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The Anglo Saxons – and their gods (still) among us

JON MACKLEY

Who do you think we were? This is the fourth in a series of independent papers that considers England's lost mythology. The central premise is that we have, as a nation, lost the core of the country's mythology, or it is now in a completely altered form. This is largely because the stories of the deeds of gods and heroes have been superseded by more recent belief systems and new heroes, whether these are in the form of comic heroes, film, music or sports icons. In previous papers, I suggested that, amongst other things, the landscape offers some clues to link us to this forgotten past, which, in turn leads us to the mythology and traditions of much older cultures. These can help fill in some gaps in our understanding.

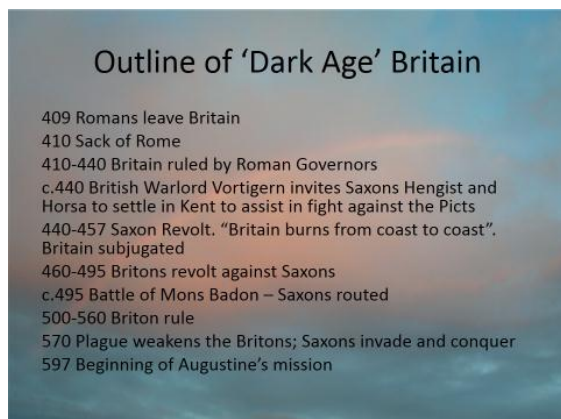
In this paper, I want to consider the arrival of Saxon culture in Britain, a culture which appeared before the Romans departed from Britain and continued after the arrival of Christianity which appropriated some Saxon traditions and practices. More importantly, despite a sustained attempt by the Christian missionaries to eradicate these practices, they still resonate in today's society. This is not a comprehensive discussion of all the heathen practices and references to Saxon gods in literature and archaeology: that would be the subject of a small library. For the purposes of this paper, I am simply dealing with the gods that remain with us, in particular in relation to the days of the week.

The Coming of the Saxons

I should like to briefly summarise the period that is sometimes called 'the Dark Ages'. The Romans withdrew from Britain around 409AD to defend Rome from the Visigoths' attacks. Roman governors were left to rule Britain. So, while there are contemporary commentators of Late Roman Britain at the end of the fourth century, and then there is the Britain that Bede describes at the beginning of the eighth century, there is very little evidence for the interim period, although the two most popular sources cited are Gildas the Briton, who wrote *On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain* in the mid-sixth century, and Nennius, who is

attributed with the authorship of the pseudo-historical *Historia Brittonum* around 830. Despite the absence of many historical sources, John Morris has posited that it is possible to reconstruct an approximate timeline for the fifth and sixth centuries.

The Romans leave Britain

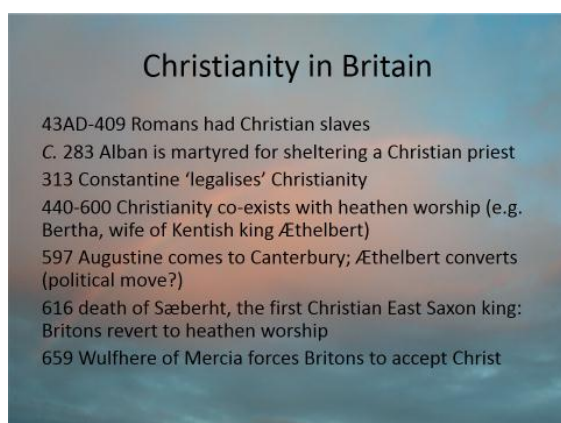


In 410, the Goths sacked Rome and it became clear that Rome was not coming back to defend its province. For the next thirty years Roman Britain continued under its own governors. At the end of this period, the Briton warlord Vortigern invited the Saxons, led by Hengist and Horsa to settle in Kent to help their fight against the Picts, although these send a

message to the Angles and Jutes detailing "the worthlessness of the Britons, and the richness of the land".

The first Saxon revolt of 440-457 was successful in subjugating Britain; however, there were also a series of British resistance campaigns from 460 to around 495 culminating with the Battle of Mount Badon which halted the Saxon advance for around seventy years. However, a plague is said to have broken out and weakened the Britons, which led to a second Saxon revolt, and the Saxons overran much of the south of England.

The Arrival of Christianity



In 595AD, Pope Gregory the Great initiated a mission to bring Christianity to England. It is said that Gregory, saw Anglian boys at a slave market, to which he described them as *non angli, sed angeli*, ('not Angles, but angels'). Christianity had existed in some forms in England long before Gregory, through the arrival of Christian slaves from abroad.

