

The Viking way: religion and war in late Iron Age Scandinavia.

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The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia

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2002 (English) Doctoral thesis, comprehensive summary (Other academic)

Abstract [en]

The social role of magic is a prevalent theme of the medieval Icelandic sagas that claim to describe life several centuries earlier in the Viking Age, and indeed also saturates the Eddic poetry that is our primary source for the mythology and cosmology of the time. However, little archaeological or historical research has been done to explore what this aspect of ritual may really have meant to the men and women of late Iron Age Scandinavia.

This book examines the evidence for Old Norse sorcery, looking at its meaning and function, practice and practitioners, and the complicated constructions of gender and sexual identity with which these were underpinned. In particular, it focuses on the notion of a "supernatural empowerment of violence" - essentially the way in which the physical prosecution of warfare was supported by a structure of rituals intended to produce success in battle. At the core of this concept, it is argued, lay the extended complex of performances collectively known as seiðr, a form of operative magic connected with the god Óðinn and often interpreted as a form of shamanism.

The thesis addresses these issues by exploring the relationship between two aspects of life in the Viking Age, namely religion and war. For early medieval Scandinavia, neither of these concepts can be exactly equated with their modern,

Western equivalents. The text examines a wide range of topics relating to the above themes, including surveys of current thinking on Viking religion and the frameworks proposed for the study of shamanism; claims for pre-Viking shamanism in Scandinavia and Europe, especially recent work on the Migration period; the cult of Å“Å°inn and its rituals; gender boundaries and sexual concepts in Old Norse society, focusing on magic and studies of female ritual specialists; the concept of the soul; spirits and other supernatural beings; the material culture of seiÅ°r and related practices; battle magic and the ritualisation of aggression; Viking Age cultural attitudes to animals; and lycanthropic, â ~totemisticâ™ beliefs relating to warriors. The concluding section examines the overall concept of ritualised violence, as articulated by a gender-bounded caste of specialists corresponding to what might elsewhere be termed shamans, in the context of the socio-political changes taking place during the Viking period in Scandinavia.

The societies of Viking Age Scandinavia spanned a complex border zone between the Germanic and circumpolar cultural spheres, and their belief systems are discussed in this light. Throughout the book, the ritual practices of the Norse are examined in relation to those of the SÅµmi people with whom they shared much of the Scandinavian peninsular. Late Iron Age understandings of religion and war are also reviewed against the background of similar perspectives among the â ~shamanicâ™ cultures of the circumpolar region, from Siberia to the North American arctic and Greenland.

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