

RALEIGH LECTURE ON HISTORY

# Reflections on Paganism and Christianity in Medieval Europe

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BETWEEN THE ARRIVAL OF ST PAUL in Macedonia in the middle of the first century AD and the conversion of the rulers of Lithuania in the late fourteenth century, the continent of Europe gradually abandoned its own ancient, polytheistic religions and adopted a new religion, Christianity. The narrative outline of this process has been sketched very capably by Richard Fletcher in his recent book, *The Conversion of Europe*.

Today I will be attempting to reflect on certain selected but, I believe, important aspects of the move from paganism to Christianity. Naturally, in the course of those 1300 years, Europe changed, Christianity changed, the ancient polytheistic religions changed. Nevertheless, it seems to me not a worthless enterprise to ask whether there were some significant general characteristics of European paganism that disappeared with the new religion, some significant general characteristics of Christianity that had not been present in the old. A shift from one religion to another is not like taking off one hat and putting on another. It is more like putting on a new head.

My focus will be on those European pagan religions that still had official cult expression in the medieval period, primarily those of the Germanic, Slavic, and Baltic peoples. Some of the gods of these old religions are well known. Thor, Woden, and others have left their mark

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in the place-names and the days of the week of Germanic peoples. The Slavic peoples and Baltic peoples, such as the Prussians and the Lithuanians, had comparable pantheons. These polytheistic religions were familiar with the adoption of new gods, the shift in the attributes and identities of the old. Yet the question is not the replacement of one set of divine names by another but rather the spread of a religion that offered different things from the old and, conversely, did not offer certain things the old ones did.

One thing that Christianity did offer that must be mentioned at once—a thing that, in the main, the older religions did not—was literacy, and the fact that few northern and eastern European pagans left written records is important not only as a central aspect of that pagan world but also methodologically, for the historian. With some limited exceptions—runic inscriptions (brief and cryptic), pictorial images in various media (surviving in thousands but posing all the problems of pictures without words) and versions of Norse mythology preserved in writing of the Christian period—the representations of pagan religion all come from hostile Christian sources, predominantly of a missionary nature. To seek to understand native paganism from missionary literature is a little like attempting to form a picture of twentieth-century British socialism from the speeches of Margaret Thatcher. A hostile, sometimes highly ideological and tactically inspired viewpoint is the one we have to deal with.

Indeed, some Christian writers thought that the pagan world should simply be written out of the picture. ‘It is of no profit to investigate the deeds of unbelievers’, asserted one eleventh-century Christian chronicler, while Neplach, abbot of the Bohemian monastery of Opatovice in the fourteenth century, wrote in his *Chronicle*: ‘894 A. D.: here begin the acts and deeds of the dukes and kings of Bohemia, but since some of them were pagans there is no need to worry when or how long they reigned.’<sup>1</sup>

European paganism thus has to be reconstructed from a combination of the mute remains it itself generated and the voluble testimony of a hostile witness. It is not a promising situation, but nor is it an insuperable one.

All this said, what do we see when we put side by side the religions

<sup>1</sup> Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, 1. 61, ed. Werner Trillmich, in *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der Hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches* (Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters [henceforth AQ] 11, Darmstadt, 1961), p. 230; *Fontes rerum Bohemicarum*, 3, ed. Josef Emler (Prague, 1882), p. 460.

of the pre-Christian Germans, Slavs and Balts and the imported religion that replaced them? I have selected three large topics in this juxtaposition of pagan and Christian practice:

- 1 divination.
- 2 sacrifice.
- 3 the physical venue of cult and worship.

Public divinatory rituals were a universal feature of European pagan religions. Some involved the reading of natural signs, others the utterances of possessed prophets and prophetesses, yet others the use of sacral lots (*sortes*). The following is a description of the divinatory practices of the Liutizi, a pagan west Slavic tribal federation that formed in the late tenth century:

There are ministers especially appointed by the inhabitants to care for their shrine. When the people assemble to make sacrifice to the idols or to placate their anger, these ministers sit while the others stand. Muttering secretly among themselves and shaking, they dig a hole in the ground, where they cast lots to seek certainty on doubtful issues. Then they cover the earth with a green turf and lead out that great horse that they revere as sacred. With all deference they lead him over two spear heads fixed crosswise in the earth. The issue that they had already explored through lots is now subject to a renewed augury, through this semi-divine creature. If the same omen issues from both procedures, they embark on the suggested course of action, if not they sadly abandon it.<sup>2</sup>

Precisely the same combination of lots and the consultation of an oracular horse is mentioned among another west Slav group, the people of Stettin (Szczecin), at the mouth of the Oder, over a century later, in the 1120s. They had a horse dedicated to their god, Triglas, and when they decided on their military tactics they walked this animal past spears fixed in the ground. If the horse did not touch the spears, they went on campaign on horseback; if he did, 'they deemed that they had received a divine prohibition against riding' and cast lots to determine whether their expedition should be on foot or by boat. It was not just warfare on which divinatory advice was sought: the people of Stettin supposedly 'were always in the temples consulting their god Triglas about every kind of event'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon*, 6. 24, ed. Werner Trillmich (AQ 9, Darmstadt, 1957), p. 268.

<sup>3</sup> *Sancti Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis vita Prieflingensis*, 2. 11, ed. Jan Wikarjak and Kazimierz Liman, *Monumenta Poloniae historica*, ns 7/1 (Warsaw, 1966), pp. 42–3.

Not far from Stettin is the Baltic island of Rügen, where the pagan Rani maintained the last bastion of west Slav paganism late into the twelfth century. They too had a divine horse, pure white, on which their god Swantovit supposedly rode to war. Only the priest could feed him or mount him. When a campaign was imminent, the horse was led over spears fixed before the shrine of the god. If he crossed over them with his right foot first, this was a good omen; if he led with his left foot, a new battle target was chosen and the ritual repeated.<sup>4</sup>

For obvious reasons, public divination had a natural place when preparations were being made for war. The starkness of the choices and the grim consequences of a mistaken decision stimulated a readiness to put the whole affair into the hands of the gods. Paradoxically perhaps, removing the decision-making process from one's own hands relieved the anxiety involved. A divine and inscrutable command was better than fallible rationality.

