him and instructs Starkaðr how this is to be done. He gives Starkaðr a javelin and tells him that this will appear to be a reed-cane. After this they return to the host, and the following morning the king's councillors meet to consider what is to be done. They all agree that the sacrifice should be carried out in form only, to which end Starkaðr proposes a plan. In the neighbourhood was a fir tree and close by it a tall stump, over which a long thin branch hung down from the upper part of the tree. The servants were at the time preparing a meal, and had killed and cut up a calf. Starkaðr took some of the calf's entrails and, climbing on to the stump, pulled down the branch and tied the strings on to it. Then he said to the king, "Here is a gallows ready for you, O king, and I do not think it looks very dangerous." The king climbed on to the stump, and Starkaðr laid the noose round his neck and leaped down. Then he thrust against the king with his cane saying, "Now I give thee to Othin," and released the branch. The cane turned into a javelin and transfixed the king, the stump fell from beneath his feet, and the strings turned into strong withies; the branch flew back and swept the king into the tree-top, and there he died.

According to *Ynglinga* s. 29, Aun, king of Sweden, sacrificed to Othin for length of life, and obtained the answer that he should live so long as he sacrificed one of his sons every tenth year. In this way nine of his ten sons were sacrificed. Again, according to *Ynglinga* s. 47, there was a famine in the reign of Ólafr Trételgi, which the people attributed to the fact that Ólafr was not zealous in sacrificing. They therefore "burnt him in his house and gave him to Othin, sacrificing him that they themselves might have plenty¹." With this passage may

¹ *brendu hann inni ok gáfu hann Óðni ok blétu honum til árs sér.*

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be compared *Hervarar s. ok Heiðreks konungs*, c. 11, 12 (F. A. S. i. 451 ff.), which describes how a famine arose in *Reiðgotaland* during the reign of king Haraldr. It was found by divination that the famine could only be stopped by the sacrifice of the noblest youth in the land. It was unanimously agreed that *Angantýr*, son of *Heiðrekr*, was the person required. *Heiðrekr* however took counsel to avoid this, and determined to offer the king with his son *Halfdan* and all their host as a sacrifice to *Othin* in place of his own son. He therefore attacked and slew them, and "had the temples reddened with the blood of Haraldr and *Halfdan*, and committed to *Othin* all the host that had fallen, as an offering for plenty in place of his son."

Besides these occasional sacrifices it is probable that sacrifices to *Othin* were offered also at certain fixed festivals. The heathen Scandinavians had three great annual sacrifices, which are thus described in *Ynglinga s.* 8: (1) *í móti vetri til árs*, "at the approach of winter; (this sacrifice was) for plenty": (2) *at miðium vetri til gróðrar*, "at midwinter for increase (of the crops)": (3) *at sumri, þat var sigrblót*, "at the beginning of summer; this was a sacrifice for victory." The first of these sacrifices was certainly connected with the worship of *Frö*; the second probably with that of *Thor*¹. It is probable also that the third of these sacrifices (the sacrifice for victory) was associated with *Othin*. This is shown by the constant references to *Othin* as the giver of victory; by his name *Sigtýr*, "god of victory"; by sacrifices and vows made to *Othin* for victory in time of war, examples of which will be given in the following pages; lastly by the custom observed in the drinking of toasts, which is thus described in *Hákonar s. góða*, c. 16:

¹ Cf. *Adam of Bremen* iv. 26. *Thor...uentos ymbresque serena et fruges gubernat.*

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“It was customary first to drink Othin’s toast for victory and for the glory of their king, and after that the toasts of Nigrör and Frö for plenty and peace.” Besides these annual festivals there were sacrifices on a great scale every nine years at Upsala and Leire¹, at which sacrifices of men together with various animals were offered. According to Schol. 137 to Adam of Bremen the sacrifice at Upsala took place about the spring equinox; it would coincide therefore with the annual sacrifice for victory. Consequently it is not unlikely that this sacrifice also was connected with the worship of Othin. At Leire indeed the corresponding sacrifice took place in January. It is possible however that the arrangement of the annual sacrifices in Denmark was not the same as in Norway and Sweden.

