

THE OLD WAYS: PRE-CHRISTIAN BELIEF. WHAT DO WE KNOW?

As we have said many times, *BEOWULF: Age of Heroes* is not intended to be history. As a setting, it is strongly informed by history, and we take our cues from history and what we think historical people might have reasonably believed. But it is not intended to be a strictly historical setting.

Within *BEOWULF: Age of Heroes* we present three alignments, shifting away from moral judgements into a set of philosophies. All three of these alignments are extremely broad categories that encompass a wide range of beliefs which a character might hold. The “Of the Church of the Book” alignment is as broad a set of beliefs as “Of the Old Ways”.

We have a lot of evidence for the various sects and movements within the real-world early church from which to draw inspiration for our characters. But what do we know about pre-Christian religious practices in Northern Europe in the timeframe that inspires *BEOWULF*? If we stick strictly to an evidence-based approach, the answer is very little.

This may come as something of a surprise because various popular media, and indeed the influence of New Age or reconstructionist philosophy can impart a wholly different impression: that we can speak to what pre-Christian people got up to in their spiritual lives in North West Europe with some confidence and in some detail.

If we are willing to take a flight of fancy, add some guesswork, and use what “feels right” or “seems likely” then we can piece together at least some kind of credible patchwork to use in a game from the evidence. Or indeed, we can just go with what we see in our favourite media.

The most important thing to mention when we look at the available evidence is that the sources we do have do not come from the people who held those beliefs, at least not in their original forms.

THE COMPRESSION OF TIME

At the opening of this article, it is also important to take a brief look at the idea of the compression of time, and thereby warn ourselves against it. The era of *BEOWULF: Age of Heroes* is roughly speaking 300 CE to 1000 CE. That is a broad spread of time in itself, which in history sees huge cultural change occur in the region.

It is easy to imagine that “things change more now”, and in some senses this is inarguably true: technological progress has seen a wild increase in pace in the last 100 years, for example. But we must be careful not to flatly assume that less change occurs the further back we go in history.

It is not hard to find someone online who believes that Stonehenge, constructed (very roughly speaking) around 2500 BCE, is somehow directly connected to the religious life of people living in 500 CE, some 3000 years later.

We wouldn't assume that people living 3000 years before our present day are culturally connected to us in the 2020s, and yet we share the same physiological brains, the same basic capacities for behaviour, belief and imagination.

Even across the 700 years of the historical period that inspires *BEOWULF: Age of Heroes* there are massive cultural changes.



When we glean through the matter of the past, we must be aware that patterns we might perceive across millennia are not necessarily meaningful to anyone but us.

For example, using wooden posts to enclose a religious space is a common feature of religious spaces around the world, and across many ages. Is this because wooden posts are somehow especially mystical or sacred? Or is it because trees exist, and wood is an available building material across a vast span of human existence?

For the purposes of our game setting, we divide the people of *BEOWULF: Age of Heroes* into what amounts to “Christian/Muslim/Jewish belief” in the form of the Church of the Book, and “Pagans” in the form of the Old Ways. When looking at evidence from the real world, we must be cautious of this implicitly-assumed idea that there was first a singular pre-Christian religious life, and then later a singular Christian religious life. This is a vast and gross simplification. It is reasonable to assume that pre-Christian religion is as varied across time and location as Christianity itself, with the Christianity of the first millennium CE seeing a huge range of approaches, well worthy of further reading in itself.

RELIGION?

We don't really know if before Christianity people in North West Europe thought about religion in the way that contemporary Christianity, Islam or Judaism presents it.

For readers who have grown up in cultures strongly informed by those traditions, it can be hard to conceive of anything different: that it is a natural fact of religion to have a priest class, that religious and “normal” life are separate, that there are special buildings akin to churches or temples to visit at certain significant times, and that religion by definition concerns itself with “faith”, the numinous, and the supernatural.

We simply do not know if this is the case for all spiritual belief in history. What people did in the past in their spiritual lives may not relate to these ideas at all, and if we're looking for evidence from the past of what to include in our games, and we want to make something interesting and credible, we are well advised to be mindful of this.

THE ICELANDIC SAGAS

Our knowledge of later Norse “religion”, which we assume has its roots in the *BEOWULF* time period or before, comes largely from the Icelandic sagas. As written sources these are Christian in origin, and appear to be part of an attempt to contextualise Icelandic pre-Christian belief within Christianity.

The sagas of the Icelanders are a group of stories, recorded largely around the 13th and 14th centuries. It is important to note that a lot of the content of the sagas comes from the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries, and details the lives of various Scandinavian kings, and

characters of note. The Early English peoples are only distantly related culturally to the Scandinavians, and we must be cautious not to view the people of *BEOWULF* as “vikings”. They are not, and do not share a culture.