The formal augury of the oracular horses of west Slav cult was not the only divinatory method on which military decisions were based. There were also inspired prophetic specialists, who accompanied the troops on campaign. They are described as soothsayers and the like by Christian writers. The sixth-century Byzantine historian Agathias, speaking of the Germanic Alamanni, refers to their custom of taking military decisions on the advice of such soothsayers (he uses the terms *mantis* and *chresmologos*). In 554, during the joint Franco-Alamannic invasion of Italy, the Alamannic soothsayers advised their generals not to fight against the Byzantines under Narses at Capua. The generals disregarded the advice and suffered a bloody defeat, leaving Agathias wondering whether this was pure coincidence or if the soothsayers really did have predictive powers.<sup>5</sup>

The way that recourse was had to sacral lots in the military affairs of native European polytheistic society is portrayed vividly in Rimbert's *Life of Anskar*, which describes the abortive Christian missionary effort in Sweden in the middle years of the ninth century. Rimbert tells how a Danish raiding party descended on the rich Swedish trading centre of Birka and had to decide whether to assault it. The leader suggested 'that they should inquire by lots whether it was the will of the gods that they should destroy that place'. This, comments our Christian infor-

<sup>4</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14. 39. 9–11, ed. J. Olrik and H. Raeder (2 vols., Copenhagen, 1931–57), 1, pp. 466–7.

<sup>5</sup> Agathias, *Historiarum libri quinque*, 2. 6. 7, 2. 6. 9, ed. Rudolf Keydell (Berlin, 1967), p. 48.

mant, 'was customary among them'. 'An enquiry', he continues, 'was therefore made by lot and it was found that they could in no way profitably accomplish this . . . Again, it was inquired where they should go . . . the lot fell that they should go to a far distant town.'<sup>6</sup>

A few years later, the same source informs us, a Swedish expeditionary force which was attempting to exact tribute across the Baltic in Courland attacked a native fortress but met fierce resistance. Much disturbed, the Swedes 'decided to inquire by lots whether their gods were willing to help them . . . after the lots had been cast, they were not able to find any god willing to bring them aid . . .' Finally, some of the Swedes who had traded in western Europe suggested trying 'the god of the Christians'. 'The lot was cast and it was found that Christ was willing to help them.' Encouraged by this support, the Swedes attacked vigorously and forced the Courlanders to surrender.<sup>7</sup>

This last incident hints at a way in which the new Mediterranean religion, Christianity, could have been integrated into the pagan divinatory system, by a simple accretive syncretism. In the mission fields of Germanic and Slavic Europe such unexpected juxtapositions were not unusual. Redwald, king of East Anglia, as described by Bede, kept an altar to Christ and an altar to the pagan gods side-by-side; likewise in twelfth-century Stettin during a period of pagan reaction, the inhabitants 'served both God and demons'.<sup>8</sup>

In the event, this was not to be a game that Christian leaders were willing to play. Whatever the level of accommodation might be, other gods—i.e. 'demons'—had to go. Paganism was indeed understood by Christian thinkers as worship of demons. There could be no half-way house on this question.

Similarly, the regular, public consultative divination that characterised European paganism, both Greco-Roman and northern and eastern European, was discarded. Christianity was not to be a religion that systematically offered rituals for ascertaining a propitious course of action. This lack might have been among its stranger features in the eyes of pagans and new converts.

<sup>6</sup> Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii*, 19, ed. Werner Trillmich, in *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der Hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches* (AQ 11, Darmstadt, 1961), p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 30, pp. 96–8.

<sup>8</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, 2. 15, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), p. 190; Herbord, *Dialogus de vita sancti Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis*, 3. 16, ed. Jan Wikarjak and Kazimierz Liman, *Monumenta Poloniae historica*, NS, 7/3 (Warsaw, 1974), p. 177.

The point can be explored in two ways, first by looking briefly at those cases in which something like divinatory rituals occurred in Christian contexts—exceptions that prove the rule—and secondly by examining what Christian prescriptive voices—the ecclesiastical authorities, the theologians and moralists—had to say on the subject.

To turn to the first point. In the year 1084 the Byzantine emperor Alexius Comnenus was considering whether to lead an expedition against the Cumans, who were threatening him. His counsellors advised against it. Alexius decided to leave the decision to God. The clergy and army leaders were summoned to Hagia Sophia. Alexius had two closed tablets placed on the altar, one advising in favour of a campaign, the other against it. After a night of hymn-singing, the Patriarch picked up one of the tablets and read it out. Alexius received the message ‘as a divine oracle’ and threw himself into the campaign.<sup>9</sup>

This is a striking incident. Structurally, the ritual in Hagia Sophia in 1084 is identical to the divination by lots and sacred horses practised by contemporary pagan Slavs and Scandinavians. The decision whether to undertake a campaign was removed from the realm of rational consideration and placed in the realm of the divine—or the random, as a sceptical outsider might say. What is also noteworthy about this event is how exceptional it is, how few similar or parallel cases can be found. For the pagans of Europe public divination was their ‘custom’; for Christians, an oddity.

Another half-sanctioned exception was the so called *sortes biblicae*, the practice of opening the Bible at random to obtain guidance. It was often done at a bishop’s consecration, to obtain a prognostication for his reign. Christian thinkers were not fully reconciled to the practice. Augustine thought that it was certainly preferable to consulting demons—i.e. the pagan gods—but found the custom (as he termed it already in the fourth century) displeasing, especially when directed towards ‘secular business and the vanity of this life’.<sup>10</sup>

There are thus cases of exceptional and half-accepted rituals of divination in medieval Christianity. It is less significant that they exist than that they fit so awkwardly. The main Christian tradition was persistently opposed to such practices. A continuous stream of ecclesiastical legislation condemned soothsayers and diviners. The aggres-

<sup>9</sup> Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, 10. 2, ed. B. Leib (3 vols., Paris, 1937–45) 2, p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, ep. 55. 20. 37, ed. A. Goldbacher, *Epistulae*, part 2 (Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum, 34/2, 1898), p. 212.

sively Christian duke of Bohemia, Bretislav II, who reigned from 1092 to 1100, expelled from his realm 'all magicians, soothsayers and diviners'.<sup>11</sup> These presumably included the *pithonisse*, female prophetesses found especially among the west Slavs who, like the Alamannic soothsayers described by Agathias, accompanied the troops and foretold the outcome of battle. One is found with a Polish army as late as 1209.<sup>12</sup>