According to Adam of Bremen iv. 27 sacrifice was offered by the Swedes to Othin on the approach of war². It seems to have been at one time a common practice to sacrifice notable prisoners taken in war. In the account of the battle in Egils s. ok Ásmundar c. 8 (F. A. S. III. p. 379) it is stated that “all Ásmundr’s men had fallen and he was himself taken prisoner; it was then evening; they had decided to slay him on the morrow at Aran’s tomb, and give him to Othin that they might themselves have victory” (*gefa hann Óðni til sigrs sér*). The same phrase is used in Orkn. saga c. 8, where it is related that Ragnar’s sons captured Ella and put him to death by cutting the “blood-eagle” upon his back (cf. Ragnars s. Loðbrókar, c. 18; Saxo IX. p. 463). It is probable also that the hanging of captured enemies was regarded as a sacrifice to Othin. This custom is frequently mentioned, especially

¹ Cf. Adam of Bremen, iv. 27; Thietmar, Chron. i. 9.

² Si pestis et famis imminet Thor ydolo libatur, si bellum Wodani.

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in stories which deal with the reign of Iqrmunrekr (cf. p. 17).

The dedication of an enemy's army to Othin before the commencement of a battle must also have been regarded as a sacrificial act. According to *Eyrbyggja* s. 44 it was the custom in ancient times to shoot a javelin over the enemy's army, in order to turn the luck in one's own favour¹. That this custom was connected with the cult of Othin is shown by the following examples: In *Hervarar s. ok Heiðreks* c. 18 (F. A. S. I. 501), before the battle between the *Reiðgotar* and the Huns, *Gizr* rode up to the Huns' army and said: "Your king is panic-stricken, your leader is doomed,...Othin is wroth with you;...may Othin let the dart fly according to my words." So also in *Styrbiarnar þáttur* c. 2: Before his battle with *Styrbiörn Eirekr* went into Othin's temple and devoted himself to die after ten years, if he might obtain the victory; shortly afterwards he saw a tall man with a long hood, who gave him a cane and told him to shoot it over *Styrbiörn's* army with these words: "Ye all belong to Othin²." This example is remarkable because the battle is a historical event and seems to have taken place about 960—970 (cf. *Saxo* x. p. 479). According to the *Saga af Haraldi Gráfæld* c. 11, *Eirekr* died ten years after *Styrbiörn's* fall. With the phrase "Ye all belong to Othin" may be compared *Saxo* vii. p. 361, where it is stated that *Haraldus* (i.e. *Haraldr Hilditönn*, king of Denmark) had acquired the favour of Othin to such an extent that the latter granted him immunity from wounds in war. In return for this *Haraldus* "is said to have promised to Othin the souls which he ejected from their bodies by the sword."

¹ Þá skaut *Steinþórr spíóti* at fornum síð til heilla sér yfir flokk *Snorra*.

² Óðinn á yðr alla.

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According to Saxo VIII. p. 390 Haraldus repeated this vow in his last fight, in order that he might obtain the victory against Ringo (i.e. Sigurðr Hringr). In the *Sögubrot af Fornkonungum*, c. 8 (F. A. S. I. 380) the words of this vow are given as follows: "I give to Othin (*gef ek Óðni*) all the host which falls in this battle." It is noticeable that this is the sacrificial formula (cf. p. 4). Again, according to Saxo IX. p. 446, Syuardus (i.e. Sigurðr orm í auga, son of Ragnar Loðbrók) was so severely wounded that the physicians despaired of his life, when a certain man of immense size approached his couch and promised to restore him to health forthwith "if he would devote to him the souls of those whom he should destroy in war¹." He declared that his name was Rostarus.

But further, the slaying of an enemy in battle under ordinary circumstances seems to have been regarded as a sacrifice to Othin. This is shown by a verse in *Skaldskaparmal*, c. 1, attributed to Thiðólfr: "There lay the dead on the sand, allotted to Frigg's one-eyed husband; we rejoiced at such a deed²." With this may be compared *Islendinga s. I. p. 307*, where Helgi after killing Thorgrimr in battle sings: "I have given the brave son of Thormóðr to Othin; we have offered him as a sacrifice to the ruler of the gallows, and his corpse to the raven³." In this passage the phrase "give to Othin" is practically equivalent to "slay in battle." In like manner the phrases "go to Othin" and "receive Othin's hospitality" are used as equivalent to "be slain in battle," e.g. in *Ragnars s. Loðbrókar*, c. 9 (F. A. S. I. 265), when Aslaug hears of

¹ Si sibi illorum quos armis oppressurus foret animas dedicasset.

