

The Pagans and the Other

Varying Presentations in the Early Middle Ages.¹

Ian Wood

For the early Christians the pagans were all around them: however much the Christians saw the pagans as different, they came from the same families, lived in the same cities, and were subject to the same government. The Otherness of the pagan was thus defined in terms of spiritual blindness or, in the martyr acts, cruelty. While the pagans were outsiders to the Christian community, they all, pagan and Christian, lived within a single Empire, and to some extent shared a single classical culture. With the Christianisation of the state, perspectives began to change, though the changes were complex, and until the eighth century pagans in our sources are likely to be close neighbours of the Christians, meaning that it was difficult to present them as totally alien: rather they were marginal figures who might be no more different than other awkward members of society. Towards the end of the eighth century, however, the pagan came to be more obviously the ‘Outsider’, defined increasingly as the Outsider to the Carolingian empire. In the ninth century, as the expansion of the Carolingian empire brought the Franks into greater contact with hitherto little-known areas, this would lead to a very complex debate about Otherness, which would only be halted in the North by the emergence of the Viking threat, which led to the emergence of a simplistic (though equally manipulated) image of the heathen – a destructive force, albeit one that might also be seen as the agent of divine wrath. Something of the complexity of the mid-ninth century debate, however, would continue in discourse about

¹ This is a version of a paper given to Hans-Werner Goetz’s seminar in Hamburg on 9th January 2010.

Slavonic paganism, especially in the writings of Bruno of Querfurt. Perhaps because the Slavs were increasingly familiar to Christian missionaries, descriptions of their religious practices, which are far more revealing than anything we have for the Germanic peoples, appear to be remarkably factual, especially in the writings of Helmold of Bosau.² The most exotic description of pagan cult in the late eleventh century does not, in fact, concern Slavonic paganism, but rather cult in what ought by then to have been the relatively familiar world of central Scandinavia. Adam of Bremen's depiction of pagan cult at Uppsala (which, after all, is not far from the Christian centre of Sigtuna) is so out-of-line with every other indication of pagan practice in the region, that it would seem to be a fantasy – and one for which archaeology has found no basis, with the result that it has even been suggested that the account is a parody of the practice of Christians who, as supporters of Gregory VII, were in conflict with Hamburg-Bremen.³ This is not an interpretation that has met with much support, but it is undoubtedly the case that the image of pagan Uppsala presented in the writings of Adam of Bremen is, as we shall see, very different from the much more nuanced picture of paganism in our earlier sources.

My argument begins, however, in the fourth and fifth centuries. Of course the transformation of the Roman Empire into a Christian State was not instantaneous, and the very fact that it was followed by the dissolution of the western Empire and the establishment of the successor states complicated the picture of the pagan. Most of the barbarians were converted to Christianity, albeit a heretical variety, Arianism, prior to the end of imperial rule. Interestingly their Arianism is often unremarked, except where it led to conflict with Roman Christians. The religious position of the Franks, the group that remained pagan longest, is equally unremarked in our contemporary sources, although Avitus of Vienne praises Clovis for his wisdom in converting – albeit the final stage of Clovis' conversion was probably from a position of being an Arian sympathiser.⁴ It is not until Gregory of Tours, writing three-quarters of a century after Clovis' conversion that we are presented with an image of the pagan Franks, in an extraordinary

² See the edition by H. Stoob, *Helmold von Bosau. Slawenchronik* (Darmstadt, 2002).

³ Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, IV 26-9, in ed. W. Trillmich, *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der Hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches* (Darmstadt, 1961). See H. Janson, 'Adam of Bremen and the Conversion of Scandinavia', in G. Armstrong and I.N. Wood, *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals* (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 83-8, for a short statement of the view that the temple at Uppsala is fictional.

⁴ Avitus, *ep.* 46, ed. R. Peiper, *MGH, AA VI 2* (Berlin, 1883). See D. Shanzer and I. Wood, *Avitus of Vienne, Letters and Selected Prose* (Liverpool, 2002), pp. 362-73.

outburst which follows the introduction in the *Histories* of the Merovingian family:⁵ the Franks ‘fashioned idols for themselves out of creatures of the woodlands and the waters, out of birds and beasts: these they worshipped in the place of God, and to these they made their sacrifices.’

It is difficult to know what to make of this. Hermann Moisl noted that in the equivalent section of his *Chronicle* Fredegar went on to tell the tale of Merovech's birth, which Moisl thought implied a critique of Merovingian sacrality, and he reckoned that Gregory's outburst was an unspoken attack on what Fredegar openly exposed.⁶ This, I think, is to go too far: first, I doubt whether the story of Merovech's birth is really a left-over of a sense of the family's sacrality (in my own view Fredegar's account of Merovech's origins is intended to satirise the Merovingians, calling into question their bloodline):⁷ second, I am not sure that Gregory's outburst was intended to say anything about the Merovingians themselves. Nevertheless, his attack on the early Franks, on their creation of idols of birds and beasts of the woods and waters, and their sacrifices, is clearly intended to carry weight. Whether we should accept Gregory's image of Frankish paganism as historically accurate is an open question. What it does is set the early Franks in a primitive world, which is made all the more distant through an ensuing series of comparisons with definitions of paganism from the Old Testament. While Gregory provides no concrete information on Frankish paganism, he offers a lot of Biblical citation.

