

The Viking Age: People, Places, Things

In what ways did the pagan and Christian cosmologies of the Viking Age differ? How are they expressed archaeologically? Use case studies to illustrate your answer.

2,500 words

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Introduction.

This piece will examine the ways in which pagan and Christian cosmologies differ, specifically those reflected in burial practices, in their archaeological expressions during the Viking Age. This will be undertaken using two case studies, specifically the burials of old Norse sorceresses to illustrate the points made. This paper will follow the burials of these sorceresses, their roles within society and their 'magical' abilities as well as the artefacts buried with them (in some cases, slaves). Following this, a transition will be explained through the burials of Scandinavian burials through the use of grave goods and ritual behaviour as a source information for the archaeological explanations, the paper will use examples of grave goods and ritual behaviour to describe their progression from pagan cosmology into Christian cosmology. Lastly, the paper will compare and contrast the studies and state the differences between pagan and Christian cosmologies of the Viking age. The assumption of the essay is that pagan and Christian cosmology has an evident progression which is shown in the burials, grave goods and ritualistic practices of the period.

Viking cosmology has been studied extensively by the likes of Neil Price who this paper will reference extensively. To understand the differences between Old Nordic '*pagan*' and Christian cosmologies of the Viking age, this paper must explain some terms and differences of the Old Nordic religion compared to Christian religion. Such as the language inhabitants of medieval Scandinavia referred to their religion; '*Forn Siðr*', which translates to 'the old way/custom' (Neil Price, 2019) and is described as '*pagan*' from the Christian view point. On the other hand, those who lived in Forn Siðr, referred to Christianity as 'the new way/custom'. Theories such as those of material culture help us show a progression of culture and faith.

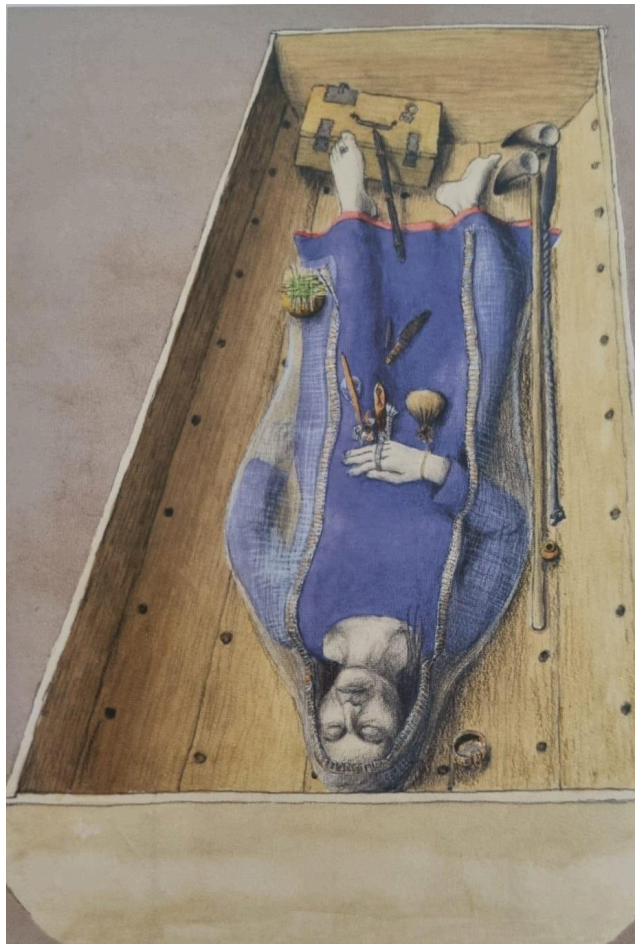


Figure 1: A reconstruction of grave 4 from the Fyrkat cemetery in Jylland, Denmark.

Drawing by Thomas Hjejle Bredsdorff. (Neil Price, 2019)

Within this particular essay, the focus is on primarily grave goods and burials of Scandinavian women/sorceresses; these however, do not directly state what the pagan and Christian cosmologies are or how they differ. As such, this paper will give a short and concise introduction.

