

Pagan Gods of the Anglo-Saxons

John Hood

The Venerable Bede, an Anglo-Saxon scholar and monk of the eighth century, described his ancestors as a fierce, pagan and warlike people. According to his account, the Christian missionaries sent from Rome by Pope Gregory in AD 596 were "appalled at the idea of going to a barbarous, fierce and pagan nation..." (Book 2,12.) Within the space of eighty four years, the age-old pagan beliefs of the English had apparently been replaced by Christianity, and nothing more is heard about the old gods. It is possible, however, to reconstruct the original beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons by using a wide variety of literary sources and by using the evidence of place-names. This material reveals a religion that worshipped nature, the powerful, uncontrollable and life-giving forces upon which their existence depended.

Bede does not name the old gods of the pagan Saxons. He has several references to the worship of idols, and he also says that they "worshipped demons". More specific information can be obtained by turning to earlier, pre-Christian, writers. The Roman historian and scholar Tacitus, writing in the first century AD about the religious beliefs and practices of the Germans of his day, describes in great detail the worship of an Earth Goddess, called Nerthus. Tacitus also mentions two war gods, identified in other Roman sources as Odin (or Woden) and Tyr. (p. 45) The great viking scholar Magnus Magnusson (1976) claims that Woden was one of the chief gods of the Germanic warrior tribes, including the Angles and Saxons, during or before the early Christian era. He points out that Woden was venerated as the ancestor of Hengist and Horsa, the legendary founders of the English nation, and that most of the early Saxon kings claimed descent from Woden. (p. 60)

These gods seem to have been primitive and bloodthirsty. According to Tacitus, human sacrifices were offered to Woden at certain times. (p.34) There are also numerous and earlier references by other classical writers to the Germanic custom of dedicating whole enemy armies to Woden. The historian Orosius, writing about the Cimbri (possibly later known as the Jutes) in 105 BC, says that "all prisoners were strung up on trees." (Magnusson, p 61) Although these descriptions apply to religious practice among the German tribes almost five hundred years earlier, there is reason to believe that the worship of Woden had not changed in later times. Adam of Bremen, writing almost a thousand years later in the tenth century, describes the worship of Odin at Uppsala, in Sweden:

"The sacrifice they offer is of this nature: of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads, with the blood that is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. ... On each day they offer a man along with other living beings in such a number that in the course of the nine days they will have made offerings of seventy two creatures"

Quoted in Magnusson (p 61)

Magnusson identifies two other Saxon gods. The Viking god Thor, the God of Thunder, was known by the Anglo-Saxons as Thunor . He was the god of the sky, ruler of storms and tempests. All the evidence, says Magnusson, suggests that, in Viking times at least, Thor was revered above Odin in daily life. He had originally been an earth god, a god of fertility and fruitfulness. Thor was the god of the ordinary people, the farmers, the peasants, the oarsmen, the settlers and the pioneers.

The strongest evidence for the identity of the Anglo-Saxon gods is found in place-names. According to Branston (1974), the survival of place-names can give us two kinds of information; they identify the gods that were worshipped, and they indicate former shrines or holy-places. Names such as Wednesbury, Wednesfield, Woodnesborough, and Wornshill were originally named in honour of the god Woden, and, surprisingly, so too were the many places called 'Grimsdyke,' since, according to Branston, Grim was one of Woden's nicknames. Using this evidence, it is possible to say that the Anglo-Saxons included Woden, Thor (or Thunor), Tiw and the goddess Frig amongst the deities they worshipped. The Old English word 'lea' added to many place names is evidence of the outdoor nature of this worship, since it referred to a clearing in the forest. Tacitus describes such sacred groves in his first century work, and states that they were linked with a temple complex. This seems to be true, since Bede relates how such a temple was destroyed when King Edwin of Northumbria became a Christian:

"And when he asked the Chief Priest who should be the first to profane the altars and shrines of the idols, together with the enclosures that surrounded them, Coifi replied: 'I will do this myself; for now that the true God has granted me knowledge, who more suitably than I can set a public example and destroy the idols that I worshipped in ignorance?' So he formally renounced his empty superstitions and asked the king to give him arms and a stallion - for hitherto it had not been lawful for the Chief Priest to carry arms and to ride anything but a mare - and thus equipped, he set out to destroy the idols. Girded with a sword and with a spear in his hand, he mounted the king's stallion and rode up to the idols. ... As soon as he reached the temple, he cast into it the spear he carried and thus profaned it. Then, full of joy at his knowledge of the worship of the true God, he told his companions to set fire to the temple and its enclosures and destroy them." (Bede, II, 14)