The Prose Edda, thought by many to have been written down by the Christian poet Snorri Sturluson in the 13th century, purports to record an older oral history. We have no way of knowing how faithfully Sturluson recorded the original stories (if indeed it was he who wrote them - this remains a matter of scholarly debate), but there is plenty of evidence to show they record actual historical events in the form of sagas. So we have reasons to trust them, and reasons to be cautious.

The Elder Edda or Poetic Edda, a collection of poems referenced by Sturluson in the Prose Edda, was a mystery until the Codex Regius manuscript was rediscovered in the 1600s. The Elder Edda also dates to the 13th century, and is believed to be connected to the Prose Edda. Many believe it was also written by Sturluson.


There are various other sagas that were written down in similar circumstances which are worthy of further reading, for example, The Saga of Hervör and Heidrek and the tradition and recording of the so-called “Germanic” heroic tradition (that name is currently subject to some scholarly dispute, but it serves a broad purpose here, much like our prior use of “Anglo-Saxon” in *BEOWULF: Age of Heroes*). While space here is lacking, there is of course much more to learn about the process of oral tradition becoming written manuscript.

A frequent influence on Christian chroniclers is not necessarily what we might think. They're not automatically trying to directly disparage or (literally) demonise earlier traditions. In Iceland in particular it seems a strong motivation in chronicling these earlier traditions was to re-contextualise and preserve them as an acceptable part of the Christian faith.

Showing that the pre-Christian deities were in fact direct ancestors of the present-day rulers, and thereby making them into real historical figures, seems to have also been a motivation. This process, called euhemerization, is arguably an assimilation and “cultural digestion” by the Christian world, meant to preserve earlier traditions rather than destroy them. We see this frequently in Early English documents, which link (?) the rulers of that day to earlier pre-Christian deities by familial connection.

The poem *Beowulf* might be said to fall to some degree into this tradition, recording earlier events of rulers and places, and contextualising the beliefs of ancestors in a way that was acceptable to the contemporary Christian mindset.

It is however a process of which we need to be aware. The only versions we have of these stories and poems come from authors with biases, and none of them were practising the faith(s) they chronicle.



In summation, most of what we know of Norse spiritual practice comes from the various sagas which are very likely to predate their translation from oral tradition into written text. By definition, the written texts were made by Christian writers. There would seem to be a logical motivation for these writers to gloss over details of pre-Christian religious practice, or to simply assume it was known by their readers and need not be explained.

When assessing usefulness and reliability, there are differences of which we must be aware between a body of traditional spoken tales and a more singular written version. We must also be aware that the influence of these texts grew massively in the 19th century as part of the folk revival and interest in national identity of that era, and that “Victorian” outlook has an influence on our thinking.

The sagas have also been liberally interpreted by media across decades. We are now culturally at the point that some groups are entirely convinced of a continuity of pre-Christian faith, stretching unbroken from eras millennia before the events described in the Icelandic sagas. Creative interpretation of many mysterious words found in the sagas have drifted into being considered fact, obvious, or “common sense”, when in reality when we look for evidence, we simply do not know what those words meant to the people who used them.

OTHER SOURCES

Reaching further back we have some accounts from Roman authors of the religious practices of the Germanic peoples. Again we must be cautious of both compression of time, and the inherent biases of Roman authors, many of whom were writing propaganda to justify the romanisation of “barbarian” peoples. In 98AD, Tacitus writes of the Germanic peoples in his work *Germania*:

“The Germans do not think it in keeping with the divine majesty to confine gods within walls or to portray them in the likeness of any human countenance. Their holy places are woods and groves, and they apply the names of deities to that hidden presence which is seen only by the eye of reverence.”

One might be forgiven for reading Tacitus as really saying “We Romans are good because we make statues with human likeness and make a lot of indoor spaces”. He’s talking about Roman identity when he sketches out “the other”.

Tacitus never actually went to Germany, and the people who lived there did not call it Germania, nor themselves Germans.

We also have some evidence of pre-Christian Norse belief from Ibn Fadlan’s journal of his travels on the Volga river, where he is the only eye witness to ever record the scenes of a Norse ship burial. We have to be aware that Ibn Fadlan includes various wildly imaginative things in other parts of his journal, and displays clear biases in some others. We can at least be fairly confident that Ibn Fadlan was actually there.

We have the writings of Adam of Bremen, who recorded the pre-Christian temple at Gamla Uppsala in the 11th century. This at last gives us some concrete details on a site of worship. Sadly his description, while detailed, is not as clear as it might be, and is thought to be a second-hand recounting of the site. Adam of Bremen’s work is hugely influential on contemporary media.

In his work *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (The deeds of the Bishops of Hamburg) he describes the temple at the main religious site at Old (Gamla?) Uppsala. This is a building which appears heavily decorated with gold, and which contains three statues of Thor, Woden and Frikko. Adam of Bremen relates that sacrifices were made to these idols depending on need. Near the temple are described sacred trees, from which human sacrifices were hung.

