Sex, Status, and Seiðr: Homosexuality and Germanic Religion

Originally published in Idunna 31, 1997

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Homosexuality and Germanic Religion

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One of the challenges facing those who seek to practice Asatru today is that of distinguishing our version of Germanic religion from the perverted vision promoted by the Nazis. Almost without exception contemporary Norse pagans eschew any connection with the Nazis as a political movement. But there is at times a tendency to retain some of their prejudices, attitudes which are shared by the more reactionary elements among Christians in America today. The purpose of this article is to examine another characteristic for which people were sent to the concentration camps by the Nazis, namely, homosexuality. My purpose is neither to condemn nor to condone, but to move towards an understanding of the place of the homosexual in contemporary Norse religion by examining the historical and literary evidence regarding homosexual practices available from the ancient world.

Homophobia in the Viking Age

Most of Old Norse literature was written down after the introduction of Christianity (in the 10-11th centuries), however much of its content is older. The surviving examples include some striking examples of homophobic speech and behavior. In the Icelandic sagas, wearing the clothing of the opposite sex was grounds for divorce, and giving a man a gift, which could be interpreted as feminine was an insult.

In the Eddas, warriors taunt each other before battle with sexual insults. Here is an example of such an interchange from the first “Helgi Lay”–

Sinfjotli: “A witch wast thou on Varins Isle,

didst fashion falsehoods and fawn on me, hag:

to no wight wouldst thou be wed but to me…”

“Thou wast, witch-hag, a valkyrie fierce…

On Saga Ness full nine wolves we

had together– I gat them all.”

(38-39)

Guthmund: “…gelded wast thou near Gnipa Grove

by thurs maidens on Thor’s Ness, before…

wast Grani’s bride on Brávoll Field…

full many a space I spurred thee on…”

(42)

Sinfjotli then accuses Guthmund of milking she-goats and being Imth’s

daughter, “a tattered troll-wench”. Not only is the foe accused of having

been a female, but a witch, Valkyrie, troll-wench, or shapeshifter,

specifically, into the form of a she-wolf or a mare (forms commonly associated

with supernatural or magical women), indicating a connection between

transsexuality and spiritual power.

Such taunts are exchanged even by the gods–

Odin: “Thou winters eight wast the earth beneath

milking the cows as a maid,

and there gavest birth to a brood:

were these womanish ways, I ween.”

Loki:”But thou, say they, on Sáms Isle once

beat (the magic drum?) like a Vœlva:

in vitki’s shape through the worlds didst fare:

in woman’s wise, I ween.”

(“Lokasenna,” 23-24)

The story of how Loki took the form of a mare to distract the Jotun’s stallion, and bore the magic steed Sleiphnir, how he ate a woman’s heart and spent twelve years as a woman, giving birth to Fenris, the Midgard Serpent, and Hella, is well-known, but it is surprising to find anyone accusing Odin of effeminacy. However, the passage in which Snorri describes Odin’s shamanic skills (learned, presumably from the Vanir) ends with the memorable words–

“But the use of this magic is accompanied by so great a degree of effemination (ergi) that men were of the opinion that they could not give themselves up to it without shame, so that it was to the priestesses that it was taught.” (Ynglingasaga: 7)

Here, as in the previous passage, a connection is made between degeneracy, the female role, and magic, a link whose significance should become clearer as we go on.

Origins and attitudes

For a man to take a female role, especially in a sexual relationship, was socially unacceptable to the Vikings. How ancient, and how deeply ingrained was this idea, and what, if any, influence can be traced to Christianity?

One possibility is that the Germanic tribes originally followed the custom of some earlier peoples, in which adolescent boys were initiated into manhood by becoming the lovers of mature warriors. According to the first century B.C. Geography, of Strabo, drawing on the even earlier work of Ephorus, 4th cen. B.C., on the island of Crete, an older man of superior status trained the younger in the skills expected of a man, and when the boy had completed his training, demonstrated by some feat such as killing a wild animal, his “graduation” was celebrated and his manhood acknowledged, making him eligible to take a wife and a boy to train in turn.

