

Household Cult in Viking Paganism: A Comparative Approach

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1. Austrfaravísur (‘Verses of a Journey to the East’), Sigvatr Þórðarson

Sigvatr Þórðarson was a poet in the retinue of King Óláfr the Holy. He was sent on diplomatic mission to (what is today) south-west Sweden during the winter of 1017-1018. Sigvatr and his companions were Christian, but much of rural Sweden was still pagan. Expecting to be able to stay at farms during their journey, Sigvatr is outraged that the locals turn them away, breaking a serious social contract about hospitality. Here are two of the verses of the poem he composed on his return:

1. I decided to aim for [the farm called Temple], the door was barred, but I inquired from outside, I stuck my hooked nose in. I got few words from men, but they said [it was] holy, heathen men drove me away. I bade the ogresses deal with them.
2. ‘Come no further in,’ said a woman, ‘wicked man; I fear Óðinn’s wrath, we are heathen.’ The unpleasant woman said they were holding a sacrifice to the elves (álfar) inside, in their farm; she drove me away like a wolf, without hesitation.

2. Account of Hedeby (Denmark) in 962, Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb al-Isrā’īlī al-Turṭushi

Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb al-Isrā’īlī al-Turṭushi – or “al-Tartushi” – was a member of the Jewish minority in Al-Andalus (Muslim Spain). During the early 960s he travelled through much of Europe, and, on returning home, wrote an account of his travels. He describes the Danes at Hedeby as wearing makeup, singing badly, and...

“hold[ing] a celebration at which they all come together to honour their god, and to eat and drink. Anyone who slaughters a sacrificial animal puts up poles at the door to his home, and impales the animal on them, be it a piece of cattle, a ram, billygoat or a pig, so that his neighbours know that he is sacrificing to honour his god.”

3. Heimslýsing ok helgifræði (‘A Description of the World and Sanctity’), anon.

Part of a larger book containing both religious and secular texts (Hauksbók), Heimslýsing ok helgifræði is an anonymous text that describes religious practices – and failures. This extract is implied to be a description of the practices performed by women in rural Norway during the C12th, when Norway was officially Christian.

“Some women are so stupid and blind with regard to their needs that they take their food out to piles of stones and give it to the cairns, on or under flat stones, and consecrate it to the land spirits and then eat it, in order that the land spirits be loyal to them and in order to have better luck with their farming than before. And there are some that take their children to crossroads and pull them through the earth for their health, and in order to ensure that they keep better health and prosperity.”

4. Afterlives at Helgafell, anon.

The inhabitants of Helgafell, a farm in western Iceland, was settled by a Norwegian priest-chieftain. He called a local mountain “holy mountain”, and it formed the centre of the religious life of the farm’s inhabitants – even generations later. Accounts survive in two medieval texts:

Landnámabók: “Thorolf, son of Ornolf the Fish-Driver, lived on Mostur Island [in Norway], and that’s why he was called Mostur-Beard. He was a great sacrificer and worshipped Thor. [...] Thorolf

sailed up the fjord and gave it the name of Breidafjord. He made land on the southern side, halfway up, and there on a headland, now called Thorsness [...] They put into the creek, and Thorolf called it Temple Creek. He built a farm there and a big temple which he dedicated to Thor. Nowadays the farm is called Templestead. [...] Thorolf took possession of land between Staf River and Thor's River, and called it Thorsness. He held the mountain on that headland so sacred that he called it Helgafell ['Holy Mountain'] and no one was allowed even to look at it unless he'd washed himself first. So holy was the mountain, no living creature there, man or beast, could be harmed until they left of their own accord. It was believed by Þórófr's kinsmen that they would all die into the mountain."

Eyrbyggja saga: *Thorsteinn Codbiter, a descendent of Thorolf Mostur-Beard, is on a fishing boat that goes missing in a storm. Shortly afterwards, a farmhand is passing Helgafell, and "he saw that the mountain opened up to the north; he saw big fires inside and heard a great clinking and racket of drinking horns from there; and when he listened, to see if he could make out what was being said. He heard that Thorsteinn Codbiter was being welcomed there, and his crew too, and it was said that Thorsteinn should sit on the high-seat opposite his father."*

5. The Saga of the Gotlanders, anon.

The Saga of the Gotlanders (*Guta saga*) is a medieval text that purports to tell the "history" of the island of Gotland in the Baltic. This history starts with mythological figures and culture heroes performing rituals to anchor the island in this world, then describes the island's settlement by their children. Before describing more historical matters (like the Gotlander's negotiations with Swedish kings), the text includes this account of their pagan religious praxis:

"Prior to that time, and for a long time afterwards, people believed in groves and grave howes, holy places and ancient sites, and in heathen idols. They sacrificed their sons and daughters, and cattle, together with food and ale. They did that in accordance with their ignorance of the true faith. The whole island held the highest sacrifice on its own account, with human victims, otherwise each third held its own. But smaller assemblies held a lesser sacrifice with cattle, food, and drink. Those involved were called 'boiling-companions', because they all cooked their sacrificial meals together." (trans. Christine Peel, *Guta saga*, p. 5)

6. The Tale of Vǫlsi, anon.

The medieval manuscript *Flateyjarbók* includes a number of short stories about the conversion of Iceland and Norway to Christianity. In The Tale of Vǫlsi, during the autumn of 1029, King Óláfr the Holy goes to investigate a farm in the far north of Norway, having heard rumours of pagans living there. He goes in disguise, and the late-medieval Tale provides a lurid, likely exaggerated account of what he found.

Shortly before his arrival, the old farmer's elderly horse had died, but when the animal was butchered for food, the farmer's wife kept the horse's penis, preserving it with herbs. The Tale states that she "regarded it as her god", called it "Vǫlsi", and that "with the devil's power he [Vǫlsi] grew so high and strong, that he could stand up for the housewife, if she wished it". Once Óláfr and his companions arrive, they are offered accommodation, and enter the farm's main room for a meal. Once they've eaten, the old woman produces the penis and starts a ritual where each person present had to hold the penis, and improvise a poem about how great it was – this was apparently "the custom of the household". Each poem has to end with the line "May mörnir [some local spirits, or perhaps a god] accept this idol/fetish/sacred object", and many poems are full of sexual innuendo. The old woman and a female slave participate enthusiastically, the old man and other members of the family less so. When Óláfr is forced to take part, he speaks the following poem:

"May mörnir accept this idol/fetish/sacred object,
but you, dog of the household, take charge of this monstrosity!

He then throws the penis to the family dog, who eats it, and forcibly converts the family to Christianity.