

Viking & Anglo-Saxon Science, Knowledge & Belief

A series of five explorations with Max Adams

Anglo-Saxon peasant farmers and Viking raiders: one-dimensional characters in a predictable plot...? In this series of explorations, we unravel the minds, skills and thoughts of the people of the Viking Age. Through economics, arts and crafts, women's lives, the Universe and engineering, we reveal their inner lives and discover what made them entrepreneurial, imaginative forces to be reckoned with.

Adam of Bremen

History of the Archbishops of Hamburg 1075-1080 AD

Book 4: That folk [the Swedes] has a very famous temple called Uppsala, situated not far from the city of Sigtuna and Björkö. In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wotan and Frikko have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, presides over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather and crops. The other, Wotan -that is, the Furious--carries on war and imparts to man strength against his enemies. The third is Frikko, who bestows peace and pleasure on mortals. His likeness, too, they fashion with an immense phallus. But Wotan they chisel armed, as our people are wont to represent Mars. Thor with his scepter apparently resembles Jove. The people also worship heroes made gods, whom they endow with immortality because of their remarkable exploits.

Near this temple stands a very large tree with wide-spreading branches, always green winter and summer. What kind it is nobody knows. There is also a well at which the pagans are accustomed to make their sacrifices, and to plunge a live man into it. If he is not found, the people's wish will be granted.

Chapter 27: For all their gods there are appointed priests to offer sacrifices for the people. If plague and famine threaten, a libation is poured to the idol Thor; if war, to Wotan; if marriages are to be celebrated, to Frikko. It is customary also to solemnize in Uppsala, at nine-year intervals, a general feast of all the provinces of Sweden. From attendance at this festival no one is exempted Kings and people all and singly send their gifts to Uppsala and, what is more distressing than any kind of punishment, those who have already adopted Christianity redeem themselves through these ceremonies. The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. Now this grove is so sacred in the eyes of the heathen that each and every tree in it is believed divine because of the death or putrefaction of the victims. Even dogs and horses hang there with men. A Christian told me that he had seen 72 bodies suspended promiscuously. Furthermore, the incantations customarily chanted in the ritual of a sacrifice of this kind are manifold and unseemly; therefore, it is better to keep silent about them.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

A.D. 910. This year the Angles and the Danes fought at Tootenhall; and the Angles had the victory. The same year Ethelfleda built the fortress at Bramsbury.

A.D. 912. ... This year also came Ethelfleda, lady of the Mercians, on the holy eve called the invention of the holy cross, to Shergate, and built the fortress there, and the same year that at Bridgenorth.

A.D. 916. This year was the innocent Abbot Egbert slain, before midsummer, on the sixteenth day before the calends of July. The same day was the feast of St. Ciricius the martyr, with his companions. And within three nights sent Ethelfleda an army into Wales, and stormed Brecknock; and there took the king's wife, with some four and thirty others.

A.D. 918. This year Ethelfleda, lady of the Mercians, with the help of God, before Laminas, conquered the town called Derby, with all that thereto belonged; and there were also slain four of her thanes, that were

most dear to her, within the gates. But very shortly after they had become so, she died at Tamworth, twelve days before midsummer, the eighth year of her having rule and right lordship over the Mercians; and her body lies at Gloucester, within the east porch of St. Peter's church.

A.D. 919. This year also the daughter of Ethelred, lord of the Mercians, was deprived of all dominion over the Mercians, and carried into Wessex, three weeks before mid-winter; she was called Elfwina.

Laxdaela saga, chapter 3

Unn (Aud) the Deep-minded was in Caithness when her son Thorstein fell. When she heard that Thorstein was dead, and her father had breathed his last, she deemed she would have no prospering in store there. So she had a ship built secretly in a wood, and when it was ready built she arrayed it, and had great wealth withal; and she took with her all her kinsfolk who were left alive; and men deem that scarce may an example be found that any one, a woman only, has ever got out of such a state of war with so much wealth and so great a following. From this it may be seen how peerless among women she was. Unn had with her many men of great worth and high birth. ... After that Unn steered her ship to the Faroe Isles, and stayed there for some time.

Laxdaela saga, chapter 5

After that she put to sea, and, the weather being favourable, she came with her ship to the south of Iceland to Vikrarskeid. There they had their ship broken into splinters, but all the men and goods were saved. After that she went to find Helgi, her brother.

Laxdaela saga, chapter 7

...After that Unn stood up and said she would go to the bower where she was wont to sleep, but bade every one have for pastime whatever was most to his mind, and that ale should be the cheer of the common folk. So the tale goes, that Unn was a woman both tall and portly. She walked at a quick step out along the hall, and people could not help saying to each other how stately the lady was yet. They feasted that evening till they thought it time to go to bed. But the day after Olaf went to the sleeping bower of Unn, his grandmother, and when he came into the chamber there was Unn sitting up against her pillow, and she was dead. Olaf went into the hall after that and told these tidings. Every one thought it a wonderful thing, how Unn had upheld her dignity to the day of her death. So they now drank together Olaf's wedding and Unn's funeral honours, and the last day of the feast Unn was carried to the howe (burial mound) that was made for her. She was laid in a ship in the cairn, and much treasure with her, and after that the cairn was closed up.

S1436 (825)

Wulfred, archbishop, summoned Cwenthryth, abbess and heir of Cenwulf, king of the Mercians, to Clofesho to demand compensation for the lands and dignity lost to him during her father's reign. Beornwulf, king of the Mercians, sought to make a compromise settlement between the two whereby Cwenthryth would surrender 47 manentes Harrow, Middx; Herefrethingland; Wembley, Yeading, Middx.. Concerning the minsters of Reculver and Minster-in-Thamet. At an initial settlement in London (? late 821) Wulfred ceded to King Cenwulf 3 300 hides at lognes homme (? Eynsham, Oxon.) and 120lbs of money. In subsequent settlements (at Clofesho and Oslafeshlau) Cwenthryth ceded to Wulfred land at Harrow, Middx; Herefrethingland; Wembley, Yeading, Middx; Boc land; and Combe, Kent.

William of Malmesbury *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* iv.156.3-4

At the age of seven Cynehelm had been left by his father Cenwulf to be brought up by his sister Cwenthryth. In her greed, she entertained the illusory hope of the throne, and assigned the job of eliminating her little brother to the retainer who looked after him. He took the innocent child off on the pretence of a hunt, killed him, and hid him in some bushes. A crime so well concealed in England became, by the will of God, public knowledge in Rome through a piece of parchment with the story written out in English, carried by a dove and laid on the altar of St Peter's. After it was interpreted by an Englishman, a letter was sent telling English kings of an English martyr. So in the presence of a great company the child's body was raised up and brought to Winchcombe, accompanied by sonorous chanting of the clerics. The murderess that time was chanting the psalm 'God my praise', going through it backwards to undermine the pleasure of the singers. But then by God's power the witch's eyes were torn out from her hollow sockets.

Notes for session 1:

General intro to the course: the themes picked up. Intro to Norse mythology and Christianity; Valhalla vs the Day of Judgement; how the two meld together in apocalypse; the Norse problem with monotheism. Intercession by capricious Gods, vs. more rational and negotiable saints and their relics.

Problems with interpreting Norse myth written down later and infused with Christian possibilities. Hybrid Anglo-Scand; the Irish pagan reaction. Examples: Thor fishing (fishers of men?); Weland Smith; the Franks casket.

Three women: Aethelflaed, Cwenthryth (the Abbess as Lord) and Aud the Deep-minded.

