

Witches in pre-christian scandinavia

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Witches in Pre-Christian Scandinavia - Why are we looking at this? it is very different from Christianity, has a different model of the witch - the other reason: Christianity adopted many elements from Norse mythology and transformed them

Film Clip: The Witches, Opening Scene: set in Norway

Questions for class: what is said about good and evil The description of the witch What is she wearing? What do you know about Nordic Mythology?

Nordic Paganism - is characterized by a polytheistic world-view (they believed in many Gods) - the official conversion to Christianity took place in the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries, very late compared with the rest of Europe (Roman Empire 4th century, England 7th century, Germany 9th century); - Christianity was introduced in Iceland around the year 1000 by parliamentary decree; in 1164 a Christian bishop ruled in Uppsala/Sweden; in Greenland the first cathedral was built in the year 1126 - Conversion took a long time: pagan practices and the pagan world-view continued unofficially for a long time; the private practice of pagan rituals was never outlawed and lived on in secret, missionaries witnessed them, wrote about them -

Syncretism: union, reconciliation of diverse beliefs - Coexistence of pagan and Christian practices: the dual use hammer-cross; pray to Thor and the Christian god - Professional magicians and witches: made a livelihood by the exercise of magical powers: finding of lost objects, forecasting the season's crops

Cosmology - First there is nothing, this emptiness is called Ginnungagap (Niflheim, home of mists, is to the North) - the earth is a round disk that swims on the surface of the ocean - there is a world tree, Yggdrasil, spreads its branches over the whole world - a world serpent (coiled around one of the three roots of the tree, bites its own tail, in a well, gnaws at the

root of the tree) - the sun is a beautiful woman in a chariot chased by wolves

- The end of the world: Ragnarok - Valhalla: hall where dead warriors dine, every day of eternity they fight a battle and then feast on a boar - Valkyries: literally choosers of the slain, accompany dead warriors to Valhalla and serve them drinks, wear armor and ride on horseback

THE GODS - hierarchy of Gods, of the Pantheon, like the Greek Gods had it - the Gods were constantly in conflict with each other: there was a war between two different groups of Gods, the Vanirs [Von-ers] and the Aesirs [eye-seers], and the gods are fighting the giants

Sky Gods - the sky gods (Aesir) live in Asgard, in the middle of Midgard = Middle Earth where they feast and drink from golden plates and golden cups - bridge Bifröst joins Asgard to other worlds, gate guarded by Heimdall - they are responsible for maintaining the cosmic order and society they include Odin - he is the boss of all the gods - he (and his two brothers) created the first two humans, Ask and Embla, from two trees - blue mantle, long gray beard, one eye, spear - eight-legged horse - his animal is the raven, two ravens (thought and memory) that would bring him news - he is the god of poetry and the god of magic and wisdom (can inspire a trance-like state of ecstasy in his followers), god of war and death - there were human sacrifices to Odin (they would hang men from trees and pierce them with spears)

Frigg(a) - his wife (there were other wives) Odin's son Thor - associated with lightning and thunder, the thunderer, the rattling of his chariot was said to cause thunder - he is red-bearded, has iron gloves and a belt of strength - his main job: to fight the giants; - he eats and drinks a lot - his weapon is the hammer, he used the hammer to hold the forces of chaos in check, he would hurl it and it would always return to his hand; often the

hammer looked like a cross - the day Thursday is named after him Balder, Baldur - he is the son of Odin and Frigga - wise and merciful - resurrection myth: dies and rises again; his mother Frigg received solemn promises from all creatures and things that they would not hurt Baldur but she forgot the mistletoe; Loki, disguised as an old woman, tricks her into telling the secret; then he tricks Baldur's brother into killing Baldur; Hel (the woman who rules over Hel) promises that he will be allowed to return to Asgard from the Land of the Dead if every creature cries for him; Loki disguised as the creature darkness does not cry; the gods decide to punish him; he disguises himself as a salmon but they find him and bind him; his torture is the beginning of Ragnarök