Images of paganism in Gregory are, in fact, always problematic. As Yitzhak Hen has remarked, the story of the Lombard stylite Wulfiloic destroying the statues of Diana scarcely proves a thriving paganism in the region of Trier: rather this seems to be destruction of images which had no religious currency.⁸ Arguably we enter a rather more significantly pagan world when we turn

⁵ Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum* II 10, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH, SRM I, I (Hannover, 1951).

⁶ H. Moisl, ‘Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies and Germanic oral tradition’, *Journal of Medieval History* 7 (1981), pp. 215-48, at 223-6.

⁷ Fredegar III 9, ed. B. Krusch, MGH, SRM II (Hannover, 1888). I.N. Wood, ‘Deconstructing the Merovingian family’, in R. Corradini, M. Diesenberger and H. Reimitz, eds., *The Construction of Communities* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 149-71, at 149-53.

⁸ Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH, SRM I, (Hannover, 1951), VIII 15: Y. Hen, ‘Paganism and Superstitions in the time of Gregory of Tours: une question mal posée!’, in K. Mitchell and I.N. Wood, eds., *The World of Gregory of Tours* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 229-40, at 232-4.

to Jonas of Bobbio, and his tale of a barrel of beer dedicated to Wodan by pagans of the Bregenz region:⁹ here we meet barbarians who are surprised at Columbanus's exorcism of the barrel (which caused its explosion), and their subsequent conversion. The extent to which this really depicts an alien group, however, is called into question by the fact that the miracle is repeated in the *Life of Vedast*, which may be by Jonas or written by someone else in imitation of his hagiography. On this occasion the exorcism of the beer barrel takes place on the estate of the noble Hocinus, when the Merovingian king Chlothar I was present at dinner. Here (as in Gregory's tale of Wulfiloic) we are scarcely dealing with active pagan cult, but rather with social practices which may once have been religious, but now constituted part of the ritual of aristocratic feasting, and which would have been familiar to many supposedly orthodox Christians.¹⁰ There probably was some pagan survival in the far north-east of Francia: we find mention of it in the *Lives* of Amandus, Audoin and of Eligius, but this is a marginal world, and, being within the Merovingian kingdom, is never really treated as wholly 'Other', at least not within authentic Merovingian texts, although, as Yitzhak Hen has noted, the Carolingians made this earlier world seem more pagan.¹¹

When we turn from the Merovingian world to Anglo-Saxon England in the late sixth and seventh century it is striking, once again, how little we learn about paganism. Augustine, the missionary sent by Gregory I, was so frightened by the prospect of working among the Anglo-Saxons that he almost turned back.¹² But once in England he seems rapidly to have adapted to the reality of the situation. Christianity may, in fact, have been rather more established in Kent before his arrival than we usually think: the queen, Bertha, had come to England with her priest, and she had certainly familiarised the upper classes of the Kentish kingdom with her Christianity – although it may well have been familiar in any case: there are indications of the survival of some Christian cult among the British even in the south-east of England. And there are also good reasons for thinking that Æthelbeht was already converted, if not baptised, before 597:

⁹ Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani*, ed. B. Krusch, MGH, SRG 37 (Hannover, 1905), I 27.

¹⁰ Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Vedastis*, ed. B. Krusch, MGH, SRM III (Hannover, 1896 and 1902), 7.

¹¹ *Vita Amandi* 13, 18-9, ed. B. Krusch, MGH, SRM V (Hannover, 1910): *Vita Andoini* 4, ed. W. Levison, MGH, SRM V (Hannover, 1910): *Vita Eligii*, II 16, ed. B. Krusch, MGH, SRM IV (Hannover, 1902): Hen, 'Paganism and Superstitions in the time of Gregory of Tours'.

¹² Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* I 23, ed. C. Plummer, *Baedae Opera Historica* (Oxford, 1896).

indeed his baptism may have prompted the Gregorian mission.¹³ From Gregory's letters and from Bede's account, we learn a little about pagan shrines and feast days, but Gregory himself rapidly understood that they could be transformed into part of the Christian cult. So unthreatening was Anglo-Saxon paganism that we cannot even tell whether some of the issues raised in the Gregorian *Responsiones*, supposedly written by Gregory in response to questions posed by Augustine, were concerned with heretical Christian practices among the Britons rather than with paganism itself.¹⁴

A small number of anecdotes in Bede apparently provide us with insights into paganism, but all of them turn out to be problematic. For instance, he tells us that king Rædwald of East Anglia apostatised from Christianity to paganism, and set up a temple in which there was an altar to Christ and another to the devils he had previously served.¹⁵ Whether this represented real apostasy, or rather some sort of syncretism is unclear, especially given the fact that temple-building seems not to have been a traditional aspect of Germanic paganism, so that Rædwald's temple is likely to have been a church. In all probability Rædwald was a Christian who continued to practice certain pagan rituals, much as the Hungarian king Geza would do in the late tenth century: Geza simply claimed that he was rich enough to do so.¹⁶ In fact Bede's portrait of Rædwald consistently makes him marginal, rather than Other, for the king of East Anglia refused to kill Edwin, one of Bede's heroes, when he was living in exile at his court, despite requests from the king of Northumbria, and in so doing Bede says that Rædwald kept faith with his guest: he uses the word *fides*, which obviously has religious as well as social connotations.¹⁷

Equally problematic is the famous account of the decision of Edwin to convert to Christianity, following his establishment on the Northumbrian throne. At the end of a lengthy debate on the

¹³ I. Wood, 'The Mission of Augustine of Canterbury to the English', *Speculum* 69 (1994), pp. 1-17, at 10-11.