The new warrior received arms, a bull, which was immediately sacrificed and eaten at the feast of celebration, and a cup, which was presumably used in drinking rituals like sumbel or the Greek symposium. In a somewhat modified form this was still the custom in Classical Greece. Strabo uses the Greek term erastés, “lover” to denote the active partner in the relationship– the husband in a heterosexual couple or the person who plays the male role in a homosexual relationship; and the word eromenos (passive past participle of the verb eramai, “to desire sexually”), to refer to the partner who takes the passive role. (Sergent, p. 8)

The evidence for love between men of equal status is less clear. Achilles and Patroclos are probably the best-known male lovers. The Romans accused the Gauls of being unduly tolerant of such affairs, but unless the relationship between Cuchulain and Ferdiad is an example, there is little indication of it in Irish literature.

Some Roman writers insist that not only were Germanic females perfectly chaste, but that the men abhorred homosexuality. Tacitus, for instance, stated that those convicted of corpore infames were buried alive in a swamp (Germania, 12). Others, on the other hand, suggest that the kind of institutionalized pederasty described above was practiced in at least some of the tribes. Procopius implies that the young men of the Heruli had to serve their elders until they had proved themselves in battle, while according to Ammianus,

…the Taifali are so sunk in gross sensuality that among them boys couple with men in a union of unnatural lust and waste the flower of their youth in the polluted embraces of their lovers. But if a young man catches a boar single-handed or kills a huge bear, he is exempt thereafter from the contamination of this lewd intercourse.” (xxxi:9)

In this system, the passive partner was of lower status. As soon as the boy became an equal, the relationship would end. In Crete, if a boy was “abducted” by a man of lower social status, his relatives would pursue and rescue him, whereas a man of the same or higher status conferred an honor on the youth by taking him. Perhaps relationships between mature men were condemned while those between a man and an adolescent were approved, or perhaps practices differed from tribe to tribe. Certainly, Tacitus’ averral that German men had only one wife is contravened by evidence that in tribes such as the Franks, and later among the Vikings, it was common for kings at least to have more than one official lady.

To understand how this varied situation developed into the homophobia of the Viking period, we must also consider attitudes towards homosexuality in Late Classical and Medieval culture and law. Pagan writers such as Tacitus, concerned about declining fertility and moral laxity in the upper classes of Rome, castigated homosexuality along with anything else that might threaten Roman Family Values. The early Church fathers, who admitted married heterosexual love only as a poor second best to chastity, were even more scathing in their condemnations.

Roman law, reflecting actual rather than ideal contemporary sexual practices, was far slower to respond. Even the Code of Justinian did no more than to prescribe confiscation of half the property and banishment for men who corrupted other free men by using them homosexually. Note that it was the status of the passive partner, not the act itself, that made such relations a crime. There was still apparently no penalty for so using one’s own slave. It was not until the Church had completed its domination of the legal system in the later Middle Ages that homosexuality became a crime for which men could be burned.

Homosexuality in Scandinavian Law

According to Gade’s excellent analysis, a measure in the Old Norwegian Gulathingslog, Ch. 32 passed in 1164 provides that two men who “enjoy the pleasures of the flesh” and are convicted be outlawed and their possessions confiscated. This regulation, part of the laws introduced by King Magnus Erlingsson, was apparently inspired (as were so many witch-persecutions) by greed and is the only anti-homosexual measure in medieval Scandinavian law. Severe penalties for homosexuality do not appear even in Continental sources until the 13th century. In the 12th century, the punishment was likely to be penance, as it was for incest or fornication.

In the earlier period, the “crime against nature” is bestiality, which is explicitly forbidden, and punished by castration and outlawry, while the animal is drowned. Later, increasingly severe penalties instituted on the Continent included burning alive. However, the provision against homosexuality disappeared from later Norwegian law and such provisos were not reintroduced even when Continental law on the subject began to grow more harsh.

Although homosexual relationships existed in Old Norse society, such behavior was not punishable by Church or secular law, except as a sin mentioned in the penitentials. It is not known to what extent the provision in chapter 32 of the Gulathingslog, was enforced: the fact that the section was not retained in Norwegian law when homosexual behavior began to incur severe penalties on the Continent shows that the regulation must have been alien to medieval Scandinavian legislation.” (Gade, p. 135)

If the accused denied their crime, they must prove their innocence by the ordeal of the hot iron, and if convicted, would lose their possessions, but no further action was taken. Furthermore, “None of the Leges Barabarorum contain provisions against homosexual behavior, and the Carolingian legislation…contains general admonitions to stay away from this sin but enacts no severe punishments for it. (126) In other words, while homosexual behavior may have been socially unacceptable, Norse tradition did not consider it something which the State ought to regulate.