Famously, St Alban, a Roman soldier, was martyred for sheltering a Christian priest in 283AD. In addition, Christianity was legalised in Britain by Constantine I in 313AD. By the

time of Gregory's mission, the Saxons' presence had been felt for around a century and a half, but they had only recently become the dominant force. Gregory already knew that Bertha, the wife of the Kentish king Æthelbert, had already converted to Christianity, and was allowed to practice freely. Consequently, when Augustine arrived in 597, he was cordially received. Æthelbert the king of the *Cantuarii*, converted to Christianity, although this may have been politically motivated to align himself with the Merovingian kingdoms.¹

Æthelbert to Augustine

The words and promises you bring are fair enough, but because they are new to us and doubtful, I cannot consent to accept them and forsake those beliefs which I and the whole English race have held so long'.

Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 40.

Initially, Æthelbert suggests that Augustine's promises are 'new' and 'doubtful [and] I cannot consent to accept them and forsake those beliefs which I and the whole English race have held so long'.² The subtext here, as Flora Spiegel argues, is that Gregory may not have anticipated the locals' loyalty to their religion and that it would be inappropriate,

politically, for the king to enforce a radical religious change.³

In June 601AD, Gregory sent a letter to Æthelbert, ordering the king to destroy all heathen

Gregory the Great concerning Heathen practice

I have come to the conclusion that **the temples of the idols in England should not on any account be destroyed**. Augustine must smash the idols, but the temples themselves should be sprinkled with holy water and altars set up in them in which relics are to be enclosed. For **we ought to take advantage of well-built temples by purifying them** from devil-worship and dedicating them to the service of the true God. **In this way I hope the people** (seeing their temples are not destroyed) **will leave their idolatry and yet continue to frequent the places as formerly, so coming to know and revere the True God**. And since the sacrifice of many oxen to devils is their custom, **some other rite ought to be solemnized in its place such as a Day of Dedication or Festivals for the holy martyrs whose relics are there enshrined**. On such high days people might well build themselves shelters of boughs round about the churches that were once temples and celebrate the occasion with pious feasting. They must no more sacrifice animals to the Devil, but they may kill them for food to the glory of god while giving thanks for his bounty to the provider of all gifts.

shrines; however, less than a month later, Gregory sent a letter to his missionary Abbot Mellitus (later Bishop of London and then Archbishop of Canterbury) in which he explains how Augustine should deal with heathen temples and traditions: Their temples should be purified, rather than destroyed; heathens would return to their

regular place of worship, but their festivals should be replaced by Christian holy days.

What Gregory was suggesting was an almost covert alignment between the heathen practices and Christian religious festivals, although his long-term plan was to eradicate all traces of heathen practice. Gregory might have been successful in his endeavours, except

¹ R.A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p 182-3.

² Bede, *Ecclesiastical history*, p. 40.

³ Flora Spiegel,, 'The *Tabernacula* of Gregory The Great', *Anglo Saxon England*, Vol 36, 1–13, pp.11 –12.

that the Venerable Bede, writing in Monkwearmouth (Jarrow) composed a work entitled *The Reckoning of Time* in around 725 which provides an important source concerning the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Given that the gradual erosion of heathen celebration was begun in the closing years of the fifth century and completed by the end of the seventh century, it is plausible that Bede was aware of the heathen deities who were still spoken about in his lifetime; however, Bede was also very careful not to give too much information.⁴

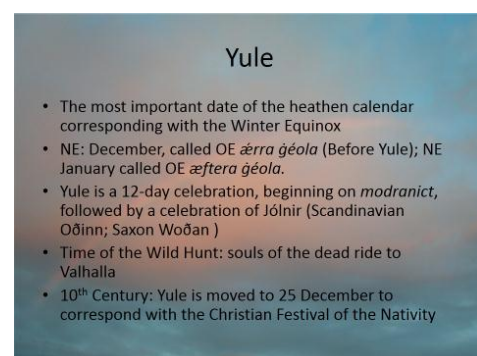
Bede's recording of heathen festivals



Bede observed that it was necessary to change only a small aspect of a festival, for heathen practices to become Christian worship. For example, the *charming* of the plough became the *blessing* of the plough (Plough Sunday – first Sunday after Epiphany) while *Lughnasadh* is now Lammas, the harvest festival. Lammas was

the day in which loaves of bread were consecrated, the name deriving from the Old English *hláfmæsse* (The name is derived from the words for *loaf* and *mass*, but even this was amended to *lamb* and *mass*, to underscore the Christian connotations). The later festival of celebrating the harvest is also appropriated from the Saxon word: *hær[b]fest*. However hard the Christian missionaries tried to displace (and then eradicate completely) the Saxon ceremonies, there are some that remain untouched. I don't propose to look at all the seasons here; just a couple of celebrations that are still prominent in our modern calendar.