¹⁴ R. Meens, 'A background to Augustine's Mission to Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1994), pp. 5-17; I.N. Wood, 'Some historical re-identifications and the Christianization of Kent', in Armstrong and Wood, *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 27-35.

¹⁵ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II 15.

¹⁶ Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon* VIII 4, ed. W. Trillmich (Darmstadt, 1957).

¹⁷ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* II 12.

merits of the new religion Bede says that the high priest Coifi mounted a stallion and desecrated the temple at Goodmanham by plunging a spear into it.¹⁸ As Julia Barrow has recently argued, this seems to be an allegorical reworking of the account in St John's Gospel of the piercing of Christ's side.¹⁹ The story might still tell us something about paganism, despite the allegorical overtones that Barrow has identified: much has been made in the past that Coifi was supposedly breaking priestly taboos by picking up a spear and mounting a stallion, but the temple he attacked may well have been modelled on a Christian Church: it might even have been a Roman building put to new use. One should remember Rædwald's temple. However we understand this story, it scarcely presents paganism as a completely alien set of practices.

Bede thus fails to present Anglo-Saxon pagans as entirely Other, but rather sets them up either within an allegorical narrative or as marginal figures. The real Other in the Ecclesiastical History are not the pagans, but the Christian British. Indeed, in his description of king Cædwallon, Bede presents him in the following manner 'although a Christian by name and profession, ... nevertheless a barbarian in heart and disposition, and spared neither women nor innocent children. With bestial cruelty he put all to death by torture ... meaning to wipe out the whole English nation ... Nor did he pay any respect to the Christian religion which had sprung up amongst them.'²⁰ He is essentially more alien than the pagan Mercians with whom he was allied.

The paganism of the continental Saxons presented a different problem for the English of Bede's day. Boniface wished to evangelise the peoples of Germania, and sought papal approval to do so. When he reached southern Germany, however, he found that Christianity was already widely established, and that the problem was not so much paganism as unorthodox Christianity, spread by such figures as Adalbert and Clemens, or even, in Boniface's eyes, by the problematic Irish bishop of Salzburg, Vergil.²¹ By the end of his life Boniface, or those in his circle, seems to have made very little distinction between deviant Christianity and paganism: the *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*, which would seem to be associated with Boniface's conciliar activities in the 740s,

¹⁸ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* II 13.

¹⁹ J. Barrow, 'How Coifi pierced Christ's side: a re-examination of Bede's Ecclesiastical History, II, Chapter 13', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62 (2011), pp. 693-706.

²⁰ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II 20. See C. Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons* (Whithorn, 2007).

²¹ Boniface, *ep.* 60, 68, ed. M. Tangl, MGH, *Epistolae Selectae* 1 (Berlin, 1916).

effectively elides the two categories of superstitious and pagan practices, the former often being rather debased forms of Christian cult.²² Nevertheless Willibald, in his *Life of Boniface*, did construct some groups to the east of the Rhine as being very much more pagan than they actually were. Above all Dukes Theobald and Hetan appear as pagan sympathisers.²³ This would have come as a great surprise to Willibrord, for Heden was one of the earliest supporters of the monastery of Echternach.²⁴ However, although Heden had been close enough to Itta and Plectrude to donate property to their foundation, he was by no means a supporter of Charles Martel. The Othering of Theobald and Heden as semi-pagan is almost certainly a political act: paganism is being used to make them look like outsiders to the Frankish State: that is, the realm of Charles Martel and his descendants.

A different type of politics also contributed to the development of the image of pagans as the Other in the closing years of the eighth century. As both enemies of the Carolingians and as pagans the Saxons could be portrayed very much as outsiders. And indeed their paganism may well have been strengthened as a result of Charlemagne's combination of military force and Christianisation to break them: Charlemagne seems to have come to think that they could only be relied upon not to threaten the Frankish State once they had accepted Christianity. By attempting to turn Christianity and its burdens into one of the means of controlling the Saxons, Charles placed religious affiliation at the heart of a definition of his enemies.²⁵

Alcuin, of course, could see the dangers of this: looking back at Willibrord's Frisian mission, he did not see Radbod as a totally alien figure, despite his hostility to Charles Martel. According to Alcuin Radbod, like Ongendus king of the Danes, received the Anglo-Saxon missionary *honorifice*, and Radbod was struck with admiration when faced with Willibrord's actions on Helgoland.²⁶

²² A. Dierkens, 'Superstitions, christianisme et paganisme à la fin de l'époque mérovingienne', in H. Hasquin, ed., *Magie, sorcellerie, parapsychologie* (Brussels, 1985), pp. 9-26.

²³ Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, 6, ed. W. Levison, MGH, SRG 57 (Hannover, 1905).

²⁴ I. Wood, *The Missionary Life. Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050* (Harlow, 2001), pp. 62-3.

