

THE RELIGION OF ANCIENT SCANDINAVIA

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The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia by W. A. Craigie

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W. A. CRAIGIE

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FOREWORD

THE native religion of the ancient Scandinavians was in its main features only a special form of that common to all the Germanic peoples, and this again was only a particular development of primitive beliefs and practices characteristic of the whole Aryan race. It is impossible to say how far back in time the special Germanic and Scandinavian developments of this religion may go, and of their earlier stages we have absolutely no knowledge beyond what may be doubtfully reached by the methods of comparison and inference. Even of the later stages our information is much more scanty than might be expected. Among the Goths, the southern Germans, and the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, paganism gave way to Christianity at so early a period, that very few details relating to it have been recorded by the civil or religious historians of these peoples; they were indeed more inclined to suppress than perpetuate any lingering knowledge of this kind.

THE ANCIENT SCANDINAVIAN RELIGION

The absence of such information is a great bar to the proper understanding of many points in Scandinavian religion, which, instead of being thus illuminated from without, has continually been forced to throw light on the heathen worship of the other Teutonic peoples.

As to the Scandinavian peoples themselves, it is only from a comparatively late period in the history of Europe that we have any real knowledge of them. They first became notorious at the close of the eighth century, when their unexpected piratical descents on Britain and France alarmed Western Christendom. Early in the ninth century the Saxon monk Ansgar ventured upon missionary enterprises into Scandinavia, at that time entirely a heathen region, and on two occasions reached the court of the Swedish king. About the middle of the same century Christianity began to make way in Denmark, which in another fifty years or so had become in the main a Christian land. During the tenth century the new faith began to make itself felt in Norway, but did not finally overcome the old religion until the beginning of the eleventh: in Iceland, which had been colonised from Norway, the adoption of Christianity took place somewhat suddenly in the year 1000. Sweden for the most part still remained

FOREWORD

heathen, and did not fully accept the new religion until the twelfth century.

During these three centuries we have very little outside evidence as to the character of the religion professed by any of the Scandinavian peoples, and our knowledge of the beliefs and practices of northern heathenism is for the most part derived from native sources of a later date. These, while in some respects copious enough, by no means give all the information that could be desired, and on some important points their evidence is either scanty or very unsatisfactory. The deficiencies are to a large extent disguised, at first sight, by the fact that we possess abundant information as to Scandinavian *mythology*. Not only do the poems of the skalds (from the close of the ninth century onwards) abound in mythological allusions, but there also exists a systematic account of the subject in the work of Snorri Sturluson, commonly known as the 'Prose Edda,' written in Iceland about the year 1220. For the facts relating to the actual *religion*, on the other hand, we have to depend on the few pieces of outside evidence, and on fairly numerous, but not always reliable, statements in the biographical and historical prose writings commonly grouped together under the name of 'Sagas.' These works,

THE ANCIENT SCANDINAVIAN RELIGION

based on oral tradition of a very full and often very accurate nature, were written in Iceland during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and most of them are separated by more than a century and a half from the period of time to which they relate. As the authors were in every case Christians, and many of them were ecclesiastics, it is obvious that the late evidence thus afforded us is not to be absolutely relied upon. On the other hand, the tenacity of Icelandic tradition, the continuous interest in the poetic mythology, and the absence of any fanatical hatred of the old heathenism, make it possible to accept, with due reservations, many of the statements made in these writings. It is unfortunate, however, that Iceland alone of all the Scandinavian countries developed a literature of this kind. The result is that the information thus preserved relates for the most part only to Iceland itself and its mother-country, Norway. The heathen period in Denmark was so remote, and Sweden itself so slightly connected with Iceland, that comparatively little is recorded of either, although Sweden was still heathen when Icelandic literature began. This is the more to be regretted, as a fuller knowledge of the precise form which the old religion had in Denmark and Sweden would in