In early Scandinavian law, (Stadharholzbok, vigslodhi: 376) calling another man ragr, strodhinn, or sordhinn, words implying sexual subordination, was a gross verbal insult, punishable with outlawry. “A man has also the right to kill for these three words.” Even though skaldic poetry sometimes got so insulting that there was a law against slander in verse, no poems survive which contain any of these terms.

In Bjarnars saga a man called Thordhr may have been raped by one Bjorn. Later, a pair of nidhstengr are set up on Thordhr’s property. “The nidhstengr illustrated two men in sexual intercourse, the implications being emphasized by the fact that one of them was wearing a hat, an attribute of Odhinn, a god charged with (active) homosexual behavior. There is no doubt that the nidhstengr were meant to disgrace Thordhr and imply that he had been used as a woman…” (Gade, p. 134)

Gade also points out that while taking the passive role in intercourse was considered degrading for a free man, the same attitude did not apply to thralls. Just as in the case of violation of a man’s wife or female kindred, forcing sex on a thrall, whether male or female, was not an offense against morality, but against property rights, and only then did it become punishable under the Old Norwegian penal code.

All of the references dealt with so far have to do with homosexual relationships between males. In material written by and for men, this is not surprising. Often the ancient writers simply did not care how females exercised their sexuality (so long as the results did not threaten rights of paternity), in the same way that they did not care as much about female spirituality as they did about that of men. Apparently, the Norse prejudice was not against male homosexuality per se, the desire of a man to make love to another man, but against a man’s taking the woman’s role in a sexual relationship.

In other words, the concern in Old Norse society is not about relationships which involve sharing the “pleasures of the flesh”, but rather with sexual assault. The one who has the power to rape, whether the victim be male or female, has demonstrated superior strength, and thus, status. In some Native American cultures, the victorious warriors raped the men (but not the women) of a conquered tribe as a demonstration of their superiority.

Rationally, this does not make sense. If there is a sin, it ought to lie with the one initiating the action instead of with the receptive partner, who may not even be a willing participant. However sexual relationships with male, as with female, slaves, were outside the social system, and therefore did not count. Clearly the prejudice here is not based on horror at unnatural desires, but rather on fear of loss of status, or control. The issue is one of power.

The female role in magic

The same social forces which led to the degradation of female sexuality also acted upon perceptions of magic and those who employed it. A study by Jenny Jochens explores the social roles of sorcerers. She identifies a tripartite division of magic users:

At one end of the spectrum are people who readily and easily predicted the future thanks to innate abilities and without recourse to magic. At the other are sorcerers who through instrumental magic were able to manipulate the future according to their own and their clients’ wishes. In the middle we find practitioners who by using a magical ritual were capable of extracting information about the future but unable to change the course of events.” (p. 306)

According to her analysis, women dominate the first group, although later men are said to have this talent too. In the sagas, members of the middle group (those who predict the future through ritual) are all female. Jochens believes that seidh was originally practiced only by women. However, this idea is not consistent with Snorri’s comment in the Ynglingasaga. Certainly, references to seidh in general (Jochens’ third group) are evenly divided between men and women.

Female workers of magic abound in the sagas. Female magicians like Thordis the spakona in Thorvalds thattr ens Vidsforla, often took young men as their pupils. In the Eyrbyggja saga, Gunnlaugr’s pupil Geirridhr dies because of the jealousy of another sorceress, Katla. Biological or adoptive mothers teach magic to their sons– Ljot to her son Hrolleifr in Vatansdaelasaga, or Thorgunna who raised Thorsteinn. Thordis raised Thorvaldr, who became the companion of the first Icelandic bishop, Fridhrekr (and possibly his lover). Fridhrekr himself is presented in the saga as a spamadhr, which could be held to deepen the implication of connection between homosexuality and female magic.

On the Continent, the Church’s hostility quickly made men abandon magic, thus (re)feminizing the art. (314) Jochens contends that the Icelanders succeeded in moving magic completely from female to male domination, as evidenced by the fact that Icelandic witch-persecutions were directed almost solely at men. In Scandinavia, on the other hand, women were more often accused.

