

Lauren-Jessica Bertini
University of Oxford
Postgraduate Certificate in Historical Studies
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A RELIGION IN THE ASHES:

PAGANISM'S CONTINUATION AFTER CHRISTIANITY IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

The birth and death of any religion has always been a controversial subject. The rise of Christianity in England, however, is one that scholars have claimed for decades to have begun in the late 9th century—and with it, the decline of paganism, at a rather immediate pace. This has rarely been disputed, as there are records of several assumedly pagan peoples—the Vikings—that certainly converted to Christianity once arriving in England. Paganism in England was thought to have come to an end. But what many seem to have looked over are the symbols in everyday architecture, lyrics in songs and poems, and strong opinions in official documents that can only lead us to the assumption of paganism's continuity long after the 9th century.

England's Christianity is thought to have officially begun with the end of the Viking raids around the year 879, when King Alfred the Great forced the Vikings to convert to England's quickly spreading religion (Ackroyd 2011). But convert though they did, these Vikings wouldn't be stopped from keeping their new lands folkloric.

Seeing that they reigned in their respected lands from the late 8th century until their defeat in 879, there was quite some time for them to infuse their traditions and beliefs into the land. This was done by ways of oral tradition, as well as in architecture and even in poetry.

A prime example is the epic poem, *Beowulf*. First appearing in the late 7th century—a time when Germanic pagan tribes were in power—the poem tells us of Danish king, Hrothgar, and his people (*Beowulf* 2000). The poem glorifies pagan virtues, such as praying to the gods for guidance, the power of nature over man (described as though personifying nature itself), an enchanted sword, the concept of *wyrd*, and the idea of a mystical creature, Grendel. *Wyrd*, the ancient concept of fate or destiny, is a pagan belief dating back to Scandinavian and Old Norse tradition, even to be mentioned later in the Renaissance, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The concept was unlikely to have been tolerated by the Christian church—since, in the eyes of Christianity, God is seen as the only force that controls one's fate or destiny. Mystical creatures like the monster Grendel, and other beasts Beowulf was known to face, were regarded with utmost sincerity by the Scandinavians, while the English Church might have found these creatures merely fool's tales. The idea of an enchanted object, like the sword, might even have been considered sorcery by the Church and therefore capable of evil (Bailey 2007). Therefore, copies of the *Beowulf* poem could easily have been destroyed by the Church by the year 911, when the Danes moved to Frankish land and made way for Christianity in Britain. (Tomes 2014). However, *Beowulf* somehow survived not only in text but also orally. The poem was likely told by word of mouth around evening fires, or perhaps performed

by pagan bards and storytellers (“The Blending of Christian...” 2018). Its popularity increased, likely due to the passing down of the tale within the pagan or non-Christian community after the 9th century.

Aside from *Beowulf*, a few other poems and songs date back to the 10th century, displaying pagan values. The story of Ingeld the Heathobard, though first mentioned in *Beowulf*, was revered as a story of its own. Through oral tradition, the tales of the pagan warrior king who married Christian princess Freawru became legends of inspiration. Ingeld’s values of ruthless revenge and finding valor of the gods through combat made him a favored pagan hero, and he was even thought to be spoken highly of amongst the Christians (Bintley 2018). The legend even survived the squinted eye of Archbishop Alcuin of York, famously writing, “What has Ingeld to do with Christ?” (2018).

Another example is the folk song, “Herr Mannelig”. Originally a Swedish song, it is thought to have been brought by the Scandinavian Vikings into England, though it wouldn’t be officially published in writing until 1877. Herr Mannelig (Sir Mannelig) is the story of a Christian warrior who happens upon a young female mountain troll—though several versions of the song describe her simply as a pagan maiden. She offers the man a number of desirable goods—twelve horses, mills of silver, a beautiful sword and fine new clothes—all if he would marry her. But he refuses her because she is not a Christian woman, causing her to wail as she runs into the night. It is unlikely that early Medieval Christians would have continued the tradition of a song promoting sympathy for a pagan woman, and certainly not a mountain troll (a creature from Nordic pagan mythology). And yet it survives. It can only be assumed

that the song was still sung by Scandinavian peoples to the Anglo-Saxons that would listen, as the story was passed down through the ages, again suggesting paganism's continuity after the 9th century.

However, while songs and poems can be assumed evidence of the pagan tradition, most of them were performed orally and were lost with time. On the other hand, architecture and archeological finds are more permanent forms of evidence.

Archeologist Brian Hope-Taylor describes in his book on an excavation in Yeavering, Northumbria, the remains of a great hall dating sometime shortly after the 10th century (Hope-Taylor 1977). Once determined how this great hall would most plausibly have been structured, the hall was discovered to be of similar design to that of the description of the Great Hall in *Beowulf* (RePete's History 2016). It is likely then that the hall was a pagan temple, since halls of that design were very rarely used for Christian gatherings. Churches were being built instead.

