

¶ Richard North. *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*. [Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 22] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 374 Pp. ISBN 0-521-55183-8.

Richard North's *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* is a welcome monograph for anyone who has patiently been awaiting new ideas on the origin, nature and function of heathen religion in Anglo-Saxon England. Unlike other scholars who have focused on the role of a few pagan gods and spirits in medieval England and Scandinavia, North traces the roots of both Anglo-Saxon and Norse pagan deities back to the 1st century Germanic mainland. Casting his net so wide, North makes provocative suggestions which will undoubtedly challenge some of the conventional ideas that have settled comfortably among Anglo-Saxonists.

The provocations start right at the beginning of *Heathen Gods*, when North reinterprets the Anglian fertility ritual for Nerthus described in Tacitus' *Germania*. While Tacitus identified Nerthus with *Terra Mater*, North makes Nerthus a male deity who mates with *Terra Mater* every year. North then argues that Nerthus continued to play a prominent role in pagan Anglo-Saxon England and Scandinavia in the form of Nerthus' hypostasis Ing-, founder of the Inguaeones in the *Germania* and later deified in Scandinavia as Njorðr's son Ingvi-freyr.

In order to establish the presence of a more elusive Ing(ui) in Anglo-Saxon England, North examines every instance of the word element *ing-* in the Old English corpus and comes up with some startling conclusions. North interprets, for example, the name Ing in the *Rune Poem* as a hypostasis of Nerthus, who performs a "solitary spring prelude to a joint summer procession" by the sea and the earth (45), while King Edwin in Bede's conversion story becomes a sacral king who represents Ing in the yearly fertility ritual. Of course, North is very aware of the fact that Christian writers must have vehemently rejected the deity. Accordingly, he argues that Hini-eldus in Alcuin's famous letter exemplifies Ingui's damned heathen cult and credits *inge-*compounds for the Egyptians in *Exodus* with three negative meanings: the evildoers are natives of their land, tribes of this earth (rather than heaven) and servants of Ingui. Finally, North devotes

considerable space to the use of *in(c)g* in *Beowulf*. Hengest and Finn are turned into Ingui's worshippers in the Finsburg episode, and even Hrothgar appears to be a follower of the cult although he escapes the poet's harsh criticism.

North does not regard marriage as the only function of fertility deities in Germanic cultures. Once Ing- had married an embodiment of the earth, he had to be sacrificed to ensure rebirth and growth in the next year. This sacrificial aspect of the fertility god, already established among the pagan Goths, underwent modifications after the introduction of Arian Christianity and was finally repaganized and personified in the god Baldr. Baldr was then taken by the Heruli to Scandinavia, where he usurped Ingvi-freyr's role as the dying god. In fact, North claims that the pagan concept of the dying god can still be detected in the Old English *Dream of the Rood*, which shares some of the features of the Baldr myth described in the Icelandic *Voluspá*.

Finally, *Heathen Gods* would hardly be complete without a discussion of the widespread phenomenon of animism in Anglo-Saxon England. North associates the worship of nature divinities (*numina*), which in early Germanic religion were hardly distinguishable from natural phenomena, with Ing's cult as well, and points out that the early Christianization of England prevented these divinities from developing into a pantheon comparable to the one in Norse mythology. Old English *frige* 'love' (cf. ON Frigg) provides a good example. North argues that although this abstract noun suggests the existence of a goddess of love in the heathen Anglo-Saxon period, the personification was reconceptualized after the conversion. Likewise, the sky *numina* hidden in the constellation *Tiu* (*Rune Poem*), in *þunor* in *þunorrad* 'thunderbolt' and in *wuldor* 'glory' (cf. ON Tyr, Þórr, Ullr) lost their status as personifications and became God's *creaturae* instead.

Woden is the only prominent god who has made his way into such Anglo-Saxon texts as pseudo-historical documents (i.e. genealogies) and poetry. In fact, as the god of war and witchcraft Woden is not even directly associated with Ingui but corresponds to the Roman Mercury who was imported into the Germanic regions and from there into England. Still, North regards the god as secondary to the native fertility deity. Not only did Woden learn his sorcery from the native Vanir (cf.

*Voluspá*), by means of which he was believed to turn Anglian kings into demons, but Woden's cult could only survive into the beginning of the 8th century because the Church permitted this survival. The missionaries, North points out, regarded the god as a lesser evil than Ingui, whose fertility cult was hard to eliminate. North even suggests that Bede's conversion of King Edwin is based upon sources in which St. Paulinus dresses up like Coifi (the hooded one = Woden) to destroy the pagan shrine of Ingui just before the spring festival. Thus North finishes his book with this rather surprising interpretation of a well-known story.