This provides a timely reminder of the variance in spellings of the names of Norse deities, being translated and retranslated over time. If this account is to be believed, it is also interesting that at Gamla Uppsala, Thor might appear to have been revered as the most important god. Through contemporary interpretation we would be forgiven for believing “Odin” to have been always

dominant as the “All-father” deity, which one might argue to be more of a Mediterranean idea, be it classical or Christian.

It’s important for our purposes to remember that Adam of Bremen was writing about this place in the 11th century. That’s half a millennium after the Migration era. While it is tempting to believe older religions somehow changed less than contemporary faiths, we would need evidence to prove it, and we have none.

All of these writers lack an important aspect in their accounts and that is why “pagan” people did the things they did. These are accounts by outsiders, who notice things which are of interest to them, and view these practices as bystanders, often writing with specific audiences in mind. We do not have any authentic voices from within pre-Christian religious practices to tell us about pre-Christian belief first-hand.

OTHER EVIDENCE

Other evidence for pre-Christian religious activity comes from Early English Christian law codes, which prohibit “pagan” religious practices, primarily the sacrificing of animals, and the carrying of amulets that depicted the pre-Christian gods.

In the 11th century, we see Cnut’s Laws offer impassioned commentary against “heathenry”. These forbid worshipping of idols, heathen gods, the sun or moon, fire or flood, water-springs or stones, or trees, and generalised “witchcraft”. This is so broad a range of bans that one might be forgiven for wondering what things were not considered by Christians to be worshipped under heathenry.

Did Cnut know people were worshipping all of the things mentioned in his Laws? Or was it a more generalised “don’t do any of this stuff which I’ve imagined, or been told, people get up to”?

Early Christianity seems keen to define itself in opposition to animal sacrifice. We cannot be entirely certain whether this means animal sacrifice was common and popular, therefore needing firm laws to outlaw the practice, or if it was a useful defining characteristic of Christianity, which law codes were used to define.

The English monk Bede describes the destruction of a pagan site in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. It appears to have been a separate religious building, with an enclosure and a shrine. There is a high priest, who is forbidden to bear arms: we can infer from Bede’s description that weapons were not allowed in the shrine.

Bede’s history is renowned for its biases, and as an ecclesiastical writer it is hard to entirely trust anything he writes about other Christian writers, let alone non-Christian beliefs.

In the Eddas, we learn of apparent religious buildings that have been subject to a great deal of interpretation. It appears that specific religious halls existed, but it is also possible that day-to-day halls were also used for religious purposes, and this idea of separate religious buildings might be intended to indicate great wealth.

Temples or religious halls described in the Eddas are reminiscent of Adam of Bremen’s description of the site at Gamla Uppsala, which lends them some credibility.

Common features of religious halls within the Eddas include a fence around the outside of the hall, an altar inside it, sometimes topped with iron, a fire that is kept lit, statues or likenesses of the gods, a copper bowl into which blood of sacrifices are collected, and a mention of “power nails” hammered into “high seat posts”.

The fence around the site at Gamla Uppsala has been shown in archaeological excavation to not be a defensive structure, and is assumed to be a symbolic one. This is a common feature of many religious sites - that specific areas are enclosed and denoted as religious or sacred spaces. This practice can be seen in the depths of prehistory where henges (commonly misunderstood to mean standing stones, but actually meaning an enclosed ritual space) are formed of earth banks and walls of wooden posts. We must take care however to avoid compressing time in the past, thinking that 3000 BCE has somehow more cultural connection to 1000 CE than 2000 CE does.

There is much debate about “power” or “god” nails, “*reginnaglar*”, and whether they are literal nails or a poetic kenning for a variety of other religious things, perhaps meaning priests, the altar or books. The high seat posts were a Norse tradition in which two posts were placed on either side of the ruler’s high seat. These are sometimes described as carved with the images of gods.

The sagas also tell of curse-poles. In Egil’s saga, Egil curses the people of Norway by attaching a horse’s head to a hazel pole, the head turned towards his enemy and a curse laid upon them. In the *Vatnsdæla* saga things are inverted, with a human face carved on a pole, and the pole thrust into the body of a horse. Could this be a quirk of translation?

Poles, posts or wooden statues of various kinds do seem to be important in the pre-Christian faith(s) of the Norse peoples. The old English poem *Maxims I* refers to “Woden worked idols”, and Ibn Fadlan also mentions carved poles used as part of religious practice.

The building of sacred spaces within the Eddas references that, in contrast to Bede’s assertion, there was not a priest class in the Norse religion, and it was local rulers who were the builders of sacred spaces and oversaw their use. There seems to have been a mixed religious and temporal use of large indoor spaces, and with sacrifices and feasting being apparently intertwined it would be