Yule



Bede remarks that the Saxons arranged their calendar according to the Moon. Consequently, they named the division of time after it too: *Mona*, the Saxon word for 'moon' became *monað* – month. The most important part of the year was Yule, the feast of the midwinter solstice: the month that we now call

⁴ Charles J Billson, 'The Easter Hare' in *The Follere Journal* 3 (4) 441-8

December was known as *ǣrra gēola* – before Yule, and the month that followed was known as *æftera gēola*. The festival of yule itself was sacred to principal deities of the pantheon, Woðen, Þunor and Frigg. In Scandinavian mythology Jólnir – lord of the yule – is one of the names of Óðinn (Pollington 48), but we will return to this aspect of the pantheon later.

Yule was a twelve-day celebration beginning on the evening before Yule-day known as *modranīct* – “mother’s night”, perhaps linked with the Germanic matron cults.⁵ It wasn’t until the tenth century that the festival was moved to 25 December to align it with the Christian festival of the Nativity.⁶ Legend says that Woðen led the Wild Hunt, made up of the souls of the dead riding to Valhalla, and, as Yule was the longest night, thus it was the height of the hunt. In Roman mythology, it was Mercury who guided the souls of the dead, and, again, we shall discuss the parallel between the two gods later.

Hrēpmōnaþ and Ēostermōnaþ

Hrēpmōnaþ and Ēostermōnaþ

Bede names two Saxon goddesses whose names were given to the equivalent of March and April: *Hrēþa* and *Ēoster*.

The name *Hrēþa* exists in isolation, and there is no obvious festival to which we can link her.

Ēoster – possibly fertility or dawn goddess, linked with the celebration of the ‘rising sun’

Ēoster is a goddess ‘in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month’, but now Christians ‘designate that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time honoured name of the old-observance’.

Based on the attestation of Bede, it is believed that the equivalent months of March and April were called *Hrēpmōnaþ* and *Ēoster-mōnaþ* named after two Saxon goddesses: Bede says ‘Hrethmonath is named for their goddess Hretha, to whom they sacrificed at this time. Eosturmonath ... was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that

month’ (Wallis 54). These names present us with problems as they exist almost in isolation without any other contextualising form. Pollington (251) suggests that the timing of the sacrifices (March) may have been some tribute to the god of war (Roman Mars, Saxon Tiw). Jacob Grimm (206) discusses the etymology of the name Hreda or Hreða from the Old High German, to be a ‘shining of fame’; he acknowledges that the Icelandic Edda has no such epithet for Tyr (the Scandinavian form of Tiw. god of war). Phillip Shaw has also presented an etymological argument for potential meanings of her name. He concludes that ‘it seems reasonable to suppose that Hreda was in some way associated with a specific local grouping, although we can recover little of the nature of the association or the group involved (Shaw

⁵ Pollington, *The Elder gods*, p. 328

⁶ Paul Frodsham, *From Stonehenge to Santa Claus* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008), p. 97.

93). Aside from Bede attributing the month of March to her, there is no obvious festival to which we can link her.

Eostre is often cited as the name of a goddess, however, Bede is the only place where she is described as such. He claims that she is a goddess 'in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month', but now Christians 'designate that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time honoured name of the old-observance'.⁷ The Frankish calendar, in the time of Charlemagne, also includes the word Eostre-month, but not to denote a goddess. Grimm argues that, because the Germans called April 'Ostermonat' and through details of the legends, one can construct a Germanic goddess. Critics are careful to point out that there is no direct evidence for Grimm's etymological discussion.

One may speculate, however, that Eostre is one of the festivals that the early Christian missionaries used to correlate their festivals with the Saxon traditions. After all, in every other western language, this festival is associated with Passover, *Pasch*, and Catholics have always referred to this celebration as 'the Feast of the Passion'. Given its time during the year, Eostre is suggested to be the name of a Saxon fertility goddess, the name cognate with the Teutonic *austrôn* and the Roman *Aurora*, meaning 'dawn', or, literally, 'from the East', who was worshipped at the vernal equinox. Consequently, Jacob Grimm argues, based on this information, it would be easy to see how the festival of Eostre was a celebration of the 'rising sun' just as Easter is now denoted. For a fertility goddess, it is plausible to assume that there were symbolic offerings: eggs, hares and rabbits, still significant today, are all symbols of fertility, while in Scandinavian mythology, Freya – the Saxon goddess Frigg – is said to have been attended by hares.

Phillip Shaw has highlighted the difficulties of decoding the etymology of the names of two forgotten goddesses when there is little supporting evidence of existence of their cult; prior to Shaw's work, R.I. Page had described them as 'an etymological fantasy' and followed scholars who claimed that their names had been imagined by Bede: Bede offers scant evidence concerning their cult, but then, as A.L. Meaney observes, 'Bede does not wish to keep quiet about paganism, but to glory in its replacement'.

⁷ Bede: The Reckoning of Time, p. 54.

