The Thorwald Cross
By Alexandra L. Moran

The Isle of Man

In the Irish Sea, between Ireland and what is now Great Britain, sits the Isle of Man. For the Norse who settled it centuries ago, it was a valuable and strategic stepping-stone. Easily accessible from Ireland in the west, Scotland in the north, England in the east, and Wales in the south, Man became a common point of layover for many sea travelers, Viking or otherwise. In Orkneyinga Saga, for example, Svein Asleifarson uses Man as a base for raiding, returning to the island each autumn (Chapters 78 and 79).

The inhabitants of Man left behind memorial crosses, erected as early as the tenth century (Page 10). What remains of these carefully crafted memorials is weathered stone, though it can be assumed that many more crosses were made from wood, now long disintegrated over time. These crosses and cross slabs “provide the most fruitful, truly monumental, sources” (Loyn 78), and such archaeological evidence is “sufficient to suggest an early accord between pagan newcomers and Christian inhabitants, and an early conversion to Christianity” (Loyn 34). In fact, the Thorwald Cross of Andreas is an excellent source of evidence for the apparent confluence of pagan and Christian ideologies, which occurred on the Isle of Man.

Thorwald Cross

Erected in either the mid-tenth or early eleventh-century, all that remains of the Thorwald Cross is part of its shaft and right side. However, the carvings visible on the surviving stone are extraordinary indicators of Viking Age religious culture. On one side of the slab, a man is depicted, holding a spear and accompanied by a bird. He stands with his right foot in the jaws of a wolf (Pluskowski 157). It can be inferred that this image represents Odin, the father of Norse gods, who was devoured by the wolf, Fenrir, at Ragnarok, the inevitable battle that brought an end to the story of the Norse pantheon. The other side of the cross is full of Christian imagery: a man, probably a monk or cleric, stands upon a serpent, wearing a belt, and carrying a book in one hand, a cross in the other. The early Christian image of the fish is also present. The incorporation of both pagan and Christian images into one piece of memorial art points to the coexistence, even confluence, of these two traditions. The Thorwald Cross thereby provides useful information about the Norse conversion to Christianity, especially as it may be seen to imply that the Christian God rose to prominence following the destruction of his pagan rivals at the mythical battle of Ragnarok.

Ragnarok

The word Ragnarok, literally means ‘fate/wonders of the gods,’ but the mythical event is also commonly referred to as the ‘twilight of the gods’ (Page 63). Since the murder of his son, Baldr, at the instigation of Loki, Odin anticipated the doom of the pantheon. It was foreseen that after an age of strife amongst men, winter would fall and last for three years. Fenrir the wolf, as well as Jormungand the serpent and other terrible beasts, would be set free to roam the earth, leaving destruction in their path (Fee 144). “Most fearsome of all, the ravening Fenrir races forward, his jaws agape so that, says Snorri [Sturluson], the upper one touches the heavens, the lower the earth. ‘He would open them wider if only there were space’” (Page 65). Odin consults Mimir, a source of great wisdom to him, but the attack is imminent and he can do nothing to prevent it. Odin’s son, Thor, fights Jormungand, and the battle results in both of their deaths. Meanwhile, Odin faces Fenrir and is swallowed by the wolf. Thus, the old gods fall and
“the sun grows dark, stars fall from the sky, the sea invades the land” (Jones 319), or as it is written in a verse of Orkneyinga Saga, “The bright sun will blacken, / Heaven’s bowl break / asunder, earth sink in dark / seas” (Chapter 32).

However, after Ragnarok (and the consequent destruction of Odin, the old gods, and the world), there would be a renewal, “a new order would arise” (Jones 319), and life would be born again. It was predicted: “The earth will rise from the deeps again one day, green and blossoming, and crops will flourish where none were planted. A new sun will take the place of her mother, and a number of gods will return to the ancient ruins of Asgard [the land of the gods], led now by Baldr [returned from the land of the dead]” (Fee 85, 144).

Ragnarok, specifically the terrors that accompany it, is reminiscent of similar Christian portents. Once again, Snorri Sturluson describes the apocalypse in verse: “An age of axes, an age of swords, shattered shields, / An age of tempests, an age of wolves, before the age of men crashes down.” This prediction strongly echoes that of the coming of Antichrist in Judaeo-Christian mythology (Page 63). Since Sturluson was probably writing during the Norse conversion to Christianity, the apparent influence is understandable.