Pope Gregory the Great gave instructions that these heathen temples should not be destroyed, but converted into Christian places of worship. Bede quotes a letter from the Pope to Abbot Mellitus in AD 601, which also includes suggestions for retaining the pagan festivals by giving them Christian significance:

"..The temples of the idols in England should not on any account be destroyed. Augustine must smash the idols, but the temples themselves should be sprinkled with holy water and altars set up in them in which relics are to be enclosed... In this way the people (seeing their temples are not destroyed, will leave their idolatry and yet to continue to frequent the places as formerly, so coming to know and revere the true God. And since the sacrifice of many oxen to devils is their custom, some other rite ought to be solemnized in its place such as a Day of Dedication or Festivals for the holy martyrs.. On such high days the people might well build themselves shelters of boughs round about the churches that were once temples and celebrate the occasion with pious feasting. They must no more sacrifice animals to the Devil, but they may kill them for food to the glory of God while giving thanks for his bounty.." (Bede, I, 30)

Bede quotes another letter, from Pope Boniface to King Edwin of Northumbria, written in c. 625, in which it is stated quite clearly that the pagan idols were representations of gods in human shape:

"How can such objects (of wood and stone) help you when they are made for you from perishable materials by the labour of your own subjects and servants? Even their inanimate resemblance to human form is due solely to man's craftsmanship. .. We cannot understand how people can be so deluded as to worship as gods objects to which they themselves have given the likeness of a body." (Bede, 11, 10)

Some of the ritual associated with these sacred groves and idols can be uncovered from Tacitus. As well as Thor, the Angles and other Germanic tribes on the west coast of the Baltic at the start of the Christian era worshipped the earth mother Nerthus. Tacitus describes her cult in great detail:

"In an island of the Ocean there is a sacred grove, within which stands a chariot covered with a cloth, which none but the priest may touch. The priest can feel the presence of the goddess in this holy place. When she goes out in her wagon drawn by oxen, he attends her with the utmost reverence. A season of rejoicing and festivity reigns everywhere the goddess honours with her presence. All weapons are ... locked away, no one goes to war; peace and quiet are known and welcomed... Afterwards, the wagon, the cloth, and even (believe it or not) the goddess herself are washed and purified in a secret lake. This rite is performed by slaves, who are immediately afterwards drowned in the lake..." (Quoted in Magnusson, pp. 73,74)

It seems clear that the gods of the pagan Saxons were primitive and barbaric, demanding human sacrifice in order to avert the disasters they might otherwise bring upon their people, through defeat in battle, storm or tempest, or failure of the harvest. There is literary evidence of this in two manuscripts, now in the British Museum, which give details of the correct ritual and spell for various occasions. Both of them date from the Christian period, but, although the Christian god has been substituted for the pagan gods, it is possible to discover the original version. The Leechbook (Regius 12 D xvii), written c.AD 950, contains a charm for curing sprain, which exists in older, pagan versions in Scandinavia:

Phol (ie. Balder) and Woden rode to the wood,
Where Balder's foal wrenched its foot.
Then Woden charmed, as he well knew how,
As for bone-wrench, so for blood-wrench, So for limb-wrench,
limb to limbs,
as if they were glued.

The Lacnunga (Harley, 585) was composed in 1050, but also contains obvious pagan content mixed in with Christian references. The Charm for increasing the fertility of the fields, known as the Aecerbot, contains a pagan hymn to the sun and another to the earth. Both contain details of the ritual that accompanied the spell:

"Turn to the east and bowing humbly nine times, say these words:
'Eastwards I stand, for favours pray
I pray to the great Lord, I pray to the mighty Prince....'
Then turn three times sunwise and stretch yourself along the ground full length...."

The hymn to the earth included a ceremony that continued well into Christian times, the ceremony of burying a cake with the first ploughed earth:

"Say these words:
'Erce, Erce, Erce, Mother of Earth,
Hail to thee, Earth, mother of men,
Be fruitful in God's embrace,
Filled with food for the use of men.'
Then take every kind of meal and have a loaf baked no bigger than the palm of your hand, having kneaded it with milk and holy water, and lay it under the first turned furrow."