Earth gods (Vanir) - created by the sky gods - dwell in Vanaheim - responsible for agriculture, fertility, death, rebirth - Njord (the father of Frey and Freyja) controls the wind and the sea; when the gods fought, there was an exchange of hostages; Njord was given to the sky gods and sometimes is considered a sky god himself - the siblings Frey (god of the weather, has a ship that sails over land and sea alike) and Freyja (also Gullveig, she is the sister of Frey and the Earth Mother) Freya - the goddess of fertility - birth: can be invoked by women in labor - death: connection to the underworld, led the Valkyries at times - can be invoked for love affairs - the day Friday is named after her, considered to be a lucky day for marriages in Germany - she has a chariot that is drawn by cats; - why cats? in Norse mythology the most lascivious of all animals are cats; cats were rare, exotic (not indigenous to Northern cultures), they were not household pets, cats are also lions, panthers etc. - she is associated with pigs, boars, goats and cats - sensuality: she is lascivious; she has slept with all the gods, including her own brother,

the stories about her are often about lust; - riches: she is thought to be greedy; she is the goddess of gold and silver - sometimes she is lascivious and greedy: Freya sold her chastity to dwarves for a necklace (slept with each of the four dwarves who forged the necklace) - she can fly: can take the shape of a falcon - seithre is associated with Freya - taught the sky Gods witchcraft; platform or lofty seat, singing of spells, ecstasy, trance the Jotunn - they are neither human nor divine - the giants were born when there was emptiness; Odin is the son of a giant; he and two other gods kill the first giant Ymir (= clay; they use his body to make the world - they are the forces of chaos and destruction; but they are not considered evil - in the legends the witch is mentioned here; she introduces chaos and death to Paradise Gods made trolls, dwarves, elves there is no concept of one side as pure evil in Pre-Christian Nordic society: there is also no concept of sin or mortal sin, that is a Christian concept Movie Clip: THE MASK God Loki - a mixed character - not even the God Loki is all bad, conflated with the Christian devil - lives neither in Asgard nor Jotunheim; by race a giant, but sometimes counted among the sky gods (was raised with Odin) - children: wolf, snake, giantess Hel - he is also a shape-changer, (can take on the shape of a woman or of a falcon or a salmon) - travels through the air - he is more of a malicious trickster, playing pranks on people (e. g., steals the hair of Thor's wife, has to go get a new head of hair); - he is greedy and selfish - he does evil deeds but also good deeds, he kills an evil giant, he helps to regain Thor's hammer, he rescues the gods - he cheated the gods and was bound in chains (in some accounts banned from Asgard), but he was also the friend of Odin - stole Freya's golden necklace there is a concept of Fate and of seers,

prophets and the witches fall into that category: - both gods and humans are subject to fate they are governed by 3 women, the Norns: - they are Fate, Being, and Necessity; one sees the past, one the present, one the future; they water the world tree - they live in their sanctuary and determine everything that will happen in the world by a large pool of water - determine the fate of new-born children, sometimes they are called the mothers power in this society: is to have access to fate; - to have some kind of magical knowledge of fate, of the future, divination (compare this to Clash of the Titans: Perseus kills the monster because he gained superior knowledge by talking to the witches) - these seers and prophets are mostly women - they are respected and venerated in human society because of their secret knowledge there are two forms of magic: galdr and seithr galdr is prophesy: - male form which is associated with Odin (first practiced by Odin) - it is practiced by saying magic chants (to summon the spirits), formulas or runes; - more dignified and permissible than seithre seithre: magic, spell-casting, this is the part that is translated as witchcraft - this the female form, owes its origin to Freyja - binding, chanting, boiling in a cauldron (pagan rituals often involved boiling meat in a pot) - any spells that have to do with love and sexuality are considered a lower type of magic; the ceremonies that were necessary for love spells and sexuality spells were considered offensive and shameful - if men practice it they had to dress like women, only transvestites could practice it; - some witches worked harm on people through seithr; - witch takes on the shape of a horse and crushes people to death - this type of magic is generally considered to be below the dignity of men - often refers to divination (seeking knowledge of the future) seithre as divination the

Volva (the Viking reading) - Volva is a female seer - Travels from farm to farm - Answers questions about the future, utters prophecies, the questions are usually of great importance for the community (weather, crops, marriages) - Divination rite, sometimes associated with harmful magic directed against a victim - Sits on a high platform - Trance, ecstasy - Accompanied by chants and incantations, her assistants form a ring around her - Appearance sets her off from the community: cloak may be set with stones; dress, boots, gloves of animal skin (catskin, lambskin, calfskin); cat's fur is lining her hood and gloves: cat is the favorite animal of the goddess Freya; necklace, glass beads around her neck (normal clothing: undyed, unadorned, homespun clothes) - A staff with a brass knob on it, studded with stones - Pouch with charms, tools of her trade, symbols of the witch - Treated with respect