²⁵ M. de Jong, 'Charlemagne's Church', in J. Story, ed., *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester, 2005), pp. 103-35 at 125-6.

²⁶ Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*, 9-11, ed., H.-J. Reischmann, Willibrord – Apostel der Friesen (Sigmaringen, 1989).

Alcuin provides a little more on Ongendus' paganism, and his obduracy in believing in idols: but despite his hard heart (a Biblical reference) he allowed Willibrord to take 30 boys back to Francia with him. Alcuin wrote in the context of the Saxon Wars: the *Vita Willibrordi* would seem to date from 796.²⁷ And the Anglo-Saxon was certainly setting out an image of Christianisation that was critical of Charlemagne's contemporary policy. But his presentation of Radbod is probably reasonably accurate. The Frisian leader had, after all, been an ally of the Neustrian king and maior, Chilperic II and Ragamfred. He may even have come close to accepting Christianity, as stated in the anonymous *Vita Wulframmi*, written at St Wandrille in the early ninth century.²⁸ While it cannot be true as it stands, because the claim that Wulfram was alive at the time of Radbod's death is chronologically impossible, the strange tale of the Frisian rulers near-conversion in the Life of Wulfram of Sens, shows that there were those in ninth-century Neustria who saw the Frisian leader as deceived rather than alien: and many would have understood his concern at being separated from his ancestors (which is a recurrent theme in conversion stories). It should, however, also be acknowledged that the account of Radbod's death, with his being seduced into entering a fantasy golden palace, presents a wonderfully imaginative image of demonic deceit.²⁹

By far our most precise account of paganism on the fringes of the Carolingian world comes from Altfrid's life of his uncle Liudger. This begins with an extraordinary family history which includes a tale of ritual child exposure, where the unwanted child (Liudger's mother) was left to be drowned on the insistence of her grandmother, who wanted grandsons and not granddaughters.³⁰ Water is a regular feature of stories relating to Frisia (it appears also in the *Vita Vulframmi* and the *Vita Altera Bonifatii*),³¹ and while this may make the region sound exotic, it clearly reflects the reality of the landscape of the Rhine, Maas and Scheldt estuaries. In Altfrid's account what might well have been presented as a world of alien social custom becomes familiar precisely because it is part of family history, Altfrid's as well as Liudger's. The extreme Other does appear in the Life of Liudger, but not in terms of the rituals of Frisian paganism, but rather

²⁷ Wood, *The Missionary Life*, pp. 80-3, 85-6.

²⁸ *Vita Vulframmi*, 9, ed. Levison, MGH, SRM V (Hannover, 1910).

²⁹ *Vita Vulframmi*, 10.

³⁰ Altfrid, *Vita Liudgeri*, I 6, ed. W. Diekamp, *Die Vitae sancti Liudgeri* (Münster, 1881).

³¹ *Vita Vulframmi*, 8: *Vita altera Bonifatii*, 9, ed. Levison, *Vitae sancti Bonifatii*.

as the looming Viking threat, which Liudger appreciates in a vision of an approaching storm, and which Altfred himself experienced directly.³² As for the Frisians, they would most fully be presented as alien in the *Second Life of Boniface*, perhaps written in the first half of the ninth century and revised around 900, when they were reconstructed as incomprehensible semi-aquatic beings, no different from various Roman water and wood nymphs who had lived long ago.³³ Why an author writing in Utrecht, over a century after the events he describes, should have made the past so much more alien than it actually had been is something of a mystery.

Although the Saxons had been presented as alien and dangerous, most of the pagans we have been dealing with were just too familiar: they were neighbours or near neighbours, with whom the Christian Franks or Anglo-Saxons had had to deal, and as a result they had become normal in some way or other. It was not so much the pagans, as the enemy, who were presented as Other. It was when the two categories combined, as in the case of the Saxons in the last decades of the eighth century, that Pagans were categorised most fully as alien.

The Scandinavians were both pagan and unfamiliar: for the Franks, if not for the *Nordalbingi*, they were not neighbours. Perhaps not surprisingly they raised the same sense of apprehension as we have seen in Augustine of Canterbury as he set out to evangelise the Anglo-Saxons. Finding missionaries to accompany Harald Klak back to Denmark after his baptism at Ingelheim was no easy task, and this despite Harald's conversion, and despite the preliminary work done by Ebbo of Rheims. Looking back on Anskar's first trip to Denmark, in Harald's company, Rimbart saw this as a heroic act³⁴ – rather more so than had Ermoldus Nigellus, who wrote a good deal closer to the event,³⁵ albeit rather more from the point of view of the court of Louis the Pious, than from that of a missionary sent to accompany the Danish king. Here, although Rimbart was closer to Anskar and his work than was Ermoldus, his sense of doom perhaps is a reflection of

³² Altfred, *Vita Liudgeri*, I 27.

³³ Wood, *The Missionary Life*, p. 103.

³⁴ Rimbart, *Vita Anskarii*, 7, ed. W. Trillmich and R. Buchner, *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der Hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*. (Darmstadt, 1961), 16–132.

³⁵ Ermoldus Nigellus, *In honorem Ludovici Pii*, II 1882-2513, ed. E. Faral, *Ermold le Noir – Poème sur Louis le Pieux* (Paris, 1932).

his writing with hindsight, knowing full well how difficult and dangerous the task of evangelising the Danes and Swedes was.

