

From drum age to viking age: religious contacts in ancient Scandinavia

Prehistoric Scandinavia, where both Sami and Norse people lived, had a unique position as a border area between the Germanic societies of northern Europe and the circumpolar ones around the Arctic. This was reflected in people's religious ideas and it is possible to see both similarities and differences between the Sami and Nordic religious worlds.

The layered world of gods, spirits and ancestors, the shamanistic reality that the Sami believed in, can also be traced in Nordic religion. Then the beliefs are linked to the god Óðinn (Oden) and a collection of rituals called seiðr. Just like the Sami people, the northerners also had their religious specialists, male and female, each with their special knowledge and function and their way of working for society.

However, it is important to understand that 'religion' was not a unified orthodoxy at this time but was probably interpreted and practiced differently between people.

The gods of both religions did not require worship or gratitude, or even compliance to them. Instead, the gods seem to have required only recognition that they existed as part of nature, and that as such they were imbued with an inner self-evidentness, perhaps even a kind of beauty. This was completely unlike Christianity's relationship to the divine.

The Sami had known Christian ideas almost as long as the northerners, but the way in which the new faith was received was strikingly different in the two cultures. The reason for this is to be found in the relationship between religion and the surrounding social structure. For the northerners, Christianity became a tool for the new states that took shape during the Viking Age. It became a tool that kings and other elites used to create national identities that over time developed into today's Scandinavian countries. For the Sami, on the other hand, the old religion was

perfectly adapted to the nomadic lifestyle, which followed the rhythm of nature and the seasons. Although some Christian beliefs gained a foothold among the Sami in the early Middle Ages, several centuries would pass before the foreign religion was finally imposed on them by the Scandinavian kingdoms.

Neil Price

The department of archeology and ancient history, Uppsala university