Days of the Week

When the invading Saxons forced the retreat of the Roman governors, and the subjugation of the British people, they displaced all Roman traditions. However, once the missionaries sought to introduce Christian practices and ritual, then with them came the reintroduction of the Roman calendar. However, as discussed earlier, the Kentish king Æthelbert was apprehensive about the wholesale appropriation of Christian practices. Consequently, there were some modifications to the new traditions, which included the substitution of local gods for those from whom Rome designated the days of the week, which gives us a window into the Saxon world. While neither Bede nor Gregory mentions specific days of the week, it is a plausible suggestion, as David Ewing Duncan suggests, that the names of the gods were used in early Christian England to appease the Saxons as the conversion process began.⁸

Germanic and Old English							
	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Roman	dies Solis	dies Lūnae	dies Martis	dies Mercurii	dies Jovis	dies Veneris	dies Saturni
Attribution	Sun	Moon	War	Messenger	Leader of the gods	Fertility	Justice, agriculture
Proto-Germanic	Sōwīlō						
Old Norse	sunnudagr	mánadagr	tysdagr	Óðinsdagr	Þórsdagr	frjádagr	laugardagr or sunnunött
Attribution	Sun	Moon	Tiwaz	Odin	Þor	Frija	Washing day
Old High German	Sunnūntag	Mānetag	Ziestag	Wōdanstag	Donarestag	Frījatag	Sunnūnāband/ sambaztac
Old English	Sunnandæg	Mōnandæg	Tiwesdæg	Wōdnesdæg	Þunresdæg	Frīgedæg	Sæternesdæg
Attribution	Sun	Moon	Tiw	Woden	Þunor	Frigge	Saturn

Greek

As said above, the Christianisation of the Saxon tribes meant re-introducing certain Roman practices onto local society. However, the Romans were following the traditions laid down by the Ancient Greeks: *heméra Helíou* refers to Helios, the god of the sun who rode the chariot with flaming wheels across the sky; *heméra Selénes* refers to Selene, the goddess of the

⁸ David Ewing Duncan, *The Calendar* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), p. 117.

moon. *Heméra Áreos* refers to Ares, the God of War; *heméra Hér mou* refers to Hermes, the winged messenger; *heméra Díós* refers to Zeus, the leader of the gods; *heméra Aphrodítes* refers to Aphrodite the goddess of love and fertility; and finally *heméra Krónou* refers to Cronos, the Titan father of the gods, who was also associated with justice and agriculture.

Roman

Between 152-162 AD, Vettius Valens the Antiochian wrote the *Anthologiarum* in which he attested that the seven-day week should be associated with the heavenly bodies. Subsequently, the names of celestial bodies replaced those of the Greek deities: Sol, Luna, Mars, Mercury, Jove (or Jupiter), Venus and Saturn. These names have been handed down linguistically to many of the Romance-based languages, including French and Italian, although *Dies Solis*, became *dies Dominica*: the “Day of the Sun” changed to the “Day of the Lord”.

Even though, as one might expect, the Romance languages followed Latin, the Scandinavian, Germanic and Teutonic languages generally followed the system used by the Romans, although they applied their own gods to this format, a process known as *interpretatio germanica* - the practice of identifying Roman gods with the names of Germanic deities. This is most likely to have occurred after 200 AD but before the introduction of Christianity; most likely it was some time after the fall of Rome. The names from the Scandinavian languages were not taken directly from their Roman precedents, but instead, the attributes for each god representing the day of the week were laid over those of the Roman gods; however, the day ran from sundown to sundown, rather than from midnight to midnight, consequently, the night time before Tuesday would have been called *Tiwsnacht* ‘Tues-night’.

Germanic

The Roman gods were replaced by more localised deities; however, they still served the same purpose. In Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse, the sun and the moon were respectively known as the goddess and the god. The chief deities in the Anglo-Saxon pantheon are Tiw – the all-father, Woðen, the chief of the gods, his bride, Frigg, the fertility goddess and their son, Þunor, the thunder god; these particular deities correspond to Tyr, Óðinn, Freya and Þorr.

Given the absence of information concerning the Saxon gods – they are often not named in any other context than the days of the week – Stephen Pollington cautions that these gods

may not have been the most important gods, but those who were honoured at principal feast days: local or family deities.

The Sun and the Moon

Thinking of the name of the days of the week, the Saxons followed the Roman tradition of naming their first days of the week after the most apparent of the celestial bodies, Sunnan and Mōnan, the sun and the moon. It is feasible to assume that these were personified as *numina*: beings to whom offerings were made to secure their goodwill. These *numina* were not only celestial bodies, but, as Richard North argues, they were also associated with the natural elements and emotions such as thunder and love.⁹ There are three rune poems (Old Norse, Old Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon). These poems list the runic alphabets and provide an explanatory stanza for each rune: the sun, for example, appears in all the rune poems, and always as a positive sign:

OE Rune poem of the Sun

“Sun to seamen is always a hope/
when they travel over the fishes' bath,
until the sea-steed brings them to land.”