The sagas of the Viking period, usually transcribed by Christians, explain differing roles of gods within the Viking period as well as cosmological events. For this introduction, the paper will use a translation of *The Voluspa* (Turner, 1841) which alongside the *Edda* are the most well referenced and venerated poems. *The Voluspa* starts with the genesis of the world and what came before, such as the giants and the

nine worlds. Several entities are referenced throughout, such as *the sun* which produced greenery, the *moon* and 'heaven'. A key event is the creation of the Duergas (*dwarfs*) followed by the finding of Ask and Embla who were given a soul by Odin, reason by Hænir, blood and complexion by Lodur. This paper will highlight the sorceress Heid, who is said to have knowledge of many future events, the ability to use enchantments and magic arts and who was burned and re-born many times (Turner, 1841, 172, 173). This woman, a potential sorceress, is the focus of interest for this paper in relation to the burials of Viking sorceresses such as the one buried at Fyrkat and the Osenburg Ship burial due to the evidence archeologists can investigate to deepen our understanding of pagan cosmology .

Within Viking cosmology, some of the dominant gods, Odinn, Tyr and Greyr resided in an upper world that served as a parallel to the human world. There was a belief that the world is connected through a 'bridge' that gods, souls and ritualistic specialists use to traverse between the plane of the gods and humans (Dubois, 1999, 56). Human specialists of their faith, the sorceresses possessed relations with spirits and could achieve altered states of consciousness by using differing trances and would then consult the world of deities (Dubois, 1999, 67). Women appeared as central to the practices within households, at times they held the title of 'priestesses', such as in the 'Landnámabók', where two women hold these titles of *gyðja* and are said to faithfully defend the pagan faith (Dubois, 1999, 66).

With the arrival of Christianity in the region, the Viking faith had to dissolve or adopt Christianity, while others who opposed this cult of Christianity created their own unified cults (Dubois, 1999, 60).

Viking Graves of old Norse sorceresses

The identification of these graves as those of Norse sorceresses is based on a handful of key objects of the trade, primarily that of the precedence of a staff, psychedelic substances, cult objects, and in some cases sacrifices. These women, also called the 'völva' - which translates to staff-bearer - are specifically known to use their sorcery

as a means, method and mechanism to influence and compel the ‘others’ (Price, 2020, 211, 224). Alongside this, imagery of Freya and Odin within grave goods, such as in jewellery or tapestries are mentioned in relation to these women due to their intertwinement with magic. The staffs and substances these sorceresses would use are also documented within Christian missionary reports, Arabic merchant texts, and pictured within tapestries at the Osenburg ship burial (Price, 2020). There is no specific look or way to classify these graves as certainly belonging to a *völva*, however, the co-occurrence of these grave goods and female inhumations does show a correlation.



Figure 2: The Oseberg Ship in the former Viking Ship Museum. Photo: Museum of the Viking Age, University of Oslo.

The *Oseberg Ship*, which for this paper is an area of focus, is a ship of distinctively viking production that was found in ‘Oseberg’ in Norway. It holds the skeletal remains of two women, one a probable princess or priestess as seen by her garments and age, being older. By taking a closer look into the materials of what she wore, archaeologists can reasonably conclude she was of a higher social status. Being of an older age, at least older than 70, than the other, younger, woman and being dressed in these garments may signify her role as a sorceress. The other woman,

approximately 45-50 years of age found on the ship is dressed in poorer clothes and may have been a slave or ritualistic sacrifice. Specifically, both are depicted within the tapestries found inside the ship and this is how archeologists, such as Price, can assume that their relationship is one of master and slave, or at least ritual sacrifice.

Archeologists have theorised on ways to distinguish boat uses in graves, one such idea by Crumlin-Pedersen (1995 cited in Gerds, Andrén, A., Jennbert, K. and Raudvere, C. eds, 2006, 156) is that boat graves can serve three purposes: a secular, a practical or, importantly for this paper, a religious meaning. Rather than serving as a method of transportation towards the world of the dead, it serves as a religious symbol, comparable to the Christian Cross or Thor's hammer. In relation to the Osenburg gravel, its already prominent association with sorceresses is only compounded by the presence of references to this and other symbols associated with gods like Thor.



Figure 3: Interpretation of the Oseberg burial during its funerary ceremony.
(Gansum, 2004).