Valhalla

When Odin became aware of Ragnarok and knew of the gods’ eventual and inevitable death, he made sure to prepare. The greatest of mortal warriors, the einherjar, were “plucked at their prime from the battlefield like ripe fruit” to fight at Odin’s side in the apocalypse. In Norse mythology, when a man died he went to one of two places. If he died of sickness or age, he would go to Hel, the shadowy land of the dead. Conversely, if he died in battle, the Valkyries, Odin’s handmaids, would collect him and bring him to Odin’s home, Valhalla. Warriors were often depicted as being welcomed to Valhalla by a woman offering a drinking-horn (Jones 342). Once there, the einherjar would practice for the coming battle each day and feast each night (Fee 23-24). As Snorri Sturluson writes: “All the great champions / in Odin’s circle / Battle together each day. / They choose who shall die, / Ride from the fight, / And sit together in peace again” (Page 20).

Odin had a need for these warriors and felt no remorse in cutting them down, even after giving them favor in battle for a number of years. While some see this as a betrayal, Odin saw it as a necessity. It was his responsibility to build an army for the coming Ragnarok. When in the heroic text, Eiriksmál, Odin is “challenged...to explain why he has denied victory to so splendid a warrior as Eirik, the god of war replies: ‘Because a grey wolf glares at the dwellings of the gods’” (Byock xxxi).

Odin is often associated with wolves and birds of prey, most likely because of their mutual association with war, battle, and slaughter. It is for that reason that a wolf guards the westernmost door of Valhalla (Fee 22-23). In fact, Valhalla’s very name spawns from Odin’s association with death and slaughter. The name comes from the Old Icelandic Valhall, meaning literally “Hall of the Slain” (Fee 24). The Hall itself is immense, and another of Sturluson’s verses describes it: “Five hundred doors and forty more / In Valhall I think there are. / Eight hundred warriors at a time / will pass each door to fight the wolf” (Page 62). Its rafters are made of spears, and its roof made of shields, upon which the magic goat, Heidrun, and the deer, Eikthynir, both live (Fee 24).

While it was certainly considered a great, even essential, honor to pass through the gates of Valhalla, the prospect did not present a very promising or optimistic afterlife for those slain warriors. Though
they would feast each night in great company, they would be forced to do battle each day without relief, without outcome or immediate purpose. The purpose was practice, but they were practicing for a fight they were destined to lose. There was no hope of a different outcome. Thus, the Christian doctrine of Heaven as paradise became more and more enticing. The Christian version of afterlife supplied a more cheerful alternative to Valhalla. This alternative, combined with Odin’s desperate and uncompromising “plucking” of warriors for his immortal army, may have facilitated, in part, the Norse conversion.

Conversion to Christianity

Christianity first entered the North in two major ways: missions and trade. In Denmark, for example, the first Christian mission took place in the early eighth century. Missionaries like Anskar spread their message throughout the North, and it spread quickly due to the amount of travel accomplished by the Vikings and Northern peoples. Trade, too, played a part in the Norse’s increasing exposure to the ‘new’ religion. Missions targeted marketplaces, and “merchants and raiders south were bound to learn something of the religion practised there and report it along with other curiosities back home” (Jones 106, 108n). Therefore, the conversion to Christianity (at least in Denmark) had begun gradually, hundreds of years before the Thorwald Cross was completed at Andreas.

Evidence of Christian influence is relatively abundant, especially in Viking Age works of literature, such as Orkneyinga Saga, The Saga of the Volsungs, The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki, and Beowulf. In The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki, for example, Christian values are unmistakably infused in the text. In Jesse Byock’s introduction to the saga, he notes the author’s “uncharacteristic moralization: ‘Human strength cannot withstand such fiendish power, unless the strength of God is employed against it. That alone stood between you and victory, King Hrolf...you had no knowledge of your Creator” (Byock xxxi). This passage seems out of place within pagan ideology. Later, Byock also recognizes that the saga writer attempts to distance Hrolf and his men from “too close a pagan connection” (Byock xxxii). From examination of this saga alone, it is clear that a fundamental shift was occurring in the North.

The shift that occurred, while facilitated by missionaries, was comparatively non-violent. “A violent conversion to the new religion was unnecessary when the old provided so many parallelisms that the tribal culture could absorb the conquering God without disrupting many of its basic preconceptions” (Chaney 209). Under this view, despite the vast difference in culture and mindset between the Vikings and the Christians when it came to everyday life, the Norse conversion to Christianity was organic and began as a kind of partnership, a fact that may help to explain the composite vision offered by the Thorwald Cross. It is these parallelisms, however, that complicate the notion of a smooth conversion, because not all religious elements are as analogous as they may appear at first glance.