A mature and considered Christian view on divination can be found, characteristically, in the work of Thomas Aquinas. His fundamental perspective is clear: 'Divination is a sin, whereby someone usurps for himself or herself knowledge of future things that pertains properly to God.' He recognises the natural human inclination to seek to know the course of the future but will not concede that divination is a licit way to fulfil that urge. Of course, he makes distinctions. Prediction based on the regularities of nature is reasonable, hence astronomers can foretell eclipses and wise men make fair guesses about the weather. Knowledge of future contingent events is God's alone, however, and the only licit way to obtain such knowledge is through divine revelation. The Old Testament may have specified some divinatory procedures, but the Christian dispensation has no place for them: 'There is in the new law nothing ordained to gain prior knowledge of future temporal events.'<sup>13</sup>

An equally sharp break occurred in the practice of sacrifice. The votive deposition of objects of real or symbolic value and the ritual slaughter of animals and, sometimes, human beings, had been one of the main components of most religions prior to the rise of faiths of a universalist, non-sacrificial nature, like Buddhism and Christianity. Medieval Germanic, Slavic and Baltic paganisms were religions of blood sacrifice.<sup>14</sup>

The German bishop and chronicler Thietmar of Merseburg, writing early in the eleventh century, describes the great regional cult centre of

<sup>11</sup> Cosmas of Prague, *Chronica Boemorum*, 3. 1, ed. Bertold Bretholz (Monumenta Germaniae historica [henceforth MGH], *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum*, ns 2, Berlin, 1923), p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> *Chronicon Montis Sereni*, ed. E. Ehrenfeuchter, MGH, *Scriptores*, 23 (Hanover, 1874), p. 176.

<sup>13</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 2. 2. 95. 1–2, ed. Thomas Gilbey and Thomas O'Brien (60 vols., 1964–76), 40, pp. 36–42.

<sup>14</sup> A good, relatively recent overview is provided by Michael Müller-Wille, 'Heidnische Opferplätze im frühgeschichtlichen Europa nördlich der Alpen: Die archäologische Überlieferung und ihre Deutung', *Berichte aus den Sitzungen der Joachim Jungius-Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften e. V.*, Hamburg, 7/3 (1989); *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 18 (1984) is devoted almost entirely to the issue of sacrifice, including its Christian version.

the Danes at Leyre on Seeland, where 'every nine years they all assemble in January and sacrifice to their gods ninety-nine men and the same number of horses, along with dogs and chickens . . .'<sup>15</sup> Later in the same century another German observer, Adam of Bremen, notes a very similar practice among the Swedes: 'It is the custom to celebrate a common festival of all the Swedish regions at Uppsala every nine years . . . this is the form of sacrifice: nine heads are offered from male specimens of each kind of living creature; it is their custom to placate the gods with their blood. The bodies are hung in a grove near to the temple.' Adam reports that a Christian informant had told him that he had seen the bodies of dogs, horses and men—seventy-two in number—hanging in this grove.<sup>16</sup> The symbolic figure nine recurs, if the recent reinterpretation of the runes is correct, on a stone from southern Sweden commemorating a sacrifice: 'With nine he-goats, with nine stallions, Hathuwolf ensured a good year.'<sup>17</sup>

The practice of offering the heads of sacrificial animals separately, as at Uppsala, is widely attested both by written sources and by archaeological finds. Agathias records that the Alamanni 'sacrifice horses, oxen and many other animals by beheading them'.<sup>18</sup> A generation later other Germanic pagans in Italy, the Lombards, are described 'sacrificing the head of a goat to the devil, according to their custom', then running around it singing heart-chilling songs.<sup>19</sup> Excavations at Yeavinger in Northumberland revealed, in a building interpreted as a pagan temple, a pit full of the skulls of oxen.<sup>20</sup>

A particularly full account of such cult practices is provided by the Arab diplomat, Ibn Fadlân, travelling in the Volga basin in 921–2. Here he encountered Swedish merchants, who prayed for success in their trading to wooden idols, in the form of 'a long post of wood fixed in the ground with a face like that of a man, surrounded by little idols, and behind them other long wooden posts fixed in the ground'. If a merchant had luck, he offered the gods a reward in the form of sacrifice. 'He takes a certain number of sheep or cows, kills them, gives away

<sup>15</sup> Thietmar of Merseburg, 1. 17, ed. Trillmich, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Adam of Bremen, 4. 27, ed. Trillmich, pp. 470–2.

<sup>17</sup> Lillemor Santesson, 'Eine Blutopferinschrift aus dem südschwedischen Blekinge', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 27 (1993), pp. 241–52.

<sup>18</sup> Agathias, 1. 7, ed. Keydell, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory I, *Dialogi*, 3. 28, ed. A. de Vogüé (3 vols., Sources chrétiennes 251, 260, 265, 1978–80), 2, p. 374.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria* (1977), pp. 98–100, 325–32.



some of the meat as gifts, brings the rest and places it before the great idol and before the small idols around it and hangs the heads of the sheep or the cows on the wooden posts fixed in the ground.' Next morning the meat has gone and the merchant concludes that his god is well satisfied with him. Ibn Fadlân points out, with only a slight hint of monotheistic condescension, the role of scavenging dogs in making the meat disappear.<sup>21</sup>

The most frightening and fascinating kind of sacrifice, human sacrifice, is found through the centuries in most parts of pagan Europe. The almost perfectly preserved human remains in the peat bogs of Denmark and northern Germany are moving witness to the custom. Some cult centres were obviously regular venues for such sacrifices. At Skedemosse on the Swedish island of Öland, excavation has revealed the remains of around fifty human beings, as well as at least a hundred horses, sacrificed in a period from the first to the sixth century.<sup>22</sup> The excavators at Sutton Hoo in the 1980s believe that the skeletons they uncovered are those of sacrificial victims.<sup>23</sup>

The Christian churchmen who undertook missionary activity among the continental Germanic peoples in the seventh and eighth centuries soon encountered the practice of human sacrifice. Wulfram, bishop of Sens, who worked among the pagan Frisians at the very end of the seventh century, saved the lives of several young Frisian boys who had been destined to be sacrificed to the gods. The Frisian king Radbod explained the custom: 'it is decreed by an ancient and unchanging law established by (my) predecessors and the whole Frisian people, that whoever is selected by lots is forthwith sacrificed to the gods in (our) festivals'. Death was inflicted by stabbing, hanging, strangling, or drowning.<sup>24</sup>

Drawing together the theme of divination and sacrifice, the use of lots to select a sacrifice is also witnessed in the life of another missionary to the Frisians, the Anglo-Saxon Willibrord. After desecrating one of their holy sites, Willibrord and his companions were brought before king Radbod:

<sup>21</sup> Marius Canard, 'La relation du voyage d'Ibn Fadlân chez les Bulgares de la Volga', *Annales de l'Institut d'Études Orientales* (Algiers), 15 (1957), pp. 41–146, at pp. 120–1 (an English translation by Dr James Montgomery is forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> Ulf Erik Hagberg, *The Archaeology of Skedemosse*, 2 (Stockholm, 1967), pp. 55–62.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Carver (ed.), *The Age of Sutton Hoo* (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 353–5.