The fourth grave found in Fyrkat contains the skeletal remains of a woman placed in a resting position within a wagon with several grave goods around her (*see figure 1 and 2*). This particular grave is important due to the ritualistic aspect and what this expresses archeologically. The grave is one of 30 years of age, found at a circular formation in Jutland, Denmark, during the 1950s and is seen as one of the best examples of a potential sorceress grave (Dubois, 1999). The grave itself is rectangular in shape and lined with a thin layer of clay, within this clay there is a wooden body of a wagon, which holds the 'sorceress' and several grave goods are found such as the remnants of a staff, charms of varying degrees (*see figure 5*) jewellery, bowls and other finds that place her as the richest of the burial grounds (Price, 2019, 110, 111). Specifically important is the charm of a chair, a recurring object in the graves of other sorceresses. Of further interest is the directional positioning of the body with her head facing west, a traditionally Christian position (Neil Price, 2019, 107). Wagon burials are seen more commonly within female burials of the Viking period, the burial of the Osenburg ship, one of the best preserved examples of the intricate design of these wagons and mortuary significance of these wagons is confirmed in the Osenburg tapestry as well as the Gotlandic picture stones (Rosdahl 1979, Hagg 2009, Graslund 1980, Brogger & Shetelig 1928 and Lindqvist 1941 cited in Neil Price, 2019, 108). The wagon burials of these women are argued by Snaedal in 2010 to be the female equivalent to the burials of dead male warriors to follow the Valhöll Journey (Snaedal, 2010 cited in Neil Price 2019, 109).



Figure 4: Reconstruction of grave 4 at Fyrkat. Drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson (Neil Price, 2019).

Price, in his book *The children of Ash and Elm* (2020), considers how the Norse population experienced life, based on archaeological finds and theories. Of interest to this paper is the life of women in relation to pagan and Christian cosmologies, specifically the lives of sorceresses and what archaeologists can infer from their presence in burial practices, tapestries or written sources. Within the graves of these sorceresses, archaeologists have discovered they are buried with 'tools of the trade' such as hallucinogens, animal body parts, charms, amulets and 'deviant' clothes, (Price, 2020, 224) which are used to interpret their graves as one of sorcery due to the written documentation which mention the use of these tools.

Women among the Scandinavians were seen as prominent members of the community, their ability specifically relates to taking on the role of connecting the spiritual side of life, such as with interactions with spirits, the gods and entities of

nature with their community. Within everyday life, Scandinavians were concerned with the invisible population of nature beings and spirits. (Price, 2020, 208).

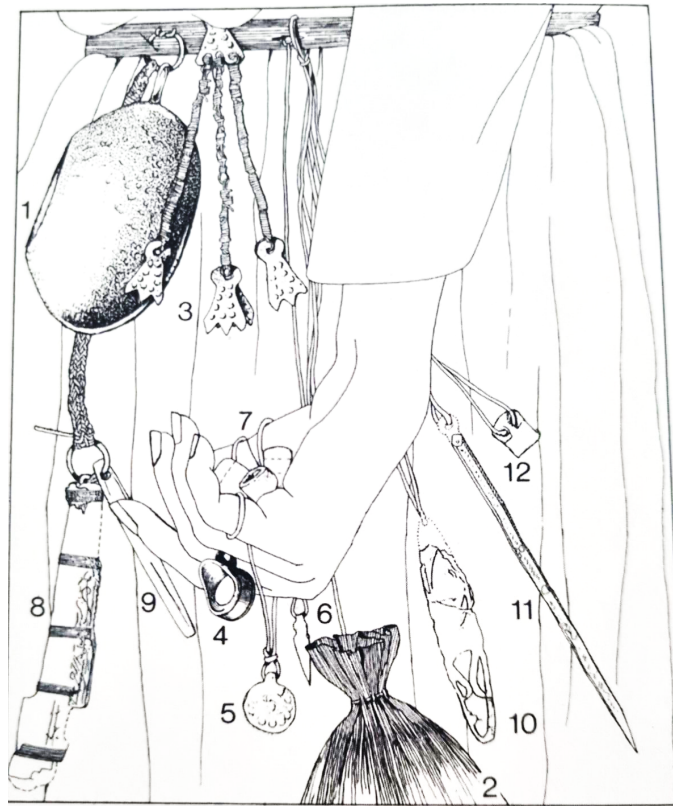


Figure 5: Grave goods from Fyrkat grave 4, reconstruction by Hayo Vierck (Niel Price, 2019).