One tempting comparison, for example, is that of both Baldr and Odin to Christ as archetypical ‘dying gods.’ In general, Baldr and Christ were similar in character; each was fair, loving, good, generous, and a favored son (Fee 84). Both Baldr and Christ also died, were mourned, and were resurrected. Baldr was killed by Loki and forced to remain in Hel until the world was revived after Ragnarok. The Norse sources make it clear how greatly this god was mourned: “The gods were bitterly sad at the loss of so wonderful a companion” (Fee 85). Christ was crucified, and after three days, and his own ‘Harrowing of Hell,’ rose again. A common comparison, therefore, is that of Baldr to the Christ described in the ninth century Christian poem, The Dream of the Rood. The poem portrays Christ as “a traditional Germanic mythic hero” (Fee 86), and is a significantly more violent account of His crucifixion than other examples. Another parallel typically noted between the myth of “The Death of Baldr” and The Dream of the Rood is that of the universal mourning that takes place in both stories. “The weeping of all creation for the
gentle Jesus is not unlike the account of the Aesir’s [a tribe of the gods] attempt to weep the equally gentle Baldr out of the land of Hel” (Fee 87). Evidently the comparison between Baldr and Christ is not unfounded, and at the very least, indicates a possible common ground between pagan and Christian ideologies.

Another parallel exists between Odin and Christ. Once again similar to Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross, Odin sacrifices himself to himself by hanging on the world tree, Yggdrasill, for nine days and nights. In the poem, Hávamál, it is written that he was, “Stabbed by the spear, given to Odin, / Myself to myself.” The myth of Odin’s sacrificial hanging does call to mind elements of the Crucifixion: “Christ hanging on the cross-beam, pierced by a spear, tormented by thirst, achieving the fullness of his Godhead by his willing self-sacrifice” (Page 15-16).

However, Odin and Christ have very different goals in sacrificing themselves, though both are based in finding a kind of wisdom. Odin sacrifices himself in order to comprehend the magical runic letters, while Christ does so to absolve the world from sin and become truly divine (Fee 87). Many even believe Odin’s sacrifice to be selfish, more for his own gain than for others. “His suffering has more in common with shamanism than with Christianity” (Jones 320) and his “hanging evokes pre-Christian rites of sacrificial hanging” (Fee 87). So, the equation of Odin to Christ is not as clear-cut, despite obvious congruence in the myths.

Another connector between Odin and Christ involves the “Nine Herbs Charm.” In the Christian emendator of the originally pagan myth, Christ invents the nine ingredients of the charm as he hangs on the Cross. Then, Odin uses the charm to repel nine poisons, and is subsequently able to kill a mythic serpent (Chaney 202). This religious anecdote exhibits a distinct combination of the pagan and the Christian.

The notion of Christ as a warrior is yet another example of the conflation of pagan and Christian ideals. Christ’s violent overthrow of Satan in the Harrowing of Hell was an extremely popular segment of Christian mythology amongst the Norse (Fee 127). This portrayal of Christ is much like that of the young hero in The Dream of the Rood. In fact, many early Anglo-Saxon kings cite the Christian God, or ‘king of victories,’ as a formidable aide in their own martial victories (Chaney 211-212). It is not surprising then, that Vikings, who champion the raider lifestyle and strive for Valhalla, begin to admire Christ, and even fully convert to Christianity, when he is given the image of a warrior.

Even so, Christ does not simply replace the old gods, and in the earlier phases of transitions there may have been a certain duality of religious practice. As Raymond Page notes, “[w]e need not assume that the advent of Christianity necessarily made radical changes in Norse practice or belief. It was quite possible...for an Irish Norseman to put his trust in both Christ and Thor. Rather than replace it, the Christian myth may have been added to, or may have penetrated Norse myth” (Page 10). It is apparent through evidence like the Thorwald Cross that paganism and Christianity were able to coincide in the North. Figures like Baldr, Odin, Christ, Thor, even Beowulf “all represent different masks of the same hero” (Fee 220), or as T.C. Lethbridge writes, the combination of the two ideologies during the conversion did not mean that the people were not Christian, only “that they could see a lot of sense in the old beliefs also” (Chaney 200). The Norse conversion to Christianity was gradual, and for a time, Pagan and Christian ideologies supplemented each other fairly harmoniously.