<sup>24</sup> *Vita Vulframmi episcopi Senonici*, 6–8, ed. W. Levison, MGH, *Scriptores rerum merovingicarum*, 5 (Hanover and Leipzig, 1910), pp. 665–7.

He was blazing with rage and thought to take revenge on the priest of the living God for the injuries done to his gods. For three days he cast lots three times, as was his custom, but, because they had God as their defender, the lot of condemnation never fell on God's servant or any of his companions, except that one of them was singled out by lot and crowned with martyrdom.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that this unlucky exception was recorded perhaps adds credibility to the whole tale.

My final example of human sacrifice in European paganism is drawn from Prussia in the thirteenth century, where German crusaders battled against an entrenched native Prussian paganism. In 1261 the Natangians, one of the Prussian tribes, defeated a German army and took many prisoners. 'After the battle', records the chronicler Peter of Dusburg, 'the Natangians wished to offer a sacrifice to the gods and cast lots among the German captives; twice the lot fell on a certain rich and noble citizen of Magdeburg called Hirtzhals.' Hirtzhals appealed to the Natangian commander, reminding him how well he had treated him when he was in Magdeburg in more peaceful times. Twice he was freed, but the lot fell on him a fateful third time. He was tied to his horse and burned.<sup>26</sup>

Christianity is the direct descendant of a religion—Temple Judaism—that had given a central place to animal sacrifice, conducted by professional priests on holy ground. This was not a feature it perpetuated (nor, incidentally, after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, did Judaism). Yet Christians were rooted in a sacrificial tradition that left an imprint on their language and thought. Although no animals or humans were to be sacrificed to God, the terminology and concept of sacrifice was not abandoned but deepened.

Christians early developed three ideas of symbolic or transcendental sacrifice:

- 1 Jesus' crucifixion was a sacrifice.
- 2 The Christian life of prayer and moral striving was a sacrifice.
- 3 The eucharist was a sacrifice.

<sup>25</sup> Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi archiepiscopi Traiectensis*, 11, ed. W. Levison, MGH, *Scriptores rerum merovingicarum*, 7 (Hanover and Leipzig, 1920), p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> Peter of Dusburg, *Chronica terre Prussie*, 3. 91, ed. Klaus Scholz and Dieter Wojtecki (AQ 25, Darmstadt, 1984), pp. 212–14.

The first two ideas certainly have their roots in the New Testament. The Epistle to the Hebrews mentions Christ offering himself up as a sacrifice, specifically contrasting this with the blood sacrifices of the Old Law; it also refers to the sacrifice of praise to God. In the Epistle to the Romans, St Paul writes of Christians offering their bodies as 'a living sacrifice'.<sup>27</sup> The origin of the idea that the eucharist is sacrificial is more controversial, since it has been the subject of violent denominational polemic, but it seems clear that such a conception is to be found as early as the time of Justin Martyr, who died around 165, and it was, in any case, quite standard in the Middle Ages.

The use of the language of sacrifice for the eucharist acquires a particular sharpness when we find it in the missionary field, where sacrifices of a literally bloody kind could also be encountered. When Wulfram of Sens was on board ship off the coast of Frisia 'the hour arrived in which the sacrifice of a saving victim was to be offered to God'. The wording—'sacrificium victimae immolandum erat'—is precisely that used by missionary writers when describing pagan animal sacrifice; but here the meaning is the eucharist.<sup>28</sup>

An even stronger parallel between the sacrifice of Christians and the sacrifice of pagans emerges from a passage in the chronicler Helmold of Bosau, referring to the island of Rügen and its fiercely pagan inhabitants, the Rani. It was customary for Christian merchants to come to the island for the herring and they were tolerated on condition they made a payment to the shrine of Swantovit. On one occasion a German priest arrived there and ministered to them. The priest of Swantovit was outraged by this and announced that the native gods were angry and could only be placated by the blood of this German priest, 'who had dared to offer alien sacrifice among them'. The Rani then demanded that the Christians hand over their priest 'so that they could offer an acceptable sacrifice' to their god.<sup>29</sup>

A Christian imagining a pagan's view of Christian ritual sees him labelling it as 'alien sacrifice'. It is not likely that Helmold of Bosau would know the exact words used by the pagan priest, nor that the Rani would call for the blood of the Christian priest in words drawn from the Old Testament, as these are, but neither of these reservations under-

<sup>27</sup> Hebrews, 7: 27, 13: 15; Romans, 12: 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Vita Vulframni*, 5, ed. Levison, p. 664.

<sup>29</sup> Helmold of Bosau, *Chronica Slavorum*, 108, ed. Heinz Stoob (AQ 19, Darmstadt, rev. edn., 1973), p. 374.

mines a central point about this passage: when the German chronicler wants to depict the pagan priest's concept of Christian liturgy, he puts into his mouth the words 'alien sacrifice'. In a sense the distinction between Christianity and paganism is not between a non-sacrificial and a sacrificial religion but between two rival conceptions of sacrifice.

Christian critics of blood sacrifice could draw on the powerful strand in the Old Testament that viewed literal sacrifice as of secondary importance. This prophetic voice put uprightness before cultic observance, presenting a God who 'desired mercy, not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings'. 'Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifice as in obeying the voice of the Lord?' asked Samuel. 'Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams.'<sup>30</sup>

Christians took up this note. 'The Framer and Father of the universe does not need blood nor the odour of burnt offerings . . .'<sup>31</sup> Medieval Christians, while stressing the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the eucharist, nevertheless contrasted it sharply with the animal sacrifices of the Old Law. The offering of plain bread and wine was 'cleaner and purer by far than that from the mangled flesh and filthy blood of a thousand bulls, goats and rams. . . . The Old Law prescribed not so much a pious offering by priests as a dire and inhuman slaughter of beast by butchers . . .'<sup>32</sup>

When writing of pagan sacrifice practised in their own time, medieval Christian observers were usually willing to concede that it had a rationale in the minds of its practitioners. It was intended to make the gods favourable, so that they would bestow health, fertility, and good fortune in war. It might also be propitiatory, 'serving', in Thietmar's words, 'to expiate the crimes they had committed'.<sup>33</sup> At Uppsala a kind of divine specialisation was evident: sacrifices were made to Thor in times of plague and famine, to Odin in times of war and to the fertility god Freyr when weddings were celebrated.<sup>34</sup>

It might even be possible for Christians to give blood sacrifice a

<sup>30</sup> Hosea 6:6; I Samuel, 15:22.

