Pagan Religion and Burial Customs

Most Vikings were pagans, and the old gods Thor, Odin and Freyr lived on in Scandinavia long after much of Europe was Christian.

Unlike Christianity, Scandinavian paganism did not have a systematic theology and lacked absolute concepts of good and evil or of the afterlife. Religion was a matter of the correct performance and observance of sacrifices, rituals and festivals, rather than of personal spirituality. There was no full-time priesthood; it was usually the king or local chieftains who had the responsibility for ensuring that festivals were observed. A cycle of cosmological myths told of the creation of the world and of its ultimate destruction. Vikings believed that all things were subject to fate, including the gods who would perish at Ragnarök, the final cataclysm that would destroy the world.

As in other polytheistic religions, the Viking gods ruled over different aspects of human life. The most important were Odin, Thor and Freyr. Odin was a rather sinister deity who, with his brothers, had created the human race and gave man the knowledge of poetry and of writing in runes. Odin was the god of wisdom, power, war and poetry: he was a sorcerer and could deprive men of their wits and exercise his power of life and death in wildly unpredictable ways. Odin’s attributes made him the god of kings, chieftains, warriors and poets: both the Danish royal family and the Earls of Hlaðir claimed descent from him. The most popular god among the peasants was Thor, the god of physical strength, thunder and lightning, wind, rain, good weather and crops. Using his mighty hammer Mjöllnir, Thor defended the world against the destructive power of the giants. Unlike Odin, Thor was a straightforward, reliable god, but he was none too bright and the myths concerning his deeds often highlight in a humorous way the limitations of brute strength. Pendants fashioned in the sign of the hammer were often worn by Thor’s devotees.

Freyr was the god of wealth, health and fertility: he was portrayed with an erect phallus. Offerings were made to Freyr at weddings. The Swedish Yngling dynasty traced its ancestry to a union between Freyr and Gerd, a giant woman. Freyr had a sister and female counterpart Freyja, who gave luck in love and represented sensuality. Freyja was the leader of the Æsir, a race of female demigods who presided over fertility in nature and in humans. The god Loki was a cunning, witty mischief-maker, whose schemes were always getting the gods and himself into trouble. Though he was not an unambiguously evil figure like Satan, Loki was capable of great wickedness and treachery, and the Vikings believed that his scheming would lead in the end to Ragnarök.

The Vikings had rather vague ideas about the afterlife. The souls of heroic warriors who had died in battle were taken by the Valkyries—female demigods—to feast and fight in Odin’s home, Valhalla, the hall of the slain, until the time came for them to march out to fight side by side with the gods against the giants at Ragnarök. Freyja too might claim a share of the warriors’ souls, as well as at least some women’s. Others went to the dismal twilight world of Hel. It was also believed that the dead could live on in the
grave. The common practice of placing everyday objects, weapons, tools and even horses, wagons and ships in graves is probably a sign that people believed that the afterlife would resemble this life, and that somehow these objects would be useful to the dead. However, in some cases, such as the rich ship burials at Oseberg and Gokstad, the grave goods may have been intended more to impress the living with the wealth and status of the deceased’s family than to help the dead. Whatever the beliefs that lay behind it, the practice of furnishing graves in this way has provided archaeologists with a major source of information about Scandinavian society in the Viking age.

Before the Viking age, cremation was the normal method of disposal of the dead throughout Scandinavia. The dead were cremated in everyday clothes together with any goods that were to accompany them. The remains were afterwards gathered together and placed in an pottery urn and buried or scattered on the ground. The grave could be marked by a mound or pile of stones or, as at Lindholm Høje, by ship-shaped settings of stones. Early in the Viking age inhumation began to be practiced in Denmark, Gotland and Birka. The richer inhumations were of the “chamber grave” type, where the body was laid fully clothed in a timber-lined pit surrounded by grave goods and sometimes horses or human sacrifices. The common people would be more likely to be buried in a simple wooden coffin or birch-bark shroud. With the spread of Christianity, inhumation, without grave goods, became the normal burial practice across Scandinavia by around 1000.