A divergence of Viking cosmology is their inhumation, as according to the Snorri, the *Laws of Odin* state that the dead must be cremated with their possessions, the ashes have to be taken to sea or buried and mounds are created for those of great merit and carved stones for the memorable. The progression away from these 'pagan' ideas into a more 'Christian' idea of a rightful burial, such as the inhumations and east-west direction of the fourth Fyrkat grave is displayed in the burials of sorceresses.

The sorceresses are also seen at times buried with animal sacrifices, or even slaves (see Osenburg and Birka sorceresses), as time progresses, a noticeable deviation in these burials occurs when animal sacrifices are no longer present. This can be seen in the Birka sorcerer, whose grave contained the ritualistic sacrifice of both two horses and a dog in a separate compartment. Based on the appearance of these ritualistic

murders, such as within the Osenburg ship burial, as well as our somewhat muddled understanding of Viking cosmology, these slave or animal sacrifices are undertaken to send the soul to another astral plain. Interestingly, the lack of cremation in co-occurrence of these burials may archaeologically show the effect of Christian cosmology and their disdain towards the cremation of the body and the adoption of inhumations.

Consideration of Pagan and Christian cosmological impact

The graves of these sorceresses are only a small portion of all possible sorceress graves, of which an indepth analysis would go beyond the scope of this essay. The identity of the dead, specifically the buried women mentioned in this essay is reflected in the rituals of death, most importantly how the identity reflected their cosmological beliefs, ideological frameworks and world-views. Certain features of burial practices, such as sacrifices, psychedelics as well as positioning all point towards differing archaeological interpretations of cosmology (Jannbert, 2006, 137). For this paper, the aim of a comparison of these archaeological finds is to show the influences of Viking age cosmologies on the burial practices of Viking Scandinavia.

While a highly educated and conscientious Christian would not tolerate pagan elements, from a Norse point of view, a new god with the name of Jesus or Mary would not be problematic to adopt without changing the nature of their beliefs due to their tolerance to such ideas and their polytheistic nature, pointing towards a development of syncretic religion - fusion of different religions or faiths in an easing of tradition (Price, 2020, 219). The slow integration of Christian ideas and practices can be seen through the seepage of Christian burial practices and symbols, (Winroth, 2012, 103). The progression of a ship burial with large, expensive burial goods to a small wagon, with the most basic of tools expresses a transference from a highly ritualised pagan practice associated with early Viking age and its cosmology – which is highly ingrained with sorceresses – into a highly influenced, coalescence of Christian and pagan cosmology into a small, coffin like burial with the barest essentials.

By following the examples set previously, the paper shows an overlapping and complex history of the Christianisation of Viking age Scandinavia, expressed in this paper through burial and monuments. The earliest Viking age Burials show ritualistic pagan funeral rites within their treatment of the dead as well as burial goods. Specifically, the pagan cosmologies are realised within the graves of sorceresses. The later Viking age burials differ in their lack of or Christian grave goods, such as the appearance of crucifixes rather than statues of Odin (Price, 2019). Another striking difference is the placement of the body, later burials have been found facing East-West which is a primarily Christian practice (Price, 2019).

Although these progressions show a removal of the 'old' to the 'new', pagan cosmologies have not been completely forgotten or ignored, but may have instead been readapted into a Christian cosmology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has opened a discussion on the way archaeologists can decipher the progression of Christianity through Scandinavia by evaluating the burials of these Viking sorceresses. The pagan and Christian cosmologies are illustrated through the examples of primarily the *Osenburg* ship burial and the *Fyrkat* burial, which show a reflection in the way Scandinavians buried their dead with regards to their beliefs of life, death and the universe.

The progression of large ship burials filled with luxuries and at times, sacrificed slaves, to in comparison a smaller, specifically east-west facing wagon with the bare essential 'tools of the trade' are both examples of the graves of sorceresses, their differing burial rituals show a concatenation, or 'fusion' of pagan and Christian cosmologies. There is an evident progression that can be followed throughout all sorceresses given outside of these two examples which is compounded by the written sources of both cosmologies.

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