To judge by Rimbert's *Life of Anskar*, which seems to have used some visionary writings of the saint himself, Anskar placed his mission firmly at the edge of the world, and linked it to a passage in Isaiah: 'Hear O islands, and hear ye people from far'.³⁶ There is a clear sense that Anskar was preaching at the very ends of the earth, and arguably his preaching, therefore, has an eschatological import: for once the Gospel had been preached throughout the world the end would come. Anskar was not the first to see his mission taking place at the edge of the world. Patrick too, in his work in fifth-century Ireland, had presented himself as evangelising at the world's end,³⁷ and the Christian Irish (for instance, Columbanus)³⁸ referred to themselves as coming from the extreme end of the earth: the same can be said of the Christians of north-west Spain, where one also finds a recognition that the region was *finis terrae*.³⁹ Neither the Irish nor the Gallaecians seem to have seen this in any eschatological light: it would appear, however, that the islands of Scandinavia did have a more ominous implication for Anskar. Despite this the lands of the Danes and the Swedes in Rimbert's representation seem remarkably normal. Indeed even some of the more curious aspects of paganism are presented in an extremely matter-of-fact manner. Rimbert relates how one Swede from Birka recounted that he overheard a council of the pagan gods, who had been aware that the people were interested in adopting a new one, but were unhappy with the Christian God because of his exclusivity, and so they had offered to elevate the recently deceased king Eric into being one of them.⁴⁰ The gods seem to be no more than a group of elders living within easy distance of ordinary people. Far from the pagans or paganism being presented as Other, here they seem excessively normal.

And yet Rimbert did expect to find alien beings on his own missions to Scandinavia, for he wrote to Ratramnus of Corbie, to say that he had been told that there were dog-headed men in

³⁶ Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii* 25.

³⁷ Patrick, *Confessio* 37, ed. D.R. Howlett, *The Book of Letters of Saint Patrick the Bishop* (Dublin, 1994), pp 76-7.

³⁸ Columbanus, *ep.* I 5, ed. G.S.M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera* (Dublin, 1957).

³⁹ Hydatius, *Chronica*, pref. 1, ed. R.W. Burgess, *The Chronicle of Hydatius and the Consularia Constantinopolitana* (Oxford, 1993).

⁴⁰ Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii* 26.

villages close to where he worked: and he wanted to know whether he should try to evangelise them or to kill them. We do not have the text of Rimbert's letter, but we do have Ratramnus' reply, which gives us some indication of its contents.⁴¹ Rimbert had told Ratramnus that these beings wore clothes, lived in communities, cultivated land, kept animals, and were able to speak. Ratramnus, therefore, concluded that they were rational and had souls. In addition, he was aware that saint Christopher had been dog-headed. So he concluded that the *cynocephali* could properly be the object of mission.

The notion that there were dogheaded men in the North is a recurrent one from the eighth-century onwards, and can be found in Paul the Deacon, the Arabic geographer Ibrahim ibn Ya'qub (who had apparently been informed by Otto the Great), as well as the writings of Bruno of Querfurt, to which we shall return.⁴² *Cynocephali* also appear in Adam of Bremen, who was told that they lived in what appears to have been central Sweden by the Danish king Sven Estridson, but he does not describe them as being dogheaded, but rather as having their heads on their chests.⁴³ We may be able to find some explanation for the idea of the existence of dogheaded people in the Baltic in the felt animal-masks discovered in the harbour at Haithabu.⁴⁴ These would appear to have been very lifelike, and they may suggest that tales of the *cynocephali* reflected observation of men wearing such masks. It may well be that the famous Toroslunda plaques depict masked men rather than monstrous beings.⁴⁵

More important than any explanation for the origin of the notion that there were *cynocephali* in the North, the debate about their nature raises very interesting questions relating to the notion of the Other in the eighth and ninth centuries. Although Rimbert is our earliest source to explicitly

⁴¹ Ratramnus, *ep.* 12, ed. E. Dümmler, MGH, Epistolae VI (Berlin, 1925). See I. Wood, 'Categorising the cynocephali', in *Ego Trouble: authors and their identities in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. R. Corradini, M. Gillis, R. McKitterick, I. van Renswoude (Vienna, 2010), pp. 125-36, at 131-6.

⁴² Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, I, 11, ed. G. Waitz, MGH, SRG (Hannover, 1878); G. Jacob, *Arabische Berichte von Gesandten an germanische Fürstenhöfe aus dem 9. und 10. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1927), pp. 14, 17; Bruno of Querfurt, *Passio II Adalberti* 25, ed. L. Weinrich, *Heiligenleben zur deutsch-slavischen Geschichte* (Darmstadt, 2005).

⁴³ Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, IV 19.

⁴⁴ I. Wood, 'Christians and Pagans in ninth-century Scandinavia', in *The Christianization of Scandinavia*, ed. B. Sawyer, P. Sawyer and I. Wood (Alingsås, 1987), pp. 36-67, at 64-5.