<sup>31</sup> Athenagoras of Athens, *Legatio pro Christianis*, 13. 2, ed. Miroslav Marcovich (Patristische Texte und Studien 31, Berlin and New York, 1990), p. 46.

<sup>32</sup> Herbert of Bosham, *Vita sancti Thomae*, 3. 13, ed. J. C. Robertson in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket* (7 vols., *Rerum britannicarum medii aevi scriptores*, 67, 1875–85), 3, p. 214.

<sup>33</sup> Thietmar of Merseburg, 1. 17, ed. Trillmich, p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> Adam of Bremen, 4. 27, ed. Trillmich, p. 470.

positive role in the scheme of divine history. A monastic theologian of the twelfth century, Baldwin of Ford, saw in the universal pagan custom of blood sacrifice a divinely inspired preparation for the ultimate sacrifice, Christ's. 'Every religion and every superstition', he wrote, 'held the opinion that it was possible to placate God by sacrifices and that prayers would be heard and crimes expiated more easily through the death of victims and the shedding of blood . . . It was by God's marvellous dispensation that this common opinion of all mankind, placing the hope of salvation in the cult of sacrifice, prepared the way for the future dispensation . . .'<sup>35</sup>

That was to take the long view. More immediately, in the mission field, sacrifices to idols were one of the most obvious pagan practices that had to be confronted and ended. Just as conversion to Christianity involved the abandonment of public, divinatory ritual, so too it meant the end of blood sacrifice.

The third topic I wish to consider in this comparison of pagan and Christian practice is the physical venue of worship. It is less clear-cut than the previous issues, divination and sacrifice, where an obvious contrast can be drawn between pagan endorsement and Christian rejection of a custom.

By the beginning of the Middle Ages Christian worship was centred in consecrated buildings, churches, which were purpose-built and had, since the official recognition of Christianity by the state, assumed a semi-public status. This had not always been the case. Early Christians had assembled in private and in spaces that had undergone no formal consecration. At that time the church—*ecclesia*—was the gathering of Christians, not the building. In the late Roman period, however, Christianity adopted the practice of constructing large cult-buildings of a type familiar in pagan or Jewish temple religion. The shift of the word *ecclesia* towards the meaning 'sacred building' is highly indicative.

The place of temples, that is, large, specialized cult-buildings, in Germanic, Slavic and Baltic paganism has been a controversial issue among scholars. There is certainly evidence for the existence of elaborate temples among the pagan west Slavs between the Elbe and the Oder in the last centuries of paganism, but it has been argued that this picture should not be generalised to all European pagan societies. In a work published in 1966, the Danish archaeologist Olaf Olsen

<sup>35</sup> Baldwin of Ford, *Tractatus de sacramento altaris*, ed. J. Morson (2 vols., Sources chrétiennes, 93-4, 1963), 1, p. 90.

painted a dramatically minimalist picture of Scandinavian paganism: no vocational priesthood, no special sacred buildings. Cult took place in the open or in the farmstead. Possibly the only specialized religious structures were shelters erected to protect the images of the gods.<sup>36</sup>

One of the problems in establishing whether temples had an important role in the paganism of northern and eastern Europe is the difficulty of identifying cult-sites archaeologically. In an area with very limited use of stone and, with the exception of runes, of writing, distinctive remains are hard to find. A contrasting situation may underscore the point. At Uley in Gloucestershire a Romano-British temple was excavated in the late 1970s. Votive objects that were found included altars to the gods, a large stone statue of Mercury, 140 lead tablets inscribed with prayers to Mercury and around a quarter of a million bone fragments, mostly of young male goats—the animal associated with Mercury.<sup>37</sup> That is a temple.

What has been turned up in northern and eastern Europe must be painted in far paler colours. Some of the representations of the gods have been found, such as the life-size double-headed male figure carved in wood excavated near Neubrandenburg, presumably an image of one of the polycephalic west Slav deities.<sup>38</sup> More imposing is the so-called Swantovit stone, a carved stone pillar with a face and different emblem on each of its four sides. This was found in the nineteenth century in what is now the western Ukraine. Whether it originally stood in a building is uncertain.<sup>39</sup> A site that is claimed to be a west Slav temple is Groß Raden in eastern Germany, where a large rectangular building was found, which had no signs of everyday occupation, contained several horse skulls and was surrounded by an enclosure of posts each shaped into roughly human form.<sup>40</sup> At Arkona on Rügen, although the site of the temple of Swantovit long ago slipped into the Baltic Sea, excavation at the adjoining stronghold has revealed an

<sup>36</sup> Olaf Olsen, *Hørg, hov og kirke* (Copenhagen, 1966) (English summary, pp. 277–88).

<sup>37</sup> Ann Woodward and Peter Leach (eds.), *The Uley Shrines: Excavation of a Ritual Complex on West Hill, Uley, Gloucestershire: 1977–9* (English Heritage Archaeological Report 17, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> Joachim Herrmann (ed.), *Die Slawen in Deutschland* (2nd edn., Berlin, 1985), pp. 306–7 and plate 72.

<sup>39</sup> Leszek Słupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries* (Warsaw, 1994), pp. 215–23 and figure 104 (grateful thanks are due to Professor Przemysław Urbańczyk for providing a copy of this book).

<sup>40</sup> Ewald Schuldt, *Groß Raden: Ein slawischer Tempelort des 9./10. Jahrhunderts in Mecklenburg* (Berlin, 1985), pp. 35–49.

interesting pattern among the bones. The large majority of animals there were killed and eaten young, probably in a summer-season slaughter.<sup>41</sup> This corresponds with the report of the twelfth-century chronicler Saxo Grammaticus, writing of the Rani: 'every year after the harvest the whole population of the island gathers before the temple, and, after they have sacrificed some of the flock, they celebrate a solemn religious feast'.<sup>42</sup>

A few idols, an anthropomorphic enclosure, the remains of a sacrificial meal. This is less solid fare than the finds from Uley. It may be that the physical plan of northern and eastern European paganism is yet to be discovered, but it seems more likely that it was always less imposing than that of ancient Middle Eastern or Greco-Roman temple cults or that of medieval Christianity. The paganism of the Germanic, Slavic, and Baltic peoples was an outdoor religion.