*Heathen Gods* leaves the reader both stimulated and sceptical. To begin with, North's almost intuitive objection to approaches dismissive of Anglo-Saxon heathenism is very healthy. It is hard to believe that paganism did not linger on in hidden ways long after the conversion. Furthermore, North's postulation of a fertility cult in Anglo-Saxon England that was disturbed relatively early by the conversion has two major advantages: it establishes a link between Anglo-Saxon paganism and its ancestor on the Continent, and it provides an excellent explanation of the demise of gods and goddesses who received very prominent roles in Norse mythology. Even North's assumption that pagan deities were reused for the new Christian doctrine (the Balder-Christ figure in the *Dream of the Rood*) adds to our understanding as to how ancient pagan ideas were integrated in Christian works and consequently has to be given serious consideration.

As plausible as North's general assumptions may be, much of the supporting evidence is not convincing. To begin with, some objections to his methodology, which North tries to remove in his first chapter, are only reinforced by the end of the book. Can we really use late Scandinavian material to reconstruct continental and Anglo-Saxon paganism? North's answer is in the affirmative although he does concede that the aforesaid material has to be used with utmost caution. Unfortunately, North is not as careful as he claims. For example, we cannot simply project the presence of *numina* into Old English sea-, sky- and earth-words by means of Norse evidence alone. A god Thunor behind *þunorrad* is likely, and we certainly can discern a

goddess Frigg in the expression *weres frige* 'a man's love' on account of another occurrence of the goddess in 'Friday.' Yet the reference to the sea as *mægðegsa* 'terror of nations' who holds the doomed sailor in her arms in *Maxims* III (ll.104-06) does not necessitate the reconstruction of a goddess resembling the Icelandic Rán. Although some correspondances between the personified *mægðegsa* and Scandinavian ravenous sea-goddess (who catches the sailors with her net) could point to a common ancestor, it is equally possible that the Anglo-Saxon poet chose a violent female exclusively as a means of vivifying the scene. This possibility becomes particularly attractive once the maritime scene in *Maxims* I is compared with the following early Irish poem, which describes the drowning of a certain Conaing:

The very clear waves of the sea,  
the sand on the sea-bottom has covered them both;  
they fell upon Conaing  
in his weak, swaying little boat.

The woman who has thrown her white locks  
against Conaing in his coracle,  
she has laughed scornfully  
at Bile Torton today.<sup>1</sup>

The sea is personified as a terrifying woman who derides Bile Torton, the holy tree of Leinster, for its failure to protect Conaing. Even if the sea is here the terror of nations, as it is in the Old English *Maxims*, we certainly should be careful about postulating the same deity behind both concepts. It is more likely that the Old English and Irish poet personified the sea to make a nature phenomenon more palpable and terrifying: in *Maxims*, the sea becomes the powerful rival of the sailor's wife; in the Irish poem, a demonic being.

A more blatant example illustrating the problematic nature of

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<sup>1</sup>For the Irish text and a German translation, see Kuno Meyer's *Bruchstücke der älteren Lyrik Irlands* (Berlin:Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1919) 39.

North's methodology is his reconstruction of the spring festival in first century Anglia. North uses the story of Skaði selecting her husband (Njorðr) by his feet in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* as an echo of the earth's manner of choosing a husband--the earth cannot see more than the feet of her selected one (!). North then associates this story with Tacitus' account of the Ingvaeones' descent from Mannus, son of Tuisto:

So, in this case, in the ideology of the Anglii in the first century, earth the mother (*terra mater*) would join with the ocean (*Nerthus*) by choosing for her female incarnation (*dea* or *numen*) a seasonal husband (*Ing-*), one man (*Mannus*) from among many, by the soles of his feet (*Tuisto*): Tuisto=Mannus=Ing-. (270)

Although North's interpretation of the marriage between Skaði and Njorðr as a late reflection of the marriage of the sea and the earth clearly shows how inventive links between apparently very different source material can be established, the incorporation of Mannus and Tuisto in the ritual is strikingly farfetched. The detail of earth choosing her mate by the soles of his feet is at odds with the symbolic nature of the marriage ritual as portrayed in the *Germania*; more importantly, why should all narrative detail including names have mythological relevance? It is safer to assume that Snorri added a humorous detail to a well-known story rather than postulating a deep-seated significance in the mention of Njorðr's feet.