Jochens sees the involvement of men in seidh (however despised) as a devolution from ancient times. “Originally a monopoly of the goddesses, the magic seidhr was needed by human sibyls to perform their predictions. This connection between women and goddesses suggests that not only divination, but also magic had originally been a female monopoly…. ” (307)

I would rather suggest that it was not female physiology, but a female identity or social role which was the prerequisite for access to certain kinds of spiritual power. Certainly, there is evidence that transsexuality had a recognized place in the religion of the barbarian period.

Tacitus tells us that the Naharvali, a Suevian tribe, possessed a grove of “. . .immemorial sanctity. A priest in female attire (ornatus mulieribus) had the charge of it.” (43) In this grove twin deities called the Alcis and identified with Castor and Pollux were worshipped. We must also cite the well-known passage from Saxo, describing how Starkad, having lived for some years with the Swedish royal family, returns to Denmark, “for, living at Uppsala in the period of sacrifices, he had become disgusted with the womanish body movements, the clatter of actors on the stage, and the soft tinkling of bells.” (History of the Danes VI:154) )

The Yngling kings were devotees of the Vanir, whose cult practices are characteristic of an agricultural fertility religion. Transvestite priests in earlier cultures of this kind are known to have engaged in ritual homosexuality. Such ritual cross-dressing (without, however, necessarily involving sexual inversion) has survived in European festival customs such as the Wren Hunt and Mardi Gras parade.

Ergi

In the passage describing Odin’s magic, Snorri uses a specific term, “ergi” to indicate the shamefulness of seidh magic. In other contexts this word and its derivatives are usually translated as lust or lewdness, specifically in the sense of sexual receptiveness. Another translation might be “desirous of penetration”. The term seems, in fact, to be a close analogue of the Greek eromenos. Men use the word as an insult, accusing a foe of having submitted sexually like a woman. It is used to describe Freyja. However, the term is also used in contexts relating to magic. What Loki actually accuses Odin of is not being “womanish”, as it is usually translated, but of “args athal”– acting in “a sexually receptive way.” The context makes it clear that what he was doing was working women’s magic.

In Volsathattr, the term is used to describe the vingull– the horse’s phallus, which is an overt sexual symbol. Magically its purpose might have been to enable the “luck” or spiritual power of prosperity/fertility to “penetrate” the physical realm.

These references may help us to understand how effeminacy and passive homosexuality became equated with magical power. Effective magic requires the practitioner to unite the powers of the conscious and unconscious, of intelligence and emotion. In many shamanic traditions, cross-dressing allows the shaman to walk “between” genders, and to unite or balance within him or herself the abilities associated with each. Upsetting ordinary gender assumptions loosens the psyche and allows one to perceive in a new way.

Shamanic and ecstatic religious experience, unlike ceremonial magic, requires the practitioner to open him or herself to divine power. In its most extreme form, this loss of consciousness may lead to states in which the medium becomes completely controlled by the possessing deity. Another form is the ecstatic rapture of mysticism, a state leading some later Christian theologians to speak of the soul as “feminine” in relation to God.

It is possible to see how early Christian attempts to suppress paganism might have focused on these practices (which generated the greatest amount of magical power) for especial opposition. Female spiritual power was already suspect, to be suppressed or channeled into specifically subordinate roles wherever it appeared, and Christian misogyny may have also increased prejudice against men who worked the kind of magic associated with women.

Late Norse homophobia seems to be inextricably connected to late Norse misogyny. Femaleness and Magic were both severely repressed and thrust into the dark, chthonic realm of the unconscious, which therefore became a place of horror and fear. This represents a major shift from the situation in most pagan cultures, which recognized and valued chthonic and liminal power, and saw in it a necessary balancing aspect of spirituality. Perhaps the degree to which horror of “woman’s magic” is expressed in the Saga period provides a measure of the prestige in which women’s spiritual power was held in earlier times.

