Nordic Religions in the Viking Age
by Thomas A DuBois
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In *Nordic Religions of the Viking Age,* Thomas DuBois takes on the task of recontextualizing the sagas of Icelandic literature. DuBois argues that most previous saga scholars have Romanticized the Viking Age, describing the Vikings as "vastly more numerous, technologically superior, or somehow inherently more warlike" than their neighbors (11). DuBois intends to cut through these stereotypes using what he calls a "geographical method" (focusing on every group within a certain area) because, he argues, we cannot truly understand the religious traditions of the Nordic peoples in isolation. A folklorist by training, he draws upon textual evidence, archaeology, the anthropology of religion, and the study of Nordic oral tradition to provide a more complete picture of the Nordic peoples of that era.

He begins his analysis by reconstructing a non-Romanticized version of Nordic history, focusing on the three main groups of Nordic peoples: the Scandinavians, the Balto-Finnic peoples, and the Sámi. In his analysis, he dispels several previous beliefs about the Nordic peoples, stating, for example, that the Finno-Ugric peoples lived in Northern Europe as early as 3300BCE. DuBois also includes a brief history of the Viking colonies in the British Isles and Greenland, which play a large role in the Christianization of northern Europe.

Chapter two discusses the relationships between the Nordic religions. DuBois emphasizes religions, due to the extremely wide variation of beliefs within the pagan communities as well as between the Nordic Christians. (He attributes some of this variation within Nordic Christians to the fact that the majority of Nordic peoples did not read Latin, so the practice of and belief in Christianity had to be translated by the priests for their congregations.) DuBois describes the influence, often ignored by previous scholarship, that eastern Christianity had on Nordic peoples; it seems that Nordic peoples were equally influenced by the symbols and art of both types of Christianity in the early stages of their interactions with Christian cultures. For their part, the Nordic pagans, though admittedly ethnocentric, were aware of the diversity of beliefs within their general geographic area, and accepted the belief in different sets of deities by other groups as normal. DuBois states that this awareness of other religions eventually led to a "convergence of religious outlook," which he argues is one of the main findings of his research (41). In the next chapter, DuBois then goes into greater detail regarding the religious beliefs of the Nordic pagans and Nordic Christians, though as he is still covering a great deal of material, he must still be fairly general. He argues that the most unique idea the Christians brought to the Nordic worldview was the concept of one omnipotent deity, for while the various individuals and sects of Nordic paganism each had their own patron deity(ies), spirit(s), and an underlying core of beliefs, they did not believe in the overarching power of one deity or another.

In chapter four, DuBois delves deeper into the specific beliefs of the pagan and Christians communities. He specifically compares differences in the ideas of "the

good death" that each group adhered to, and how the believers adapted their everyday realities and older customs to ensure a proper burial and afterlife according to their beliefs. Chapter five continues examining Nordic beliefs during in a discussion of healing practices, including rituals and herbal remedies. The area of healing, especially, shows the influence of the continental and classical modes of thought, brought by Christianized cultures, upon Nordic monks, who often listed remedies including plants not native to northern Europe. Folk remedies, like the burials, DuBois argues, can be read as a barometer for the strength of influence of Christian beliefs in the pagan worldview during the time that the area was becoming Christianized. In the next chapter, DuBois analyzes one particular pagan ritual, called *seidhr,* in detail. He compares the different versions of the ritual in the three Nordic cultures mentioned above.

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With his descriptions of pagan death, healing, and *seidhr* rituals and beliefs, DuBois has provided a detailed basis for the comparison of several key Christian beliefs brought later by missionaries and traders. In chapter seven, he argues that Christian symbolism came into contact with the Nordic world long before locals accepted the religious significance associated with it. DuBois shows how, through saga and archaeological evidence, scholars can uncover how the Nordic peoples adopted the main symbol of Christianity, the Cross, and what it meant to them over time. Christian influence came to Northern Europe via three main routes: the British Isles (the West), Novgorod and Byzantium (the East), and central Europe (the South.) With it came three main traditions of the Cross: Constantine's Cross of the Vision (the tradition of a ruler seeing a vision of the cross at a critical time), the Cross of the Relic (owning a piece of the cross that Jesus was crucified on), and the *Crux usualis* (making a cross in the air with one's hand). DuBois compares each of these traditions to previous pagan traditions, and follows the adaptation of the Christian symbols into the Nordic vernacular. He points out that many Christian practices had similar pagan predecessors that were able to be adapted fairly easily, including having visions and making sacred gestures. The only key Cross tradition that did not get incorporated into Nordic Christian belief and practice or have a predecessor in Nordic religion was the personification of a symbol—the Cross of the Relic tradition was so firmly held by the British and Irish Cult that they made a Cult of the Cross, turning the Cross itself into something similar to a conscious deity.

DuBois concludes his work with a deconstruction of older saga scholarship by pulling out the underlying Christian biases

in the 13th century Nordic sagas, an important undertaking because the vast majority of our textual knowledge of pre-Christian culture and faith comes from these sagas. He chose to focus on three sagas based primarily on their use by previous scholars to reconstruct Nordic culture: the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (dealing with Christianization and public cults), the *Víga-Glúms saga* (dealing with personal and familial devotions to specific deities), and the *Eiríks saga raudha* (dealing with three episodes of ritual). Though each saga depicts pagan-Christian relations during three different moments during the Viking Age, DuBois concludes that the sagas are not merely Christianized accounts of pagan culture at those times but "a narrative with a unified Christian agenda" whose main goal was to glorify the triumph of Christianity over the inferior pagan religion (203). In other words, the sagas are highly biased versions of history, written by the (Christian) winners. This detailed analysis of these three texts may turn out to be the most valuable parts of DuBois' work—paving the way, he hopes, for further holistic, un-Romantic saga and religion scholarship.

Nordic Religions in the Viking Age may best be used as a good example of recent scholarship in this area, taking on older, long-held concepts within Viking Age studies. It would work well as a general book for Viking-Age studies, or as a specific example of culture and ritual. DuBois provides extensive notes throughout this work, the vast majority of which are citations for the various sagas or scholarly analyses of the ideas/facts he discusses. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on any of these citations or mention that some of the many arguments he cites may or may not be under dispute themselves. However, I feel that this is mainly due to the vast amount of material he attempts to cover in less than three hundred pages. This book rides the line between detailed analysis and general overview. It may frustrate those not familiar with Viking Age scholarship but merely reiterate a great deal of information that Viking Age scholars already know. Still, he brings up some good ideas for future research and I think his "geographical method" toward historical research provides valuable insights into the sources of information we have about the time period.