Sigel semannum symble biþ on hihte,
ðonne hi hine feriað ofer fisco beþ,
oþ hi brimhengest bringeþ to lande.

“Sun to seamen is always a hope/
when they travel over the fishes' bath,
until the sea-steed brings them to land.”

Sunna also appears as a personification uniquely in the German Second Merseburg charm and Simek observes that there is ‘no other evidence for the worship of a personified sun among Germanic peoples’ (303).

Although it appears that, in Old English, Monday is directly named as ‘The Moon’s day’, in the Scandinavian pantheons, Monday, ‘mandagur’, is named after Mani, the god of the moon (Simek 201).

Tiw

Of the other days of the week, some names are familiar than others: Tîw gives his name to Tuesday. In Roman mythology, he would be associated with Mars, god of War. However, the etymology of his name suggests a more prominent role: Tiw derives from the Old Norse Týr, which ultimately derives from the proto-indo European word *dewos*: this term is the also the

⁹ North, 209.

origin of the Proto-Germanic *Tîwaz* and the Latin *deus*, both of which gives us a literal word for ‘god’. In addition, the name Tyr probably also meant ‘daylight’ (hence Jacob Grimm’s attempts to find some correlation between Hreṇa and Tîw). Brian Branston argues that initially Tîw would have been presented as the ‘sky father’ and the most important of the gods, and perhaps some of this popularity is shown that his name appears to have been given to a variety of places including Tuesley and Tishoe (Surrey), Tysoe (Warwickshire), Tyesmere (Worcestershire) as well as numerous toponyms in Denmark, Norway and Sweden.¹⁰ Tysemere in Worcestershire, translated as “Tiw’s lake” shares a name with *Tissø* in Denmark: here the lake was a place of weapon deposition, presumably as tribute to Tyr, although archaeology in Worcestershire has failed to uncover any evidence of such a practice.



Tyr’s father was the Giant Hymire,¹¹ which draws a parallel with the Greek gods descended from the Titans. Over a period of centuries, however, his popularity and supremacy declined and he became relegated to a lesser role as the war god; however he is also seen as fighting for a just cause. In Housesteads, one of the Roman forts of Hadrian’s Wall, there is a third century altar

dedicated to Mars Thincsus which is believed to be a Romanised form of Tîw, thus, associating him with Mars (RIB 1594).¹²



The change of name may be evidence of when the *Interpretatio germanica* began to take place, that is, when the Teutonic gods were placed over the Roman gods. Certainly, we might see a parallel between the symbol for Mars and the rune for Tîw:

Tîw, or rather the Scandinavian form Tir, appears in all three rune poems, but in the Old Icelandic

¹⁰ Branston pp. 74–6.

¹¹ North, 232

¹² Kathleen Herbert, *Looking for the Lost Gods of England* (Swaffham, Anglo-Saxon books, 2007), John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire*, 212; cf. Simek, 203

rune poems, Tir is identified with Mars in the gloss: *Mars tiggi*.

In some depictions, Týr is represented as a one-handed man. According to Snorri in the Prose Edda, Týr was the only one who dared to feed the fierce Fenris wolf. While the creature continued growing, there was a prophecy that it would bring harm to the gods, and particularly would bring about the death of Óðinn. The gods commanded the dwarves to construct a magical fetter called *Geipnir*. Fenris was then challenged to see if he could break the bond. Fearing some trick, Fenris was reluctant to do so, so he bid that first one of gods demonstrated his courage by placing *his* hand in Fenris's mouth. This done, Fenris allowed the fetter to be placed over him. The more he struggled against the *Gleipnir* bond, the stronger it became, but, in his defeat, he bit off Týr's hand, but the wolf is bound until the day of Ragnarok: the twilight or the Apocalypse of the gods.

According to mythology, Týr will be slain by (and will slay) a hell-hound named Garmr – the Scandinavian equivalent of Cerberus. The trope of mutual destruction is a folkloric device that we see in, for example, Arthurian legend in the climactic battle between Arthur and Mordred.

Although, as has been suggested, Tîw was considered the 'all-father', it is possible that there was a conflict between the cult of Tîw and the emerging cult of Woðen. Branston argues that 'by the first century AD many North West European tribes accepted Tiwas and Woðenaz as equals' (102). Tacitus, writing at the end of the first century, names the Germanic gods by Roman names; consequently, Tîw is associated with Mars, while Woðen and Þunor are associated with Mercury and Hercules respectively. In the *Germania*, Tacitus observes that Woðen is rising to supremacy of the pantheon: "Above all other gods they worship Mercury, and count it no sin, on certain feast days, to include human victims in the sacrifices offered to him. Hercules and Mars they appease by offerings of animals, in accordance with ordinary civilised custom" (108).