⁴⁵ Wood, 'Christians and Pagans in ninth-century Scandinavia', p. 64.

talk about dogheaded men in a missionary context, we know that missionaries had been considering texts which debated cynocephali since the early eighth century. Ratramnus himself drew attention to the tradition of Christopher as a dogheaded saint.⁴⁶ In this version of the saint's life Christopher was an extremely handsome young Canaanite who was constantly attracting the attention of young women, much to his alarm. To stop this he prayed, and in answer to his prayer God disfigured his face so that it became doglike. It was in this guise that he was accused of being a Christian, and martyred. We can probably explain some features of the tale if we note the similarity of the words Canaan and *canis*, the Latin for dog. More important, we know that this version of the *Life of Christopher* was accessible at Fulda in the late eighth century, because it is included in a manuscript of that period.⁴⁷

The most extreme of the texts describing the presence of the monstrous races in the Baltic area and beyond is the *Cosmography* of Æthicus Ister, which purports to be an account of the world from the pre-Christian period. In the guise of a travelogue which concentrates above all on the islands of the North (most of which seem to lie in the Baltic), this describes a series of marginal peoples including the Amazons and the *cynocephali*.⁴⁸ Like the *Life of Christopher* this would seem to have been a text available to missionaries: certainly the manuscript dissemination reveals it to have been known in Bavaria.

Like Ratramnus' discussion of the cynocephali, the *Cosmography* forces us to consider how alien the Other really is. The marginal peoples of the *Cosmography* include, alongside the dogheaded men and the Amazons, a very bizarre picture of the Turks.⁴⁹ There is no doubt that these beings are strange, but a careful reading of the text reveals that the same vocabulary is used to describe the inhabitants of *Germania*, as to describe the monstrous races.⁵⁰ What the *Cosmography* does is imply that the Other is to be found in the eastern part of the Carolingian world, as well as beyond it. The people of *Germania* are almost as monstrous as their neighbours.

⁴⁶ Ratramnus, *ep.* 12.

⁴⁷ Wood, 'Categorising the cynocephali', pp. 132-3.

⁴⁸ I. Wood, 'Æthicus Ister: an exercise in difference', in W. Pohl and H. Reimitz, eds., *Grenze und Differenz im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna, 2000), pp. 197-208, esp. 201-3.

⁴⁹ Æthicus Ister, *Cosmographia*, 1, 4, 6, ed. M.W. Herren, *The Cosmography of Æthicus Ister* (Turnhout, 2011).

⁵⁰ Wood, 'Æthicus Ister: an exercise in difference', pp. 203-4.

Thus, when we find Rimbert and Ratramnus debating the nature of the *cynocephali*, what we are looking at is not a simple sense that the pagan Scandinavian world is a very alien place, even though it is clear that it could seem different and frightening, but rather a debate about what the Other actually means.⁵¹ Rimbert did not question the existence of dogheaded men: rather he wanted to know whether difference mattered. The cynocephali provided the ideal subject-matter for such a discussion: they looked monstrous, but as domesticated animals, dogs were very close to humans. And indeed Gregory the Great identified dogs as allegorical representations of preachers,⁵² a notion taken up by Bede in his commentary on the prophet Tobit.⁵³ But the *cynocephali* also raise the question of whether looks were a major issue for assessing the nature of God's creation. What ultimately mattered for Ratramnus and for Rimbert was not the features of the dogheaded beings, but whether they had souls.

With the Scandinavian missions of the ninth century, then, we come across a major paradox. These missionaries had reached the extreme ends of the World, something which had eschatological overtones: yet however fearful they might be, the missionaries had discovered that the society they entered was surprisingly normal.⁵⁴ And although they heard of the existence in the region of beings who were apparently monstrous, when the missionaries considered them rationally they could be situated within God's creation. The Other was not so alien after all.

Much more of a problem than the monstrous was the aggression of the Vikings. It would appear to have been this, rather than any ongoing worries about working in an alien world that led to the interruption of the Scandinavian mission under Rimbert. Although they were not conceived of as physically different as some of the inhabitants of Scandinavia had been, the Vikings were

⁵¹ Wood, 'Categorising the *cynocephali*?'.

⁵² K.H. Kendall, ' "Mute dogs, unable to bark". Innocent III's call to combat heresy', in *Medieval Church Law and the Origins of the Western Legal Tradition*, ed. W.P. Müller and M.E. Somar (Washington, 2006), pp. 170-8, at 174-5.

⁵³ Bede, *In Tobiam*, 11, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 119B (Turnhout, 1983).

⁵⁴ I. Wood, ' "The Ends of the Earth": the Bible, Bibles, and the Other in Early Medieval Europe', in *The Calling of the Nations. Exegesis, Ethnography, and Empire in a Biblical-Historic Present*, ed. M. Vessey, S.V. Betcher, R.A. Daum and H.O. Maier (Toronto, 2011), pp. 200-16.

frequently pagan – in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle ‘heathen’ effectively becomes a synonym for the Scandinavian raiders and invaders, and in the North they were still thought of as pagan even after some of them had been converted.⁵⁵ Tales of monastic destruction and of the killing of God’s servants become relatively commonplace,⁵⁶ even if many of them are questionable (and, indeed, they tell us as much about monastic attempts to influence Carolingian policy as they do about the reality of Viking activity). However, the destructive force of the Vikings, rather more than their paganism, led to an interruption in missionary activity in the North, and insofar as mission continued through the ninth century and into the tenth it was to be found further south, in the world of the Slavs.

