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## PREFACE

Shamanism and magic within the Norse field have been the subject of several major studies in recent years. Even within the bounds set by our limited medieval sources, the topic is a wide one – wide enough, perhaps, not to call for particular pleading when another study is presented. Each scholar has his or her own forte; my own focus is on the literary use of mythic motifs, and this has informed my approach throughout, although not all the discussion is devoted precisely to this consideration. My focus therefore differs somewhat from other recent substantial studies: Neil Price, in his *The Viking Way*, covers a good deal of the same ground as do I, but his most worthwhile focus is upon archaeological aspects of the topic; François-Xavier Dillmann, in *Les magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne*, concentrates on what the title states, magicians (rather than magic as such) as depicted in Icelandic family sagas; John McKinnell, in *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend*, offers a detailed analysis of beings such as *völur*, but his focus is upon the structural analysis of literary themes, and his ambit extends far further into folklore materials than does mine, though I do indeed recognise that while motifs which appear in literature may have many sources, any attempt, such as, in part, the present one, to glimpse something of the ancient pre-Christian traditions through this literature takes us into a pre-literary world of originally oral tradition, which formed part of the folklore of the people concerned. The present study therefore involves looking at the manipulation of motifs, many (but not all) deriving ultimately from folk tradition, in an increasingly artistic, literary milieu; yet the overriding concern is to answer the question of whether Norse literature indicates that ancient Scandinavians had the notion of a practice which might reasonably be termed “shamanism”, whether as an actual phenomenon of ordinary life, or as a motif appearing in fictional settings.

I hope that the length of the present study will not predispose the reader to nod in agreement with the poet and cataloguer of the great library of the ancient world at Alexandria, Callimachus, who proclaimed μέγα βίβλιον μέγα κακόν, “a big book is a big evil”; the length in fact reflects a fundamental aim I have sought to meet, namely to avoid considering an isolated list of supposedly “shamanic” features divorced from their context: I therefore present fairly full discussions of the myths and texts in which these features occur, dealing with a wider range of interpretations than the purely shamanic. I do not engage in lengthy consideration of purely historical or archaeological materials or arguments.

The present work is the result of a long process of maturation; I began my investigations in the topics under consideration in the mid-1980s,

leading to my doctoral thesis, submitted at Oxford University in 1993. Personal circumstances thwarted my intention to develop my research and produce a more substantial and connected interpretation than appeared in my dissertation within a reasonable period thereafter, but, my thoughts on the topic having naturally developed over the years, I am glad now to be able to offer these reflections in a rather more considered form than would have been the case fifteen years ago, and which in important areas also amend earlier published work of mine (the section on *Hrólfs saga kraka* in Chapter 20 is, however, adapted from my recent article, Tolley 2007a).

Whilst the book is scholarly in intent, I believe it may also be approached by less specialised readers, as well as by scholars whose speciality is not Norse. I have presented as wide a range both of shamanic source material (though still very selective) and of Norse texts as seemed feasible and justified by the aim of contextualising the Norse sources under discussion, and out of consideration for readers who may not otherwise have ready access to them. I have also held to the principle that all materials discussed should not only be presented in the original language whenever possible, but also rendered into English (as translation is interpretation, and the scholar is thereby obliged to clarify what he believes a text to mean; translations are mine unless noted otherwise). I trust too that the reader will find I have been able to avoid any obfuscation of academic jargon and expression.

It is my hope that this volume will contribute positively to the growing debate in this area of research, and that the reader will emerge from this book not only with greater understanding, but also, through that, with greater enjoyment of the works considered and appreciation of the cultures described.

Clive Tolley  
Chester, Christmas 2008

### *A Note on the Reprint*

I am glad it has proved possible, some fourteen years after its first appearance, to reprint *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*. This is not a new edition – such an undertaking would be beyond my or the series' scope – but a number of small errors have been corrected, and, far more rarely, a slightly more significant rewriting of certain passages has been made (particularly in the chapter on Heimdallr). Whilst many details in the book might profitably be reconsidered, I hope it will be seen to have stood the test of time. I do not, in any case, see any reason to revise the central point that our primarily late (and Christian) sources, often of an imaginative nature, preclude our drawing many firm conclusions about pagan Norse magical practices and associated myths, still less any justification for calling them “shamanism” – while at the same time it remains legitimate to bring in comparisons with other magical practices, including in particular shamanic ones, to assist in our understanding of the scant evidence we do have and in the disentanglement of the contexts of such traditions as are recorded.

## THE COVER ILLUSTRATION

The front cover shows the painting by Thomas Fearnley (1802–42), a Norwegian of English descent, of the Slinde birch, which he completed in 1839. The tree grew on an ancient Iron Age grave mound, Hydneshaugen, in Sogn. It was the subject of a number of romantic paintings and poems in the nineteenth century, which have rendered it one of the best known of Norwegian trees, yet its tale is not a happy one. It is clear from local research, in particular by Wilhelm Christie in 1827, that the tree was regarded as holy in the eighteenth century, and offerings of beer were placed at its foot at Christmas, but such customs had dwindled by the early nineteenth century. The mound was supposed to contain treasure, guarded by a white snake, and twelve interlocking copper cauldrons. In 1861, the tree had a girth close to ground level of 5.6 metres, and its height was 18.8 metres, whilst the canopy had a diameter of 21.6 metres. The grave mound on which it grew, which was 19 metres in diameter and 4 metres high, was a local boundary nexus; Fearnley's painting illustrates how the tree also functioned, at least metaphorically, as a vertical axis uniting heaven, earth (mountain) and sea, as well as, on a temporal plane, standing on the boundary of light and darkness, day and night – the discussions later in the present volume suggest these may not have been simply nineteenth-century romantic notions. The tree blew down in a storm in 1874. In 1892–3 locals dismantled the grave mound, no longer awed by the old stories that disaster would ensue upon any damage to the monument, and removed three thousand loads of stone from it. A couple of burial cists were found, but no treasure, cauldrons or white snake; no archaeological survey was undertaken. Nowadays a new road and petrol station have, it seems, obliterated what remained of this once revered site.

The Slinde birch is surely a late local manifestation of an ancient Norse tradition of sacred guardian trees, which reached its culmination in myth in the form of the world tree, guarding and sustaining the cosmos and reflecting its passage through time, stretching up to heaven and, like the Slinde birch on its burial mound, reaching down to the world of the dead, where resided the serpent *Níðhöggr* and where were to be found springs bestowing life and wisdom, as well as the spring *Hvergelmir*, the Cauldron Roarer, the source of all waters. In Siberia, it was along the world tree that the shaman was believed to pass to other worlds to fulfil his spiritual missions for his community.

Aside from its topical relevance, Fearnley's depiction of the Slinde birch stands as a fitting symbol for much that is discussed in the present volume: it is an imaginative, artistic response to and use of an object rooted in cult,

as are many of the poetic and literary sources discussed here, and it portrays something of erstwhile religious significance, a significance which had already faded into vague memory. The Slinde birch teeters, a thing of beauty, on the brink of oblivion.