It is tempting to see the older cult of Tîw in conflict with Woðen as the German word for Tîw's day is Dienstag: it is possible that this is an abbreviation of O-Dienstag. More likely, however, this is a corruption from *Zies*-dag (as the day is still called in Swiss German). Some of the other days share the same divine etymology as the Anglo-Saxon names: *Donners-tag* (thunder day) and *Frei-tag* (Freya's day). Woðen, of course, won in the battle for supremacy

and as leader of the gods. As Richard North points out, Tîw only survives in a handful of references, while Woðen is described as an outright personification.

Woðen

By the time the Saxons were applying the names of their gods to their days of the week, Woðen had become the most prominent, taking the position of the middle of the week: Wednesday. The name Woðen in Old English is derivative from Woðenas meaning 'excitement', 'rage', 'fury' as well as 'inspiration'; thus, Woðen is presented as a war god. As mentioned earlier, there appears to have been a fight for supremacy between the cults of Tiw and Woðen. In one of the Eddic poems, Woðen is seen to sacrifice himself, but to himself, on the World Tree: "I wot that I hung on the windy tree, the nights all nine, gored by spear given to Wodan, self by self to me... Not with loaf they comforted me nor with drinking horn, I looked below. I took up the runes took them up screaming fell I after from there." Thus through this action, Woðen acquires the understanding to make him the most powerful of the gods. He is shown in same poem gathering up the runes, synonymous with the Scandinavian Oðinn who invented the runes and used them to teach the people the magical force of writing. Similarly, the Old English Rune poem describes 'Os' the Old English word for 'god' as the "origin of all language/ wisdom's foundation and wise men's comfort/ and to every hero a blessing and hope" (Pollington 179), while in the Old Icelandic version, Oðinn status as leader of the pantheon is highlighted when he is described as 'the originator of old and Asgard's lord and Valhalla's leader' (Pollington, Runelore 54).

As I have said, Oðinn is associated with the Roman Mercury. Wednesday in Latin is *dies Mercurii*. Curiously, modern German retains the names of the other gods, but Wednesday has been renamed in the more ecclesiastically form of 'Mid-week'. Bede observes that the early Saxon invaders, Hengist and Horsa, could trace their lineage back to Woðen, while in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Woðen is named as the ancestor of the kings of Mercia. Indeed, as Richard North argues, 'no king by the late seventh century could do without the status that descent from Woðen entailed' (North 13). Thus while Tiw was seen as the god of the people, Woðen was seen as the god of royalty. It is Woðen who leads the Wild Hunt, which reaches its peak at Yuletime, hence his association with Jólnir (Lord of the Yule), as well as Mercury, who also leads the souls of the dead. Conversely, he is also associated with healing: he is named in the Saxon 'Nine Herbs charm' as the god who '*took nine glory-*

twigs,[and] Smote the serpent so that it flew into nine parts', however, as Baugh and Malone observe, this is 'a precious relic of English heathendom' though there is no surviving Woðen myth to place it into context.¹³

Pollington suggests that 'Woðen may have originally been an Anglian ancestor god whose domain spread with the Anglian dominance of the Southumbrian kingdoms' (181). The popularity in England is attested through the numerous places or topographical features that are associated with Woðen. These include Wednesbury (Staffordshire, originally named as Woðensbyri – Woðen's Barrow), Wansdyke (Woðen's dyke, Wiltshire) and Woodbridge (Suffolk). In Old Norse, another name for Oðinn is *Grim* or *Grima*, which possibly meant 'disguised' or 'the hooded one'. The appellation is unknown in Old English tradition, although several placenames suggest that it was a name that was used in Britain, including Grime's Graves (Norfolk), Grimscot (Northamptonshire) and Grimspound (Dartmoor). Woden's popularity was clearly seen as a threat to the Christian missionaries. So we see something of an attempt to stifle his worship in the Anglo Saxon *Maxims I*, which was probably copied in the second half of the tenth century: here the works of Woðen are compared with those of the Christian God: "Woðen fashioned idols, the Ruler of all fashioned heaven and the spacious skies".

Punor

The fifth day of the week is named after Punor, god of weather; son of Oðinn and Freya, the sky and the earth. His name corresponds with the old German Donar (Thunder) and the Old Norse form Þorr. Branston argues that the name of Punor is derived from the Celtic 'Jupiter Tanarus' – the thundering Jupiter' (which would also correspond with the Latin *dies Jovis*) Simek observes that after the 9th century, the sources use the Old Norse version of the name suggesting that 'the native name Þunor had already been forgotten and as a result of the very early Christianization of England, the Old Norse form had to be borrowed'. Certainly, in Norse mythology, Þorr was considered as chief god (Branston 115). However, despite his waning popularity in Britain Þunor, along with Woðen, must have been considered a threat to the Christian missionaries. The Old Saxon Baptismal vow (*Merseburg*

¹³ Albert C. Baugh and Kemp Malone, *The Literary History of England: Vol 1: The Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1959). p. 42.