Throughout the period I have been discussing there was a steady erosion of paganism in the Danube region, beginning with the activity of Columbanus’ pupil Gallus, who is depicted as challenging local pagan cult in the area of the Bodensee.⁵⁷ It is the cult of traditional spirits, linked to the landscape, and not to any exotic pantheon. Immediately to the east, however, in Noricum and western Pannonia, the main work of Christianisation already seems to have been achieved in the Roman period.⁵⁸ Moving further east we come to the lands of the Bavarians and Carantanians, whose conversion is told in the *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum*.⁵⁹ Although the pagan Carantanians can hardly have seemed alien to the clergy of Bavaria, the priest Ingo deliberately cast them as animal. We are told in the *Conversio* that Ingo, who was sent as a missionary priest by Arn of Salzburg, invited the Christian servants of Carantanians to dine with him, while insisting that their pagan masters ate outside like dogs. When asked why this was, he replied, ‘Since your bodies are not cleansed, you are not worthy to communicate with those reborn in the sacred font, but you should eat your food outside like dogs.’⁶⁰ According to the author this had the miraculous effect of causing the pagans to seek instruction and baptism. A priest could challenge the leaders of Carantanian society, people with whom he must have had

⁵⁵ See the overarching description of the York Vikings as pagan, even after some had converted, in S. Keynes, ‘The Vikings in England, c.790-1016’, in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. P. Sawyer (Oxford, 1997), pp. 48-82, at 70-1

⁵⁶ J.L. Nelson, ‘The Frankish Empire’, in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. Sawyer, pp. 19-47, at 24-30.

⁵⁷ Walahfrid Strabo, *Vita sancti Galli*, 7, 12, ed. F. Schnoor and E. Tremp (Stuttgart, 2012).

⁵⁸ Eugippius, *Vita Severini*, ed. P. Régerat, Sources Chrétiennes 374 (Paris, 1991).

⁵⁹ *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum*, ed. H. Wolfram (Ljubliana, 2012).

⁶⁰ *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum* 7.

regular contact, and announce that they were doglike, because of their paganism.

The comparison of Slavs and dogs recurs in Helmold of Bosau's account of the uprising of 983-95.⁶¹ He relates how the Winil prince Mistivoi asked to marry the niece of the Saxon duke Bernard. The negative reply prompted Mistivoi to say 'The highborn niece of a great lord should marry a notable man, and not be given to a dog. We get great thanks for our service, in that we are judged to be dogs and not men. But if the dog is strong, it can bite savagely.' Helmold here seems to sympathise with Mistivoi, however, even though his rebellion was devastating. There is perhaps even an echo of the Second Book of Samuel, 3, 8: 'Am I a dog's head, which against Judah do shew kindness this day unto the house of Saul thy father ... ?'

The image of the *cynocephali* recurs in the writings of another missionary: Bruno of Querfurt. In his account of the death of Adalbert of Prague he describes how the saint, shortly before his death, found himself surrounded by a long line of dog's heads (*capita canum*), showing their fangs, and asking where he came from.⁶² This description is all the more interesting in that it is not to be found in Bruno's source, the *Life of Adalbert* ascribed to John Canaparius. Here the text written in Rome is a good deal more prosaic than that written by a missionary, who was actually waiting in Poland to continue Adalbert's mission to the Prussians.⁶³ One might have thought that the more distant text would be the less realistic. Such an assumption underlies the work of numerous modern historians (including John Block Friedman and David Williams)⁶⁴ who have commented on the monstrous in the early Middle Ages, but curiously misrepresent the evidence. For them, the Other is always in the far distance: this is radically to misunderstand its function in the imagination. Like Rimbert, so too Bruno clearly expected to meet dogheaded beings, and like Rimbert he does not seem to have been put off by the thought. The monstrous Other was close by, and it was something to be confronted head on, even if with apprehension.

⁶¹ Helmold, *Cronica Slavorum*, 16.

⁶² Bruno, *Passio II Adalberti*, 25.

⁶³ *Vita Adalberti* 28, ed. C. Gaspar in G. Klaniczay, ed., *Vitae Sanctorum Aetatis Conversionis Europae Centralis* (Saec. X-XI) (Budapest, 2013), pp.77-183.

⁶⁴ J.B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse, 2000), pp. 1, 37, 58; D. Williams, *Deformed Discourse. The function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Exeter, 1996), pp. 14, 149.

Bruno more than any other writer epitomises what I have been trying to explore, and not just in his description of the death of Adalbert. Equally revealing is his description of his mission to the Pechenegs, to be found in his Letter to Henry II. Bruno travelled to the kingdom of the Rus, and asked permission of Vladimir to go further, to work among the Pechenegs.⁶⁵ The Russian prince asked him not to, saying that he would not return alive. He took Bruno to the great dykes at the edge of the territory of the Rus, and there they camped, the king and the saint on adjacent hills, overlooking the lands of the Pechenegs. It would be impossible to be any more marginal than this. Paolo Squatriti found the description so fanciful that he denied the significance of any such dykes,⁶⁶ but they do in fact exist, and are known as the Serpent Wall or Snake Ramparts.⁶⁷ Having looked across to Pecheneg territory while singing hymns for three days, Bruno decided to defy Vladimir, and went off to evangelise. He was untouched for two days: on the third he was arrested and freed. Clearly he is recasting his experience in liturgical time. Some time later he was threatened and tortured, but when it was clear that he and his companions were not a threat, they were allowed to work among the Pechenegs. They covered three-quarters of Pecheneg territory, and converted around 30 people.