The worship of Sun and Moon as deities is also evident, both in these charms and in the names for Sunday and Monday. Moon-worship is attested in two charms from a Herbarium (8 and 10) where the herbs are boiled in water 'when the moon is waning' and another charm

involves hanging a wreath of clove-wort round a lunatic's neck 'when the moon is waning, in April or October.' According to Branston, the tenth century laws of King Canute expressly forbid moon-worship. Branston also describes a popular English belief still held in the twentieth century that to see the new moon through glass would bring 'bad luck', or, as he suggests, would offend the deity. (Branston, p.51)

The extent to which pre-Christian paganism still survives can be seen from a description of the pagan cycle of festivals given by Bede in another work, the *De Temporum Ratione*. Bede says that the Anglo-Saxon year began on 25 December, and that the last month of the old year and the first month of the new were known collectively as Yule. The second month of the year was called Solmonath and was marked by the baking of cakes to be offered to the gods. Branston points out that some scholars reject Bede's translation of the word, but he claims that Bede is referring to the ancient ritual of ploughing in the loaves, a custom which survived well into Christian times. The third and fourth months, according to Bede, were named after two goddesses called Hretha and Eostre (Easter). May was known as Thrimilci because 'cows were then milked three times a day;' the sixth and seventh months were together called Litha, named from an old word for the moon. Next came Weodmonath, or 'weed month' then Halegmonath or 'holy month', which Bede also calls the 'month of offerings' - corresponding to the still celebrated 'harvest festival' of the church. November was known as Blotmonath or 'blood month', because surplus livestock were killed. This was a custom that continued throughout the medieval period, since there was no means for keeping more than a small percentage of the flocks and herds alive during the winter.

Bede's information makes it clear that the Anglo-Saxons lived in a close, symbiotic relationship with nature, and reflected this closeness in their religious beliefs and practices. As Branston points out, we no longer stand in such a relationship to nature.

"A comparison between ourselves and our ancestors in the light of their calendar will illuminate some of the dark corners (as we may think it) of their heathenism. Their roof was the sky with the sun by day and the moon by night; as for us, most of our heads are covered by day and night by a home or office ceiling or a factory shed; their walls were the winds, ours are bricks and mortar; their floor was the earth carpeted with grass and crops, weeds and wild flowers; ours is concrete and tarmacadam; their measure of time was the seasons and the heavenly lights, ours is the alarm clock.. Their food came not from processing plants, cans and deep-freeze cabinets but from their won fields and stock. Their clothes were not reach-me-downs at the end of a production line but rough homespun garments made by their own hands. And their success or failure depended not on the scientific application of knowledge, but on the gods and goddesses of the sky, earth and weather in combat with the demon giants of flood, fire, drought and pestilence." (Branston, p. 52)

This is a reasonable and sympathetic view of the material, and accounts for what may otherwise seem to be a superstitious and primitive religion. In a sense, the pagan beliefs were both superstitious and primitive, but it does not follow that those who held such views were incapable of rational and sensible thought. Bede's description of the conversion of Edwin (Book 2. 9-14) reveals both a king and his advisers who are willing to listen to new ideas and who seem dissatisfied with the lack of meaning and purpose to human existence embodied in the worship of the old gods. In one of the most poetic passages in *De Ecclesia Anglorum et Gentes*, Bede makes one of Edwin's advisers say:

"When we compare the present life of man on earth to that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thanes and counsellors. In the

midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it." (Bede, II,13)

On another occasion, Bede puts into the mouth of their chief priest a surprising attitude to these gods: Your Majesty, let us give careful consideration to this new teaching, for I frankly admit that... the religion we have hitherto professed seems valueless and powerless... (2,13) It is doubtful that Coifi ever said these words. No doubt this is what Bede thought he should have said. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the new faith, with its emphasis on personal morality and salvation, was vastly different from the ritualistic worship of the gods of nature. Bede was probably right to suggest that the old religion offered no comfort at the end of life, but he perhaps underestimated the extent to which their pagan beliefs gave comfort and control over daily life. Woden, Thunor, Frig, Tyr, the Sun and the Moon, and all the many charms and spells that gave an individual control over the afflictions of life, were not entirely displaced by the new religion. Much of medieval Christianity retained the old superstitions and rituals, clothed in a Christian form.

Bibliography

- Alexander, M, (ed) 1995, *Beowulf*, Penguin, London
 Branston, B, 1974, *The Lost Gods of England*, Thames and Hudson, London
 Bede, *De Ecclesia Anglorum et Gentes*, Penguin, London
 Magnusson, M, 1976, *Viking, Hammer of the North*, Orbis, London
 Tacitus, *Germania*, Penguin, London