Charm), dating from the 9th century demands that the baptismal candidate renounce the deeds and works of the devils, naming Þunor, Wōden and Saxnot and their companions: “*I renounce all the words and works of the devil, Thunear, Wōden and Saxnōt, and all those fiends that*

Merseberg Charm (Baptismal Vow)

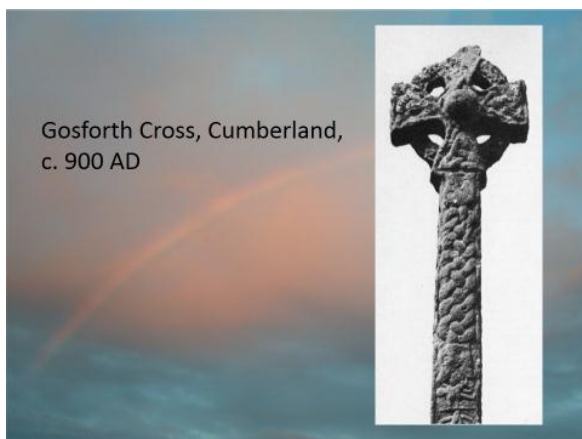
I renounce all the words and works of the devil,
Thunear, Wōden and Saxnōt, and all those fiends
that are their associates.

*“End ec forsacho allum dioboles uuercum and
uuordum, Thunaer ende Uuōden ende Saxnōte
ende allum thēm unholdum thê hira genōtas sint”.*

8-9th century: Vatican Codex pal. 577

are their associates.”. In the *Dialogue of Salomon and Saturn* (dating from the ninth or tenth century), Þunor is seen to strike the devil with a fiery axe (*...se Þunor hit þryseð þære fyrenan æcxe*). Here then Þunor’s ‘fiery axe’ corresponds with Þorr’s hammer. Indeed, archaeological digs in Saxon England have unearthed hammer-shaped amulets.

Þunor striking the devil also brings to mind the fight between Þorr and the world serpent. This story is not told in English writings, although it is depicted on ancient monuments such as the c. tenth century Gosforth Cross in Cumberland. However, it is possible that in this instance the story, which is found in the Prose Edda, has been imported into Scandinavian



Gosforth Cross, Cumberland,
c. 900 AD

Yorkshire. It tells of Þorr who fished for the World serpent, which lies in the ocean circling the world until the Ragnarök at which point, Þorr and the serpent meet again where they will destroy each other. When we consider that Snori who compiled the Edda Poems was a thirteenth century Christian attempting to preserve the old stories, one can perhaps see parallels with the George and the dragon

motif. However, because Þorr is a heathen, he and the dragon destroy each other, as it is no longer permissible for the old gods to rule.

Where Þunor’s name is synonymous with topographical features, these places are almost exclusively in coastal counties that were occupied by Saxon and Jutish settlers, and often associated with forest clearings: Thundersfield (Surrey), Þunorslege (Sussex), Thunresfeld (Wiltshire), Thunreslea (Hampshire, two examples) and Þunorshlæw (Thanet in Kent).

Frigg

In Scandinavian mythology, Óðinn's wife was Freya, and in the Latin days of the week, Friday was associated with 'dies Veneris' or 'day of Venus'. Consequently, from these two analogies, we may presume that the Anglicised form Frigg was an important goddess in the pantheon, and also a goddess representing love and, perhaps more importantly, fertility. Likewise it is possible that, as her consort was the sky-god, then she represented the Mother Earth as Freya is represented in Scandinavian mythology. [PPT19] As with her husband, the Poetic Edda speaks of Frigg understanding arcane wisdom, although she does not impart it:

I think Frigg
knows all wyrds
although she keeps them to herself.

örlög Frigg, hygg ek, at öll viti, þótt hon sjalfgi segi.

Frigg's name is cognate with Germanic *Frijjō* meaning 'wife'. She is mother to Þorr (Þunor) and Baldr (whose death begins the events that lead to the Ragnarök. Baldr is reborn, Christ-like, in the New World). Her grief for Baldr stems from her guilt of overlooking the mistletoe as the only thing that could kill him.

It is possible that Frigg was another early Saxon goddess; she is potentially connected with the *dea freagabi* who is named on one of the Housesteads Altar Stones at Hadrian's Wall. This form, *freā*, is also used in Layamon's *Brut*, a pseudo-history of Britain written at the start of the thirteenth century. He records a boast by Hengist (one of the Saxon invaders invited by Vortigern) that 'We have a lady, who is high and mighty, high she is and holy, therefore courtiers love her— she is named Freā - well she them treateth ... to Freā, their lady, they gave her Friday'. Conversely, Ælfric of Eynsham writes about 'Uenus' which he clarifies: "They established the sixth day in honour of the shameless goddess called Venus, or Frigg in Danish" in *De falsis diis*:

There was a woman called Venus, Jove's daughter; she was so abandoned in her lustfulness that her father had her, and also her brother, and others as well, like a prostitute; and yet the heathens worship her as a high goddess, as their god's daughter.