To further verify the possibility of this assumption, Hope-Taylor even describes that among the remains were found several ox skulls, along with a staff designed with the head of a goat on top (1977). Being that the sacrifice of animals to gods is commonly known to be an ancient pagan ritual, it can be further assumed that this hall was used by non-Christian peoples—likely the Danes, who still remained in Northumbria at that time. The goat head could even be said to pay homage to pagan god, Thor, as Thor was thought to have often traveled in a chariot pulled by goats (2016). This would suggest that the Vikings still remaining in England by the 10th century, converted though they were, still likely practiced their old tradition.

Architecturally, many Christian and Catholic churches in England have been found to possess pagan iconology. Several cathedrals in England possess the Green Man symbol somewhere amongst the interior; in the sacristy, or along the walls (Knight 2015). The Green Man, or the “Horned God”, is a pagan god with a face of green leaves that is believed to appear during the Spring Equinox, bringing with him renewal and rebirth to nature after the long winter. For this image to be found within a Christ-worshipping church is contradictory enough to suggest pagan continuity.

Along with the Green Man, other pagan symbols have also been found. The pentagram is one, for instance—the Celtic symbol of a five-pointed star enclosed in a circle—which represents the binding of the five elements and protection of the earth. Even the symbol of a mere ship very often represented a Norse water warrior god who protected the seas and blessed travelers as they sailed. Both have been found in churches throughout England, particularly in the north (2015). The question arises of how such symbols could have come to be built within their walls, if England had officially been converted.

The answer could lead one to the shocking theory that perhaps some Christian priests *themselves* practiced what we classify as pagan virtues in the growing Medieval era. For instance, by the 11th and 12th centuries, local priests were very often drawn from peasant communities. It is largely believed that religions began to separate by social class (Watkins 2007). Christianity has been argued to have been practiced mostly by nobility and the elite, while peasant communities practiced what we would now categorize as paganism. It is thought that the lower class were

more likely to believe in mythical creatures, spells and other supernatural forces than in a singular god who controlled all things. Scholar Carl Watkins reports well what author and researcher Jean Delumeau had to say on the matter. "He argued that, although social elites may have been converted to full-blooded Christianity, the masses were only superficially Christianized and continued, beneath a veneer of official observance, to practice a protean, pagan folk-religion. This religion was articulated orally and so left few traces, occasionally preserved by the pen of elite churchmen who, more often than not, noted it for the purposes of repression." (2007). And indeed they were. In the 10th century, an elite churchgoer only able to be identified by the name Alfrick, wrote in a rather displeased letter: "Some men are so blinded that they bring their offerings to an earth-fast stone, and also to trees and to springs, just as witches teach, and do not want to understand how foolishly they behave, or how the lifeless stone or simple tree can help or give health, when they themselves never stir from that place." (2016). The theory can then be confirmed from this that the general masses of the English people, excluding the elites, might have practiced what we now consider paganism after Christianity had long been established. Christian priests, therefore, who were often chosen from the lower class, would have certainly incorporated aspects of their own beliefs and traditions into their teachings.

This theory may have held even more truth to it in the countryside of England, away from more populated areas. The landscape was what these people knew best, as we can only imagine was the same for the Vikings and other pagan tribes, whose entire lives were based around the natural elements of the earth. Historical

researcher and podcaster, Peter from *RePete's History*, words well why paganism in growing Christian England is a valid argument. He claims that their sacred text, like the Bible, was not a text at all but rather the landscape in which they lived (2016). A peasant's land constructed their lifestyle entirely—even those who lived further into the towns. The amount of rain and sun their crops and fields got determined how well they would eat that year. The elite wouldn't provide for them. The winter's cold determined who in one's family would survive before the new year. The trees provided necessary cool shelter on hot summer days. The animals and all the rhythms of the land determined several aspects of their lives and even their travel. It would only make sense that they would pray to gods designated to each of these natural elements, or that they would value and honor the natural and supernatural characteristics of these gods and goddesses. The things their idols provided them would likely have seemed much more real to them than the singular God that the Christian church preached of.

So in these forms of evidence, whether through famous poems, through songs and stories, carvings of symbols into Christian churches, or simply through evidence of discreet attempts to pay homage to several gods and all they provided, it grows easier for the theory to be accepted that the pagan tradition continued on after the 9th century. England's paganism lived on in the Anglo-Saxons and up to the late Medieval era in England's peasant communities. This wouldn't perhaps be so were it not for its continuity, long after the tradition was thought to be dead. Paganism instead survived, perhaps giving us a new outlook on Medieval England's religious history.

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