This is reflected not only in the existence of cult sites where anthropomorphic figures were revered either in the open or with only insubstantial shelter, but also in the strongly attested fact that one important part of European paganism was the veneration of natural objects, notably trees and springs.

The holy tree and the sacred grove were among the most widespread and visible foci of pagan devotion. Agathias records that the Alamanni 'worship trees'; before their conversion, the Saxons 'showed reverence to leafy trees'; the Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus noted that the Swedish Varangians offered sacrifices on one of the islands in the river Dniepr 'because there is standing there a huge oak tree'. Their offerings included arrows, bread, and meat, as well as cockerels selected by lot.<sup>43</sup>

There are great continuities in the history of these holy trees and holy groves. The first written record of veneration of sacred groves among the pagan Prussians is a statement of Adam of Bremen, around 1070. Even when relations between Christians and Prussians are good, he remarks, the natives do not allow Christians to enter their holy groves,

<sup>41</sup> Hans-Hermann Müller, 'Zoological and Historical Interpretation of Bones from Food and Sacrifices in Early Medieval Times', in *Animals and Archaeology 4: Husbandry in Europe*, ed. Caroline Grigson and Juliet Clutton-Brock (British Archaeological Reports, International Series 227, 1984), pp. 187–91.

<sup>42</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, 14. 39. 4, ed. Olrik and Raeder, 1, p. 465.

<sup>43</sup> Agathias, 1. 7, ed. Keydell, p. 18; *Translatio sancti Alexandri*, 3, ed. G. H. Pertz, MGH, *Scriptores*, 2 (Hanover, 1829), p. 670; Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, 9, ed. G. Moravcsik (Budapest, 1949), p. 60.

'for they assert that they are polluted by the entry of Christians'.<sup>44</sup> Two centuries later a Christian missionary among the Prussians noted tersely 'these Prussians worship special trees as gods'.<sup>45</sup> Later yet, in the late fourteenth century, some French knights, taking a break from the Hundred Years War to join the Teutonic Knights in Prussia, observed the 'holy pine woods' on the borders of Prussia and Lithuania.<sup>46</sup>

One of the more detailed accounts of a medieval pagan holy grove is given by the German chronicler Helmold of Bosau who visited one in 1156. It lay in eastern Holstein, at that time inhabited by Slavs. The grove stood alone in a treeless plain. 'There', writes Helmold, 'amongst the ancient trees we saw the sacred oaks dedicated to the god of the land, Proven.' The oaks were surrounded by an open space enclosed by a wooden fence with two gates. The grove was a central sanctuary for the whole area, with a specialist priest and a complex ritual of feasts and sacrifices. Every week the people assembled there with the local ruler and the priest in order to hold court hearings. Access to the enclosed area was permitted only to the priest, to worshippers wishing to make a sacrifice and to those seeking asylum from their enemies.<sup>47</sup>

The precision of Helmold's account allows some flesh to be put on the bare bones of the bland statements about 'tree worship'. Sacrality in this case was constructed from the ancientness of the trees, the dedication to a named god and the enclosure of a prohibited space. A genuine cult, with a sacrificial priesthood, was practised. The link between cult centre and open-air judicial assembly is one that can be demonstrated or surmised elsewhere.

Over and over, the veneration of trees is linked to that of springs and fountains. Indeed, 'worship of groves and springs' was a standard topos of the Christian definition of paganism. There would be little point in surveying the evidence in detail here.

The cult of trees and springs stimulated Christian hostility. Indeed a stock image in missionary literature is the heroic preacher wielding an axe against the holy tree. The Life of St Martin contains a famous early instance, but the motif is recurrent: Boniface hewing down 'the oak of

<sup>44</sup> Adam of Bremen, 4. 18, ed. Trillmich, p. 456.

<sup>45</sup> Marvin L. Colker, 'America Rediscovered in the Thirteenth Century?', *Speculum*, 54 (1979), p. 722 (*Descriptiones terrarum* by a thirteenth-century Bohemian missionary).

<sup>46</sup> Jean Cabaret d'Orville, *La chronique du bon duc Loys de Bourbon*, ed. A. M. Chazaud (Paris, 1876), p. 65.

<sup>47</sup> Helmold of Bosau, 84, ed. Stoob, p. 288.



Jupiter' at Geismar in Hesse; Cyril-Constantine, the 'Apostle of the Slavs', preaching in the Crimea and securing the destruction of a great oak where sacrifices were made.<sup>48</sup> Helmold of Bosau himself follows his description of the holy grove in Holstein with an account of how his party, headed by the bishop of Oldenburg, made a giant bonfire around the sacred oaks with the planks from the sanctuary fence.

Ecclesiastical legislation condemning the veneration of trees and springs and disciplinary action directed against it can be found in virtually every part of Christian and missionary Europe throughout the Middle Ages. Injunctions against tree-worship, well-worship and stone-worship begin in England in the first generations of the new Church and continue in an unbroken series down to the Reformation, and beyond. St Hugh, Bishop of Lincoln, who died in 1200, succeeded, after a fierce struggle, 'in ending the cult of springs' at Berkhamsted, High Wycombe and other places.<sup>49</sup> The inhabitants of High Wycombe were persistent, however. In 1385, one hundred and eighty-five years after St Hugh's death, they were crossing the river Thames to venerate a newly discovered healing well at Bisham in Berkshire. Above this well grew a tree and in this nested a supernatural bird. Those coming to the well placed an offering in the nest. In the firm tradition of Martin, Boniface, and St Hugh, the local bishop ordered the well to be filled with earth and stones and the tree uprooted and burned.<sup>50</sup>

A distinction can perhaps be made between the tactics Christians adopted towards holy trees and those they employed against holy wells. The attitude to the former appears to have been far more uncompromising. As Christian missionary literature put it: 'there is nothing religious in a tree trunk'.<sup>51</sup> The Christians had, of course, one holy tree of their own, and allowed no competition. Wells were different and there are hundreds of examples of wells dedicated to a Christian saint,

<sup>48</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, 13, ed. Jacques Fontaine (3 vols., Sources chrétiennes, 133–135, 1967–1969), 1, p. 280; Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, 6, ed. Reinhold Rau, *Briefe des Bonifatius/Willibalds Leben des Bonifatius* (AQ 4b, Darmstadt, 1968), p. 494; *Vita Constantini*, 12, tr. Marvin Kantor and Richard S. White, *The Vita of Constantine and the Vita of Methodius* (Michigan Slavic Materials, 13, Ann Arbor, 1976), pp. 41–3.