² valr lá þar á sandi vitinn inum eineygia
Friggiar faðmbyggvi. fognuðum dáð slíkri.

³ Ásmóðar gaf ek Óðni arfa þröttar diarfan,
guldum galgavalði Gautstafn en ná hrafni.

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her son's death, she says :—"Rognvaldr began to stain his shield with the blood of men; he, the youngest of my sons, in his terrible valour has come to Othin¹."

In *Hrómundar s. Greipssonar*, c. 2 (F. A. S. II. 366), Kari, when mortally wounded, says to the king :—"Farewell, I am going to be Othin's guest²." So also in the account of the fight between Hialmar and Oddr and the twelve "berserkir" in *Hervarar s. ok Heiðreks*, c. 5 (F. A. S. I. 422 f.), Hialmar says to Oddr : "It seems to me very likely that we shall all be Othin's guests in Valhøll to-night³." Oddr answers : "It is not I who shall be Othin's guest to-night, but they will all be dead before night comes, and we shall be alive." In the verse the dialogue runs thus : H. "We two brave warriors shall be Othin's guests this evening, but those twelve will live." O. "They will be Othin's guests this evening, the twelve berserkir, but we two shall live⁴." The synonymous phrase *í Valhøll gista* ('lodge in Valhøll') occurs in *Hrólfs s. Kraka* 51 (F. A. S. I. 106).

It has already been pointed out that the phrase "give to Othin" is applied both to sacrifice and to the slaying of an enemy. By itself the meaning of this phrase might be ambiguous; the expression "become Othin's guest" however can have only one meaning, namely that the person of whom it was used must have been regarded as still existing after death in some close relationship to Othin. That persons killed in battle were regarded as passing into Othin's presence is shown by the names

¹ Rognvaldr tók at rióða rønd í gumna blóði;
hann kom yngstr til Óðins ógnðiarfr sona mínna.

² ek man hiá Óðni gista.

³ at vér munum allir Óðinn gista í Valhøll í kvöld.

⁴ H. við munum í aptan Óðinn gista
tveir fullhugar, en þeir tolf lifa.

O. ...þeir munu í aptan Óðinn gista
toft berserkir, en við tveir lifa.

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Val-føðr, "father of the slain," applied to Othin himself, and *Val-höll*, "hall of the slain," applied to Othin's dwelling; so also by such passages as the following:—"The fifth dwelling is called 'Glaðsheimr,' where Valhöll bright with gold stands wide outspread; there Hroptr (i.e. Othin) chooses every day men who die by arms." *Grímnismál*, v. 8¹. So also *Krakumál*, v. 29 (F. A. S. I. 310):—"The Disir (i.e. Valkyries) summon me home; Othin has sent them to me from Herjan's hall; I will gladly drink ale in the highseat among the Aesir...²" Ragnar Loðbrók, however, whose last words are here given, did not die actually in battle but was put to death afterwards by means of poisonous snakes. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana*, II. 37 f., the slain Helgi is represented as coming to Valhöll and there meeting his old enemy Hundingr. Othin offers Helgi a share in all his power. The entrance of a slain man into Valhöll forms the subject also of the poems *Eireksmál* and *Hákonarmál*. In the latter poem the Val-kyriur, "choosers of the slain," figure prominently. But it is at least questionable if in actual religious belief they occupied the same position which is ascribed to them in the poetry. They are elsewhere (*Völsunga* s. 2 etc.) called Othin's *óskmeyjar* "adopted maidens" (or "daughters"). With this may be compared the expression *óskasynir*, "adopted sons," in *Gylf*. 20: "all those who fall in battle are called Othin's

¹ Glaðsheimr heitir inn fimti,
þars in gullbiarta
Valhöll víð of þrumir;
en þar Hroptr
kýss hverian dag
vápndauða vera.

² ...heim bióða mér Disir,
sem frá Herians höllu
hefir Óðinn mér sendar;
glaðr skal ek ǫl með Asum
í ǫndvegi drekka.....