Consequently, as Kathleen Hughes observes, Frigg is a character filled with contradictions. As well as devoted wife and grieving mother following the death of Baldr, she is also represented as 'the object of desire, the whore [and] the sorceress'. Given this diversity to

attributions, the Scandinavians divided her into two goddesses, Frigg and Freya (26).¹⁴ In Britain, however, she remained as one goddess, but, not surprisingly, her cult was quickly suppressed, partially because she was seen as sexually permissive, but also because her position was a direct rival to the Christian Mother, Mary.

Despite the application of her name to a weekday, there is scant evidence in England for her as a goddess. In fact, her name, in the nominative form of Old English, gives us *frea* which equated to the appellation "lord" or 'dear one' so that it could be used in a Christian connotation (consider the importance of Good Friday and Christ), as well as giving us the root of the word *freond* – friend.

In addition, some place names apparently commemorate her: an English charter from 936 AD displays the name Frigedune, which means "Valley of Frig," thus implying that Friden in Derbyshire is named after her.¹⁵ The villages of Froyle ("Frigg's Hill") and Freefolk, which was *Frifefolc* in the Domesday Book ("Frigg's People"), Froyle and Frobury in Hampshire, may also be named after Frigg, as might Fryup and Fridaythorpe in Yorkshire.

As the Earth Mother, it is likely that Frigg would have been represented by the rune for Harvest in the three Rune poems. The month that we now call September was known as Halegmonath – the month of sacred rites. These rites would likely have included the Harvest Festival: the tradition of decorating the church with baskets of food and the weaving of corn dollies: 'doll', here, is a corruption of 'idol'.¹⁶ Obviously the festivals of Lammas at the start of the harvest and of Michaelmas at the end of September were ways in which the missionaries attempted to Christianise the heathen festivals to make them acceptable: the Loaf of Lammas became synonymous with the communion host, while Archangel Michael guarded the end of the harvest festivals.

Saturn?

There is much debate concerning the etymology of the last day of the week, Saturday. While it is very easy to see a similar development from Greek to Roman, from Cronos the Titan to Saturn, the father of the gods, there is considerable debate as to why a Roman god would

¹⁴ Whether they were originally one goddess, see Stephan Grundy, 'Freyja and Frigg' in *The Concept of the Goddess*, ed. Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (London: Routledge 1998), pp. 56–67.

¹⁵ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*. (London: Routledge). pp. 20/ rework this paragraph

¹⁶ Discussed by Ronald Hutton in *Stations of the Sun*, p. 141-2

be included among Saxon deities and personifications. Foremost is that there was no Saxon equivalent to Saturn, so they retained the Roman name.¹⁷ It is also suggested that it refers to the Sabbath Day, which would have been an apparent Christian attribution. The OED refers to Saturday as a half-translated adoption of Latin and observes that the French 'samedi' and the Old High German 'sambagtag' correspond with their naming of the day of the week. It is possible that this idea of the Sabbath links in Old Norse links with washing day as a cleansing and purification ritual and consequently there is only a linguistic similarity between Saturn and Sabbath.

Conclusion

At the time of the later Anglo-Saxon period, once Christianity had taken hold of the nation, former deities such as Tiw, Woðen, Ðunor and Freya had become devils, although, it can be argued that the symbol of Tiw was adapted to the symbol of the crucifix. Despite Gregory the Great's best efforts, the Venerable Bede's celebration of the passing of the heathen ways provides us with sufficient evidence to piece together a skeleton of a pantheon. Of course, we cannot be totally certain that a place-name that bears a nominative similarity with a Saxon god is *actually* named after them, but if it does it provides us with suggestions of both the spread of worship and the popularity of the god: clearly, Woðen is the most important as there are a significantly larger number of places that are named in connection of him. The names of the Saxon gods as days of the week have a long tradition in Saxon culture, they were not necessarily enforced upon the settlers by the later Viking invaders, although it may also be argued that these are not necessarily the most important of the gods, but the ones whose names correlated most closely to their Roman counterparts.

The names of the Saxon gods have fallen into obscurity, even though, ironically, they are invoked on a daily basis. The other irony is that when Gregory suggested aligning two other Saxon festivals, Yule and Eostre, this was still sufficient to present clues to understand something of their heathen heritage. These two festivals, appropriated by Christianity, have themselves been appropriated: for many people their significance has been obscured under all the trappings of chocolates, presents and feasts.

¹⁷ John C. Pope, ed., *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, 2 vols., Early English Text Society 259-260 (London 1967-68) 2: 667-724. Translation by P. Baker.