<sup>49</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Magna vita sancti Hugonis*, 5. 17, ed. Decima Douie and D. H. Farmer (2 vols., Edinburgh, etc., 1961–2, repr. Oxford Medieval Texts, 1985), 2, p. 201.

<sup>50</sup> *Victoria History of Berkshire*, 2, ed. P. H. Ditchfield and W. Page (1907), p. 14, citing the Register of bishop Ralph Erghum.

<sup>51</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, 13. 1, ed. Fontaine, 1, p. 280; a phrase repeated in *Sancti Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis vita Prieflingensis*, 3. 11, ed. Wikarjak and Liman, p. 71.

many supposedly having healing powers and often being the focus of pilgrimage and ritual. There might thus be some degree of acceptance of suitably Christianized holy springs.

Yet healing wells, even when associated with a Christian saint, could be controversial. In the eleventh century, when a foreign abbot visiting the abbey of Ramsey in Huntingdonshire drank from St Ives' well, one of his monks flew into a rage. 'It was not right', he said, 'for a wise and prudent man to foster the fatuous superstition of peasants who had been deceived by pagan error and worshipped water.'<sup>52</sup> A similar controversy is revealed by the twelfth-century account of miracles at the spring of St Agilus or St Aile associated with the abbey of Rebais in northern France. The monastic writer who recorded the miracles at the spring felt compelled to include also a defence against 'the madness of certain people' who claimed that the miracles were the work not of God but of demons. Since the miraculous cures occurred 'in a wild and remote place where there is neither divine worship nor the shrine of a saint', these objectors argued, it was likely that rustic spirits were behind them. The author championing the miracles counters, 'it does not seem to me that a charge should be raised against a place because it is in the open country', but there was evidently a long and strong tradition against him.<sup>53</sup> Christianity was more of an indoor religion than its pagan rivals.

The refusal to provide standard rituals for prediction and prognosis, the shift from sacrifice as the shedding of blood and the circulation of protein to sacrifice as metaphor and metaphysics and the hostile or suspicious attitude to the sacrality of natural objects made Christianity a different genus of religion from the paganisms it replaced.

I would like to conclude by looking briefly at two issues closely allied to these changes in the nature of European religion: first, the construction of the concept of 'superstition'; second, awareness on the part of the medieval protagonists of the great fissure that conversion represented.

The abandonment of the practice of public divination did not mean that divination ceased; it simply fell into the hands of private practitioners. Blood sacrifice no longer took place at official cult sites, but, on a small scale, could be found in out-of-the-way places. Tree

<sup>52</sup> Goscelin, *Miracula sancti Ivonis*, ed. W. Dunn Macray, *Chronicon abbatiae Ramesiensis (Rerum britannicarum medii aevi scriptores*, 83, 1886), pp. lxxi–lxxii.

<sup>53</sup> *Miracula sancti Agili abbatis*, 3, *Acta sanctorum Augusti*, 6 (Antwerp, 1743), pp. 594–5.

worship and spring worship continued, as we have seen, even in the stockbroker belt.

Christian authorities and Christian thinkers, looking at this decapitated and incoherent morass of prohibited religious practices, had a word for it: 'superstition'. It was a term, and a concept, inherited ready made from Roman antiquity.<sup>54</sup> Thoughtful Romans had distinguished *religio* and *superstitio*, regarding the latter as excessive, futile and inspired by fear. Quintilian thought that religion and superstition differed as much as careful attention to an object did from pointless curiosity about it.<sup>55</sup> The pagan emperor Julian the Apostate was not praised even by all his fellow pagans for his lavish blood sacrifices. The fact that he offered animal sacrifices to the gods 'as if he thought oxen would soon be going out of existence' made him not a 'dutiful observer of sacred rites', but 'superstitious'.<sup>56</sup> Christians could take up the term and apply it to religions other than their own. 'Religion is worship of the true God,' wrote Lactantius, 'superstition of a false god.'<sup>57</sup> Paganism and the relics of paganism could thus be classified as misdirected religion—superstition.

Superstition was false and fatuous but it was also an ancient proclivity of mankind. One of the most influential medieval texts on the subject was produced by Martin, Bishop of Braga in the sixth century, and was addressed to the problem of 'those who are still entangled in the old superstition of the pagans'. He goes back to the origin of the world to make the story clear. After a brisk survey of the Creation, the Fall of the Devil and the Fall of Man, we arrive at the Flood. At that time 'human beings forgot God, the creator of the universe, and began to venerate created beings—some worshipped the sun, some the moon and stars, some fire, some deep water or springs . . .' The demons, seeing how foolishly men were behaving, lured them into worshipping them, 'so that they offered sacrifices to them in

<sup>54</sup> See, in general, Denise Grodzynski, 'Superstitio', *Revue des études anciennes*, 76 (1974), pp. 30–60; Jean-Claude Schmitt, 'Les superstitions', in *Histoire de la France religieuse*, 1, ed. Jacques Le Goff (Paris, 1988), pp. 417–551; and especially Dieter Harmening, *Superstitio: Überlieferungs- und theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlich-theologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1979).

<sup>55</sup> Quintilian. *De institutione oratoria*, 8. 3. 55, ed. Ludwig Radermacher (2 vols., Leipzig, 1965), 2, p. 91.

<sup>56</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae*, 25. 4. 17, ed. Wolfgang Seyfarth (2 vols., Leipzig, 1978), 1, p. 363.

<sup>57</sup> Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, 4. 28. 11, ed. Pierre Monat, *Institutions divines*, 4 (Sources chrétiennes 377, 1992), p. 234.

the high mountains and leafy woods'. The 'ignorant peasants' of those days fell into full-scale cult, with temples, idols and animal and human sacrifice. The demons even got them to name the days of the week after them. By trickery, they encouraged them to pay attention to auguries, observing such frivolous signs as the flight of birds. 'God did not command men to know the future,' asserts bishop Martin, 'but to seek guidance and help in life from God. It pertains to God alone to know something before it happens.'<sup>58</sup>

Martin's words were copied, circulated, and translated down the centuries. They seemed to support the idea that there was a category of behaviour amongst human beings, even amongst Christian populations, that represented misguided religion—vain practices, demonic illusions, rustic ineptitudes, the survivals of paganism.