In many respects Bruno's mission to Pecheneg territory is heroic. He deliberately goes into an unknown world, despite the opposition of Vladimir. The lands of the Rus must have seemed alien enough, but Pecheneg society, being semi-nomadic, must have been even less familiar. Even so Bruno persisted in his work. And he did so despite the fact that he regarded himself as somewhat spineless. In the *Life of the Five Brothers* Bruno presents himself as being afraid to travel through war zones in Italy and on the Polish border of Germany.⁶⁸ But, having faced the Pechenegs, facing the dogheaded peoples of the Baltic must have seemed very much less of a challenge.

⁶⁵ Bruno of Querfurt, *Epistola ad Henricum II Imperatorem*, ed. W. von Giesebrecht, *Geschichte der deutschen Kaiserzeit*, 4th edn., vol 2 (Leipzig, 1875), pp. 689-92. There is a good translation online at Bruno_of_Querfurt_Letter_to_Henry_II_for_MARS_website.

⁶⁶ P. Squatriti, 'Digging ditches in early medieval Europe', *Past and Present* 176 (2002), pp. 11-65, at p. 32.

⁶⁷ S. Franklin and J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus 750-1200* (Harlow, 1996), p. 172.

⁶⁸ Bruno of Querfurt, *Vita vel Passio sanctorum Benedicti et Iohannis, sociorumque suorum*, ed. M. Miladinov, in G. Klaniczay, ed., *Vitae Sanctorum Aetatis Conversionis Europae Centralis (Saec. X-XI)*, (Budapest, 2012), pp.183-315. I. Wood, 'Shoes and a fish dinner: the troubled thoughts of Bruno of Querfurt', in R. Corradini, M. Gillis, R. McKitterick, and I. van Renswoude, eds., *Ego Trouble: authors and their identities in the Early Middle Ages* (Vienna, 2010.), pp. 249-58.

For a missionary, the Pagans obviously were the Other, but the very fact that they were to be evangelised meant that they were capable of entering Christian society. Very few attempts to write about German or early Scandinavian paganism have managed to get very far: or at least, the extensive accounts of Scandinavian paganism presented by some modern authors depend on questionable evidence: the most picturesque accounts almost all come from the pen of Snorre Sturlason, and are probably a recreation of a belief system that never really existed. The pagan Other was rarely that exotic. And even when it was imagined as exotic, as in the case of the *cynocephali*, the Other was transformed into something that was comprehensible in order to test whether it should be the object of mission. Far from being completely exotic, the Other of the early medieval missionary is almost always negotiable territory. It might look terrible and alien, but it has in it the seeds of something familiar and domestic.

This, it seems to me, is the purpose of the Other in the early Middle Ages: it is concerned to make things negotiable or ambiguous. The early medieval pagan was not particularly exotic. Those within what had been the Roman Empire, or just across its borders, were known quantities. The Anglo-Saxon pagans would appear to have modelled their religion on Christianity, in that, unlike their continental cousins, they seem to have developed the use of buildings, probably on the Christian model. The pagans of *Germania* had no such buildings, preferring to perform their rites in natural places: but for Boniface their superstitions were not really very different from some of the more debased Christian practices: for if the boundary between Pagan and Christian was ambiguous, that cut in two directions: Christianity was liable to degenerate into improper practice.

And this, surely, was a significant factor. As we saw at the outset, in the Roman World Pagans and Christians belonged to the same society in many respects, so the distinction between them was only to be found in certain areas of life. In the early Middle Ages there were fewer pagans in the successor states, certainly once the Anglo-Saxons had been converted. The Pagans were, therefore, across the border: but the border was very permeable, and it is not clear where pagan territory really began. For Willibald, Theobald and Heden could be presented as semi-pagan,

which was probably a political slur.

Missionaries only really began to enter an unfamiliar world when they reached Scandinavia, that is territory that did not lie directly across the border from the Frankish world as defined in the Merovingian period. It was conceptualised as Other, but that conceptualisation, with its use of *cynocephali* and even Amazons, was one that allowed integration. The Other is often seen as a way of making certain groups different and alien. In the early Middle Ages we seem to witness a use of difference that was rather concerned to make things potentially integrable. As a result, paganism in our sources is very much less alien than we usually expect, except perhaps in some of the great Slav temple sites of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, for which we have excellent descriptions in both Adam and Helmold, as well as some archaeological evidence.⁶⁹ These, however, may indeed have developed as a reaction to Christianity – like the temples of Anglo-Saxon England. Significantly, the most alien site of all, Adam’s temple of Uppsala, would seem to be a construct of the imagination, intended to render the region totally alien, although we really do not know why.

In short, although Paganism was alien to the Christian, churchmen wanted above all to bring the pagans into the Christian fold: they were part of God’s creation, and they had to be preached to before the Last Times. The Other, therefore, had to allow the possibility of integration. As a result the Pagan Other in the early Middle Ages is an ambiguous category, and not a clear demarcation of difference.

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