Androgyny

For purposes of cross-cultural comparison, Walter Williams’ classic study of trans-sexual status in Native American culture is suggestive. Although the role of the berdache is not found in all Amerind tribes, it does appear in many of them as a culturally acceptable, even valued, alternative to ordinary sexuality. The berdache occupies a third status in the tribe, that of the androgyne, recognized as being distinct from either masculine or feminine, and this liminality is believed to give him/her extra spiritual power. Rather than being despised, the berdache fulfills valuable functions in the community, and neither s/he nor the masculine men who are sexually connected with him/her are stigmatized. It is accepted that men who play a conventional role in sexual relations (i.e., dominance) may be equally interested in effeminate males or in true females. It is also assumed that most men will engage in homosexual play at some time in their lives and may take a passive role sexually without change in status if they continue to otherwise play the masculine part in the culture.

One may hypothesize that in tribal societies, including European cultures before their exposure to Middle Eastern dualistic and monotheistic influences, sexual identity depends more on social role than it does on sexual behavior. Extramarital homosexual relationships may in fact be engaged in more freely than heterosexual ones, since they will not produce children. The institution of the third-sex role exists to accommodate those whose physical and spiritual genders are not the same and tends to acquire a sacred character.

Conclusions

The key to the problem of interpreting Germanic attitudes towards homosexuality seems to be the relationship of passivity/receptivity to the feminine gender role. Of the variants in homosexual behavior– berdache; boy-man pairings; and the pairings of macho men– I would speculate that the one which was most common in the ancient North was transsexuality, because of later references to effeminate dress in a religious context, and because sexual passivity is used as an insult later on.

The culture was less concerned with the behavior of women. One would assume, however, that the tradition of Valkyries and the prohibitions against women dressing like men indicated some tradition of women at times adopting a masculine role. The spakona Thorhild is said to have girded herself like a man with a helmet on her head in order to prophesy. As far as sexual behavior was concerned, it is likely that same-sex preference became a problem only if it interfered with serving the interests of the kin-group by marrying and bearing children.

Given the above, what conclusions can be drawn regarding the place of homosexuality in a social group which is attempting to live by the old Germanic values?

Clearly in a traditional culture the criminality of sexual behavior depends less on the gender of the partners than on their relative social status– their freedom to refuse. Whether any act (of sex or magic) is considered shameful depends on the status of those with whom it is typically associated in that society. If women are defined by a culture as submissive, and if one considers women inferior, then it becomes shameful for a person of socially superior status (a male) to submit sexually.

As Williams puts it, “It may be accurate to suggest that the status of berdaches in a society is directly related to the status of women. In societies which ascribe low status to women, a male who would want to give up his dominant position would be seen as crazy. But where women have high status, there is no lowering of social role for a male to move in a feminine direction.” (p. 66)

In a society in which women are considered to be equal to men, or even to have abilities which though different from those of men are equally valuable, there should be far more tolerance for a man who takes a traditionally female role. When the relationship is not one of submission to a social superior, but a free association of equal partners, then even the conditions of Viking homophobia become irrelevant. Ethically, one should not force sexual attentions on anyone, be it man, woman, or sheep.

Even in the period of the sagas, Scandinavian women enjoyed a degree of respect and freedom unknown in the rest of Europe. In seeking role models for magical work, however, I would prefer to focus on the earlier Germanic culture in which women held such a high position as spiritual leaders. It is from this period as well that we draw most of our evidence for the existence of a “berdache” role in Germanic religion, as well as for homosexual practices among warriors. The earlier and less affected by Christian ideas the culture we examine is, the more likely it is to accord women spiritual equality and to provide a culturally defined place for sexual inversion.

Taking such a liminal role is not necessary to practice Norse magic. It is true, however, that a condition of openness and receptivity is extremely useful in some kinds of magic, specifically those involving relinquishing conscious control in trance. In a culture which traditionally requires males to be intellectual, controlled, and dominant, gay men, who have already had to question so many assumptions about the relationship between social role and gender, may find it somewhat easier to attain a state of spiritual receptivity than conventionally heterosexual males.

However, it must be emphasized that psychic receptivity has less to do with sexuality than with socialization. Those– be they male, female, or other, who have the courage to work outside stereotypes, the clarity to accept all aspects of their own nature, the self-discipline to develop the requisite skills, and the devotion to trust themselves to the gods, should be able to work seidh, no matter what their sexual identity.

Furthermore, this kind of magical work is only one aspect of Germanic religion. Though devotion to the old gods may be variously expressed, there should be room for persons of all sexual orientations within Asatru.

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