The missionaries and ecclesiastical legislators soon began to elaborate lists of these practices, lists which are often formulaic but sometimes also important evidence for local religious customs. Boniface's mission in central Germany in the eighth century left several such lists. The Germans are urged 'to abstain from all pagan cult, firmly rejecting diviners and casters of lots, sacrifices for the dead or to groves or springs, auguries, amulets, enchanters and witches . . .'<sup>59</sup> In the significantly named 'Catalogue of superstitions and pagan practices', originating from the same mission, thirty customs are listed, including predictably the cult of holy groves and springs, augury, and divination. The Catalogue also lists some other customs of a rather different nature. What of the condemnation of 'the sacrifice that is made to one of the saints'?<sup>60</sup> It is described more explicitly in the canons of a contemporary council: 'the sacrificial offerings that foolish men make before the churches in the name of the holy martyrs and confessors but in the manner of pagans.'<sup>61</sup>

This shows that in this newly converted region an important point had been reached. 'Superstition' denoted not only pagan cult, with or without explicit invocation of pagan gods (demons), but could also be

<sup>58</sup> Martin of Braga, *De correctione rusticorum*, ed. C. W. Barlow, *Martini episcopi Bracarenensis opera omnia* (Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome, 12, 1950), pp. 183–203.

<sup>59</sup> Boniface, ep. 43, ed. Reinhold Rau, *Briefe des Bonifatius/Willibalds Leben des Bonifatius* (AQ 4b, Darmstadt, 1968), p. 124 (sent by Pope Gregory III but presumably at Boniface's instigation).

<sup>60</sup> *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*, *ibid.*, pp. 444–8.

<sup>61</sup> *Concilium Germanicum*, 5, *ibid.*, p. 380.

extended to cover the rites of Christians, performed explicitly in honour of the saints, if the authorities considered these improper. As Aquinas put it, 'superstition is a vice opposed to religion . . . because it involves religious cult addressed either to an improper object or in an improper manner'.<sup>62</sup> 'Superstition', a concept that had at its core an idea of 'pagan survivals' as clear and as condescending as that held by a Victorian or Edwardian anthropologist, could thus be extended to cover all that theologians and canonists deemed rustic, foolish and restlessly vacuous. Whatever Christianity sheered off from prior religious practice could be bundled up and put in a pile labelled 'superstition', but, like a compost heap, it was a pile with a life of its own.

Finally, it is worth stressing how conscious contemporaries were of the radical fracture in their religious life that the new dispensation represented. There is the famous story of how the pagan king of the Frisians, Radbod, agreed to convert and even had one foot in the font, when it occurred to him to ask 'whether there would be more kings, princes and nobles of the Frisian people in the heavenly region or in hell'. The missionary did not disguise the fact that Radbod's pagan predecessors would certainly not be in the heavenly region. Radbod withdrew his foot from the font, asserting that he did not wish to cut himself off from the company of all his predecessors, princes of the Frisians, simply in order 'to live in the heavenly kingdom with a few poor people'.<sup>63</sup>

The story may not be literally true, but it expresses a basic fact: the commitment of the pagan peoples of Europe to their religion as something ancestral and something defining. When Cyril-Constantine denounced the holy oak tree in the Crimea, its devotees responded, 'We have not just begun to do this, but have taken it from our fathers.'<sup>64</sup> Converts to Christianity were frequently reproached by fellow pagans for abandoning 'the laws of their fathers' or 'the laws of the fatherland'.<sup>65</sup> There was a battle on about identity. Even the bodies of the dead might become weapons in this struggle. In 1044, over half a century after the conversion of Kiev to Christianity, the remains of two of the old pagan princes of Kiev were exhumed, baptised, and

<sup>62</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 2. 2. 92. 1, ed. Gilbey and O'Brien, 40, p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> *Vita Vulframni*, 9, ed. Levison, p. 668.

<sup>64</sup> *Vita Constantini*, 12, tr. Kantor and White, pp. 41–3.

<sup>65</sup> e.g. Helmold of Bosau, 13, ed. Stoob, p. 72; *Sancti Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis vita Prieflingensis*, 2. 5, ed. Wikarjak and Liman, p. 34.

reburied in the Church of the Holy Virgin there.<sup>66</sup> This far from orthodox solution to what we might call Radbod's dilemma drew new lines in Kievan history: the dynasts of the pagan past did not have to be jettisoned but could be torn from their own world and placed in a Christian Kievan history.

Treatment of the dead is indeed one of the fundamental components that defines a community. Christian missionaries and conquerors repeatedly insisted that cremation was a wholly unacceptable pagan practice, Charlemagne even making it a capital offence in Saxony.<sup>67</sup> It was, however, part of the ancestral laws in many pagan societies, part of the traditional world. In 1223, when the Estonians threw off the Christianity that had been recently imposed on them, they immediately reasserted their own ancestral funeral customs, 'digging up the bodies of their people that had been buried in the churchyards and burning them in the old pagan way'.<sup>68</sup>

This is a counterpart to the baptism of the corpses of the Kievan princes. Both acts were designed to integrate the living and the dead by reclaiming the ancestors. In Kiev the dead were dragged into the new dispensation, in Estonia the dead were pulled back from it, even though, as in the case of Radbod's foot, it might seem that an irrevocable step had been taken by their inhumation in Christian cemeteries.

Pagans and Christians alike knew what the issues were and how much they mattered. Eventually the whole of Europe passed into the new order. Pagan societies became Christian; in the long run no Christian societies became pagan. Yet this ratchet-like, one-way process was not inevitable, quick or easy. If Europeans had gained something that they had not had before, it is also worth remembering that they lost some things they already had.

<sup>66</sup> *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, tr. Samuel Cross and Olgerd Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 139.

<sup>67</sup> *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, 7, ed. Alfred Boretius, MGH, Leges sectio II: *Capitularia regum Francorum*, 1 (Hanover, 1883), p. 69.

<sup>68</sup> Henry of Livonia, *Chronicon Livoniae*, 26. 8, ed. Leonid Arbusow and Albert Bauer (AQ 24, Darmstadt, 1959), p. 286.