In fact, it is not North's methodology *per se* but his desperate attempt to synthesize material which escapes synthesis and which forces him to resort to far-fetched textual evidence that makes *Heathen Gods* less convincing than it might have been. North's interpretation of *ing-* in Old English texts is a case in point. Whereas the association of the Egyptians with Ingui in *Exodus* is an ingenious addition to Nicholas Howe's interpretation of the poem as political allegory, the various assessments of the word element in *Beowulf* do not have the same persuasive power. The epithet *frea Ingwina* 'Lord of Ing's friends' for Hrothgar certainly does allow a connection between the Danish king and a fertility cult, and North's association of the gold on which Finn

and Hengest swear their oath with Ingvi (*[i]n]cge gold, ingesteald*) creates a good rendering of otherwise completely obscure MS *icge*. Yet North does not know where to stop. For example, the horses in *Beowulf* seem to be automatically associated with the god Ingvi-freyr only because the horse is Freyr's sacred animal in the late 13th century *Hrafinkels saga Freysgoða* and in the 14th century *Flateyjarbók*. When Hrothgar gives Beowulf eight horses in return for the latter's services, the gift is supposed to reflect Hrothgar's worship of Ingvi-Freyr, while the name Hengest "naturally" forces Hnæf's famous retainer to heed the oath performed on Ingvi-freyr's treasure. Finally, the association of Ingvi-freyr with the world in *Flateyjarbók* makes North identify the noun *woroldræden* 'wordly counsel' as a circumlocution for the god himself. North is therefore hardly surprised that Hengest cannot refuse *woroldræden* (= Ingvi-freyr); after all, "the cult of Ingvi was invested in his name" (77). At this point, the argument has become so tentative that only a leap of faith will save it.

Faith, however, is still better than the incredulity with which North's interpretation of Bede's conversion story and yet another set of far-fetched equations have to be read. One wonders why Woden (rather than a wise councillor or converted priest) should help the cause of Christianity by preventing the locals from starting their spring festival. And why should Paulinus be dressed up as Woden? Again, a simpler solution could be proposed along North's lines but without the tenuous equations. Coifi is a priest who, like the wise counsellor, is suddenly converted. As a consequence, he destroys the shrine of Ingvi for the very reason North suggests: he makes sure that the spring festival with the sacral King Edwin as human hypostasis of Ingvi will never come about. Bede's reference to Coifi's spear-cast, furthermore, may still be a reflex of an old myth according to which Óðinn throws his spear against the Vanir and which is recorded in the *Voluspá*. Only now its thrower represents a new religion in its fight against the old demons.

*Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* is a provocative although not always convincing analysis of Anglo-Saxon paganism. North himself concedes that some readers will regard his rendering of Bede's con-

version story as “the last straw,” a prediction that will undoubtedly prove to be true. However, North also stimulates us to rethink many of the so readily made assumptions about Old English heathen deities. He consequently brings a fresh breeze into a rather stagnant field of research.

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¶ Klaus von See (et. al.). *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*. Bd. 2: Götterlieder. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1997. IV + 575 Pp. ISBN 3-8253-0534-1. Geb.: DM 148,-

Bij het verschijnen, een kwart eeuw geleden, van zijn baanbrekende monografie over *Hávamál* verklaarde Klaus von See dat het boek tot stand was gekomen in het kader van werk aan een omvangrijk Eddacommentaar dat binnen afzienbare tijd (*in absehbarer Zeit*) zou uitkomen bij Carl Winter in Heidelberg. Twintig jaar lang werd weinig meer van dit plan vernomen, maar dat het niet ter ziele was bleek vijf jaar terug toen van Von See bij genoemde uitgever een separaat commentaar op *Skírnismál* uitkwam met de nadrukkelijke ondertitel: “Modell eines Edda-Kommentars”.

Thans, vijftwintig jaar na de eerste aankondiging, ligt dan het eerste deel van dit werk ter tafel. De titel *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* klinkt neutraal, maar is mogelijk mede gekozen als eerbetoon aan het gelijknamige commentaar van Sijmons en Gering, waarvan het werk van Von See de aangewezen opvolger lijkt. Dat aan een dergelijke aflossing behoefte was, staat buiten kijf. Sijmons en Gerings' commentaar op de Edda mag dan een monument van geleerdheid zijn, het dateert wel van driekwart eeuw geleden en was hard aan vervanging toe, al was het alleen maar vanwege Gerings' gedrevenheid een metrisch correcte tekst te presenteren. Andere commentaren zijn zelfs nog ouder en worden vrijwel niet meer ter hand genomen, al is dat van Detter en Heinzl soms nog bruikbaar voor het vinden van overeenkomende uitdrukkingen en zinswendingen. Volkomen ach-