The written records about these women? Sagas: - A body of literature, they are prose narratives - They were written in Iceland and Norway during the 12th and 13th centuries - Scholars describe them as serious popular entertainment - They relate the history of the Icelandic families and the kings of Norway - The sagas are very nationalistic and describe in detail the country, the people who live there, the conditions of life, the laws, morality - They also document the transition from a pagan, pantheistic society to Christianity - Witch in Icelandic sagas: a prophetess, very wise woman, she is not necessarily positive but she is respected and revered by the community because of her special powers, sometimes she is feared - the Edda, a famous corpus of Icelandic myth is devoted to prophecy (voluspa) and the prophetess Volva (person with a long stick) - Information about the Volva also in Vinland Saga: Eirik's Saga (13th century): traces 2

lines of Gudrid's genealogy forward from the roots of Icelandic history; this is a very matriarchal line; it has the story of Leif Eiriksson and the Viking discovery of the New World Your reading is from the Eyrbyggja Saga: legends relating to an entire district in 13th century Iceland Describe two types of Nordic witches based on the reading assignments from the Eyrbyggja Saga; describe their attributes, what do they do: Struggle between a good witch (Geirrid) and a bad witch (Katla) in a local community - The entire community believes in magic, spells, spirits - Mentioning of water witches and foul fiends - Hag riding: hags can cause nightmares by sitting on a person's chest and riding them through the night, sometimes killing them; asthma attacks, sleep disturbances, wet dreams, heart attacks, (Gunnlaug was ridden, he was severely beaten and his flesh was torn from his shoulders) - Shape shifting: Katla hides Odd - Evil eye: cause of illness, misfortune, calamity, and death - Evil witch is caught and punished with the help of the good witch, also because the community is watchful - Good witch is identified by her appearance: blue cloak, pouch, staff - Good witch is a seer, prophetess (sees the future) Mixed Legacy of Nordic Witches: - On the one hand: respected and venerated as seers: integrated into the community; they can do positive magic, they can assist the community in neutralizing black magic, they are wise women and healers - They can be harmful: agents of hatred, malice, harm to physical well-being, harm to fertility; shape-changers; - in the creation myth it was these women who brought hatred and war into the world, they are responsible for aging, death and strife, for lust and greed - Their attributes: they are associated with goats, pigs, cats, cauldrons, sticks, riding out at night, all these attributes will be

transformed into the Christian model of the witches sabbath

Witches in Pre-Christian Scandinavia: - Nordic paganism: polytheistic world-view - Conversion to Christianity in the 11th and 12th centuries; pagan world-view lingered on - Syncretism (hammer-cross); eclectic Hierarchy of the Pantheon: - Cosmos: world tree/Yggdrasil, serpent, Ragnarok, Valhalla, Valkyries - Gods were constantly in conflict with each other - Sky gods (Aesir), live in Asgard: Odin, Frigga, Thor, Balder - Earth gods (Vanir): Vanaheim, Frey, Freyja, Njord - Jotunn: giants and trolls - God Loki No concept of pure evil, no concept of mortal sin Concept of Fate and of seers and prophets - humans and gods are subject to fate - the 3 Norns - power in this society = access to fate - seers and prophets are mostly women, respected and venerated Two forms of magic: - Galdr: prophesy - Seithr: magic, spell-casting Seithr is associated with Freyja

Volva Sagas: - Prose narratives - Written in Iceland and Norway during the 12th and 13th centuries - Transition from paganism to Christianity - The Edda, Vinland Saga - Very nationalistic Eyrbyggja Saga: 13th century Iceland, legends about a district Vinland Saga the Edda (corpus of Icelandic myth): prophecy/voluspa and the prophetess Volva hag riding incubus, succubus Katla, Geirrid

Mixed Legacy of Nordic Witches: - Respected and venerated as seers, integrated into the community, neutralize black magic - Can be harmful - Attributes: goats, pigs, cats, cauldrons, sticks, riding out at night